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*‘A Life of Repetition’ Attachment Theory in Visual Art Analysis*

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## ***School of Visual Culture***

*I declare that this Critical Cultures Research Project is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.*

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## **Table of Contents**

List of illustrations	4
Introduction	5
Case studies	7
Tracey Emin	7
Louise Bourgeois	15
Edvard Munch	21
Conclusion	27
Bibliography	28

### List of illustrations

Fig. 1. Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with* 1963 -1995 c. 1997, Appliquéd tent, 122 x 245 x 215 cm, White Cube London

Fig. 2 Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with* 1963 -1995 c. 1997, Appliquéd tent, 122 x 245 x 215 cm, White Cube London

Fig. 3 Tracey Emin, *Left Soul*, c. 2018, Drawing in ballpoint pen on paper, Drawing in ballpoint pen on paper, 15 × 21 cm, Hidden Galleries

Fig. 4 Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, c. 1940, Ink and pencil on paper, 6¼ x 9½ in, The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, New York

Fig. 5 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, c. 1999, Steel and Marble, 9271 × 8915 × 10236 mm, Tate Modern, London

Fig. 6 Edvard Munch, *Separation*, c. 1896, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 127cm, Munch Museum, Oslo

Fig. 7 Edvard Munch, *The Artist and his Model I*, c. 1919, oil on canvas, 134 x 152 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo



## ***‘A Life of Repetition’ Attachment Theory in Visual Art Analysis***

*Is there evidence of Attachment Theory within the recurring themes explored by artists who have experienced childhood trauma? Through visual analysis of particular works, this essay is an attempt to bridge connections between Attachment Theory and art.*

### **Introduction**

*“The artist is condemned to a life of repetition, and his entire production is a symbolic reenactment of the originary trauma, a variant of the return of the repressed”*

*(Larratt- Smith, 2012, p. 13).*

The focus of this essay will be on finding evidence of Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (1969) within the work of artists who are victims of early childhood trauma. Framing my research around the findings of psychologist Mary Ainsworth’s ‘attachment styles’ (1970), I will analyse the writings and artwork of three influential artists. This analysis will be an attempt to explore how early childhood trauma and the relationship between caregiver and child, may have played a role in the development of a particular attachment style in each artist. Furthermore, this essay will look at the effect that attachment styles may have on the artistic output of each artist, and subsequently lent to the confessional, analytical, and expressive approach these artists have adopted in their practice. The artists I have chosen to discuss within this text are Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Edvard Munch. By choosing one living, one recently deceased, and one historical artist I hope to display a solid basis for my research into this subject.

In order to understand the effects of early childhood experiences on the development of particular attachment styles it is essential to understand John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory, in respect of which he said-

*“Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or a toddler or a school-child but through his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age”*

(Bowlby, 1980, p. 422).

Attachment Theory proposes that as children, we form emotional attachments to one or more primary caregivers. The child relies on the caregiver(s), usually the child's parents, for protection, comfort and support (Davis et al. 2004, p. 1077). Therefore, the availability and responsiveness of primary caregivers to an infant's needs is the central theme to Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969). Depending on the caregiver's reaction to the child when seeking comfort and reassurance, Bowlby suggests that different attachment styles will develop in response to this (1982, cited in Davis et al. 2004, p. 1077). Ainsworth (1970) expanded upon Bowlby's research into Attachment Theory. In her studies, she observed and documented three main 'Attachment Styles'; Secure attachment, Anxious attachment, and Dismissive-Avoidant attachment. A fourth attachment style was later added by researchers Main and Solomon (1986); Fearful Avoidant-attachment. Secure attachment within children is the result of a caregiver who is thought to have provided consistent and responsive care, physically and emotionally to the child. The securely attached individual is comfortable around others and has a positive self view (Wearden et al. 2005, p. 280). Typically, If one or more of the primary caregivers is consistently unresponsive and insensitive, an insecure attachment style is likely to develop within the child. The insecurely attached child will possess a negative view of the self, and relationships (Davis et al. 2004, p. 1077). These attachment styles and subsequent learned behaviours associated with the developed attachment style are carried into adulthood, and form the basis for the relationships we develop with family, friends and romantic partners (Borhani, 2013, p. 1). In this essay I will be focusing on the work of artists who display evidence of insecure attachment styles due to various traumas experienced by them in their early lives.

## Case Studies

The emotional state of the artist is often reflected in their artistic work. Therefore, by applying knowledge of Attachment Theory and development of attachment style to visual analysis of their work, it is possible to gain an insight into the mind of the artist and make connections between Attachment Theory and the content of their creations. Although analysis of artistic work will form the basis of my research, I will also be analysing the writings and documentation of each artist's life, as Attachment Theory essentially stems from the relationships formed between people. An interesting quote by Gardner (1993, cited in Oppenheim, 2005, p. 9) states that

*“All creative activity grows, first, out of the relationships between an individual and the objective world of work and, second, out of the ties between an individual and other human beings.”*

Both Attachment Theory and creative work are based on the individual and their connection to the world and others, therefore it is essential to first examine the early life of Emin, Bourgeois and Munch in order to find connections between Attachment Theory and their work.

