

Abstract

THE THEME OF DEATH IN PICTORIAL EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism mainly explores, investigates the human existence. Thus feelings, conditions such as sadness, metaphysical anxiety, despair, absence, nothingness, fear of the world, death, self-dissemblance, chaos of the cities are present in varied pictorial, musical or literary constellations. The theme I approached is a sequel and a detailed study of my artistic research from the past years, period in which I explored with the means of painting and my own intellectual and spiritual resources (no doubt, under the influence of expressionism), the world of disabled beggars and of people being on the verge of death. In these artistic attempts I intended to convey, primarily with the means of lines and colours, powerful emotions, effectively experienced by me, a low-spirited outlook on real, tangible human life, made up of flesh, viscera, pain, hunger, fear, terror. From these artistic-pictorial explorations and reflections on expressionism, in general, came to life the theme I would like to develop - *Theme of death in the pictorial expressionism*. *The theme of death* is complex and is approachable from several perspectives: art, psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, biology, religion, ethics, etc. Although I am aware that the only valid perspective for knowing death (this aspect is probably important for the artistic approach as well) is self-experience, I intend to investigate the chosen theme appealing to the iconography of death in expressionistic paintings, to aesthetic, philosophical, psychological studies and research about death, focusing mostly on possible connections between life and art in the context of the questions built around death. Fear of death plays an important role even now, at the beginning of the third millennium, when many voices warn people about a possible apocalyptic end, starting from the danger of using advanced technologies for destroying the humanity. Thus, visual art, too, is engaged in reflecting this situation, which creates a certain psychosis, that affects individuals, social groups, movements, etc. Evidently, the artist's warnings are not listened to. These phenomena keep perpetuating, manifesting themselves in different forms, which characterize the contemporary period. The consequences are obvious. The burden of each day, of the harsh reality, politics, society, but economics, as well, hang heavily on the individual again and again, and once more the expressionist artist is looking for salvation beyond appearances through the means of spirit. The theoretical approach is based on bibliographic research, iconographic studies, experiments, is permanently

accompanied by personal plastic investigations which will be placed on “the inexorable passing of time and fear of death” continuum felt by myself.

The first chapter, entitled *The theme of death seen in art - mythical-analytical references*, follows a strictly synthetic approach, which is rendered necessary due to the fact that along the study I make references to artistic phenomena from the closer or more distant past. Artists have always been preoccupied with *the theme of death*, the threat of death, running away from it or by people being on the verge of death. On the other hand, not only artists, but people in general, are affected by this painful thing, which cannot be escaped by any human being from our world. I tried to emphasize those elements that have mainly influenced the twentieth century expressionist movement, by presenting them, from different centuries, analysing the most important references from an artistic point of view.

Chapter 1.1 deals with *The cult of the dead in ancient Egypt*, where the importance of death is apparent from the building of the imposing pyramids and the numerous graves dug in the mountains. I presented the most important pyramids through which the pharaohs were seeking immortality. This edifice was ideal for the study of the different ways in which one of the most sacred aspects of the Egyptian civilisation, “the cult of the dead”, manifested itself. Ancient Egyptians believed in life after death, they considered it to be maybe even more important than their life on earth. Besides these, I also tried to highlight the importance of Anubis, the god of the dead, who appears in many scenes that depict the mummification ritual.

In subchapter 1.2., *Antique Greece and mystical cults*, I tried to stress the fact that the Greek religion always knew what answer to provide in front of death, through mystical cults, such as those connected to Dionysus, Orpheus or Eleusinian Mysteries. I also highlighted Plato’s theory of death. He held, probably influenced by Orphism, that the soul is immortal, thus he claims that the soul is unbreakable, but is destined to go through many stages until a final relief.

Subchapter 1.3., *African art*, presents the main features of African art, after these the paintings from the Inoro cave are presented in more detail, paintings which depict *the theme of death*. These paintings have a sacred- monistic character, as we can observe from Leo Frobenius’s descriptions; similar paintings have been found in semi-galleries shaped like a chapel, being entitled *dende maro*. This theme of death is present in the initiation rituals of boys

or in the hunting rituals where paintings made with blood can be found. The mask is another important element of these rituals. This is how the body mask of the juju dancers in Cameroon is explained. At the end of the chapter I underlined the influence of the African art over expressionism.

