

# **REPRESENTATION OF DEATH IN EUROPEAN AND MODERN CONTEMPORARY DRAWING**

## **SUMMARY**

The present doctoral research entitled “Representations of death in european and modern contemporary drawing” chronologically, investigates through an artistic and socio-politically point of view, the finitude theme from the beginning of medieval era through present by analysing the graphic representations. The work investigates human’s perception regarding the death subject and the semblance of this misfortune with fadeaway, terror, dehumanisation and sorrow. I have enriched the subject by expressing strong beliefs on this current matter, both through theoretical study and one of personal creative act.

The study begins from the medieval era, an obscure period built upon pillars of brutality, violence and torture, a historical period in which war and hunger were inevitable. These unfortunate situations led to the establishment of so called Black Death pandemic. It is tried, both to clarify but to debate the migration from central Asia to Europe of this plague, even with modern scientific methods. Medieval’s man helplessness confronting the wide spread epidemic of bubonic plague builds intimidating and protective solutions. The power that the misfortune brings by decimating human settlements and beliefs and seeding fear of death, is exposed in writing and graphics of that era, inspiring the XIVth century macabre style of drawing. The temporary nature of existence has formed the consciousness on the funeral ceremonial by creating works of art which contain anamorphic and hidden symbols of fatality. The cause that led to an inceased number of deaths among human kind is still researched in the present. It was said that fleas and rats are responsible for carrying the disease, theory that is countered by scientific studies which confirm that air would be a much more plausible way to spread such fast. Also, the hunger led to rachitis, anemia and malnutrition, creating a perfect environment for the strong virus to expand. Every step that the plague made, was portraied in a macabre scenery an so,

death became a fellow friend. The monochrome imagery of the medieval manuscripts is empowered and refined by a vibrating fluid line oozing with drama. Regardless the medium used, we manage to uncover a universe that holds within frightening entities, a bestiary that forms a strong bond between image and writing. Many artists and writers were inspired by the catastrophe that hit mankind, one that spread over decades in many forms, each being marked by a macabre engagement. This imagery held inspiration even in contemporary era that took its core from the past.

The innovations that appear in the matter of war and which were destined to annihilate the enemy at a blink of an eye, had generated the notions of fear and deadly danger, notions that aroused the artistic realm to create works that portray personification of inert bodies. By comparing The medieval drawing with the contemporary one, we manage to discover resemblance regarding macabre topics and the usage of iconic images, developing somehow a parallel between the past and present events that press hard upon the beauty and also the gravity of the matter. Death holds a mystery that created a humongous number of artworks, intimate visions of importance that were related to the tangible world described by Voltaire: „the human kind is the only one aware of dying and knows how to do it due to experience”. In conclusion, fear might be the reason that leads our nature to madness, hypocrisy and foolishness.

The art of drawing was inspired by the illness, a proof stands in the scientific documents that testify the writings being a strong argument juggling between image and written words. Drawing's evolution is based upon the form that captures the meaning of the image, killing the naive representations and replacing them with divine and true symbols.

Throughout the thesis I bring in front draughtsmen who were forgotten and use their defining visual imagery to remind about the transformations of the subject of death. The artist, seen as a witness and also as a pawn in society, analyses the ideology that hunts death, an ideology that stigmatises every single part of the nature's act. The contemporary drawing embraces the uncanny details from the medieval pictures and uses them to investigate what universe is and so, the modern graphic representations are given the worthy attention. Drawing gets a significant number of followers because of the honesty that resides in expression which

transforms it in a thought's extension. "By the pure possibility of the impossible", I place in an obvious example, spaces along time served "unequivocally and definitively end of our existence". Art is expressed by the distinctive's swing between aggression and playfulness which resides in the fascination for death. The viewer feeds his craving for a repugnance of evil by experiencing different ways of artistic statement.

