

Zdzislaw Beksiński's Paintings of the "Fantastic Period" as an Expression of Early Childhood Experience

Beata Sokolowska-Smyl

Maria Curie Skłodowska University, Poland

E-mail address: beata.soko@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Beksiński paintings

Beksiński biography

Grotesque in the visual arts

Article history:

Received 31 December 2013

Received in revised form 12 April 2014

Accepted 7 May 2014

ISSN:

DOI: 10.15290/ctra.2014.01.01.11

ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to indicate possibilities for the interpretation of Zdzisław Beksiński's work, based on selected examples of paintings from the so-called "fantastic period". A grotesque look at art, which would explain the style of the artist's paintings, so compulsively using the language of deformation, attaining alarming degeneration, is a look from the generally inaccessible, cavernous depths of the subconscious. Thanks to psychoanalysis, art can be read as a representation of the inner world of the creator, who unknowingly embeds the story of his childhood into his work. The direction of the foregoing, represents the position of Alice Miller, a Swiss psychotherapist, in whose opinion knowledge stored in the subconscious is not pure fantasy, but rather an explanation referring to the reality of early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Each time Beksiński's paintings come to my attention I ask myself the questions: what needs to happen to a person to make him paint such frightening things? What open or hidden dramas is he subjected to? To get closer to the sources of this terrifying imagery, the following questions have to be answered: are we dealing with miasmas of morbid fantasy or fears split from their original stimuli and recurring in visions that perpetuate them again? Where should we look for the causes of destruction and self-destruction in man? For the reflections considered in this article, paintings from the 70's to the early 90's of the 20th century were chosen, the period named by the author himself, the 'fantastic one'. The selection criteria were based on symptomatic works that strengthened Beksiński's image as a surrealist both in Poland and abroad.

Origins of artistic creation according to Alice Miller

Delving into the problem of the origins of artistic creation, Alice Miller, a Swiss psychotherapist, claims that the subconscious mind, which in psychoanalytic terms is a reservoir

of repressed emotions, traumas and desires, becomes an infinite arsenal of all creation, dreams and fairy tales. In her opinion, knowledge stored in the subconscious is not pure fantasy, but rather an explanation referring to the reality of early childhood. Hence, fascination with certain works of art is defined by the strength of the message they convey, which in turn is based on the intensity and sincerity of profound human experience.

Science has stripped the World we live in of its original magic. These were the three pillars of scientific thought: The Copernican Revolution, Darwinian theory of evolution of organic matter and Freudian Theory, which gave us the tools for describing connections between early childhood experiences and adult emotional life. Relations with parents, congenital and hereditary factors, experiences of birth, adolescence, sexuality, love and death all play a crucial role in the process of shaping a person's personality. Square one in psychoanalysis is the rudimentary assumption that deep within the human brain there is an area inaccessible to consciousness, which conditions our behaviour and emotions. Feeling inspired by Miller, whose reformulation of the psychoanalytic approach provided a way of deciphering the enigmatic pieces of Franz Kafka's poetry, I have attempted to take a look at Beksiński's style of grotesque illustration from a similar methodological point of view (Miller, 1991). Before turning to a description of this approach, however, it would be helpful to introduce the Freudian conception of interpreting works of art.

The Freudian conception of interpreting works of art

In "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming" Freud undertakes the subject of the origins of poetic creation and the phenomena of its reception. He sees an analogy between the imaginative work of a creative writer and child's play in: (1) rearranging the elements of the real world according to subjective needs, (2) taking these fictional worlds surprisingly seriously and (3) providing "large amounts of emotion" (Freud, 1991, p. 249). As a result, a world of fantasy is created. The child's fantasies are of great importance as a way of dealing with inner conflicts that cannot be dealt with on the conscious level. This can only be achieved by means of repression and sublimation. Therefore, fantasy would appear to be a vehicle fuelled by unfulfilled wishes stored in the unconscious. Having investigated the nature of inspiration in art, Freud concludes that it is more likely to originate from the artist's unconscious mind than from the outside. Moreover, fantasy moves from the present through the past to the future, transforming the memory of the desired situation, recalled by current experience, into a creative fulfillment. It is the unreality of the fictional world that unbinds us from the imperative of control and enables us to live out our disruptive conflicts, fears, longings and desires indirectly, in a camouflaged way, without any stings of remorse and shame. This in turn releases psychological tension.

The next question concerns the methods that the writer uses to arouse intense emotions in readers. The first step is to strip the fantasy of any subjective aspects by means of changes, veils or distortion. Initially, the writer teases the reader with purely aesthetic pleasure to gain access to the deeper pleasure of psychological release. Both the writer and the reader identify with the protagonist, who unveils the complexity of his inner experiences and sensations.