Subchapter 1.4., entitled *Funerary objects in Oceanic Art*, investigates the funerary objects from around Australia, Melanesia, Micronesia, Easter Island and Polynesia. In Australia the cult of the dead is easily identifiable through several representations: “*Funeral ceremony*”, “*Mask with a mythological spirit*” and sculpted totem animals. In Melanesia, in Papua New Guinea island many poles and body masks have been found, depicting Asnat ancestors for the funerary rites, which have been created from wood, plant fibres, and palm leaves. Continuing, I mentioned the moai sculptures which, according to a recent research, portray deceased aborigine chieftains, capable of connecting the living with the world of the dead.

Another subchapter is dedicated to *The theme of death in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, with research focusing on the four thematic subdivisions: “*Doomsday*”, “*Dance Macabre*” “*The Triumph of Death*” and “*Christ near Death.*” The cult of dead appeared in this period due to the eschatological fear caused by the plague, by the frequent riots caused by soldiers and thieves, due to the threat of famine and fiscal authority, due to crusades and the Turkish invasion, but also to the moral decay of the papacy. Later in this chapter I laid emphasis on artistic personalities, and on their plastic discourse focused on *the theme of death*, personalities like Nicola Pisano, Van Eyk, Fra Angelico, Hans Memling, Giotto and Grunewald.

In chapter 2, entitled *Funerary in modern expressionism*, the theoretical approach focuses on the study of those works of expressionistic artists that were built around death, harsh reality, which is a constant pressure for the individual, taking the form of a permanent threat over the human existence. *The theme of death* is present in their work in the shape of different inner individual constellations, focusing mainly on possible relations between life and art.

Subchapter 2.1., *The term expressionism - from Vauxcelles to Fechter*, offers an overview of the history of the term *expressionism*. An exact definition of the term is difficult and it represents a delicate problem due to its complexity. The fundamental issue remains the spatial and temporal delimitation of this phenomenon. From this a question rises, whether expressionism

can be proclaimed as a coherent movement or as a characteristic directive of a certain period, or is it a tendency which emerges to the surface from time to time in the course of history. At the end of the subchapter I remarked the fact that the term expressionism was created much later than it established itself in the European art; expressionist painters and poets are members of not a movement exactly, but rather of a generation, which is meant to express the freedom of this era.

Subchapter 2.2., entitled *The forerunners of expressionism between Géricault și Ensor*, studies those artists who, through their revolutionary sense of the drama of humanity, of the inequities that social existence is based on, have defined an aesthetic thinking earlier than the term expressionism could have had a relevant meaning. This is the reason why I consider that the research from this chapter has the obligation to justly present the accelerator factors of the process which resulted in the birth of a cultural attitude from the first half of the 20th century. The stress fell on those artists' work where *the theme of death* is identifiable under various visual collections. As the title of the subchapter suggests, the first artist is Theodore Géricault, the research starts from him and is directed towards the centre of the investigation. The plastic analysis, filtered through the point of view of the studied subject, continues with artists such as Francisco Goya, Vincent Van Gogh, James Sidney Ensor, Kathe Kollwitz, Ernst Barlach.

Subchapter 2.3., entitled *The theme of death in expressionism*, is mostly dedicated to the expressionist movements, but before analysing the work of these artists for the sake of the study, I considered Constantin Prut's opinion about expressionism worthy of mentioning, he stated that "... *in its essence it remains an attitude of individuals, of cases. Confronted, on a social level, with dramas, with often apocalyptic tragedies (World War I) the artist feels the looming presence of destructive elements in himself.*" Further on, I remarked the author of *Faust* - Goethe's - significant contribution to the birth of expressionism, as well as Nietzsche's contribution, the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

This subchapter is divided into several parts, for example subchapter 2.3.1. is dedicated solely to **Edward Munch**, the artist who becomes an expression of the tragedy of existence, which becomes a basic benchmark of German expressionism. This inner state from which Munch's work emerges is exactly what takes us to the core and theme of our study. The studied

theme is probably united best in the work of this artist, who becomes the symbol of expressionism.

Research is continued in subchapter 2.3.2., called *Die Brücke - The Bridge*; in the first part I present the elements that have contributed to the birth of the group, then the emphasis is on the work of artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Emil Nolde. My analyses are centred on those works of art that convey powerful emotions focusing on *the theme of death*, which are created from a depressing world, made up of feelings like sadness, metaphysic anxiety, fear of the world, apprehension, fright of the imminent universal catastrophe that might paralyse the individual for good.

Subchapter 2.3.3. called *Der Blaue Reiter-The Blue Rider*, studies the works created by the members of the group; although *the theme of death* doesn't appear quite as frequent as in the case of the members of *The Bridge* movement, still I rendered it necessary to carefully analyse the works of art that reflect the dismayed life caused by the war. Even the artist who firmly believed that this conflict will be the centre for reconstructing this world, Franz Marc, became himself, unfortunately, a victim of this war. The artist Paul Klee brings a noteworthy contribution to the activity of *Der Blaue Reiter* group; however he was not a typical expressionist, because his works don't fit into only one category. Klee created several paintings with ghostly effect and tragic significance caused especially by the disaster that affected Europe in that period. In his later works we can observe simplified archaic shapes, too, which prove a preoccupation for the passing character of human existence. Studying the work of other artists from *Der Blaue Reiter* group, I concluded that *the theme of death* or the expression of dangers that threaten the existence of life in that epoch is not as intensely expressed in their work as it is in the case of the previously presented artists. Still a few pieces of work do appear and the work of Lyonel Feininger and Alfred Kubin cannot be forgotten.

Subchapter 2.3.4. , *Neue Sachlichkeit-New objectivity*, starts with the presentation of the after war period, when, sadly, even the hopes for a better life in the German society disappear, moreover, due to the severe economic crisis, survival becomes the foremost issue. This catastrophe touches the cultural world as well, which could not remain a silent spectator of these social problems that endangered human life. Even though artists were searching for new plastic shapes, expressionistic aesthetics is kept especially at the beginning, resulting in *New objectivity*,

which can be defined as a new realism with social tint, too. Later these innovative tendencies will lead to the decline of expressionism, especially in the critics' opinion, and less in the artists' opinion. The artists were attempting to recover, to revive the world after the decline brought on by the war and to strengthen it, however, the dramatic realities reflecting the images of death frequently occur in their work. My research continues with the work of those artists, where we can identify *the theme of death* or elements related to the gloomy side of the human soul. **Max Beckmann** is a powerful figure, who was fascinated by his work on the front line, this being shown by his works, which demonstrate that the artist was preoccupied with the people wounded in the battles, but in the meantime overwhelmed by the numerous impressions and experiences which made him believe that his art can create new forms; this is the period when he creates, among other works, *The Large Operation*, *Morgue* and *Self Portrait in Wheelchair*. Diseases, poverty and famine were rapidly spreading on the streets of Berlin, full of dead former soldiers, who have returned from a lost war; Beckmann is also present, representing a small group of the last revolutionaries, fighting against governmental forces. Beckmann could not be silent in front of these atrocities, creating two of his masterpieces in this period: *Hell* and *The Night*, where *the theme of death* is the main subject. One of the most ruthless analysts of the Republic of Weimar, Siegfried Kracauer, wrote an article about Beckmann in 1921, describing the hellish effects of *The night*: "Truly, the horsemen of the apocalypse are riding and mowing down the human race. Bloodlust creeps through the nights and instigates pogroms, in which men and women are slowly tortured to death with diabolical powers of inventiveness. The victims' whimpers of pain are drowned out by the hellish cacophony that is expelled from the blood-red gramophone trumpet...the whole order of things is inverted... But in the midst of the noise the executioners' apprentices busy themselves with complete quiet and impassivity. Little pipe in mouth, they strangle necks and dislocate limbs, as if these were perfectly normal tasks about which nothing further need be said." The study continues with the work of **Otto Dix**, who paints - with a systematic and merciless persistence - decomposed and repulsive faces, the satisfied carnality of a bourgeois world, but mainly the horrors of World War I. Most of his major works were created in the midst of the battles, on the battlefield. His paintings from this period can be divided into three categories. The first one might be called *The cruelty of death in the trenches*, the second one *Barren landscapes - the mirror of the human power*, and the third one: *The world of brothels and prostitutes*. It is worth mentioning that Dix was interested in *the theme of death* before the

