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Anger and Art
Ambivalent emotion in art

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Abstract

The present study investigates the depiction of anger in Western visual art, highlighting the paradox of this emotion: its inherent unpleasantness and repulsiveness versus its artistic representation. The authors examine historical transformations in the expression of anger and the mechanisms that render its depiction effective in art. Despite being a fundamental human emotion encountered from birth, anger is surprisingly scarce in Western visual art. Historical artworks often depict actions resulting from anger rather than capturing its raw emotional expression. Kelly Grovier's essay "Art of Feeling: Why We Should Celebrate Anger" posits that the rarity of anger's depiction may stem from its classification as a deadly sin by early Christian teachings, which stigmatized the emotion. However, significant works such as Delacroix's "Medea" and Gentileschi's "Judith" juxtapose violent acts with serene facial expressions, underscoring a disconnect between action and emotional display. The repulsiveness and transformative impact of anger on human appearance make it a challenging subject for art. Yet, works like Cabanel's "Fallen Angel" and Gérôme's "Truth Coming Out of Her Well" explore this transformation, employing beauty to attract and distortion to repulse, thereby creating a Medusa-like effect. This duality engages viewers and evokes mixed emotions, which enhances an artwork's impact. Furthermore, anger can drive creative innovation, as demonstrated in works by Munch, Picasso, and Kahlo, where personal and societal grievances fuel artistic expression. However, prolonged anger may lead to destructive creativity, emphasizing the complex role of anger in art and its potential for both innovation and hostility. This multifaceted exploration underscores anger's unique, albeit limited, place in visual arts and its dual capacity to repel and inspire.

Keywords: anger, art, creativity, emotion, ambivalent

1. Introduction

Anger is among the common, frequent, and perhaps even fundamental emotions. We encounter it from birth, and it can be seen both in the private, intimate sphere of personal feelings and as

a powerful phenomenon in social dynamics. Therefore, it is understandable that we should find its representation in art as well.
Recently, while finalizing a book on anger (Démuth 2024) and searching for an appropriate image for its cover, I examined various works from the history of Western visual art in search of a prototypical depiction of anger. To my great surprise, whether due to bad luck or poor search strategy, I discovered that the history of Western art does not offer a broad range of artworks depicting this emotion. More precisely, there are works that depict actions stemming from anger, but few capture anger in its emotionally expressive form.

2. Methodology

This work is a theoretical (primarily philosophical) study that draws on the analysis of other works as well as the author's own research. Therefore, it is methodologically and formally conceived mainly as a philosophical essay or treatise, analyzing the art historical works of other authors, well-known artistic pieces, and selected psychological studies addressing the relationship between anger, art, and creativity. To examine the historical transformations in the expression of anger in art, we employed a qualitative analysis of iconic artworks depicting anger in Western visual art. This analysis primarily relied on the essay "Art of Feeling: Why we should celebrate anger" by Kelly Grovier (2019) and a review of existing literature on the depiction of anger in art, including theological, psychological, and aesthetic perspectives. Following the literature review, we proceeded with art analysis, contextual analysis, comparative analysis, and an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating insights from psychology and neuroscience to understand the emotional impact of anger in art.

3. The depiction of anger in Western visual art

3.1 Historical transformations in the expression of anger

An essay by Kelly Grovier, "Art of Feeling: Why we should celebrate anger" (Grovier 2019), can serve as a guide when exploring the history of anger in art. This American poet and cultural critic analyzes iconic works of Western culture and ponders why anger appears only sporadically and slowly in visual art. He argues that anger was classified among the eight deadly sins by the ascetic monk Evagrius Ponticus in the 4th century in his writing Logismoi, a classification later adopted by the entire Catholic Church in its teachings on sins. It is therefore not surprising that deadly sinful anger was not a common theme in artistic creation.
Nevertheless, we do find several motifs depicting anger throughout history. Examples include Euripides' and Seneca's Medea murdering her children out of revenge, or the famous motif of Judith beheading the Assyrian general Holofernes. Delacroix's painting of Medea (1838, Musée du Louvre, Paris) and Judith's scene in Artemisia Gentileschi's painting (1613, Uffizi Gallery) are compositionally and contextually brutal, similar to Elisabetta Sirani's depiction of the murder of Alexander's captain Timoclea of Thebes (1659, National Museum of Capodimonte). The peculiarity of these works, however, is the contrast between the brutality of the act and the expression on the faces of the main protagonists. Medea seems mentally absent during the murder of her offspring, Judith and her accomplice carry out the brutal decapitation with the focused gaze of technicians—butchers, ensuring they get as little blood on themselves as possible, and Timoclea observes the fall of her victim into the well with a porcelain-like expression, almost with compassion, while she herself throws him into the well. The contrast between the bestial fury of the act and the calm expression on their faces could not be greater. Indeed, most artworks depicting anger seem to differentiate between the act and the expression. If we look at Bosch's painting The Seven Deadly Sins (1500, Museo del Prado, Madrid) or Pieter Bruegel the Elder's drawing of Anger (Ira) from his series The Seven Deadly Sins (1557-

