

## CHAPTER 9

# The Aesthetics of Suffering or Being Enchanted by Van Gogh's Ear

*Andrej Démuth, Slávka Démuthova*

**Abstract:** The paper focuses on an analysis of the aesthetic appeal of suffering in the visual arts and literature with special regard to the problem of self-harm and its visual representation. The text is based on the assumption that suffering is part of our everyday life. However, the way it is expressed may lead to something that is not everyday – it is addressed to others – to try to change their perceptions and actions. On the contrary, self-torture or self-sacrifice is, in principle, considered to be uncommon, and their temporal domain is rather non-everydayness. This non-everydayness has attracted some attention from the days of Attis, through Christ, to the ear of van Gogh. Although self-harm and self-torture may and often have in principle a hidden and intimate character, they are nevertheless addressed to a certain audience that is supposed to see them and whom they affect. The paper considers selected reasons for the aesthetic appeal of (self-) suffering and focuses on the visual rhetoric of bodily self-harm as a means to make the inner world of the individual visible. It analyses some forms of self-harm, along with their aesthetic presentation in everyday life, as well as in an artistic environment. The authors thus aim to clarify the attractiveness of the suffering that is displayed as well as the various forms of the aesthetics of suffering and self-harm, which has both historical and modern forms.

**Keywords:** Self-harm, Suffering, Aesthetics, Kintsugi, van Gogh

### 1 Suffering in Art

Pain and suffering are undoubtedly an integral part of our day-to-day lives and almost everyone experiences them. We tend to shy away from pain rather than seeking it out, and we look for various ways to avoid it, or – if it does occur – not to feel it. Yet, in art, the situation is usually reversed. Pain and hardship are frequently used in artistic renderings and are a way for the artist to reach their audience. There are several examples of artworks that depict pain and suffering, starting with the

ancient myths and depictions of hardship (e.g. Attis, Prometheus, or the birth of tragedy as a dramatic genre), through the pain and suffering of the journeys and trials of the ancient heroes or heroes from the Middle Ages – especially, for example, the pain of Christ (e.g. Grünewald's paintings) and his followers, of martyrs and penitents, through the various paintings by Memling and Bosch with depictions of suffering in hell (based on motifs from Dante's description) to various forms of torture, depictions of sadism and satanism, or a penchant for cruelty; but also personal suffering due to the loss of a loved one, guilt, anxiety and depression (e.g. the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, the drowning of Ophelia, etc., Dürer's *Melancholia*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*), to modern expressions of suffering, which are represented by, for example, *The Scream* by Munch, the works of Dalí (e.g. *The Face of War*) or Francis Bacon. What all these works of art mainly share is their expressive and non-traditional portrayal of something which somehow naturally forms a part of our everyday lives (pain and suffering). However, these artworks render it in a non-traditional and uncommon way. So, where is the magic, the attractiveness and the charm in the artistic depiction of pain and suffering? Is it only the way in which they are depicted and their non-traditional context?

One answer to this question is the assumption that artworks that are tragic and depict pain speak to us through their ability to touch on our empathy and sympathy. Experience shows that when we encounter situations in which someone else experiences deep emotions, most people are able to detect this emotional state and very often sympathise with the feelings they perceive in the individual or individuals. The reason is that people are social beings, not only in Aristotle's understanding, but also from a Darwinian perspective. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1972), Darwin showed that the experience of various somatic states, including emotions, is of great importance to humans and other social animals. Emotions play an important role, not only in the sense that they make certain, very important, contents from the environment of Antonio Damasio's somatic markers available to us (Damasio 1994; in a different context Husserl 2009; Démuth 2019), but especially as this experience is manifested externally, which means that the experience does not trap the individual in the world of their feelings, but rather the opposite: an important part of the emotional message is devoted to others, not only to themselves. The reason for this mainly lies in the evolutionary advantage of this behaviour.