### Tracey Emin

Tracey Emin's autobiographical and emotionally complex artwork is integral to my research into linking Attachment Theory to creative practices. Through her work, we see that Emin's traumatic childhood experiences follow her into adolescence and adulthood, and appear consistently throughout her artwork and writings. She provides us with a stark and honest view of the experiences she has faced and her emotions towards these experiences. I will explore the ways in which I believe Emin displays evidence of the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style within her art by looking at one of her most well known works *Everyone I have ever slept with 1963-1995* c. 1997 (fig. 1- 2), alongside *Left soul* c. 2018 (fig. 3), and her personal memoirs in *Strangeland* (2005).

Gibson (2019a, n.p.) provides an outline of the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style and the root causes of the development of this attachment style. She explains that

patterns of the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style are often the most unpredictable and incongruent of all attachment styles, and are usually unique to the individual. However, as a general rule, major patterns are present among all individuals with Fearful-Avoidant attachment style (Ibid., 2019a, n.p.). Children who develop Fearful-Avoidance are often the victims of some form of sexual, emotional or physical trauma. In terms of caregiving, the responsiveness is inconsistent. The relationship between the child and caregiver is often one-sided, and the child often only gains any form of emotional connection when the caregiver needs it (Gibson, 2019b, n.p.). Due to this inconsistency, the Fearful-Avoidant child is highly disorganised in their patterns of behaviour, as they are essentially a combination of both Anxious and Avoidant attachment. The Fearful individual shares the same negative self view with the Anxiously attached person, who desires emotional connection. However, they hold a negative view of others and avoid intimacy similar to the Dismissive-Avoidant individual (Wearden et al., 2005, p. 280). This fear of intimacy is fuelled by fear of rejection, as any emotional bids from the Fearful-Avoidant child were often rejected by their caregiver (Ibid., 2005, p. 280). This inconsistent rejection of emotion from caregiver to child leads the Fearful-Avoidant child to develop a subconscious belief that love must be earned. This often leads to the child feeling deeply unseen, unheard and unloved and can result in the child violating their own boundaries in an attempt to earn some emotional response from the caregiver (Gibson, 2019b, n.p.).

By looking at Emin and the large body of work produced by the artist, certain themes and patterns are consistent. The work spans across a wide variety of media, from painting to sculpture, installation to tapestry. However, no matter the medium, the message of these works is our key to unlocking evidence of Fearful-Avoidant attachment style within her work.

Firstly, it is essential to look at Emin's childhood in order to pinpoint particular events which may have contributed to the development of Fearful avoidant attachment style. Through my reading of Emin's collection of personal writings about her life in *Strangeland* (2005), I was able to gain an understanding of the experiences Emin was exposed to in her childhood and adolescence.

Emin describes herself as “*rich and spoiled*” (Emin, 2005, p. 12) as a child, as she and her twin brother Paul grew up in a “*seventy-bedroom maze*” (Ibid., p. 11) called Hotel International, which was essentially a series of B&Bs. Emin’s father was a wealthy Turkish businessman who was married to another woman, yet agreed to spend three days a week with Emin’s mother and the twins. In *Strangeland* (2005), Emin provides the reader with a specific memory of her early childhood. “*As they argued, I pushed the stick through the top of my thigh. Blood started to pour. And they stopped screaming*” (Emin, 2005, p. 11).

Due to the core wound of the Fearful-Avoidant feeling unseen, unheard, and unloved, a child with this attachment style might use self-inflicted pain or a violation of their own boundaries as a way to gain an emotional response from their caregiver (Gibson, 2019b, n.p.). In this case, Emin’s parents, in the midst of an argument, changed the focus of their attention to Emin when she hurt herself. Through my interpretation of the text, it is impossible to determine if Emin purposely pushed the stick through her thigh in an attempt to gain attention. However, the reaction of her parents may have programmed a subconscious belief that pain equals an emotional response from a caregiver, that otherwise may have been neglected. Perhaps this is why Emin uses art as a means to tell her painful stories; in an attempt to feel seen and heard.

At ten years old, Emin’s father became bankrupt, and the family was left with nothing. Emin, Paul and their mother moved into the old staff cottage, part of the abandoned Hotel International. Her father returned to Turkey. Emin’s mother worked long hours in order to provide for the family, which meant leaving the children at home alone. Due to the lack of parental availability, for many years there was an unstable sense of safety and protection provided by Emin’s mother, who seemed to be either oblivious or disillusioned to the reality of events taking place in Emin’s life. Due to this, she was vulnerable. “*It all hurt so much. A stranger coming and going. The world had become such an ugly place*” (Emin, 2005, p. 14).