war, too, and this aspect is revealed besides the importance of self portraits in which the tense atmosphere, that is pressuring the artist's soul, is visible. After a detailed analysis of his work we can affirm that *the theme of death* is constantly present in his art, in an original form, which emphasizes subjectivity. Further on, I developed my personal experience regarding Dix's work, which is an impressive one and resulted in an exhibition at Kunsthalle in Mannheim. The study of Dix's art ends with his masterpiece called *The War*. This triptych painting depicts a ruined world seen from the front line, a work meant to draw the contemporaries' attention, without excluding the truth about human misery and decay brought on by the war. In Dix's visual language one can notice the transition from expressionism to an emotionless realism, which enables him to express himself with brutality, in the style called later The New Objectivity. Before his death, at old age, Dix stated: "*Actually I wasn't that interested in depicting the ugly. Everything I saw was beautiful.*" In the end of the subchapter the research focuses on the art of **George Grosz** and **Ludwig Meidner**, where *The metropolis* becomes the main scene of death. Grosz's paintings and drawings depict alienated individuals, revolted people, hiding criminals, prostitutes and violent and brutal crowds from the streets, buildings and alleys of Berlin. In Meidner's paintings the chaotic, conflicting and destabilizing energies have taken over the human life, resulting in the renowned "*apocalyptic landscapes*".

Subchapter 2.4., entitled *The theme of death in Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka's works*, examines these Austrian artists' works, where *the theme of death* appears in a similar psychological nature, but one that differs from visual point of view. Egon Schiele created free representations of human shapes, endless nudes, and self portraits; they are depicted so penetratingly, that makes it obvious that the artist considered anatomy to be a psychological, spiritual and emotional element, rather than being a physical one. With the same expressionistic enthusiasm, he finds interesting urban motifs to express *the theme of death* and he creates a series of works entitled *dead city*, his work of art becoming more intense and more trying, approaching subjects like *mother-child* or *birth-life-death*. In the same Austrian territory, in Vienna, worked the painter and writer **Oskar Kokoschka**, who created some of the most important expressionistic work of art, where *the theme of death* is pervaded in a very personal style by the depiction of dramatic and restless subjects. Through this search for new forms of art manages Kokoschka to convey without restrain an authentic inner life dominated by depressing conflicts of the psychic. Devastating forces attacking the human being, like war, sickness, sex or

death become recurring themes for this artist from Vienna. Many critics of art characterise Kokoschka's art by the term eternal expressionism and due to the fact that all his life he was looking for the most powerful means of expressing himself through paintings, he was nicknamed *Chief of the wild ones*.

The third chapter called *The theme of death in expressionistic film making, literature, music and theatre. Landmarks and interpretations* was written along the course of study because of the mutual influence between different forms of art, where the same principles were shared, that is the depiction of the inner reality, which, due to a world unable to find its roots, generated a protesting, but gloomy work, with harrowing tents of sadness. Although this study focuses on the investigation of *the theme of death* in visual arts, I could not neglect the other forms of art related to visual arts, such as expressionistic film making, literature, music and theatre, which essentially have the same basic elements such as *state of mind, expressionistic view, inner reality, and inner tension* like the visual arts. In this chapter I focused only on important benchmarks of these areas, where *the theme of death* is presented in various constellations. Studying these creative realms, I recognized the major impact the plastic art had on them. In the same time, the inevitable and beneficial connections between these forms of art, resembling a spider web, create an even more concrete image of expressionism, in general.

In subchapter 3.1., entitled *The theme of death in German expressionist film making*, we notice that expressionism in films was possible due to the powerful influence of the other forms of art from the period. However, painting had the most important impact on it. We could not neglect the positive effect of literature over film making. This phenomenon was quite strong because expressionism appeared in cinematography as a very influential school, finding a fertile soil in it, and the universal character of the film made it possible to spread worldwide. Continuing, my investigations are focusing on those films which approach *the theme of death* from different angles, like hallucinatory universes, haunted by ghosts, atmosphere of vague fear and hidden terror, caused by the tragic spiritual crisis of a society deeply traumatized by the chaos of the war, which has just ended. Thus, in this atmosphere are films like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligary*, by Robert Wiene, *Destiny/Weary Death*, by Fritz Lang, *Shattered*, by Lupu Pick, *The Lodger*, by Alfred Hitchcock, created.

Subchapter 3.2., called *The expressionist poetic world pervaded by the thrill of death*, presents, at the beginning, the defining elements by which the authors of literary work define themselves. Afterwards the editor Kurt Wolff is emphasised, who will become the most important editor of the expressionists. Studying the expressionist poetry I came to the conclusion that *the theme of death* is there in most of the works, caused in most cases by fear, madness, war, loneliness, disease, aggression and sadness, and these are identical with those from the expressionist visual arts, film making, music and theatre. The filtering analysis continues with the work of poets like **Georg Heym**, **Gottfried Benn**, **Georg Trakl**.

At the beginning, subchapter 3.3., called *Expressionist music*, deals with the first expressionist attempts in music written by **Maurice Ravel**, in whose work one of the main stress falls on *the theme of death*. The researched subject can be found in pieces of music such as *Pavane for a Dead Princess-Pavane pour une infante défunte*, *The tomb of Couperin - Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Sérénade Grottesque* and *Boléro*. Investigation continues with pointing out the two expressionistic schools, the one from Vienna and the Russian one; from these schools arise those musicians whose work allows us to trace *the theme of death*. In **Arnold Schönberg's** work, *the theme of death* appears in the *Transfigured Night*, *Expectation*, *The Lucky Hand*, and at **Alban Berg** especially in *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, in the case of **Paul Hindemith** - in *The Murderer*, *Sancta Susanna*, and in *Murderer, Hope of Women*.

Subchapter 3.4., entitled *Expressionist drama* investigates the most important references from the expressionist drama, which has evolved through the various and varied searches and expressions, but these exact searches around the time of the war give the drama a violent, social, realistic and corrupt tone, from which the expressionist heroes try to detach themselves or which they want to transform according to their own vision. This theme is analysed in **August Strindberg's** plays: *The father*, *The dance of death*, *The ghost sonata*, *Cities Set on Fire* in **Frank Wedekind's** *Spring Awakening*, *Earth Spirit*, *Pandora's Box*, *The Dance of Death*, *Death and the Devil*; in **Max Reinhardt's** play *The Miracle*, as well as in **Oskar Kokoschka's** *Murderer, Hope of Women*, and in Ernst Toller's *Transfiguration*, *The Son*, but in other playwrights' works as well.

In the last chapter of this thesis called *Conclusions. Reflections upon personal artistic work*, I synthesised the main directions analysed throughout the whole theoretic research, those

that have mainly focused on *the theme of death*, but also on the human existence swept by feelings, states like sadness, metaphysic anxiety, despair, fear of the world, of the war, of the hell of the cities, investigated mostly in the domain of visual arts. In the end I presented the personal artistic projects developed throughout this process of research, projects which follow a pre-established plan and a precise conceptual line, due to my artistic searches related to *the theme of death*, which date back before the research for this thesis. In the same time what I attempted to analyse and understand in the work of the predecessors presented in this thesis is synthesised in my personal work of art materialized in paintings, such as: *The Funeral*, *The Call of Death*, *Death and the Oak Tree*, *The Oak Trees*, *The Silence of Death*, etc.