The somatic state experienced by an individual is not only an expression of the optimisation of the body of the organism in terms of the prepared reaction (Ekman and Friesen 1975), but it is also expressed outwardly, which makes us 'readable'. Anger is a sign of being ready to attack and is closely linked with an expression of intimidation or a warning to the other person to stop their irritating behaviour. Conversely, a smile is an expression of openness, of being relaxed and 'the truce of weapons' (the weapon being our teeth – we reveal them as a way of showing that we do not intend to use them), although this could be an insult in certain contexts. The outward expression of emotions encourages the possible cooperation between individuals, to achieve a higher number of overall benefits as a consequence of the cooperative behaviour (Démuth 2013, 2019). At the same time, it is a means for the creation of connections and fostering of relationships (as a form of reward and punishment). In this spirit, for example Michael Trimbe (2012) speaks of crying and tears, Edmund T. Rolls (2005) of the social aspect of emotions and Nico Fridja and Batja Mesquite (1994) generally mention the social role of emotions.

There are many ways in which we learn to understand the emotional expressions of others. It is highly demanding to comprehend some expressions, considering how complex, mixed and socially conditioned they are. On the other hand, other expressions seem to have evolutionary origins, and how we understand them is determined by species-specific sedimented experience. Giacomo Rizzolatti's theory of mirroring neurons can also be interpreted in this spirit. Based on a series of trials and observations, Rizzolatti and Laila Craighero (2004) concluded that we have a specific type of neurons which mirror the activity of the observed subject. This manifests itself, for example, in the phenomenon that when we see someone with their tongue out, the neurons associated with the control of poking our tongue out are activated. If we see a frowning face, we also tend to frown. The existence of these neurons is genetically determined, and they have evolved because they facilitate the understanding of certain social activities. Therefore, the sight of a sad face activates the plethora of brain cells and centres that are associated with sadness, starting with the activation of the mirroring neurons. This may be why it is usually quite naturally expected that the sight of a person who is suffering will provoke sympathy and an effort to participate, not only for social reasons. Understanding the emotions of others (empathy) allows us to share emotions – to sympathise (Démuth 2019). The link between the sensory and motor centres in the brain is bilateral. As demonstrated by

Daniel Kahneman (2011), the activation of facial muscles in the specific configuration of an emotional expression may activate the experience of the feeling itself. Seeing or imagining suffering leads to sympathy, which forms a bond between the perceived and the perceiver.

The second neurocognitive theory used in the interpretation of the attractiveness of suffering and therefore the possible relationship between liking and pain is the theory of common neural centres (especially the amygdala, pallidum, and nucleus accumbens) and pathways. Pain and pleasure use the same dopamine and opioid systems (the reward system), and as such operate along similar principles. From Spinoza or Descartes, it has been assumed that these feelings are in opposition to each other (or are the opposite poles of the same continuum), or that they at least work in opposition. But there are also theories suggesting a completely different 'architecture' of suffering and pain. One way or another, most types of pain activate the same structures and systems, which are active when we like something or when we experience pleasant feelings. This partially explains why it is possible to combine pleasure and pain in several, not only masochist, feelings. Suffering and pain may excite us, especially if we do not directly experience them, but only observe them in someone else. What they especially have in common is the rise in excitement and tension and the attention that is drawn by the experience itself.

An example of this understanding is the analogy of the beauty of pain with the attractiveness of fear and anxiety, as described by Rudolf Starý in his essay *Medúsa v novější době kamenné* (Medusa in the Modern Stone Age, 1994). Starý realises that according to Greek mythology, one of the Gorgons, Medusa, had such a terrifying and horrendous face that anyone who saw her turned to stone in terror. The only way to kill her was to cut off her head, just as Perseus did as per his instructions from Pallas Athena. Not only did she tell him how to do it, but she also gave him a metal shield and a sword to use to do it. The terror of seeing Medusa with his own eyes would kill him. Therefore, the only way to see her safely was to look at her reflection in the shield given to him by the goddess of wisdom. This may be why many people adore the fear and dread that come from otherwise safe situations. We have been listening to terrifying fairy tales since we were children; watching thrillers or horror movies we experience a certain tension, but mostly we are safe and have a real certainty that we are not physically in danger. We enjoy watching terrifying scenes and illusionary danger. Yet, we do not enjoy undergoing real danger and risk.

The situation is similar in respect to pain and suffering. If we feel it indirectly or if we have it under control, it does not have to represent a danger or something undesirable, quite the opposite. It draws attention, it activates, but does not kill. It is the sight of Medusa's face through the shield of Pallas Athena. At the same time, it is interesting that it is difficult to tear your gaze away from pain and suffering, horror and fright, just as from the appearance of Medusa. Although ugliness and suffering are not usually enjoyable, the terror of their reflection does not directly harm us. The tabloid press and other media are well-aware of this fact and exploit our never-ending interest in, and the attractiveness of, the unhappiness, pain and suffering of others. Even readers who seek these tragedies realise this.

We are – as Marlow said last night, quoting Damien Hirst – a ‘trauma culture’, expecting to watch an artist’s suffering play out on canvas or stage or screen – and relating to them through it (Barnett 2008).

The reason we are sensitive to the pain and suffering of others lies in the fact that they may be giving us an important signal – they might signal danger. If someone is injured, we could be injured too. Hence, we do not usually ignore someone crying, tears or pain. A pain-soaked, screwed up face does not resemble its bearer, quite the opposite – it is the face of Medusa and is intended to communicate something unusual and uncommon. As such, it points to the extraordinary situation of the sufferer.

The suffering of others thus draws attention to our own fragility and vulnerability, and not only in the Heideggerian sense that only the awareness of our own death or injury reveals to us the limitations of our own existence. The perception of the suffering of others also draws our attention to our coexistence in the sense of being with others. Van Gogh’s madness charms us by its extraordinary nature, but also by a certain universal nature of the principle behind it. It is an unusual act, regardless whether it was the result of a failed romance, creative madness, the symptoms of drug withdrawal, depression, or schizophrenia. But equally, it is something that each of us could experience. All of us are occasionally unhappy, depressed, deceived or hurt. All of us know physical and mental suffering and hardship, which is why we are also concerned by the situation. But not everyone feels the intensity of the experience to the same extent; the experience does not lead all of us to take such a radical and unusual step as van Gogh. This makes him a unique example. And uniqueness is attractive.

According to certain theories, the suffering of artists such as Van Gogh, Goya, Ella Fitzgerald or Amy Winehouse is not only unique in its intensity but also in its specific nature. Some scholars even believe that the originality and artistic uniqueness of these important artists lies in their distinctive experience of their own hardships (Richardson et al. 2017). Although psychological and neuroanatomical studies may reveal certain specific links between the disorders or personality characteristics of individual artists, we believe that it was not the uniqueness of their perception and experience, but rather the originality and precision of their expression of those feelings and states that made them exceptional and glorious.

Winfried Menninghaus and his colleagues at the *Frankfurt Institute of Empirical Aesthetics* have, for a long time, been researching the role of pain, hardship and suffering in the artistic process and in the perception of art. They found out that the greater the number of domains an artwork affects, the greater the effect it has on us. In other words: art strikes us not only by being well-crafted and well-presented – beautiful and original – but also by touching our deepest and existential emotions and feelings. “Sadness and joy turned out to be the two preeminent emotions involved in episodes of being moved” (Menninghaus et al. 2015). Thus, works that produced mixed emotions, or rather touched one’s perception through more than one mental domain, left a stronger aesthetic impression on the observer. In addition, they also found out that so-called negative emotions, which include pain and suffering, play an important role not only in drama (far beyond tragedy), but they are significantly more effective than any other emotion in art in general. The basic explanation for this statement is that “negative emotions have been shown to be particularly powerful in securing attention, intense emotional involvement, and high memorability – and hence precisely in what artworks strive for” (Menninghaus et al. 2017a, p. 1).

It may sound like a paradox, but the reason why we enjoy art that evokes mixed or mostly negative emotions, according to cognitive scientists, is that they impact us in a deeper and long-lasting way. Terror, fear, pain, or sadness shock us and force us to pay more attention to the motif. But being shocked or disturbed is not enough to make us like something. Quite the opposite, this may often represent an obstacle to liking. If we fear something, if it scares us or triggers disgust, our natural reaction is to divert our attention and run to something that is more suitable and that reassures us. However, Menninghaus et al. (2017b) point out that negative emotions provoked by a piece of art only work if

we maintain a distance and they remain a reflection in the legendary shield of Pallas Athena. They warn us of a problem, but do not deter us. On the contrary, they allow us to see the beauty in ‘terrible’ and ‘painful’ things. We do not wish to contemplate whether this beauty stems from the suffering that the artist must withstand and overcome. Neither do we intend to interpret why the symbol of Pegasus, a legendary mythical horse and the symbol of poetry, was born from the blood or the severed head of Medusa. In the second part of this essay, we wish to pay attention to the paradox of the relationship between self-harm and its aesthetics from the perspective of the self-harmer.

## 2 The Aesthetics of Self-harm

Physical self-harm is a surprisingly common form of maladaptive behaviour. Scientists even speak of a certain pandemic of this behaviour.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary Western culture, it is possible to identify fashion styles or trends that utilise the connection between beauty and pain or suffering, such as the use of piercings and tattoos (which were originally manifestations of a subculture), through various beauty techniques (in the past, these included corsets, leg deformities, today they mostly include surgical procedures) to fashionable styles such as Emo or Gothic, based on the promotion of emotions such as sadness, inner pain, depression and suffering. Non-suicidal self-harming behaviour has occurred in all periods, even in the past, but scientific literature did not pay adequate attention to it, even though particular traces of it can be identified in historical art.

What is remarkable from the point of view of an uninvolved observer is not the connection between beauty and pain that the subject must often overcome in order to achieve beauty, but rather the motives that lead the subject to aestheticize suffering and pain – to express them in a way which is supposed to be attractive.

Van Gogh’s action in severing a part of his ear is often attributed to various different motives. But whether it was due to his dispute with Gauguin, an attempt to cope with the loss of Brother Theo, or any other personal hardship, it is clear that it was a shocking gesture by the painter

<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons for the increasing prevalence of self-harming behaviour is its accessibility through media. In the 1990s, most self-harming individuals experienced their own self-harm first and only then met someone with a similar problem, while in the first decade of this century (mainly due to the Internet) the opposite is true and most people first learned about self-harm in the media and only then did they attempt this behaviour themselves (Favazza and Conerio 1989; Favazza 2011).

to express something that he was unable to adequately express in any other way. Similarly, Dalí's excesses, caused by his painful love for Gala, could be perceived as expressing what he felt, but could not put into words.

In its essence, self-harm in humans is a paradox. In most cases of self-harm, this paradox is enhanced by the fact that they occur on the threshold of private and public. Some acts of self-harm are meant to be a scream aimed at someone else. And since it is a scream, it is intended to be loud, but not articulated in a normal way. It is intended to express what cannot be pronounced. This is why Van Gogh does not keep the piece of his ear, but leaves it in a brothel, wrapped in a tissue, with a note. Hence, self-harm is often not aimed at the person who is harmed, but rather at the harmer, who does not see that someone is suffering as a consequence of their actions or inaction. When performing this type of gestures, it is very important how the expression of self-sacrifice is arranged.

Thus, self-harming behaviour creates its own distinct aesthetics. The essence of this aesthetics is to make the biggest possible impression on the emotions of the percipient. The problem with some forms of self-harming behaviour is that it does not have just to be a reckless appeal and a gesture to someone else. A more frequent aspect of this behaviour is that it is done in private and secretly. Cutting, burning our own skin, tearing our hair or hitting ourselves all lead to hidden injuries. They are hidden under our clothing and if they are revealed, the sufferer has a believable explanation, which conceals the true origin of the injury. So why do they suffer it if it is not supposed to be seen by others?

One reason for self-harm is the transformation of mental suffering into physical pain. Mental pain tends to be unbearable because it is not under our control. It is often vague, uncompromising, or obsessive, it can be controlled for a while by another activity, but it usually returns and often with the same, if not greater pressure. However, this is not true of the physical pain that the individual controls. Not only are they ready for it, but thanks to various defence mechanisms, the physical pain caused by cutting, for example, not only blanks out the mental suffering, but thanks to its own endorphins and opiates, it also provides a considerable amount of relief. Moreover, the individual has it more or less under control – its intensity, location and duration. Thus, in addition to relief, physical pain has another phenomenologically important aspect – it allows the pain hidden in the soul, in the depths of the body, out and allows it to surface – allows it to be embodied and thus grasped. It is no

coincidence that many are relieved to see blood flowing from their wounds, as if their pain and tension were washed away, as if the wound was opening the way ‘to’ and ‘from’ the deeper levels of our existence. And this is also reflected in the aestheticization and expression of suffering in scenes that are ready for it (e.g., Tumblr). We often find a combination of innocence and purity in contrast with blood or open or healed wounds. These two moments are the key in the symbolism of self-harm.

Open wounds or blood symbolise relief from pain, its sharing, the release of tension. They are a scream and provide an insight into the deeper levels of experience. They are a means of revealing the inner world, the transition from pain to evidence (Alderton 2018; Jamison 2014). At the same time, they leave scars, which permanently demonstrate suffering (Jamison 2014), one’s own past and what the individual has gone through. In the spirit of the Japanese art of *Kintsugi*, every wound is a place where fragility and strength meet: fragility resembling vulnerability and strength stemming from the fact that the wound, after it is pulled back together, is stronger than that which has not had to resist anything. Hiding imperfections by touching them up so that they cannot be seen is thus a kind of deception, against which stands the ideal that one should acknowledge one’s own imperfections and fragility, which uplifts the individual even more. This is why the art of *Kintsugi* uses a mixture of glue and gold instead of clear glue, in order to highlight the lines of healed damage. Clearly, damage reveals fragility and harm and evokes a feeling of great remorse and pain over the loss of something valuable (*Mottainai*). On the other hand, a scar stems from the ideal of *Wabi-sabi* – the beauty found in imperfections and in disturbing something original and untouched.

Not everyone who commits self-harm is aware of this Japanese ideal and not everyone reflects on the beauty in being damaged. However, what they understand is that the scar allows them to repeatedly experience the associated pain, as if it were a reflection in Perseus’s shield. This repeated experience, now perceived with a certain distance, again allows individuals to feel relief from the flow of pain or tension, but also to see the beauty in suffering, its reasons, or in the process used to overcome it.

### 3 The Attractiveness of Suffering

The attractiveness of pain and suffering in art is linked to the attractiveness and attention drawn by pain in real life. Unusual forms of

pain (e. g., crucifixion, infernal torments etc.), their unusual causes or ways to deal with them, attract our attention because in a certain way, they also concern us. They remind us of the past, when we have experienced pain and suffering, which is why we empathise and sympathise with those who are suffering. We repeatedly experience it, but this time from a safe distance. The depicted pain draws our attention to everything that signals it, while a safe distance allows us to experience even the tiniest nuances of the artistic representation of human suffering. The presence of a painful impulse brings our past to life, creates new bonds and seals our personal history with the contemporary experience.

Thus, representations of pain touch our presence. The emotions they evoke here and now are the evidence of reality and the present. A feeling of pain is an immediate warning of danger or the vulnerability of the subject. It warns us where harm may occur. However, the emotions that trigger pain are more complex – they reveal to us that we are fragile and destructible beings. They also emphasise that contact with ourselves or with the world that sometimes forces us to pay our dues in the form of suffering. The suffering depicted is therefore only a reminder of our own finality and impermanence through someone else. It awakens the part of us that we share. Sympathising thus creates a truthfulness, which connects us to other beings across time and space.

Observing the depicted pain equally manifests a possible future. We may see potential self-sacrifice in the depicted pain and we may also see that the value of being lies in overcoming obstacles. Nevertheless, a face filled with pain will finally return to its original form, the open wound will heal and the grief will disappear, although the wounds should be visible and golden, as an important memento of the value of life. Therefore, pain is the affirmation of the price and the value of being that we taste in both our lives and art.

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