58, British Museum), the context the artist captures is more important than the facial expressions. In Bosch's case, anger is depicted in the scene of a woman preventing one of two drunken peasants from continuing his weapon attack on the other. Were it not for the broken chair on one peasant's head and the drawn weapons, we might not realize that the protagonists are gripped by furious anger. Similarly, in Bruegel's apocalyptic scene, full of violence and bizarre cruelty, only two shouting faces (an attacking soldier with a drawn sword and a peasant brandishing a club) clarify that it is a scene of anger. It seems that capturing the expression of an angry face was considered inappropriate or even a technical problem.

Anger, it appears, is best deduced from the context of the situation. This is true even in the iconic example of Jesus' anger when expelling the money changers and merchants from the Jerusalem temple. Giotto's fresco depicting this scene shows Jesus with an outstretched hand, holding a blasphemer by the garment. His intention is indicated primarily by his clenched fist and the cord prepared for striking. Christ's face, however, remains calm. His gaze is focused but without shouting or grimacing. He is not overwhelmed by anger. His eyes are fixed on the vendor, and from the vendor's defensive reaction, we infer that he anticipates a strike. Such a depiction of Christ aligns with the biblical view condemning anger, especially anger that would last until sunset or that is directed personally against a neighbor. At the same time, it accepts anger as a means of establishing justice, rejecting lawlessness, or violating divine laws. Thus, Jesus does not exhibit personal hatred but rejects evil and establishes justice. So much for the semi-theological interpretation. Back to aesthetics!

3.2. Raw emotional expression is repulsive

A peculiar characteristic of an angry face is its repulsiveness (Silvia et Brown 2007). A truly angry person succumbs to anger. This changes their appearance and partially their essence. Just as they lose control over themselves, their human nature also diminishes. They transform into a distorted caricature of a human, a purely animal entity—a beast. Anger (similar to crying) distorts the mouth, wrinkles the eyebrows and forehead, clouds the gaze, and changes the overall appearance of the face into a twisted grimace, which does not resemble a friendly and good-natured person. On the contrary—it reveals unpleasantness, danger, and threat, sometimes in a very bizarre manner.

3.3. Paradoxical impresions - naked fury, beautiful anger

As Grovier points out (Grovier 2019), Alexandre Cabanel's painting "Fallen Angel" (L'Ange déchu, 1847, Musée Fabre in Montpellier) depicts Lucifer in the form of a beautiful fallen angel who hides his face. The wild, disheveled hair and hateful, bloodshot eyes are particularly striking. These eyes conceal inner pain, defiance, and a desire for revenge. The dehumanizing invisibility of the rest of the face and the sharp gaze suggest tension and the potential danger of a future attack. This is supported by the tense muscular tonus of an otherwise beautiful naked human body.

The contrast between the attacking nudity and the danger from something that should be defenseless can also be found in Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting "Truth Coming Out of Her Well Armed with Her Whip to Chastise Mankind" (La Vérité sortant du puits armée de son martinet pour châtier l'humanité, 1896, Musée Anne de Beaujeu, Moulins, Allier). According to an ancient allusion to Democritus's saying that "We know nothing of truth, for truth is in a well" (Greek: ἐτεῇ δὲ οὐδὲν ἴδμεν: ἐν βυθῷ γὰρ ἡ ἀλήθεια), where "well" can also mean "good" or „well (subj).„ in English; truth emerges from a well. She is entirely naked and seemingly defenseless at first glance. However, the expression on her face and her focused gaze suggest that her nudity is not synonymous with defenselessness. In her hands is a whip, and from the position of her almost-grounded foot and overall direction, it is clear that she is in a hurry and

heading straight for us. Truth suddenly does not liberate and is not even charming; it is dangerous and aggressive.
This Medusa effect is perfect. The beautiful young naked woman attracts attention, but the real focal point is her face. Similar to Caravaggio's Medusa (1597, Uffizi Gallery, Florence), her face is distorted, inhuman, yet captivating. This is not only due to her wild hairstyle but also to her visible suffering and the "geometry of her open mouth," which screams and draws us into the depths of her pain.
In contrast to fear or experienced suffering, which elicit sympathy, an angry face evokes a different impression. It also signals potential danger and threat, thus attracting attention. However, this only happens until we identify that the presented threat does not concern us. Anger is anger if it signals dissatisfaction or disapproval of a certain behavior (Démuth 2021). Such anger must be directed at the appropriate recipient, someone who has done something wrong and needs to change their behavior. If we somehow sense from the context that the displayed anger does not concern us, the image loses the power of fear that an angry face should radiate, and only the impersonal perception of the depicted protagonist's anger remains. This is neither pleasant nor affecting.