In this quote, the “*stranger*” in context was a boyfriend of Emin’s mother, who subsequently ended up sexually assaulting Tracey as a child. It is not clear through my reading if Emin’s mother had ever consciously acknowledged this assault, but it is true that Emin never received any psychological support as a child. In the hospital

after the assault, Emin remembers her Aunt's question; *"Have you been naughty, mucking around, playing strange games?"* (Emin, 2005, p. 15).

As a child, this must have placed Emin in a state of confusion and guilt, as if she, the child, was responsible for the grievous wrong perpetrated against her. In reality, she had been placed in a vulnerable situation entirely out of her control. Emin experienced constant sexualisation and a violation of her boundaries on multiple occasions as a child and adolescent. The rape she endured at age thirteen had traumatising consequences for her and subsequently makes its way into a large amount of work produced by the artist. In *Strangeland* (2005), Emin recalls the night of the rape, and the reaction of her mother upon her arrival home. *"She didn't call the police or make any fuss. She just washed my coat and everything carried on as normal, as though nothing had happened"* (Emin, 2005, p. 24).

The authors Main and Weston (1982, 1990, cited in Davis et al, 2004, p. 1077) posit that children who develop Avoidant attachment style have been actively discouraged to express negative emotional expressions. In response to this, Grossmann et al. (1986, cited in Davis et al, 2004, p. 1077) states that caregivers of Avoidant children will withdraw from them when negative, but not positive, emotions are expressed. This example of Emin's mother's reaction to the situation that took place suggests emotional unavailability and withdrawal in response to Emin's negative emotional expression. This must have deepened Emin's feeling of invisibility, and contributed to the development of this insecure attachment style. That would appear consistent with 'Rape Trauma Syndrome', described as:

*"(RTS) Introduced as a subset of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in 1974 by researchers Ann W. Burgess and Lynda L. Holmstrom, RTS describes victims' reactions to their rapes. These responses include everything from expressive grief, terror, and apparent equanimity to silence and denial"*

(Murray, 2012, p. 1633)

(Ibid., pp. 1634 - 1635) also comments that scholars and critics of Rape Trauma Syndrome agree that due to the large proportion of unreported rapes and the lack of research into *"non-western"* reaction to trauma, there is *"little information about the real range of postrape reactions."*

Although there is limited research into Rape Trauma Syndrome and into all possible responses to the trauma of rape within different cultures; the art produced by Emin, which explores her ambivalent feelings towards intimacy as a result of this rape, could be considered one of Emin's personal post-rape reactions. As put forward by Murray (2012); her *art is* her response to the trauma. When combining this information with the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style we can see some clear consistencies in Emin's artistic practices.

In one of her most popular yet controversial works *Everyone I have ever slept with* c. 1998 (fig. 1- 2), Emin's ambivalence towards intimacy is present.



Fig. 1 Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963 -1995* c. 1997, Appliquéd tent, 122 x 245 x 215 cm, White Cube London

The tent is presented as an homage to the people whom Emin has been intimate with. She presents the names of all the people she has slept with, including family, sexual partners, and even two foetuses. Interestingly, Emin includes herself in this piece by stitching 'With myself always myself never forgetting' along the floor of the tent.





Fig. 2 Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963 -1995 c. 1997*, Appliquéd tent, 122 x 245 x 215 cm, White Cube London

Emin is never separated from her art, she is always present, which is why her work is so important in providing an insight into her psyche, and subsequently evidence of her attachment style which is heavily linked to her history of sexual trauma. Much like Emin, the tent is a delicate, yet strong piece of work that beams loud with confidence and defiance. However, Emin herself describes it as a painful piece of work. *"It was like carving out gravestones for me"* (Illuminations Media, 2007, n.p.).

I find this analogy between intimacy and death an interesting comparison to make, as I find it solidifies evidence of Emin's painful and fearful relationship towards all kinds of intimacy, due to her attachment style and post-rape reaction. However, although painful, Emin chose to go through the pain to make the work, which shows the value and need for intimacy in her life. This is consistent with the Fearful-Avoidant individual, who desires to have close relationships yet feels



uncomfortable being emotionally close to someone (Borhani, 2013, p. 1). Due to this fear of emotional intimacy, the Fearful-Avoidant often substitutes sex for intimacy, as the brain seeks pleasure as a distraction to pain (Gibson, 2019a, n.p.). This is important to note, as a vast body of Emin's work explores her feelings towards sex and sexuality.

In *Left Soul* c. 2018 (fig. 3), a woman appears with the words *"Every time it feels like half my soul has left me - and it has"*. The woman's head has been scratched out, as she lies down, naked with her legs open. Due to the intimate nature of the drawing, my interpretation is that in this image Emin expresses the feelings she associates with sex and vulnerability.