The essay "Leonardo da Vinci & A Memory of His Childhood" is a psych biographical analysis of the artist's work. From Freud's standpoint, the stigma of Leonardo's spurious origin, the absence of his father, partly compensated by his mother's fondness were of paramount importance in shaping his personality. The act of sexual repression and sublimation of libido to cognitive passion was the aftermath of separation from his birth mother. The memory of her, stored in the unconscious, was evoked by the mysterious and enchanting smile of Mona Lisa del Giocondo. "Physiognomic subtleties of this woman's visage" were willingly recreated in his subsequent paintings (Freud, 2000, p. 300). The iconographic depiction of The Virgin and Child with St. Anne, a theme not often occurring in Italian art, was interpreted by Freud as a symbol of the love of two mothers. Leonardo's composition of this theme diverges greatly from the conventional scheme, which according to Freud is explained by its hidden meaning.

In the article "Dostoyevsky and Parricide" the choice of literary themes itself - murder, violence, egoism to name but a few - indicates the author's personality traits. Freud sees the problem of parricide, appearing in "The Brothers Karamazov", as a subjective expression of the Oedipus complex. One cannot help but notice an undeniable reference to the story of Dostoyevsky's father's life.

Alice Miller's conception of interpreting works of art

Alice Miller challenges two aspects of Freud's theory: (1) those referring to the infantile sexuality of a child, and (2) those perceiving a work of art as a sublimation of physiological drives. Her psychoanalytical practice confirmed Freud's empirical finding of traumatization, described in 1896 as seduction theory, which he later abandoned to the theory of the Oedipus complex. Miller prefers to call the former 'abuse theory', thus extending its meaning beyond the sexual sphere. This theory, posing a threat to the commonly accepted idealization of parents, had to withstand much stronger criticism than the Oedipal one. According to the latter, a child is not abused by adults, but through denial and repression of its drives, fantasizes about them and perceives them as external to itself. Miller's experiences as a psychoanalyst proved both sexual and narcissistic disorders, as well as the aetiology of destruction, to be of a reactive nature. Hence, creation is potentially possible

when unpleasant emotions felt towards certain people from the past get detached and forced out into the subconscious, making it an inexhaustible wellspring of ideas, dreams and fairy tales. According to Alice Miller, until this subconscious data is perceived merely as fantasy and not an elucidation of an early childhood realm, it will be admired as a form of art, transmitted in tales as the "wisdom of ancestors", and interpreted constantly as an expression of ever the same, archetypical, collective subconscious (Miller, 1991, p. 225) while the creators unwittingly depict the silent drama of a suppressed child, the deeply hidden story of constant subjugation.

Art of poetry - Franz Kafka's anguish

According to Miller, the absurdity and grotesqueness contained in Kafka's works should be viewed as a cryptogram, not just as a product of the author's vivid imagination. The repressed experiences may come to life as an artistic creation of fictional characters and events. In "A Hunger Artist" the imaginary – one might say – refusal of food refers to Kafka's childhood, marked by emotional starvation. "The Metamorphosis" of the protagonist into an insect-like creature causes rejection and hostility among his family. It is a metaphor depicting the disastrous consequences of revealing the real 'self', which has been suppressed by the snugly fitting false self. Understanding of Kafka's literary works became possible through analysis of his letters, where Miller searched for the truth about the early-childhood realm. For instance, "Letters to Felice" are the key to deciphering "The Castle": Kafka's futile efforts to communicate with his fiancée can be interpreted as a reflection of lack of understanding that was imprinted his childhood.

Fantasy or elucidation ?

If we perceive art as a creative articulation of the painful experiences dwelling in one's subconscious, it is hardly conceivable that a child, whose needs for acceptance, love, affection, respect, expressing feelings, thoughts and desires are met, could grow up to create paintings so deeply touching and full of emotional tension. However, in most societies, the upbringing of a child is commonly performed merely as an exercise of authority.

It is probable that Beksiński's emotional alienation from his family might have been the driving force behind his work, which is perceived as enigmatic and is often misunderstood.

INTERPRETATION OF SELECTED PAINTINGS BY BEKSINSKI

Each time Beksiński's paintings come to my attention, I experience the feeling of psychological death. Surprisingly, as a child, he was deeply moved by Bocklin's "Isle of the Dead" that became for him a subject of contemplation.

A recurring theme in Beksinski's work from the 'fantastic period' is the frail silhouette of a child. In the first painting a feeble, fragile human being attempts to lighten an obscure pathway, leading through a glen-like lane of monstrous monks.



FIGURE 1 1972/DG-2466.

An evident overscaling of their figures resembles the position the overpowering adults hold in a child's world. It may also be a metaphorical portrayal of the emotional perspective from which children experience their reality. Both the unsettling visages of hooded skulls and the dark, monochromatic coloration of the painting only add to the overwhelming sense of petrifying fear, horror and helplessness.

Another painting introduces us to a secluded, mysterious location, restricted by a stone wall.



