

From Inner Shadows to Collective Trauma: The Evolution of Fear in Modern and Contemporary Art

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Abstract. This paper examines the evolution of fear as both an aesthetic and social phenomenon in modern and contemporary art. Tracing its transformation from inner psychological experience to collective trauma, the study analyzes how artists have visualized fear across different historical moments—from Francisco Goya's critique of social irrationality, to Edvard Munch's existential anxiety, to Francis Bacon's depiction of human fragility. It further explores how Damien Hirst, Louise Bourgeois, and Anselm Kiefer expanded fear into the realms of consumer culture, gender relations, and historical memory. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Kierkegaard, Freud, Kristeva, and Foucault, the paper argues that fear functions as a critical lens through which art exposes the instability of human existence and the contradictions of modern civilization. In its socialized form, fear becomes not merely an emotion but an ethical and philosophical practice—an artistic means of confronting violence, mortality, and collective memory in an age of globalization and spectacle.

Keywords: Fear, Modern and Contemporary Art, Trauma, Collective Memory, Existentialism

1. Introduction

Fear, as one of humanity's most universal yet ineffable emotions, has always been a significant theme in artistic creation. From ancient cave paintings to modern installation art, artists have continuously attempted to capture and express this psychological state, deeply rooted in both individual and collective consciousness, through visual language. Fear is not only related to personal spiritual experience but is also closely connected to society, history, and culture. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard stated, anxiety and fear are "the shadow of human freedom and existence." Therefore, studying fear in art not only helps us understand the inner world of artists but also reveals the spiritual landscape of societies across different eras.

In the field of art history, the expression of fear has undergone a transformation from inward-looking to externalized. During the Industrial Revolution, artists gradually began to channel personal emotions like inner fear into their individual creations. Following the Information Revolution, artists expanded the expressive dimensions of fear further, moving from individual inner anxiety, to the absurdity of human existence, and on to collective trauma within social history. They no longer confined themselves to personal psychological experiences but transformed fear into

social critiques of consumer culture, gender relations, and historical memory through new materials, forms, and contexts.

This paper aims to explore the evolutionary trajectory of "fear" in art history, focusing on analyzing the shift from individual inner fear to social fear. By comparing works from different periods, we can reveal the constant reshaping of fear in art, thereby establishing it as a crucial entry point for understanding human existence, social contradictions, and historical trauma.

2. Fear as inner experience

Within the developmental context of art history, fear was initially often regarded as an internal psychological experience. Artists projected their own experiences of anxiety, loneliness, and pain onto the canvas, giving visual form to those ineffable emotions. In these early stages, fear was not yet seen as a broad social issue but was rooted in the predicaments of individual existence. However, these "personalized" fears, precisely because of their profound resonance with the human condition, gradually broke through the confines of the private sphere, eventually evolving into enduring cultural symbols.

After the Industrial Revolution, in the 19th and 20th centuries, artists began to constantly explore their inner fears through artistic forms; the art of fear also became a way for artists to review their own lives and express their inner worlds. The first part of this paper will explore the artistic expression of inner fear by artists post-Industrial Revolution through the study of three artists: Francis Bacon, Edvard Munch, and Francisco Goya.

This section will examine how these three artists concretized their innermost fears into artistic imagery through lived experience and formal innovation. Their works collectively reveal the complexity of fear across three levels: the individual, the existential, and the social. Through this creative practice, they not only laid the foundation for understanding "inner fear" in art but also constructed the historical and intellectual groundwork for the subsequent socialization of fear in modern and contemporary practice.

2.1. Francisco Goya: the inner fear of society

Francisco Goya (1746–1828) stands as one of the most incisive critical masters in modern art history; his life trajectory resembles a microcosm of Spain's political and social turmoil. He personally witnessed the corruption of the Bourbon monarchy, the bloody massacres of the Napoleonic invasion, and the tyrannical rule of the Inquisition. The theme of social fear running through his work sets him in sharp contrast to Francis Bacon, who focused on the absurdity of human nature, and Edvard Munch, who concentrated on the pain of familial breakdown. Goya's art confronts fear at the social and historical levels, warning that when power becomes corrupt and religious fanaticism prevails, irrationality and violence will ultimately dominate human destiny. His works are therefore filled with brutal honesty—they do not deliberately avoid the viewer but strike directly at the soul with shocking imagery. Goya's inner fear was inseparable from his era: having personally experienced socio-political upheavals, his works are imbued with darkness, despair, and critique. Personal circumstances intensified this anxiety: after becoming deaf due to illness in middle age, Goya gradually withdrew from the world, growing increasingly fearful of the irrational forces governing human behavior. Over time, his art shifted from flattering court portraits to profoundly critical works.