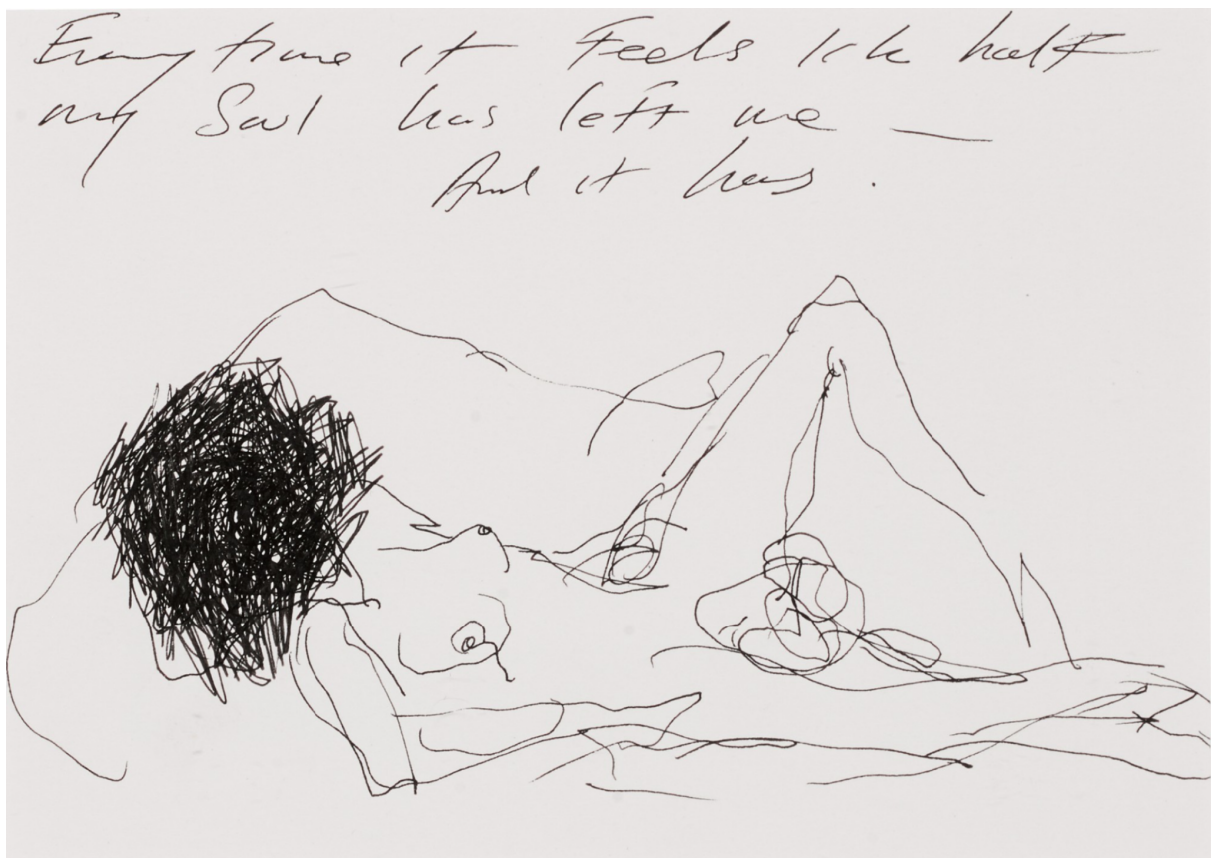


Fig. 3 Tracey Emin, *Left Soul*, c. 2018, Drawing in ballpoint pen on paper, 15 × 21 cm, Hidden Galleries

The scratched out face is a dominant feature in this work, and could suggest feelings of rejection, shame or evasiveness towards being intimate with another person.

Birnbaum, Gillath, and Mikulincer note that feelings of estrangement and emotional detachment during sex were reported in association with the Avoidant individual (2003, cited in Davis et al, 2004, p. 1078). These feelings of estrangement and detachment could provide an explanation for Emin's 'loss of her soul' during sex as she suggests in the drawing. Emin appears to be highly ambivalent when it comes to sex. Although it is a very common theme throughout her work, it seems to cause substantial pain for her. This coincides with the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style. Through their findings, Davis et al (2004, p. 1078) breakdown the relationship between attachment styles and their subjective motivations for sex. Anxious adults are more likely to prefer more frequent sexual encounters, due to a high need for approval, acceptance, and reassurance. (Ibid., 2004, p. 1079). However, a study by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver found that the use of physical touch as a form of expression of affection had negative associations with the Avoidant individual (1998, cited in Davis et al, p. 1078). This is possibly due to the fact that Avoidant individuals were raised by caregivers who responded negatively to bids for closeness and comfort (Davis et al, 2004, p. 1077). These polarities in feelings towards intimacy are common within Fearful-Avoidant individuals who have suffered sexual trauma. Gibson (2019a, n.p.) states

*“An individual suffering from sexual trauma in childhood or at any point in life, either becomes hyper-vigilant about avoiding sex and very closed off, or becomes very hyper- sexual..”*

In Emin's case, the combination of sexual trauma and the development of the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style have contributed immensely to the recurring themes of intimacy and pain within her work, which is often paradoxical. Her art radiates vulnerability yet screams confidence; it is fragile yet strong; it is often so comfortable, yet provocative and unsettling in nature. It could be claimed that this is Emin's intent, to create art that is emotionally multidimensional, however I don't believe this to be the case. This is simply how Emin interprets her world, and delivers to us her poignant perspective on life; through the lens of a woman who has faced great trauma; through the lens of the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style.

