

**UNIVERSITATEA BABEȘ-BOLYAI  
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**THE ARTIST AND DEATH IN THE  
TWENTIETH CENTURY IMAGINARY**  
*-summary-*

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## SUMMARY:

Any given study concerning the relationship between artist and death is quite disturbing. The literary and philosophical tradition renders the two concepts as two essential constructs of the unthinkable, at the boundary of intelligible. Since Platon, we know that art is the path towards the absolute, so that the juxtaposition of the two concepts offers some interesting points for discussion. We must admit that death is a privileged subject for any artistic representation, a fruitful source of inspiration for any artist.

Death is a radical rite of passage, inevitable for any individual, for any social group, and thus becoming part of any cultural representation. The subject is a fashionable one, as Jacques Le Goff states in the preface for Jacques Chiffolleau's *La Compatibilité de l'au-delà*. The approaches on death evolved: in the forties, Lucien Febre complained about the lack of studies on death, but in the sixties we witness a renewal of interest in this subject. The psychological effect of the encounter between the living and death is the subject matter for a study about the „psychotic culture of fear” by Jean Delumeau, who opens his approach towards the history of the ghosts, „intermundi”, the history of paradise and hell. The anguish towards death has constantly stimulated the imagination of artists, philosophers, anthropologists, writers and painters. The bibliography on the subject is impressive: the fascinated morbidity (Phillipe Ariès), the vision of macabre and eroticism (Huizinga), the anthropological approach of Louis- Vincent Thomas, the philosophical approach of Edgar Morin and Vladimir Jankélévitch, Jean Ziegler and the employ of sociology, the aesthetic perspective of Danyel Payot and Enrico de Pascale, the gender studies of Elisabeth Kübler Ross, the biological and medical perspective, to name only a few studies on a long list.

The first attempt to tame death through explanation, to ascribe sense to it means narrating death, its integration in the text. Those writers discussed here try to grasp its raw factuality. All death sciences could be considered relevant in order to build a narrative structure. Those death narratives are also the proof for survival, echoing the rhythm for the progression of individual and collective death.

The study is focused on the morphology of death representations as an inner paradox of writing. The end of Nineteenth Century and the beginning of the

Twentieth Century is a widely recognised turning point regarding not only the situation of art, but also concerning the metamorphosis of the artist's image. Consequently, the body of texts were analysed in order to emphasize the essential features found in the imaginary of the age. The absence, the oblivion, the fatal encounter with the other, the fascinated look into the abyss, all reinforced by the Christic condition of the artist show a few essential signs of a crepuscular atmosphere. The work of art traces its own destiny and also molds the destiny of its own maker. In this pattern death suffuses the very essence of beauty, pervading the force of creation in a corrosive, irradiant manner. We focus here on a common, yet unique situation: the experience of writing art, the instances of inspiration.

The literary text is a mirror to reflect the ugliness of death. Art's victory consists not only in the aesthetic process of reflection, but also in the ambition to change the relationship between *to be* and *to look*. The moderns refused to nurture this illusion, and also refused a reality deprived of any ingenuity. Solitude, lack of trust, doubtfulness, wars, the inner hell, indifference proved to be more frightening than death itself. The artist assimilated all these not through realistic reflection, but by creating a different possible world, a substitute and a artificial construct as a response to these disturbing visions. His refuge is a volatile one and bears the influence of imaginative act. A symbolic image can be found in Mantegna's painting with the soldier and his shield, discussed in *Remembrance of Things Past* by Proust.

The relation between artist and death is threefolded: the representation of the dying artist, death as the dimension of art and death as the last aesthetic option for the one who lived only for art's sake. The pattern of aesthetic death is a representation recurrent in Decadentism. Death of the artist is also a interrogation about his own condition and activity.

The texts we have selected for analysis are extremely relevant for the death of the artist, for the historical background of an age, a complete picture that combines themes, motifs, social, aesthetic and historical features. Our study selects similar artistic preoccupations and visions from their works in the attempt to isolate the hidden instance of death, manifested through absence.

Death represents the „other“ narrative, the unknown story that desintegrates all our bonds with the old temporal order. Death is a solution to the passage of time, a particular way to fulfill time and to insert in the story of life. The narratives about death form a fascinating double in which every moment seems to be the negation of

the other. A work of art is also a privileged manner to avoid the death of the author and a mean of survival. Death is the end of the narrative. Narratives belong to a historical and rectilinear time. Writing is a refuge, a new beginning, word becomes a general truth, as in cosmologies. Beyond this zero degree of life, there is a certain desire for continuity in any narrative act (a death denial).

There is a temporal dimension in the relation between artist and death, connected to the problem of memory, to a regressive path towards the unification of past and present egos, towards the effect of the encounter with the Otherness. On the other hand we have a diachronic approach: the artist as prisoner in a real, destructive, Gorgonic time, when Death becomes his guide. Our demonstration includes a discussion about what is beyond time, about the journey towards a suspended and circular time, an illustrative experience for understanding death and the possibility of life after death. This is an attempt to look into the abyss, an endeavour to distinguish what is beyond the immensity of a landscape, to understand the very essence of death.

In the everchanging universe, death is a disease and writing is a cure for the spirit. What is this alchymic formula in the writing, able to cure this „sickness unto death” ? Our present approach seeks an answer to this question and configures its chapters after the four phases found in the creative process, following the passage of a symbolic death similar to those in the Greco-Roman Mystery religions. Our thesis consists of studies in the representation of death in the Western culture, namely in the beginning of the Twentieth Century, with a selection of the most important works by four acknowledged Modernist writers: Thomas Mann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gabrielle D’Annunzio și Marcel Proust. Each chapter can be read separately. The order of the chapters is just a possible version of reading.

The first chapter is somehow detached from the rest of the work and summarizes the possible instances of the artist as a cultural notion, from its original meaning in the Renaissance to the dawn of Modernism, but also the way in which the artist invents and configures the principle of coherence and harmonies, helping the individual to cope with the chaotic ways of the world.

The second chapter is focused on the mechanism of memory and oblivion, following the regressive pattern of any artist, who, like Orpheus, re-discovers his past memories and egos. The imaginary representation of the self becomes manifest as melancholy, nostalgia, neurosis, but the encounter with otherness is subsided in a narcissistic way to the self.

The third chapter describes vanities in a prospective manner. Vanities are signs that helps the artist to decipher the secrets of the world and to anticipate his own death. It is also an investigation regarding time as an obsession for man, as the bells are continuously suggesting the rythm of the end. The chapter is a self-portrait with death, where the latter brings a special incantatory rhythm.

In the fourth chapter we discuss „time beyond time”, a paradigmatic experience that nurtures the thought of death and opens the possibility of life after death. This journey is equivalent with transcending experience, when common life embraces mystery. All the characters we analyse have a similar openness for adventure, a similar desire to surpass the average, to forget the past and start a journey without any luggage into the unknown. The existence does not head towards the void, but takes a leap out of time, open to a pure duration. The way out of history coincides with the immersion into a sacred space, an utopian out-of-time city in the form of a sanatorium such as the famous Berghof or the imagined Venice or the idealistic realm of slumber.

The Artist can be best portrayed as Ulysses on his way home, as Oedipus or as naive Don Quixote challenging the windmills. None of these instances escapes the thought of death, the conscience of the limit. This knowledge belongs exclusively to the Western cultural inheritance. The imaginary generates the ability to travel through texts in order to find the essence of human condition, and death paves the way for a promising reading. The „eternal recurrence of the same”, the sign of death and our unconscious determination remain without answer. In other words, whether we like to admit it or not, we belong to a civilization „in love with its own death”, in search of the truth about death. In order to decipher this secret we need a special code, which is hidden in the books discussed in the present thesis.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

**Totentanz, vanitas, suicide, eros and thanatos, coincidenta oppositorum, spleen, Melancholy, Saturnism, the tragic Otherness, decadentism, decrepitude, decline, Scara Vieții, contemplation of death, death and music, Self-Portrait with Death, personal death, the death of the others, anguish, slumber and death, the mourning, memory, oblivion, nostalgia, Paradise Lost, absence, the Mask of Death, the sacrifice, The Christic condition.**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

### *INTRODUCTION* *La mort qui console*

.....2

## **PART I** **TOTENFEIER** **ARTIST FACING DEATH**

**CHAPTER I . – The Parable of a Problematic Identity.....10**

**CHAPTER II. – General Considerations about the Artist.....13**  
I. 2.1. An Artifex *ingenio e virtu*, 13 – I. 2.2. The Baroque *finis secularis*, 22 – I. 2.3. The Romantic *Untergang*, 34 – I. 2.4. The *Fin de Siècle* Seducer, 42

**CHAPTER III. – The Art *das Gleitende*.....62**

## **PART II** **MEMORY**

**CHAPTER I.- Memory's places and games.....67**  
II. 1.1. Memory and the *fort....da* game, 68. – II. 1.2. The Consequent Deaths of Ego. The Catabasic Experience, 78. – II. 1.2.1. *Claudio am Fenster stehend*, 78 – II. 1.2.2. Isolation and the Return of the Repressed, 83 – II. 1.2.3. Melancholy, Nostalgia, 87 – II. 1.3. Romantic Meditation in Solitude, 88 – II. 1.3.1. The Cemetery of Cultural Movements. Old Masters, 88 – II. 1.3.2. The Esthetics of the Ruins and Proust's Neoromanticism, 89 – II. 1.4. „Les Intermitences du Coeur”, 99

## **PART III** ***In ruhig fließender Bewegung*** **VANITAS**

**CAPITOLUL I – Self-Portrait with Death.....109**  
III. 1.1. Ill-Fated Times and Hard Times, 109. – III. 1.2. Two Masters of Resignation: Schopenhauer and Baudelaire, 115 – III. 1.1.3. Anguish, Exhaustion, and Fear of Life, 123 – III. 1.4. Mister Albin's Lesson, 125 – III. 1.5. Peering at Death, 129 – III.1.6.

Compliance, Detachment and Indifference Towards Death in Proust's Novels, 131 – III.1.7. The Sight and the Metaphors of the Skull, 134.

**CHAPTER II – *Memento quia pulvis***.....138  
III. 2.1. The Religious Constraint, 138 – III. 2.1.1. Thomas Mann and The Sickness Unto Death or another Essay about Irony, 138 – III. 2.1.2. *Contemptus mundi* à la Proust, 144 – III. 2.2. Visions of the End of the World, 155 – III. 2.2.1. Proust, the Heath Death of the Universe and the Infusers, 155 – 2.2.2. The Burgeois Apocalypse: *Buddenbrooks*, 162 – 2.2.3. *Lamentatio Fausti* – The Tragedy of the German People, 166 – III.2.3. *Genius Epidemicus*, 167 – III. 2.3.1. Ah! Literature is Death!, 168 – III.2.3.2. The Disease and the Magic Soul of Music, 174

***PART IV***  
***Urlicht***  
**PRIMORDIAL LIGHT**

**CHAPTER I – Primordial Light**.....177  
IV. 1.1. The Aesthete on Holiday, 177 – IV.1.1.1. Journeys and Imaginary Spaces, 180 – IV.1.1.2 „Bitter” Venice, 183 – IV.1.2. *Nekyia* as Narrative Pattern in *Recherche*, 207 – IV.1.3. Can Anyone Narrate Time?, 215 – IV.1.4. To Die, to Sleep, 221

***CONCLUSIONS***  
***La mort qui fait vivre***

.....

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**.....234