3.4. Ambivalent emotions move us more

Winfried Menninghaus and his colleagues at the Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt am Main investigated what art needs to touch us or move us (Menninghaus et al., 2014). They found that the viewer is more affected by art when it targets multiple domains—not just one emotion. Therefore, we are most captivated by works that evoke multiple mixed, even contradictory emotions. Pure beauty attracts and captivates but fades quickly. However, if a work can evoke admiration, but also emotion, sadness, or other feelings, its impact is more lasting and compels us to return to it, think about it, and reflect on it over the long term. Purely positive emotions do not have this effect. On the contrary, sadness and emotion, fear and horror combined with beauty can evoke such impact (Silvia 2009).
Fushung Wang and Alfredo Pereira Jr. believe that all emotions we experience are induced by specific neuromodulators. Among the basic ones, they include dopamine, responsible for the perception of pleasant feelings and increased mOFC activity (see Kawabata, Zeki 2004), serotonin, which is released in increased amounts during sadness and suffering, but also when experiencing beauty based on nostalgia and sentiment (Ishizu, Zeki 2017), noradrenaline, released during fear and anger, and acetylcholine, important for calm contemplation and planning (Wang, Pereira 2016). Based on the different effects of these neuromodulators, they hypothesize an emotional plane that can be described by the dimension of calm vs. activity and pleasantness vs. unpleasantness. The weakness of this concept is that it does not account for mixed emotions, where something can be perceived as both beautiful (pleasant) and simultaneously as stimulating activity, or conversely, calm, or sad and beautiful at the same time. Most emotions in everyday life exist in such mixed forms, and pure emotional states are more of a prototype than a reality. This means that most feelings involve a range of neuromodulators that are not necessarily antagonistic but rather complement each other. If this is the case, Menninghaus's conclusion that mixed and particularly negative emotions move us more has its neurochemical justification. Simply put, beauty linked with other feelings affects us more than pure pleasure, precisely because it impacts a broader "surface" or affects us more complexly. An aesthetic experience is thus most capable of moving us if it is ambivalent or multidimensional.
As Menninghaus et al. note, it is important to remember that this phenomenon applies only to stimuli that we do not perceive as real, or that we perceive as artistic stimuli. Real pain experienced from suffering in a hospital, much like real anger on the street, does not produce

a pleasant aesthetic experience. However, in artistic representation, they can be subjects of artistic impact (Wagner et al. 2016).
If we look at Rubens's depiction of "Saturn Devouring His Son" (1636, Museo del Prado, Madrid), we are shocked by the image of an old man tearing apart a defenseless child with his own teeth. This motif appears even more apocalyptic in Francisco de Goya's rendition (1820-1823, Museo del Prado, Madrid), located just a few meters away. What shocks us is the brutality, uncivilized nature, and "divine" barbarity, the lack of compassion for the small child, and the conflict with the norms and rules we uphold. Saturn's anger and fear thus generate our anger, disgust, repulsion, and horror, and in this way, the painting touches us.
Many artworks of anger operate through this mechanism. They provoke shock, astonishment, and alarm, shaking our everyday experiences. They use various means—shocking brutality, violence, visual contrasts, imitation of splashing blood and its traces, hints of aggression and attack (Damiano et al. 2023; Norman, Wheeler 2020). Several neuroscientific studies confirm that the perception of these motifs captures attention and mobilizes the frontal cortex, amygdala, hypothalamus, and periaqueductal gray matter of the midbrain, forming a subcortical circuit that drives anger and aggression. Thus, visual, as well as auditory stimuli, can evoke anger in the perceiver.

3.5. Anger and creativity

However, anger can also be a positive element in art. As various studies have shown, what angers us can inspire us to something new. Anger often leads to an effort to eliminate what displeases us, both in society and in art. Matthijs Baas et al. (Baas et al. 2011) demonstrated that anger promotes increased creativity, both in originality and fluency of products, albeit in an unstructured way. Research results (Zhan et al. 2020) showed that inducing the emotion of anger reduces cognitive control and shortens response time, thereby supporting original (non-conformist) thinking and leading to effective ways of creative problem-solving by breaking established rules. An angry artist uses emotional energy to create works in a completely new, unrestrained, rule-breaking, and even elemental way. Furthermore, as Miron-Spektor et al. (Miron-Spektor et al. 2011) show, anger also increases complex thinking and creative problem-solving, although, as it seems (Baas et al. 2011), only short-term.
"An example of such anger-motivated artistic creation could be Edvard Munch's famous 'The Scream,' Picasso's 'Guernica,' a reaction of anger to the bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica by Nazi Germany. Mexican artist Frida Kahlo also expressed her emotion of anger in her work 'The Little Deer,' where she depicted the pain and anger caused by her former husband Diego Rivera, who openly cheated on her, as well as the pain, devastation, and suffering from numerous surgeries she underwent during her life. A special case of anger as a driving force of artistic activity is the confession of Franco-American sculptor Louise Bourgeois, who raged throughout her life at her governess, who was also her father's illicit lover. Similarly, one can think of the works of Banksy, the songs of Dolores O'Riordan, or Sinéad O'Connor" (Démuth 2023, 124-125).
Long-term anger (along with conventional creative ideas, an antagonistic personality, and state anger) explains unique, non-overlapping differences in the ability to implement malicious creativity. This can ultimately lead to frustration or even destructive and malicious thinking. In other words, anger can lead to the ingenuity of reappraisal (the ability to create various reappraisals of negative situations), but also to malicious creativity, which deliberately uses ingenuity for destruction or harm to others. A higher degree of malicious thoughts can then potentially hinder the successful handling of stressful events that evoke anger and lead to frustration, (self-)destructive and aggressive behavior.

4. Discussion and Limitations

The analysis presented documents that anger is an artistically challenging and paradoxical emotion. Historically, its depiction has been influenced significantly by religious and cultural factors. On one hand, anger was often rejected, but on the other hand, the acts associated with it drew attention. This supports Menninghaus's assertion regarding the heightened impact of artworks that evoke ambivalent emotions. Similarly, anger is demonstrated to act as a catalyst for increased creativity in seeking new solutions, yet it may also be destructive in the long term. The authors acknowledge the limitations of their analysis, which stem from the selection of artworks, the relevant scholarly literature, and the subjective nature of qualitative analyses. Potential improvements for future research include the integration of neuroaesthetic studies of the brain in relation to the perception and evaluation of artworks associated with fear, as well as objective, quantifiable studies of the behavior of perceivers of "anger art" in galleries or theaters. Integrative interdisciplinary research could contribute to a deeper understanding of the perception of the attractiveness or repulsiveness of anger from both first-person and third-person objective perspectives.

5. Summary Instead of Conclusion

Anger is not a common motif in (especially visual) art, primarily due to its inherent repulsiveness and its ability to depict a person in an unpleasant and even dehumanizing manner. When it is depicted, it is often done with a certain moral message in a social context or an attempt to shock the viewer and capture their attention. Often, the artist uses the paradox of naked (defenseless) beauty and the danger of furious attack. Influential art touches us because it affects multiple aesthetic domains and evokes complex emotions. The use of aesthetically appealing threats has the nature of the Medusa's gaze; however, once we identify that the anger does not concern us, the frightening effect dissipates, and we can observe the image calmly.
The second insight is that an artist's anger can be a positive driver of innovation, rebellion, and original creativity for artists who strive to respond to undesirable stimuli, finding ways to eliminate them. In this sense, they act similarly to an angry motif—shocking and capturing attention. Long-term and unmanaged anger, however, is more repulsive and often leads to destruction and hostility, both in art and in everyday life.

6. Conclusion

Anger belongs to ambivalent social and moral emotions. Historically, it has often been depicted indirectly—primarily through violent acts and contexts. Due to its association with moral sin and its repulsive, dehumanizing effects, it has typically evoked outrage and disgust. Artists frequently acknowledge the aesthetic repulsiveness of its manifestations (sinfulness, animality, loss of self-control), which they attempt to portray in more acceptable forms. On the other hand, anger also captures attention, signaling danger, and its observers often perceive its appeal in the form of courage, bravery, and the willingness to fight for the values we believe in. When anger is depicted, it is often combined with beauty or used in ambivalent, multidimensional ways, creating works that provoke complex emotional responses from viewers. Anger can serve as a powerful driver of creativity, fostering innovation and rebellion in art. However, if left unmanaged, anger can lead to destructive outcomes both in the creative process and in life itself. Through these dual effects—shocking yet compelling, repulsive yet creative—anger remains a potent but challenging subject in art.

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