## Louise Bourgeois

Bourgeois in particular is an interesting artist to study in relation to this research into Attachment Theory and art, as she practiced psychoanalysis for more than 30 years of her life. Psychoanalysis is a therapeutic process developed by Sigmund Freud which focuses on an individual's unconscious and deep-rooted thoughts. In terms of the comparison between psychoanalysis and Attachment Theory, Gullestad (2001, n.p.) states

*“Although Freud and Bowlby differ in their image of Man, ideas developed within attachment theory have parallels in those of psychoanalytic object relation theories, both with regard to the conceptualisation of motivation and the understanding of the origins of psychological disturbances”.*

With access to her psychoanalytic writings and art, we are able to gain a privileged and unique insight into the unconscious mind of the artist, which may help us in our quest to seek evidence of her particular attachment style.

Bourgeois prolifically refers to themes of childhood trauma, abandonment, the home and family within her symbolic and often cryptic sculptures, drawings and writings. From my interpretation of these writings and artwork, and my research into the early childhood of Bourgeois, I believe she displays many characteristics of the Dismissive-Avoidant attachment style.

Dismissive-Avoidant attachment style is believed to be developed due to a consistently unresponsive caregiver during childhood, leading to compulsive self-reliance and a negative view of others (Wearden et al., 2005, p. 280). Gibson (2019c, n.p.) puts forward a number of traits often associated with the Dismissive-Avoidant, in which she describes Adults with Dismissive-Avoidant attachment style as analytical and emotionally repressed. They often derive emotional connection through material objects or doing things, as this was how their needs were met as children. The creation of fantasy worlds among Dismissive-Avoidant individuals is also common, as imagination is an alternative way to meet their emotional needs (Gibson, 2019c, n.p.). As adults, those with Dismissive-Avoidant attachment style are security-oriented individuals who value

freedom and fear commitment, and often experience deep feelings of shame or guilt (Gibson, 2019c, n.p.).

Looking to her early life, we know that Bourgeois experienced a great deal of trauma within the family as a child. Her father's ten year affair with a live-in English governess caused great distress within the family and consequently resulted in Bourgeois's deep-seated fear of abandonment. This fear of abandonment is a common wound for all insecure attachment styles, including Dismissive-Avoidant individuals, as they have developed an unstable sense of security and safety in the world as children. Bourgeois endlessly returned to referencing this experience and the subject of the family, particularly the mother and father, within her work.

As early as eleven years old, Bourgeois's writings are void of emotion, and are consistent with her pressing, analytical way of trying to understand the world. As a child, she is intuitively aware of herself and to the world around her. A diary entry from Bourgeois dating back to December 1923 states:

*"I despair but can't find  
the strength to think things through  
and yet I have quite a lot of things to think about  
The people who will read  
this diary will certainly think  
that this child is too nervous  
she has nothing else to do  
but sleep play eat, but  
not at all I have things to think about  
to reflect upon mysteries to dig up  
all these important  
to you but for me it isn't the same"*

(cited in Larratt -Smith, 2012, p. 10)

This cryptic diary entry is an early example of how Bourgeois often used writing to reflect on her life. It provides an insight into the workings of Bourgeois's mind at such an early age, and the unsettled nature of her existence. Many years later, at twenty-nine years old, Bourgeois produced this drawing; the first of Bourgeois's works to be analysed in this essay.



Fig. 4 Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, c. 1940, Ink and pencil on paper, 6¼ x 9½ in, The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, New York

The name of the work, *Untitled*, is common for Bourgeois. Much of her work refers to this title, perhaps being indicative of a need for privacy or an unwillingness to be open. This coyness is a key trait of the Dismissive-Avoidant (Gibson, 2019c, n.p.). However, although the title remains aloof, Bourgeois discusses this work in her own words in *Drawings and Observations*, and provides a deeper insight into the symbolism behind it. "*This is the ideal house: it is completely symmetrical. It is almost a grid!*" (Bourgeois et al., 1995, p. 25). It is self-contained and everything in the scene is peaceful and there are family and friends present. "*you could call it the Peaceable Kingdom*". (Ibid., 1995, p. 25).

Through her drawing Bourgeois had control over her past. She decides who and what to put in the scene.