Philosophy, religion, culture and morality are trying to confer a solid answer regarding the awareness of disappearance but it lacks a solid ground, while the empiric perspective embraces fatality. Death is a gloomy reflection upon social events which stirs interest in scientific research by heaving the capacity to destroy and convert at the same time. In the evolution of time death is surrounded by dissension and mystery, being placed in an ancestral dimension. Mythology and religion offers an alternative for the brutal events, one of a spiritual kind. There is no redemption without wisdom. The right and the evil, two opposite territories tend to implement fear and manipulate the human consciousness by compelling it unwavering morality an values.

In contrary with the christian doctrine, the artist has a fascination with the tangible part of what death is. Being drawn to anatomy creates an urge for unorthodox practices in which the specimen's body is desecrated. In this particular pattern, drawing becomes the binder between scientific research and grotesque, but fascinating imagery. The morbidity and decadence that is found in anatomical illustrations is brought in contemporary art by asphyxiating the creative surface. This is what Marc Bauer's mortality feature drawings bring; human condition brought to the essence of the phantasmagoric.

As so, death is being portrayed in various forms by the ancestral cultures. Mindaguas Lukosaitas dedicates his visual interpretation to aggressive acts with violent and inevitable ending, conveying anguish and disappear. The rigidity that accompanies the disembodied entity, to whom the arts had dedicated posterity, defines it as visual affirmation. Assigning human attributes brings „memento mori" as a message that preaches the idea of awareness of self mortality. The acceptance of finitude can be seen in most of the drawings that bare this message.

Death is defined symbolically by the human skull, in the modern period, opposing with ancient beliefs who associated it with life and rebirth. The XVth century genre scenes presented the skull lying next to the saint or prophet's feet. This particular picture will be seen on XIXth century poison bottles and in decoration design of the nazi uniforms.

Regarding the visual aspect, contemporary drawing has built an altar on the notion of disappearance increasing the grotesque themes of the modern era. This remarkable medium of visual manifestation creates parables with powerful significance that allow the imaginary world to intertwine with imminent ending. The artist forges himself a personal graphic archive from which he plucks images as reference, a practise that becomes an important piece of the puzzle. Drawing reveals a whole new universe where visual overlapping is defined by depicting the inward space to an introspective inquiry. Society, as a whole, identifies with consumerism, uniformity, identity loss and death, subjects that are devoured by the artists in a monochrome game as a reminder of the photographic medium used as reference. A possibility is given to the graphical representation to overcome the sketch book and to introduce itself revealing the creative force of drawing. The picture's energy becomes a tool used to dissect the daily routine with lines oscillating between static and dynamic state upon the working surface. Transforming the intimacy into monumental is sustained by an argument of individuality. Death is being represented ambiguous by analysing the obsessive speech among black and white. The obvious destruction of lives outlines the ending's portrait who maims calling the heady, strutting disaster and revealing the human's impotence regarding fatality. Our own ephemeral existence is characterized by this kind of discourse being an inspiration for artists. In 2013, the artist Elpida Hadzi Valera presented at The Venice Biennale of Art a fence constructed from white taxidermied rats, a project ment to remember about the devastating plague that grew root even in contemporary era.

Historical background turns into enthusiastic creative source for the contemporary drawing to describe death's triumph. Therefore art appears as a link that connects historical context and traditional beliefs, marking a different, yet, known territory.

The second part of the summary presents an abstract discourse concerning the subject. The matters referring the final act are exposed, in a natural grotesque manner sprinkled with ridiculous enigma, suggestion and drama, by a sum of artists. Holding as an iconic image the inert, yet, beautiful body of Ganimede, it is developed a certain attraction for the corpse. It is seen as an anonymous discourse, excluding our own person until the moment that brings forward our own death.

The artist's inner experiences preserve the visual freshness creating a high contrast itinerary. The, so called dull techniques shelter an abyssal force and reflection. The speech indicated how the topic is made anonymous and abstract, a statement which runs in the third person ignoring its own extinction. Drawing's mystical ability to dissimulate and connect with the viewer, proves it's capacity to expose itself as the playful sense of creation. There is no doubt that the destructive actions are a foundation built in place where death and brutality dance with people in a repulsive ritual. George Grosz and Otto Dix have embraced the foul nature of humanity, being the initiators of morbid imagery in modern art by exposing the dark and wicked of the human mind. Their drawings show sex scenes, aggression and death thrown in an obscure and sinister society bordered by disaster. Throughout history the body's frailty changes from an image that emerges from revulsion to a meditative state of loneliness which embraces the final act. This reminds us about the metamorphosis of death guarded by a human skeleton and topped with a hint of sarcasm, an image that remind us of Arnold Bocklin, Louis Corinth an Stephane Mandelbaum.

The thesis presents, in addition to the graphic portrayal, both samples from the visual arts area and tangible locations which develop the finitude notion in order to sustain the request for the inspiring sources which created a change in thinking and also the contemporary individual's bond with the subject. The beautiful dead body is preserved as a learning experience through the instructive boards which are presented in a strict and exact, yet grotesque, drawing manner. As referring to this kind of image, it is developed a new curiosity for the function of the human body. With these arguments consisting in a foundation, I agree with the fact that art, in any creative medium, expresses hope by giving the freedom of experiment and forcing the artist to evolve to an alleged but not proven journey. As Coreg Robin once said, fear is the base of the society, the first visceral emotion that humans feel, an emotion that

triggers the survival instincts, causing conflict. Saocrate considered death as a partition, claiming that the soul is beyond tangible and final. Mircea Eliade said: „ fear of death has a double meaning, once through the fear for dead people and the second regarding the presence of the loved ones that creates a permanent state of worrying and uneasiness. „

Drawing operates with a wide range of monotony derived from black, mostly with the darker tones, situated on the verge of blackness which is surrounded with a dark aura, an eternal silence. The absorbing power that the abyssal surface has, conveys strong lines and tensed points revealing the mystery behind the blackest black. Mind outlines fact, individualising in an attempt to elucidate the event. Panic is settling triggered by a feeling of danger, even this being real or imaginary.

Eros and Thanatos are two pillars that define each specimen, subjects overly disputed by artists and philosophers in the attempt of decrypting their mystery. The antithetical perspective of the two terms is derived from the medieval artistic themes. Hans Balding stands as the bringer of the contrast of the two in contemporary art, by enhancing the dramatic sorrow.

The third chapter reveals the macabre cult through suggestive images showing death's transformations toward recent events, bringing new terms, as apocalypse, strengthening the force of fatality. The impact considering the consciousness must be immortalised and passed on, making a path in aesthetic of ugliness, a theory that reveals the usual under a monstrous and crooked face. A royal death show is conspired by the similarity that lies between the XVIIIth century jewel decorated corpses and Chloe Piene's drawings. On a second hand, it refers to Peter Failer and Ragner Peerson's works, who graphically describe a kind ending anticipated by embracing you own human condition, guarded by beats that fight for the decaying soul. This kind of powerful images stand as a memento for what is to come. Art history issued the creative power of the permanently changing funeral art, by giving importance to the picture of a decomposing carcass. Hegel marks the hideous by creating a parallel from the tormented Christ figure to the immolation on the altar. These visual aspects are seen nowadays and tend to go for a much brutal image and an overwhelming atmosphere. Disaster caught in a snapshot redeems the grotesque in two of Goya's engravings presenting body mutilation as a centre piece, reminding

about Belvedere torso. The tangible is a must that comes after the impact with the visual experience. There is no particular recipe for the graphic representation, each and every one feels the need to experience the visual disturbance. For the gifted ones this is just an exercise of clearing their mind, but the results are intense and creatively valuable, emerging above any other influences.

I have created a connection between what honesty is and naive art by naming some artists whom works function as an instinctive gesture, synthesising the abstract in profitable ideas. But reality becomes evanescent regarding death and receives new visual combos.

My guidance is the passion for drawing and the artistic drawn for the grotesque and macabre, beliefs that go to the conclusion that death and my visual language couldn't exist one without the other. The deceiving simplicity of the drawing and the bitter sweet taste that lingers when the end is near are holding the whole existence in tension. Death is a gesture, drawing is a gesture, whatever comes in-between stands as relative.