FIGURE 2 1971.

What seems to be the only way out is blocked by a giant face of stone with eyes wide open. In the foreground there is a colossal yellow mask and a figure who is probably praying (or meditating) with the aid of beads. What strikes us the most in this picture, however, is an emaciated human being, stranded in his repeated yet miserable efforts to struggle free from the fortified place, eventually falling to the ground in a tragic gesture of futility and surrender.

Yet another painting presents a tiny, inert, lifeless figure with thin, dangling legs that intensify the sense of weakness.



FIGURE 3 1972/DG-2241.

It is held by a preposterous creature of hominal flesh but with a reptile-like head that makes the hybrid devoid of humanity. But it is the lifeless creature that draws our attention, forming a compositional and chromatic centre, due to the application of the dominant colour red and the appropriate use of grotesque proportional imbalance. Thus, it becomes the focal point of hidden meanings and contexts. All of the three paintings seem to retell the story of a child's feelings and desires that were deprived of any sense of individuality, because of an adult's approach in perceiving the young as an extension of self. They show emblematically the power of parents' authority, beginning with Beksiński's compulsory activities in childhood up until his father's refusal to allow his son to pursue the studies of his dreams.

Zdzisław Beksiński was born into a distinguished family with long standing contributions to the town of Sanok. He was an only child, always neatly dressed and with impeccable behaviour, he envied those grimy and dirty children who were allowed to run around all day long in the yard with laughter and fun. His upbringing was more in line with

his parents' imagined desires than with his own childhood needs and wants. His father, with the best of intentions to foster the comprehensive development of his only son, sent him to piano lessons and tennis, which the boy strongly disliked. There is a voluminous list of activities that Beksiński was forced to undertake as a child, against his wishes: apart from piano and tennis lessons, there were morning exercises and bathing in the river San (come rain or shine) and acolyte courses. He once told his father "he would like the first bomb that ever drops to smash that goddamned piano" (Grzebałkowska, 2014, p. 12). He used to pray for something to happen, so he wouldn't have to serve at mass every Sunday (Grzebałkowska, 2014, p. 13). When entering university, one of the decisive moments in his life, Beksiński did not follow his heart (he dreamed of film school in Łódź) but was forced by his pragmatic father to continue the family tradition by studying architecture (Banach, 2005, p. 34). It didn't even occur to the boy to revolt against this pressure. Just how deeply he was affected by his father's plans for him can be judged from Beksiński's confession, that was written many years later, not long before his death: "I generally know little about cinema. It used to be different, but then when I gave up my dream to become a film director I completely lost interest in cinema" (Śnieg-Czaplewska, 2005, p. 26). In 1960 during the Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in Poland, the exhibited works of Beksiński drew the particular attention of the president of the AICA and at the same time, the director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. He offered Beksiński a half-year scholarship in the USA. It would seem that standing at the gates of artistic paradise, every obstacle might be overcome. Beksiński did not accept the offer, amongst the reasons for his decision, naming the fact that he did not have a second pair of shoes or pants and his family situation (Banach, 2007, pp. 30-33). The truth is, that he was frightened by the expectations put on him as well as his situation of dependency. It was for the same reasons that Beksiński also broke a contract with Peter Dmochowski, a collector and art dealer.

His paintings are full of horrifying elements that terrify us. But for the painter it was the mechanism by which he transferred his inner visions into an image and locked them up. Was there another route for Beksiński to express his subconscious; was there another way to express powerlessness, helplessness, loneliness? Have we not received the manifestation of his world, which had become strange in the process of becoming inhuman and therefore ultimately appearing absurd? According to Beksiński it is so: „No, Beksiński: Back to work! Convert your daily portion of anything into anything". "I always had and still have only bad thoughts". "The error in my resume was that I was born. (...) The World is the candies, which have been invaded by the worms. Attracts yet at the

same time fills with disgust“ (Śnieg-Czaplewska, 2005, p. 125, 67, 27). He never studied film direction that he had dreamt about. He never resumed any sports he used to do in childhood.

When Beksinski took up painting, he did so to express fear. One of his works depicts a monstrous, deformed head, devouring hordes of spiders crowding into its mouth.



FIGURE 4 1970/DG-3399.

The horror in its eyes leads us to conclude that it must have somehow been forced into this revolting act. This constraint might possibly be a camouflaged enunciation of the obsessive - compulsive disorder that haunted Beksiński from his early years. Even the sight of the smallest spider triggered uncontrollable fits of hysteria (Śnieg-Czaplewska, 2005, p. 62). One of his major obsessions was the thought of somebody stuffing spoonfuls of spiders into his mouth (Grzebałkowska, 2014, p. 75) The roots of these neuroses, according to Alice Miller, can be found in psychical enslavement in the infantile years and being deprived of the possibility to express rapid, spontaneous feelings (Miller, 1991, p. 301) awakened by traumatic experiences. Indeed, Beksiński was brought up in a regime of tempering emotions: “a man does not cry or demonstrate any feelings” (Grzebałkowska, 2014, p. 12). He was a reserved, inhibited boy who never laughed or fooled around.