*"I do not make it more beautiful than it was, nor do I make it less beautiful than it was, but I make it peaceful. and that it was not!"* (Bourgeois et al., 1995, p. 25)

Bourgeois uses this drawing to create a fantasy world, one in which there are happy couples, animals, an idyllic home. A peaceful place, in contrast to the reality of the turbulent nature of her family home. This is a characteristic trait of the Dismissive Avoidant attachment style, as people with this attachment style often learn to get their needs met through fantasy and imagination (Gibson, 2019c, n.p.). I find the house in the drawing to be the most interesting and revealing aspect. The home is often associated with being the centre of the family. However, in this case, the house is divided into a grid, each containing inanimate objects such as a chair and what appears to be a bottle and a bin. This is particularly interesting in terms of Attachment Theory, as previously mentioned, a common characteristic of the Dismissive-Avoidant is the derivation of emotional connection through material objects (Gibson, 2019c, n.p.). Bourgeois has replaced the family with household objects, which perhaps remained a permanent fixture of her childhood when family were absent. Larratt-Smith notes how Bourgeois understood that the root of her fear of abandonment stemmed from her fathers frequent absences due to war, work and extra-marital affairs (2012, p. 10). Combined with the death of her mother in 1932, when Bourgeois was just twenty-one years old, this led to her inability to throw anything away (Ibid., 2012, p. 10). Throughout her life, Bourgeois found comfort through material possessions. In her own words she reveals;

*"It gives me great pleasure to keep my clothes, my dresses, my stockings, I have never thrown away a pair of shoes of mine in 20 years. I cannot separate myself from my clothes nor Alain's.."*

(Ibid., 2012, p. 144)

This connection to material objects as a substitute for emotional connection may have influenced Bourgeois' desire to create, particularly in terms of her sculptural



creations. *Maman* c. 1999 (fig. 5) is the second of Bourgeois' works to be analysed in this essay.



Fig. 5 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, c. 1999, Steel and Marble, 9271 × 8915 × 10236 mm, Tate Modern, London

The spider is a regular form appearing in many of Bourgeois' drawings and sculptures. However, *Maman* (fig. 5) is by far the most magnificent of them all. This giant steel sculpture towers above viewers and, as described by Manchester (2009, n.p.), mimics the feeling of a child looking up towards their parents from below.

The title, *Maman*, translates into the French word for 'mummy', again referencing the spider from a childlike perspective (Manchester, 2009, n.p.). This contrasts curiously with the terrifying nature of the sculpture and begs the viewer to question the connection between mother and spider. Bourgeois provides an explanation for this, and introduces the spider as a symbol of her own mother;

*"The friend (the spider – why the spider?) because my best friend was my mother and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and as useful as a spider. She could also defend herself, and me, by refusing to answer 'stupid', inquisitive, embarrassing, personal questions."*

*(1995, cited in Manchester, 2009, n.p.).*

Through *Maman* (fig.5) she is able to embody the characteristics of her mother, and channel them into a physical manifestation of admiration. Having previously acknowledged Bourgeois' ability to derive emotional connection from material objects, it is impossible to ignore the possibility that Bourgeois may have produced this sculpture as a means of emotional connection to her mother, who had died sixty-seven years prior to its making. This, similarly to *Untitled* (fig. 4) could also be connected to the Dismissive-Avoidant's tendency to meet their own emotional needs through fantasy (Gibson, 2019c, n.p.). Jerry Gorovoy describes how Bourgeois would "*transfer her emotional state into the material..*" and how she "*used materials as a resistance that she was struggling against..*" (Tate, 2016, n.p.). Perhaps Bourgeois felt that by pouring her emotional energy into her work, she would subsequently be capable of creating vessels for emotional connection.

Bourgeois is a unique addition within this case study, as out of the three artists discussed, she is the only one who became a parent herself. Manchester (2009, n.p.) suggests how *Maman* (fig. 5) may be interpreted as a symbol of what it means to be a mother, perhaps referring to Bourgeois herself. Connections could be made between the cold steel of the spider combined with the distance from the viewer, and the nature of the Dismissive-Avoidant parent, who can often be cold and aloof (Gibson, 2021, n.p.).

Through this analysis of *Untitled* (fig. 4), *Maman* (fig. 5), and some examples of her psychoanalytic writings, I put forward the idea that Bourgeois displays evidence of the Dismissive-Avoidant attachment style in her work. The analytical and cryptic nature of her drawings combined with her history of family trauma, and the powerful sculptural representations of her internal emotions, all play a part in painting a picture of an artist trying to escape the pain of her past.



## Edvard Munch

Edvard Munch is an artist whose work has always been known for its direct reflection of his emotional, physical and psychological state. Munch's reference to relationships, pain, isolation and death will play a key role in my research into how his early traumatic experiences, family attachments and family deaths have played a key role in the development of his expressionist artwork.

Munch, out of the three artists chosen, has been the most difficult to assign to a specific attachment style. Through his writings and paintings, particularly paintings from his series -*"The Frieze of Life"*-, we can see Munch experiences a multitude of emotions associated with love, intimacy and romantic relationships, displaying both anxiety and emotional avoidance in his paintings.