The pinnacle of this artistic transformation is the series of Black Paintings created in his late years, arguably the most direct visual depictions of social fear in Western art history. In his famous

etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, he inscribed the warning: "The sleep of reason produces monsters." As Fred Licht noted, in *Saturn Devouring His Son*, Saturn's frenzied eyes and cannibalistic violence become "a metaphor for power devouring the future." [1] *Witches' Sabbath* depicts a demonic black goat presiding over a frenzied ritual of deformed figures, giving concrete form to collective irrationality in a chilling visual presentation. As Janis Tomlinson stated, these images reveal Goya's profound anxiety about the collective psyche: when reason collapses, society descends into an abyss of madness and violence. If Goya revealed humanity's inner fear of society under the collapse of reason, then Munch and Bacon further internalized this fear—the former presenting individual existential anxiety in the form of psychological trauma, the latter probing the limits of human consciousness through bodily distortion and physical agony. Together, the three constitute a modern spectrum of fear spanning the "social—psychological—existential" dimensions.

2.2. Edvard Munch: the fear of loss

Edvard Munch's (1863–1944) artistic creation was deeply influenced by personal trauma, a fear directly stemming from the loss of loved ones. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was five, and his sister passed away from illness a few years later. Plagued by chronic illness since childhood, Munch constantly suffered from severe anxiety and recurrent depression. Reflecting on these experiences, he once wrote: "Disease, insanity, and death were the black angels that kept watch over my cradle." This shadow followed him throughout his life, making "the fear of loss" an eternal central theme in his art. It is against this background that his masterpiece *The Scream* was born, now one of the most shocking images of fear in the history of world art. The painting depicts a lone figure on a bridge, hands clasped to its face, its open mouth emitting a primal shriek. The blood-red sky in the background contrasts sharply with the turbulent landscape, as if the entire universe is convulsed by the figure's fear. At the end of the bridge, two indifferent figures recede into the distance, further highlighting the protagonist's helplessness and loneliness in the face of immense darkness. As critics have noted, "Munch's work transforms intensely private trauma into universal imagery. Reinhold Heller points out that Munch uses exaggerated Expressionist techniques to dissolve the boundaries between the figure and the environment, making fear itself seem to permeate the entire natural world." [2] In this way, Munch projects profound personal psychological experience onto a cosmic scale. His unique contribution lies in this transformation: starting from family tragedy, he elevates private pain into a universal state of human coexistence.

2.3. Francis Bacon: the fear of human nature

Francis Bacon's *Screaming Pope* series perfectly illustrates the artist's lifelong exploration of the "fear of human nature." Inspired by Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, Bacon strips the Pope, a symbol of authority, of his solemnity and majesty, recasting this sovereign of power as an embodiment of isolation and despair. The Pope figure, enclosed by vertical cage-like lines, appears oppressed by the cold architecture of the modern world. The dominant hues of purple and icy blue reinforce this sense of alienation, while the gaping mouth, rendered with thick paint and blurred brushstrokes, becomes, as David Sylvester stated, "the most tragic image of loneliness in modern art." [3] In Bacon's hands, the symbol of supreme power is no longer sacred and inviolable but is exposed in a state of fragility and vulnerability—precisely the portrayal of human nature itself.

Bacon's personal experiences profoundly shaped this artistic vision. Born in 1909 into a conflicted Irish family, he endured both his father's tyrannical brutality and his mother's emotional detachment. Plagued by asthma and stigmatized for his homosexuality, he deeply experienced the

pain of social marginalization during his upbringing. The horrors of World War II and the tensions of the Cold War later compounded his despair. These experiences ultimately condensed into three persistent themes: death, isolation, and nothingness, with his distorted bodily forms becoming the visual concretization of existential fear. As he himself declared: "We are meat, we are potential carcasses." This blunt statement articulates the core of his artistic view: fear does not stem from external threats but from the fate of death and decay inscribed within the human body itself. Scholars emphasize the extremity of the imagery in Bacon's art. Margaret Walters observed that by "tearing and twisting flesh into extreme images, he directly presents the horror of human existence in visual form." This explains why his paintings are both repellent and compelling: they force viewers to confront truths they would rather avoid. Bacon's work insists that no authority—not even the Pope himself—can escape the ultimate conditions of life: death, loneliness, and nothingness. Therefore, his art is both a personal confrontation with existential fear and an indictment of the fragility at the foundation of human existence.

2.4. "Transformation" of fear

In summary, artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, during the Industrial Revolution, used their personal life experiences as a starting point. Through formal innovation change and the externalization of emotion, they transformed "fear," this intimate psychology, into perceptible artistic language. Whether it was Goya's exposure of social violence and religious oppression, Munch's presentation of mental breakdown and lonely existence, or Bacon's revelation of the absurdity of human survival through distorted flesh, they all demonstrated, on different levels, the universality and complexity of inner fear. These works are no longer merely outlets for individual emotion but become testimonies to the spirit of the age—reflecting the profound tension between industrialization, modernity, and the crisis of the human spirit.

Through their explorations, fear transformed from a passive psychological state into an artistic motif with aesthetic and philosophical significance. It is both a fissure in self-awareness and a mirror of human civilization. It can be said that it was these artists, using pain as their medium, who revealed the "fragility of existence," providing rich spiritual soil for later modern and contemporary art. From this point on, fear no longer belonged solely to the individual's inner world but became a key thread for understanding the dilemmas of modern society, politics, and culture—heralding the historical turning point where fear moved from internal experience toward social symbolism.

3. From inner anxiety to collective fear

With the passage of time and the advent of the Information Revolution, the world became interconnected in unprecedented ways. The speed and breadth of information dissemination allowed for the resonance of emotional experiences among human individuals. The fear perceived by artists was no longer confined to the dark corners of individual psychology but gradually extended to the spiritual structure of society as a whole. As information disparities constantly diminished, making the resonance of human emotions possible, artistic creation shifted from an "internal expression of personal fear" to an examination of "social fear and collective anxiety."

This transformation signified not only an expansion of artistic themes but also revealed a change in the artists' self-positioning: they were no longer just soliloquists of emotion but became recorders and critics of the zeitgeist. From the mechanical alienation brought by industrialization to the spread of modern warfare, political violence, and media panic, fear was re-encoded in art as a social symptom, becoming a key clue for understanding the fragility of modern civilization. Thus, art

entered a new stage—fear was no longer merely the shadow of the individual psyche but a reflection and critique of social reality.

If early artists like Munch, Bacon, and Goya primarily expressed "inner fear" through personal experience and inner tremors, then, entering the modern and contemporary era, fear in art gradually broke through private boundaries, evolving into profound reflection on social, historical, and cultural structures. Modern society experienced the rise of consumerism, the expansion of globalization, the restructuring of gender relations, and the historical trauma of war and the Holocaust. These grand contexts meant that fear was no longer just a shadow of individual psychology but an unavoidable collective experience for the entire society.

The core of this artistic transformation lies in the fact that artists no longer merely expressed individual inner fear but, using new materials, forms, and contexts, transformed private emotions into symbols of social consciousness. In the context of the information and globalization age, fear gradually expanded from the hidden space of individual experience into a collective reflection on social structures, historical trauma, and cultural mechanisms.

For example, Damien Hirst confronts the theme of "death" with a shark preserved in formaldehyde, but within the cold display tank, death itself is transformed into a consumable spectacle, revealing contemporary society's numbness towards life and capital's manipulation of fear. Louise Bourgeois, in her giant spider *Maman*, sublimates childhood trauma into a public metaphor for maternity, family, and gender power structures, transforming individual memory into a shared symbol of social emotion. Simultaneously, Anselm Kiefer reconstructs the canvas using straw, lead, and ashes, making his works resemble scorched earth burned by war, symbolizing the continuation and memory of the Holocaust and historical trauma. His art elevates "fear" from a psychological experience to a field of historical-ethical reflection.

Thus, the meaning of fear in art is thoroughly reshaped: it is no longer an isolated emotion but becomes a kind of social energy—a medium for exposing mechanisms of power, memory, and violence. Artists participate in public discourse through visual means, making fear an important symbol for understanding the contemporary social-psychological ecology.

Therefore, this section will focus on these three modern and contemporary artists, exploring how they transform personal pain into symbolic representations of social structures and historical experiences in their creations. Through their works, we can see the continuous expansion of the semantics of fear in art: from the loneliness and anxiety of the inner world to critiques of consumer culture, gender relations, and historical disasters. This evolution not only reveals the continuity and transformation of the theme of fear in art history but also indicates that the mission of modern art is no longer confined to expressing the individual soul but must confront the dark side of society as a whole.

3.1. Damien Hirst: the fear of death and consumer culture

Damien Hirst (born 1965), a central figure in the Young British Artists (YBA) group, explores contemporary society's perception of death and how consumer culture influences this perception. Hirst, from a working-class background, showed an unusual sensitivity to death from an early age: "I am aware of the fact that I am going to die, and the only thing I want to do is live." This lifelong concern runs through almost all of his artistic work. The core of Hirst's artistic practice lies in the recognition that the human fear of death has been commodified in contemporary culture. Death, once a source of existential anxiety, is repackaged as a consumable visual spectacle. His art thus reveals the paradox of modern society: we attempt to "tame" death through exhibition and consumption, yet in the process, we intensify the very fear we sought to control. As Julian

Stallabrass pointed out, Hirst continues the exploration of existential fear initiated by artists like Francis Bacon, but through the logic of consumerism and the museum display format, he reconstructs the "individual's fear of death" into "society's control and consumption of death." [4] One of his most representative works, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), features a giant tiger shark suspended in a transparent vitrine filled with formaldehyde. The shark's open mouth and frozen predatory posture make it both a specimen and a threat. When facing this work, the viewer does not engage in detached scientific observation but experiences a complex psychological reaction: death seems distant and controlled, yet suffocatingly close. As art critic Robert Hughes stated, this work "turns death into a museum exhibit." In this way, Hirst transforms personal existential anxiety into a public discussion about death, consumerism, and spectacle.

3.2. Louise Bourgeois: the fear of family and childhood trauma

Louise Bourgeois's (1911–2010) giant sculpture *Maman* (1999), standing ten meters tall, is one of the most representative works of her artistic career. Her creation consistently revolves around childhood trauma, family relations, and gender power, and this colossal spider is the key work where she transforms personal fear into social symbol. In Bourgeois's depiction, the spider is both an embodiment of the mother—weaving, mending, nurturing, protecting—and, due to its steel-like limbs and immense scale, exudes a force of oppression and threat. As the artist herself said: "The Spider is an ode to my mother." Yet this ode harbors a deep contradiction—a desire for protection coupled with a fear of being consumed.

Art critic Lucy Lippard noted that *Maman* creates a "maternal paradox": she is both a sanctuary and a potential oppressor. Bourgeois was born into a Parisian family of tapestry restorers; her father's betrayal and her mother's early death plunged her into a long-term state of attachment and anxiety. The spider, a creature often associated with cunning, threat, and fear in Western culture, is reinterpreted in her art as a dual symbol: embodying both maternal labor, resilience, and reparative capacity, and metaphorizing the power imbalances and potential oppression within emotional relationships. She once stated plainly: "Art is a guarantee of sanity." For her, art was not only a means of self-healing from trauma but also a way to confront the contradictions of gender and power within social structures.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, *Maman* is the externalization of two emotional archetypes: the "absent mother" and "threatening sanctuary." As Donna Haraway suggested, Bourgeois's spider not only symbolizes maternity but also reveals "power and dependency relations on the social level." In this work, personal fear is amplified into a metaphor for social fear—the seemingly warm family bonds actually conceal structural inequality and oppression. When facing *Maman*, the viewer is not only awed by its monumental scale but also experiences, on a psychological level, the tension where maternal love and threat coexist.

Ultimately, *Maman* channels the artist's personal psychological trauma into a collective reflection on contemporary social issues like gender order. Through this giant spider, Bourgeois transforms private pain into public memory, making fear a social reality that the viewer must confront—that symbiosis of dependency, domination, and vulnerability latent within intimate relationships. It is an expression of family trauma, gender discrimination, and childhood trauma as social issues.

3.3. Anselm Kiefer: the fear of history and war

Anselm Kiefer (born 1945) was born amidst the ruins of post-war Germany. The devastation following the Nazi defeat immersed his childhood in rubble and war memories—experiences that profoundly shaped the themes of his artistic work. Kiefer's works often employ unconventional materials like straw, ash, lead, tar, and heavy impasto techniques, creating canvases with heavy textures, weathered and worn. Through this material expression, Kiefer confronts the crimes of German history and its lingering memory. As he stated: "History never ends, history is always present." The fear of historical catastrophe does not dissipate with time; it persistently haunts and shapes society.

The symbolic use of materials is central to Kiefer's practice. Straw symbolizes both the fragility of life and alludes to the remnants after burning; the toxicity and weight of lead bear the heavy shackles of history. These materials give disaster concrete form, transforming the canvas into a tangible field of memory, scorching like burnt earth. In *Nigredo* (1984), the cracked, black surface resembles ruins scorched by flames. In *Margarethe* (1981), Kiefer embedded straw into the canvas, alluding both to the golden-haired Margarethe in Paul Celan's *Death Fugue* and juxtaposing her with the victims of the Holocaust. These works are not simple memorials but reconstruct German guilt and atrocities through symbolism, refusing the comfort of forgetting.

Kiefer firmly resists any tendency towards "historical amnesia." Through the heavy materiality and violent visual imagery, he consistently places the Holocaust, war, and national crimes before the public eye. As Andreas Huyssen stated, Kiefer's artistic practice is a crucial cornerstone in constructing a "culture of memory," [5] revealing that the fear of historical trauma exists not only in the past but permeates the present. Art critic Donald Kuspit similarly noted that Kiefer's work "forces us to face the things we want to forget."

Kiefer ultimately transforms art into a field where memory and fear converge. By confronting the weight of history, he issues a call: trauma cannot be erased; only by facing it can society avoid repeating past mistakes. His artistic practice thus ensures that the fear of the past remains an active force shaping collective responsibility and historical consciousness.

3.4. The socialization of fear

In the field of contemporary art, the works of Damien Hirst, Louise Bourgeois, and Anselm Kiefer reveal a profound phenomenon: fear is no longer confined to individual psychology but is amplified and reshaped through art as a social mirror. Hirst transforms death into the absurd spectacle of consumer culture; Bourgeois sublimates childhood trauma into a symbol of gender power relations; Kiefer makes historical fear a scar in collective memory. The creative trajectories of these three artists collectively outline the metamorphosis of fear—from the pain of individual psychology, to the existential anxiety of the human condition, eventually evolving into the deep trauma inflicted by society and history.

Hirst, through clinically staged installations and the logic of consumption, reconstructs the existential human fear of death as a commodified experience. His formaldehyde-preserved shark not only confronts the immediacy of death but also exposes contemporary society's trick of attempting to "tame" death through spectacular exhibition, thereby highlighting the absurd paradox of a socialized death. Bourgeois, starting from her own family trauma, gives concrete form to the contradiction of maternal protection and oppression in *Maman* forcing viewers to recognize the power and fear latent within intimate family relationships. Kiefer turns his gaze to collective history,

using canvases built from straw, ash, and lead to recreate the shadows of the Holocaust and war, emphasizing that historical disaster remains deeply embedded in cultural memory and social fear.

This transformation also reveals the expanded mission of modern and contemporary art: it is committed not only to expressing the artist's personal anxiety but also to excavating the deep-seated fears rooted in society, history, and culture, thereby prompting viewers to confront collective dilemmas. In this sense, modern art effectively socializes fear, transforming it into a carrier of collective memory and public discourse. It marks both the deepening of fear as an artistic theme and the broadening of its scope, placing fear at the core of art's critical engagement with the nature of human existence.

4. Conclusion

Fear, as one of humanity's most universal yet ineffable emotions, runs consistently through the historical development of art. From primitive cave paintings to modern installations, artists have continuously used visual language to capture this psychological state deeply rooted in individual and collective consciousness. Fear belongs not only to the realm of individual spiritual experience but is also tightly interwoven with social structures, historical memory, and cultural order. As Kierkegaard stated, anxiety and fear are "the shadow of human freedom and existence." Therefore, the study of "fear" in art not only reveals the inner world of artists but also refracts the spiritual landscapes and intellectual circumstances of different eras.

In the evolution of art history, the expression of fear has undergone a profound transformation from inward-looking psychology to externalized society. Artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, using personal life experience as a starting point, transformed anxiety, loneliness, and the awareness of death into visual symbols; entering the era of the Information Revolution and globalization, artists further broke through the boundaries of individual emotion, extending fear to more macroscopic social dimensions—from the absurdity of human existence to the emptiness of consumer culture, from the power conflicts within family and gender relations to the representation of historical trauma and collective memory.

This transformation marks a redefinition of fear in art: it is no longer merely a psychological reaction but has become a critical perspective for examining social contradictions, historical trauma, and the human condition. Through new materials, forms, and contexts, artists have made fear a medium for social critique and an intellectual practice. Fear, as an eternal motif in art, records the spiritual history of humanity amidst existential crises and social changes. It is constantly re-interpreted, re-presented, and amplified, becoming our unique perspective for understanding human nature, society, and culture. By gazing into fear, artists reveal not only darkness but also humanity's ceaseless search for meaning.

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