The last of the selected paintings shows a woman standing astride, with hands raised high.



FIGURE 5 1981/DG-2457.

There is also a head tangled in the wrinkles of her dress and the stretched out hand of another character. In a letter to a friend Beksiński confessed: "As a child I dreaded the thought of falling asleep, the thought of what I would have to go through (Grzebałkowska, 2014, p. 17). What he feared most was: a phantasma of a woman who sat on a boy's chest and the Holy Mother descending from the wall and placing herself astride his face, which obviously made him suffocate (Grzebałkowska, 2014, p. 16). The female effigy in the painting might refer to the second image or a combination of them both. The depiction of the scene from a worm's eye view may suggest the perspective of a child who experienced these night terrors. The seventy-year-old artist admitted that his "memories from childhood never filled [him] with nostalgia, on the contrary. (...) he damned didn't like himself. He continually felt inferior to others: weaker, less handsome, cowardly, shy, no muscles, in a word an ass" (Grzebałkowska, 2014, p. 10).

The grotesque and the depths of the subconscious

By applying the aesthetic quality of the grotesque (which in the act of degeneration always stops at the stage of elementary similarity) to Beksiński's paintings, is it not the case that we shall receive a manifestation of the world, which has become alienated in the process of becoming inhuman and therefore ultimately appears absurd? Is this grotesque language a peculiar way to discover the 'real' bottom of transforming reality? In this almost neurotic escape into deformation, the creator does not stop at the external physical nature of distortion, but also exposes the state of our mental disturbances. The message of the grotesque comes to the aid of our fear, frustration generated by moral, social, aesthetic restrictions. A grotesque look at art is the view from the inaccessible, cavernous depths of the subconscious. It is connected with the deep structures of works of art, which at first glance are not obvious. Some researchers perceive in this kind of message "the epitome of extreme pessimism, a cosmic frown, an expression of the anguished soul" (Głowiński, 2003., p. 56).

Neither Kafka nor Beksiński had they realized that they were revealing the traumatic reality of the early years of their lives would have permitted exhibitionism of this kind. But because the mechanism of expulsion is a defence mechanism, an attempt to deal with the unbearable truth is achieved by erasing memories. Recipients will share the belief that earth-shattering descriptions in Kafka's works such as "The Castle" or "The Trial" as well as the similarly disturbing paintings by Beksiński are the product of the specific imagination of these artists. However, the content of their works come from the depths of their subconscious where traumatic, authentic experiences are stored and it is also the subconscious of the receiver that registers them. This is why Beksiński's work is a subject of fascination and fulfils the role of a mirror for so many adolescents undergoing psychological revisions of childhood traumas. But these young people might rest assured „that what they find in their intimate, inner world might not be madness“. (Miller, 1991, p. 272).

REFERENCES

- Banach, W. (2007). *Między Warholem a Beksińskim: antypody kultury*. [Between Warhol and Beksinski: antypodes of culture]. Gorlice: Muzeum Historyczne w Sanoku, P.W. DINARD.
- Banach, W. (2005). *Zdzisław Beksiński w Muzeum Historycznym w Sanoku*. [Zdzisław Beksinski in Historical Museum in Sanok]. *Sanok*.

- Freud, Z. (1991). *Poeta i fantazjowanie*. [The relation of the poet to daydreaming.], *Dostojewski i ojcobójstwo*. [Dostoyevsky and parricide.] In K. Pospiszył. Zygmunt Freud – człowiek i dzieło. [Sigmund Freud - a man and his works.] Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków : Ossolineum.
- Freud, S. (2000). *Leonarda da Vinci wspomnienia z dzieciństwa*. [Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood.] In *Poza zasadą przyjemności*. [Beyond the pleasure principle.] Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Głowiński, M. (Ed.) (2003). *Groteska*. [Grotesque]. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria.
- Grzebałkowska, M. (2014). *Beksińscy: portret podwójny*. [Beksińscy: dual portrait]. Kraków: Znak.
- Miller, A. (1991). *Mury milczenia. Cena wyparcia urazów dzieciństwa*. [The walls of silence.] Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Śnieg-Czaplewska, L. (2005). *BEX@. Korespondencja mailowa ze Zdzisławem Beksińskim*. [e-Mail with Zdzisław Beksiński.] Warszawa: PIW.

Corresponding author at: Beata Sokolowska-Smyl, Faculty of Fine Arts, Maria Curie Skłodowska University, 2b al. Kraśnicka St., 20-718 Lublin, Poland.
E-mail: beata.soko@gmail.com