Although it is possible for the brain to reprogram new sets of rules due to recurring emotionally charged negative experiences, it is rare for an individual with Anxious attachment to switch to Dismissive-Avoidant attachment and vice versa (Gibson, 2019d, n.p.). However, as discussed above in relation to Tracey Emin, Fearful-Avoidant attachment style is a combination of traits between Anxious attachment and Dismissive-Avoidant attachment (Borhani, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, it is possible for an individual with Fearful-Avoidant attachment style to swing between displaying high levels of anxiety in relationships, and high levels of avoidance, depending on the particular relationship (Gibson., 2019d, n.p.). Due to this, I put forward the theory that Edvard Munch had Fearful-Avoidant attachment style, displaying evidence of anxious and avoidant traits in his work. The paintings depicting man and woman I find to be the most highly emotionally charged in terms of Attachment Theory. The paintings *Separation* c.1896 (fig. 6), and *The Artist and his Model I* c. 1919 (fig. 7) display a strong evidence of contrasting emotions towards romantic relationships. For the purpose of this essay I will be studying these paintings in comparison to each other, as I believe they provide a deep insight into the psychology behind Munch's relationship to emotional connection. However, in order to analyse these paintings with Attachment Theory in mind, it is essential to look to Munch's early life experiences.

Through family letters, we know that Munch's father was absent for the first year of his life. At age five, Munch's mother died. In later years, Munch wrote about his father:

*"My father tried to be both mother and father to us, but he had a difficult temperament and an inherited nervousness that led to almost insane bouts of religious obsession, during which he would spend days pacing up and down the room, praying to God....When he was not going through one of his periods of religious fanaticism, he could be like a child and play and joke with us and tell us stories. As a result, it became doubly painful for us when he punished us; on those occasions he would be almost beside himself with anger. It is that nervous anger that I have inherited".*

(cited in Stang, 1979, p. 31)

The absence of his father as a baby, the death of his mother as a young child, and the inconsistency of his father's parenting are all key ingredients to developing Fearful-Avoidant attachment. The death of Munch's mother and young sister Sophie may have contributed greatly to his fear of relationships, and the development of an unconscious belief that any relationship might result in loss and abandonment, as his earliest associations with the female have ended this way. This fear of relationships is evident in *Separation* (fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Edvard Munch, *Separation*, c. 1896, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 127cm, Oslo, Munch Museum

The painting features man and woman, a common theme in Munch's work. Throughout Munch's painting career, his backgrounds become increasingly less realistic, leading the viewer to focus on the subject matter, which is highly psychological and symbolic. In *Separation* (fig. 6) the background is skewed and warped, and sets a whimsical scene for the man and woman. The man, I believe to be Munch himself. His heart is bleeding. Munch often spoke about heart blood, and the importance of pouring one's heart into one's work. In *Munch by Himself*, Muller-Westermann (2005, p. 52) quotes Munch:

*"I do not believe in art if it does not arise from the creator's urge to open his heart. All art, literature and music, must be produced with one's heart-blood. Art is the heart-blood of a person."*

The story of the painting appears to be about the separation of Munch and this female, and the heartbreak that Munch endures as a result of this abandonment. The faceless woman, dressed in white with long golden hair adds to the fantastical element of this scene, as if she is an apparition. Perhaps the fairytale-like woman represents his late mother or sister; or Munch's first love, Milly Thaulow. Perhaps she

is a representation of Munch's expectation of all women - that they will abandon him.

I believe that this painting displays the Anxious traits of Munch's Fearful-Avoidant attachment style. Some traits of the Anxiously Attached individual that may show up in the Fearful-Avoidant are the minimisation of the self, fear of abandonment, openness and ease of expression of emotion, feelings of unworthiness and the idealisation of others (Gibson, 2019e, n.p.). This painting portrays a deep rooted subconscious assumption of rejection which is characteristic of the Anxiously attached side, as well as an idealised vision of the woman. She is beautiful, pure and confident; while the man is broken, dark, and unworthy of love. The ease with which Munch expresses pain of love and loss in this painting is another trait of the fearful avoidant leaning anxious. This is contradictory to the avoidant side of the fearful-avoidant, who finds vulnerability difficult and can appear to be void of emotion (Gibson, 2019c, n.p.).

Through his art and writings, Munch appears to sway back and forth between anxious and avoidant as he displays a great deal of ambivalence towards women. In *Separation* (fig. 6), we see a man hunched over in pain as he is abandoned by his love. However, in the later painting, *The Artist and his Model I* (fig. 7), the viewer is presented with an unsettlingly emotionless depiction of estrangement between man and woman.



Fig. 7 Edvard Munch, *The Artist and his Model I*, c. 1919, oil on canvas, 134 x 152 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo

Both man and woman in this painting are starkly different to those depicted in *Separation* (fig. 6). The scene, depicted in a bedroom with an unmade bed, suggests an expectation of intimacy. However, the couple stand before the viewer, both rigid and disconnected from one another.

*“While her wide-open, cavernous eyes express fear, the artist stands there stiffly, his arms hanging powerlessly downwards, an almost indifferent expression on his face.”*

(Muller-Westermann, 2005, p. 145)

The female in this painting is far from the golden-haired, confident, fantastical figure depicted in *Separation* (fig. 6). Here, she is very much present and real. Munch depicts himself standing behind her, almost overshadowed by her presence. He wears a suit which adds to the stiffness of his manner, his face is void of all emotion. *The Artist and his Model I* (fig. 7) indicates a change in Munch’s psychological state



of mind, when compared to *Separation* (fig. 6). I believe that this painting expresses Munch's avoidant side of his Fearful-Avoidant attachment style. His unwillingness to express emotion and his fear of intimacy is ever-present. It is interesting to note that *Separation* (fig. 6) was painted prior to Munch's turbulent relationship with Tulla Larsen, however *The Artist and His Model I* (fig. 7), was painted after the relationship had ended. Munch's relationship with Tulla Larsen was oppressive.

*"Unable to respond to the intensity of her affection, which left him mentally and physically exhausted, he continually retreated from her to find peace and regain his strength"*

(Muller-Westermann, 2005, pp. 78-79)

In *Separation* (fig. 6) we see Munch's longing for love and pain of rejection. However, in this painting the presence of the woman robs Munch of his strength, much like his relationship with Tulla Larsen. It is interesting and essential to this analysis, to note in terms of Fearful-Avoidant attachment style, the fearful avoidant individual will often become Anxious while in a relationship with an Avoidant individual, and will become Avoidant while in a relationship with an Anxious individual (Gibson, 2019f, n.p.). This could explain the shift in emotional subject matter between *Separation* (fig. 6), in which Munch expresses Anxious traits in response to abandonment- and *The artist and his Model I* (fig. 7), in which Munch displays Avoidant traits at the intense presence of this female.

I put forward the theory that Edvard Munch occupies Fearful-Avoidant attachment style, swaying between displaying Anxious and Avoidant traits in his work. In *Separation* (fig. 6), we see evidence of anxiety and a clear expression of emotion. Munch's heart bleeds at the rejection and abandonment of a beautiful, idealistic female, perhaps representing the women in Munch's life who have abandoned him, such as his mother, sister and his first love Millie Thaulow. In *The Artist and his Model I* (fig. 7), there is evidence of a change in Munch's perception of relationships - perhaps due to the turbulent nature of his relationship with Tulla Larsen in the years prior. Avoidant traits are present in the stiffness and lack of emotion towards his female counterpart. Broken intimacy and a disconnect between the couple indicate a fear of vulnerability and an avoidance of commitment.

*“Thus, in Munch’s scheme of things, man’s longing for woman, and woman’s longing for man, remain unattainable utopias.”*

(Muller-Westermann, 2005, p. 150)

## **Conclusion**

Art analysis can offer a deep insight into the subconscious mind of the artist. By applying Attachment Theory to analysis of works produced by artists who are victims of trauma, I propose that evidence of attachment style can be found within the content of their work and the repetition of themes within this work.

Furthermore, through my analysis of the life and works of Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Edvard Munch, I posit that by analysing visual art through the lens of attachment theory, connections can be made between particular attachment styles, and the type of work produced by the artist.

Emin’s childhood experiences and sexual trauma have led the artist to develop an extremely expressionistic, confessional style of practice. Through the contradictory nature of Emin’s work exploring themes of sexual ambivalence and painful intimacy, the artist displays evidence of the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style.

Bourgeois’ psychoanalytic writings and artistic work influence each other. Combined, they depict a cryptic and analytic profile of an artist who dissects, reconstructs and channels the pain from her past into physical manifestations. This is how Bourgeois navigates her world, reflecting evidence of Dismissive-Avoidant attachment style.

The expressive paintings of Munch express a deep desire for love yet fear of abandonment and avoidance of emotional connection. Munch sways between this desire for connection and fear of intimacy through his life, and subsequently through his paintings. Due to this analysis I posit that Munch displays traits of the Fearful-Avoidant attachment style.

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## Illustration Bibliography

Fig. 1. Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963 -1995* c. 1997, Appliquéd tent, 122 x 245 x 215 cm, White Cube London

Fig. 2 Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963 -1995* c. 1997, Appliquéd tent, 122 x 245 x 215 cm, White Cube London

Fig. 3 Tracey Emin, *Left Soul*, c. 2018, Drawing in ballpoint pen on paper, Drawing in ballpoint pen on paper, 15 × 21 cm, Hidden Galleries

Fig. 4 Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, c. 1940, Ink and pencil on paper, 6¼ x 9½ in, The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, New York

Fig. 5 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, c. 1999, Steel and Marble, 9271 × 8915 × 10236 mm, Tate Modern, London

Fig. 6 Edvard Munch, *Separation*, c. 1896, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 127cm, Munch Museum, Oslo

Fig. 7 Edvard Munch, *The Artist and his Model I*, c. 1919, oil on canvas, 134 x 152 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo