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EXPRESSING DEATH BETWEEN REALISM AND SURREALISM IN BRUEGEL'S PAINTING "TRIUMPH OF DEATH"

Abstract: Art constitutes an essential means of communicating and expressing the artist's psychological states, concerns, questions, and sense of danger depending on the surrounding natural factors and circumstances. This study delves into the nuanced depiction of death in Pieter Bruegel's renowned painting, "Triumph of Death," exploring the interplay between realism and surrealism. Bruegel masterfully captures the inevitability of death while infusing surrealistic elements that transcend conventional artistic boundaries. Through an analysis of the painting's composition, symbolism, and historical context, this study aims to unravel the complex narrative woven by Bruegel and shed light on the philosophical implications of death as portrayed in his work. Depicting death as something inevitable, much like the unchangeable past time, with an unknown future, art becomes an attempt to pause time, hoping to avoid the uncertain. Aiming at Analyzing the details of real social life in the artist's era and approaching them with his surreal expressive outlook.

The study uncovered various insights, notably concerning the significance of death in the minds of artists and its impact on their work. Moreover, the study emphasized the pioneering nature of the painter Bruegel, who was ahead of his time by seamlessly blending elements of realism, expressionism, and surrealism in his artistic endeavors.

Keywords: Dialectic of life and death - Pieter Bruegel - Philosophy of temporality - Real and Surreal.

INTRODUCTION:

Man is born into the universe and embarks on diverse paths in his pursuit of future aspirations. Constantly seeking to affirm his existence and distinguish himself among society members, he relies on his work and ideas. Art forms an integral part of this expression, shaped by changing circumstances. It serves as a means to delve into the universe's mysteries and explore the dialectics of life. Death, a key focus of current research, has been depicted by artists since ancient times, as seen in drawings on the Ishtar Gate. This tension between opposing poles fuels artistic expression, offering a medium for conveying psychological states, concerns, questions, and perceptions of danger influenced by natural factors and surroundings.

From there, the research problem crystallized as researchers embarked on exploring the possibility of comprehending the dialectic between life and death depicted in the painting "The Triumph of Death" by the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel (1525-1530 – 9 September 1569)¹. Does the inevitability of death serve as the driving force behind this artistic creativity? Is the specter of death accompanied by an intense desire for survival and a love for life? Choosing this painting as the subject of an analytical semiotic study, the researchers concluded by demonstrating the artist's yearning and his attachment to life, akin to a castaway clutching a straw upon realizing the inevitability of their fate.

The research puts forth the following key points:

- Death is viewed as a troubling event dating back to Adam's time, prompting humans to seek liberation from it, with art emerging as a pivotal avenue. Echoing Roland Romain's words, "Where death reigns, genuine art is absent, as it celebrates life, not death"². This ethos guides artistic exploration, emphasizing creation and creativity.

¹ The renowned Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel (1525-1530 – 9 September 1569), hailing from the village of Bruegel near Breda, emerges as a luminary in sixteenth-century artistry. Renowned for his distinctive style characterized by warm hues and vivid depictions of rural life, Bruegel's artistry was marked by a fervent dedication to portraying authentic local scenes, particularly those of peasant life. In his defiance of Renaissance artistic norms, Bruegel inadvertently pioneered a novel approach to painting, characterized by honesty and a commitment to truthfulness in representation. Notably, his seminal work „The Triumph of Death” stands as a testament to his mastery, offering a hauntingly dark portrayal that remains unparalleled in European artistry. Bruegel's panoramic oeuvre, spanning various subjects, underscores his unparalleled talent and enduring influence, with „The Triumph of Death” earning a place as one of the most profound and impactful paintings of all time, prefiguring even Goya's nightmarish compositions of the nineteenth century.

² Jean Bonnerot, *Romain Rolland, sa vie, son œuvre, Carnet-Critique*, 1921 (p. 5-99).

- The chaos depicted in the painting serves as a vital element in the quest to restore stability.
- Painter Bruegel's significance lies in his pioneering strides beyond his era, positioning himself within the realms of realism, expressionism, and surrealism.

Problem and Research Questions:

Our investigation centers on unraveling the complex interplay between life and death within Bruegel's masterpiece. Key questions guiding our research include whether the inevitability of death serves as a catalyst for Bruegel's artistic expression and whether the presence of mortality ignites a profound longing for life. Furthermore, we aim to examine the influence of Bruegel's distinctive style, characterized by chaos and satire, on the interpretation and dimensions of the painting. Additionally, we seek to understand Bruegel's legacy as a pioneering artist and his enduring influence on subsequent artistic movements.

Research Objectives:

Our research endeavors to achieve several objectives:
Analyze the socio-cultural context of Bruegel's era and interpret its manifestation in his surrealist expression.
Highlight Bruegel's innovative contributions in challenging artistic conventions and forging a path towards modern artistic expression.
Significance of the Research:
By offering a novel perspective on the concept of death, our research aims to reinvigorate the interpretation of Bruegel's painting with contemporary relevance.
Through the analysis of Bruegel's panoramic vision, we aim to challenge traditional artistic norms and inspire new avenues of artistic exploration.

Research Methodology:

Employing a comparative, descriptive, and analytical approach, our study aims to deconstruct the intricate layers of Bruegel's painting. By examining relevant socio-cultural factors and artistic influences, we seek to unravel the underlying motivations driving Bruegel's artistic choices.

Research Hypotheses:

H1: Artists, including Bruegel, have long grappled with the existential questions surrounding life and death, fueling their creative expression.

H2: Bruegel's unique synthesis of chaotic elements into organized compositions reflects his mastery of artistic technique and secures his place in art history.

H3: Bruegel's emphasis on the landscape as the focal point of his painting redefines traditional artistic conventions, signaling a shift towards innovative artistic expression.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

Dialectic of life and death:

To elucidate the dialectic of life and death, it is imperative to comprehend, from a philosophical standpoint, the concepts of dialectic, conflict, and paradox.

Kant reveals that for the ancient Greeks, "dialectic" denoted a logic of deceptive semblance, characterized as "the logic of illusion." It involved a refined skill of presenting ignorance, or even deliberate deceit, with the guise of truth by mimicking the meticulous and precise methodology required by logic. This was achieved by employing the subject matter as a cover for vacuous statements³. As for Plato, dialectics is "a type of knowledge"⁴, he stated, "...dialectics, and dialectics alone, goes straight to the first principle and is the only science which gets rid of hypotheses to secure its ground"⁵.

The word "conflict" comes from the Latin "conflictus", meaning clash or shock. "The conflict", for Hegel, pertains to the war between states, which, at first glance, appears to be the sole mode of conflict within the Philosophy of Right. Thus, it is within the realm of the history of nations, rather than the history of self-consciousness, that conflict assumes a central position⁶. Definitions of conflict vary between two extreme perceptions, viewing it as either a negative or positive process. Some consider conflict a natural phenomenon, while others see it as foreign and abnormal in social life. Yet, there are those who regard it as a necessary condition for the development and flourishing of both individuals and societies.

The third aspect in relation to the dialectic of life and death is the paradox, encompassing contrasts such as black and white, light and dark, stability and

³ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press.1998.

⁴ Plato. *Phaedo*. Cambridge University Press.1993.

⁵ Plato, et Benjamin Jowett.. *The Republic: The Complete and Unabridged Jowett Translation*. Vintage Books, book VII, 533b, 1991.

⁶ Vieillard-Baron, Jean-Louis. « *Les conflits et la vie dialectiqueselon Hegel : conflitjuridique, conflithistorique et conflithiérohistorique (1807-1821)* », *Les Études philosophiques*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2006, pp. 223-236.

movement, and so on. In the ordinary sense, a paradox is viewed as an absurd or extravagant opinion, as evidenced by its Greek origin “*pará doxa*”, meaning “opinion against.” In a more specific context, a paradox refers to a form of reasoning where an unacceptable conclusion is reached from seemingly acceptable premises and apparently correct reasoning⁷.

Death is defined as the separation of body and spirit. Being dead means this: the body stands apart, detached from the soul, existing in isolation, and the soul stands apart, detached from the body, existing in solitude. Plato, for instance, articulates this concept, stating: “We believe, do we not, that death is the separation of the soul from the body, and that the state of being dead is the state in which the body is separated from the soul and exists alone by itself and the soul is separated from the body and exists alone by itself? Is death anything other than this?”⁸.

Death, as a perennial phenomenon, has perennially impacted those it touches. To forge a temporal connection between contemporary artistic expressions and ancient rituals and artistic endeavors, we embark on a study centered on Bruegel and poetics—an exploration articulated by René Passeron as “the conceivable thought of creation”⁹. We delve into how artists have drawn upon personal experiences or imaginative faculties to elucidate or evade death. This endeavor, whether implicit or explicit, promises deeper insights into this enduringly enigmatic phenomenon.

Philosophy of temporality:

Our reflection about artistic expression in the face of death unfolds within the framework of the philosophy of temporality. Death, as the unforeseeable and inevitable, underscores the artist's perennial confrontation with time's constraints. Bound by time's unyielding grip, the artist remains incapable of revisiting the past or peering into the future.

The philosophy of time and space delves into ontological, epistemological, and qualitative aspects related to time and space. Plato said that “time is the moving image of eternity”, whereas Aristotle suggests that the world came into existence within a pre-existing, infinitely ancient time frame. Aristotle further argues that time is a conceptual construct, devoid of real existence, as it only consists of past and future moments, with the present serving as

⁷ Sainsbury, R. M.: *Paradoxes (third edition)*, Cambridge University Press (2009).

⁸ Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 translated by Harold North Fowler; Introduction by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1966.

⁹ René Passeron, *Pour une philosophie de la création*, Klincksieck, Broché - 3 mai 2000.

a temporal boundary rather than time itself. However, the theory of general relativity introduced the notion of curved time, which can be both infinite and finite concurrently, reconciling Plato's and Aristotle's perspectives. Aristotle further developed this understanding of time, defining it as a "measure of movement." This interpretation was enshrined in his *Physics*, and it laid the foundation for the natural sciences' understanding of time. He raises the question of evidence of the existence of time and reproduces a dialectical approach here: the past no longer exists, the future does not yet exist, and the present is the moment of the unity of being and non-being¹⁰.

Let's delve into the etymological origins of the word "time." It stems from the Indo-European root *tem*, which signifies "to cut." This root is evident in various Greek terms such as "temno", meaning "to cut," *temenos*, referring to the divine enclosure, "tomos", representing a slice (from which the French term "tome" is derived), "epitome" denoting abbreviation, and "atomos" signifying the indivisible corpuscle. Similarly, the Latin language incorporates this root in words like "templum", which initially referred to the space delineated by celestial signs and later came to denote the temple. Eventually, it evolved into "tempus", representing a fraction of duration or time itself. We observe that these words essentially refer to a form of separation or division, delineating an element or individual from a larger entity: whether it's the volume of a book distinct from the book itself or the sacred enclosure of a temple set apart from ordinary space. Moreover, this notion of division establishes a boundary between an interior and an exterior, implying both the exclusion of the separated element and the potential for its integration into the whole.

THE INFLUENCE OF TEMPORALITY ON ARTISTIC PRODUCTION: (Bruegel as example)

The influence of time on artistic production is an enduring aspect that remains deeply intertwined with human existence. Whether time's passage or the desire to freeze it becomes materialized, artists compel us to confront our emotions, desires, fantasies, and fascinations. Time, both intangible and omnipresent, pervades our surroundings and sparks profound inquiries into the essence of humanity. Whether seeking to immortalize the ephemeral or elevate the passage of time, artists and designers pay homage to this phenomenon that transcends human comprehension. Their works evoke sensitivity and provoke introspection, reflecting both the contemporary perception of time by artists and our own personal relationship with temporality as spectators.

¹⁰ Sus, Viktoriya. „*The Philosophy of Time: Study the Nature of Past, Present, and Future*” The Collector.com, December 17, 2023, <https://www.thecollector.com/philosophy-of-time/>.

The artists employed both philosophical and scientific dimensions to impact the psychological dimension of the audience, seamlessly blending past, present, and future into a singular moment. It's noteworthy to consider the arrow of time, which progresses linearly towards the future, resonating psychologically within our minds. Humans possess a distinct psychological stance on the temporal flow, as they reminisce about the past, inhabit the present, yet remain oblivious to the future and its uncertainties. There are various types of time, as elucidated by the astronomer and physicist James Jeans¹¹, ranging from objective time to psychological or perceptual time¹².

What we aim to explore here is how Brueghel's painting, the focal point of our current research, transcended the confines of physical time and entered the realm of absolute time – the time conceptualized by Isaac Newton, where matter is perceived through the lens of time as absolute, flowing continuously and independently of any external influence. Absolute time is infinite and uniform, progressing at a constant rate for all observers regardless of their location in the universe¹³.

Bruegel crafted his painting and its elements in a manner that transcends the present moment, projecting into the future and evading the constraints of time and space. His work seems to echo Dali's philosophical clock, symbolizing the melting of time under the sun's influence. In Bruegel's realm, where the earth halts its rotation and past and present interchange, the future takes on significance, mirroring the thematic elements of his painting, which is the focus of our research.

Bruegel Within the Realm of Realism, Expressionism, and Surrealism:

In 1347-1349, the Great Plague swept across Europe, decimating nearly half of the population (with certain regions experiencing even greater losses) during the epidemic. This catastrophic event recurred multiple times until the 16th century, albeit with lesser intensity. These harrowing experiences undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of a fascination with macabre themes. However, the Church initially employed macabre themes to instill fear of damnation rather than fear of death itself. These themes initially served to illustrate the sense of personal failure and human vulnerability in the face of mortality

¹¹ Sir James Jeans | Astronomy, Cosmology & Philosophy from www.britannica.com

The astronomer and physicist James Jeans was an English physicist and mathematician who was the first to propose that matter is continuously created throughout the universe.

¹² Al- Kholy,y,t, "*Travel in Philosophy and Science*", Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority.1990, p21.

¹³ Parker, B, "*Travel in cosmic time*", Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority. 1999, p. 10.

and physical decay, particularly prevalent during the 15th century. This association between death and human frailty gave rise to a sense of melancholy and regret for the fleeting and precious nature of life, rather than instilling a fear of death. Macabre imagery thus served as a reflection and amplification of these profound existential sentiments.

In this portrayal of the apocalypse, depicted by Pieter Bruegel, Death takes center stage in the painting. Armed with a scythe, she rides a skeletal horse, guiding humanity towards their demise. A multitude of skeletons inundate the landscape, indiscriminately claiming lives - from kings and mothers with infants to knights and lovers, all subjected to Death's relentless advance. Even card players attempt futile resistance with swords, oblivious to the inevitability of their fate. The scene is one of despair and desolation, with withered trees and scorched earth, while infernal fires rage in the distance. Everywhere, skeletons perpetrate atrocities, from drowning to hanging, with no sign of redemption or salvation. Amidst this grim tableau, prayers for mercy go unanswered, and hope fades into oblivion.



Fig. 1. *The Triumph of Death*, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Original title: *De Triomf van de Dood*, c.1562 - c.1563, oil, panel, Prado Museum, dimensions: 117 x 162 cm.

"The Triumph of Death" (1562) by Pieter Bruegel is renowned for its intricate narrative and visual complexity, hallmark features of the artist's oeuvre. Bruegel employs a multitude of visual techniques - from the dense arrangement of figures to the deliberate omission of significant details, and from paradoxical imagery to subtle visual traps - all designed to unsettle the viewer and provoke contemplation. In stark contrast to the traditional Christian depiction of death as a passage to either eternal bliss or damnation.

The painting depicts the court of the dead during the time of the Holy Inquisition, symbolizing death's triumph overall, with a grim reaping affecting all walks of life. An army of skeletons ravages a desolate landscape, with fires blazing on the horizon and shipwrecks strewn across the sea. Hordes of skeletons advance upon the living, who flee in terror or futilely resist. Bruegel's composition is a chaotic reflection of the randomness of life and death, with each group embodying its own distinct symbolism. Thus, we find it imperative to dissect and analyze each fragment of the painting individually, decoding its significance, despite their shared title, in our quest for survival amidst the chaos.

"The Triumph of Death," painted by Bruegel in 1562, stands out for its unusually dark and tragic subject matter, teeming with intricate details. In a departure from conventional norms of the time, Bruegel's style amalgamated diverse elements against a panoramic backdrop, evoking a sense of rebellion. The painting's background is delineated into two main sections: a somber sky, ranging from dark black to light grey, and a scene depicting various strata of society succumbing to the sudden onslaught of death. The high horizon line serves as a potent visual device, intensifying the relentless pressure exerted by death upon all facets of life depicted in the composition.

The painting we're looking at isn't just a flat image - it feels like you're diving into a whole world. Everything is arranged so that you feel like you're right there with the artist, exploring every detail. Bruegel's painting is like a big story, told with so much detail that it feels like it's woven into history itself. The land in the painting looks empty and sad, with no plants, just gallows and other symbols of death everywhere. Death seems to be lurking around every corner, catching people off guard while they're busy with everyday things like playing games or spending time with loved ones. Even brave knights can't escape death's reach. It's all set against a dark sky, with ominous-looking gallows looming in the background. It's a scene that makes you think about the fragility of life and how death is always lurking, waiting for its moment.

On the bottom left of the painting, there are skeletons driving a cart filled with skulls, while others are ringing a bell, signaling the approach of devastation and death. In a heartbreaking scene, a starving dog is biting the face of a helpless infant held by its mother. Towards the center, people are trapped,

unaware of the danger looming above them. A skeleton on horseback wields a machete, ready to strike, while the people below gaze at the ominous clouds of smoke, their mouths agape. It's a scene that's both shocking and eerily reminiscent of Edvard Munch's famous painting, "The Scream." (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. „The Scream” as Depicted by Bruegel and Edvard Munch

Suddenly, there occurred a shift in the laws, where previously reliable boundaries between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead were breached, akin to a vast village. In the painting, individuals from all social strata stand side by side - peasants and soldiers, nobles, and cardinals, even the king - all summoned to death's banquet, reaped indiscriminately. There exists an unmistakably inevitable global end for all humanity, albeit in this depiction, unlike in the artist's previous works, there is no presence of the devil, but rather his emissary. Perhaps the implicit intention behind this is to allow for a hint of hope, even if distant. However, this hope is shattered by a few skeletal judges adorned in white attire, not symbolizing peace, but rather signifying the status of the deceased and the transition from one realm to another. They condemn the remaining living within an authoritarian system that has engulfed everyone's serenity.

Elements Symbolizing Death:



The landscape appears desolate, dominated by hues of ochre. Even with a body of water in the distance, everything seems parched. Beyond a mountain range on the horizon, there are numerous fires, suggesting perhaps an eruption. Death is present here by the fires in the distance and the sinking ships in the sea.



We can observe the theatrical nature of the composition, reminiscent of the Ommergang, a Dutch festival featuring a procession symbolizing death. Particularly notable is the rider wielding a large scythe, who relentlessly pursues the crowd atop a skeletal horse, reminiscent of the horses of the Apocalypse.



Conveyors with a melancholic expression carrying a cart full of skulls. Most notably, there is the figure of a rider wielding a large scythe, chasing the crowd on a skeletal horse, reminiscent of the horses of the Apocalypse.



The allegorical portrayal of death features two figures representing the Fates from Greco-Roman mythology, tasked with cutting the thread of life. In the scene, we observe two women depicted on the ground, one of whom is being crushed by a cart brimming with skulls. One of the women wields a pair of scissors, while her companion holds a spindle.



The wheeled fortress, positioned behind the gaunt horse, might evoke the chariot known as the Hellewagen, associated with the concept of a chariot of hell. Another significant element is the cart laden with skulls.



Executioners and gravediggers, represented by legions of skeletons, including horsemen, foot soldiers, and those armed with nets.



Skeletons playing trumpets also evoke the Apocalypse.

Elements symbolizing defiance against death:



Resistance proves to be ineffective. Good Christians seek refuge in a structure marked with a cross, unknowingly entering a trap from which escape is impossible. Despite a monk's plea to the heavens, their fate is sealed.



We can observe a man bravely un-sheathing his sword to engage in a futile battle.



Another, less courageous, attempts to conceal himself under a table. Yet another seeks refuge in the hollow of a tree only to be struck by an arrow.



Some attempt to distract themselves, such as these lovers who play music obliviously, unaware that a skeleton accompanies them on the violin. It's notable that Bruegel portrays a pessimistic view of love in this scene: it's depicted as shallow – the courtesan scatters coins on the table – and transient – the blue dress of the musician's mistress serves as its symbol.

Color plays a crucial role in the interaction between form and light, shaping the overall external appearance of the form. Together with lines of varying types, it gives rise to shapes and spaces central to the artistic painting process. The role of color in art is akin to that of melodies in music. Without color, there would be no visual arts, and life itself would lack vibrancy. On this subject, Fernand Léger says: "Color is a vital necessity. It is a raw material essential to life, like water and fire," he wrote in 1937¹⁴. Their function is not only decoration or ornament, but they also have an undeniable psychological and social value, especially when they are related to light." The process of color is closely linked to intellectual emotions, and this is what the artist Paul Klee confirmed when he said: "Color and I are one: I am a painter"¹⁵, as did Kandinsky when he affirmed that the artist must not only train his eye and hand, but also his soul, so that it becomes a standard and a particular measure of artistic creativity.

In Rembrandt's paintings, dark brown and black colors dominate, imparting a sense of mystery and visual depth to his works. This immersion in dark hues has been linked by critics to his tumultuous personal life, suggesting that his surroundings influenced his artistic expression. Such influences likely shaped the psyche of Brueghel, impacting his artistic vision and overall endeavors¹⁶.

In Bruegel's mesmerizing masterpiece, colors aren't just pigments on canvas; they're vibrant storytellers, weaving narratives of emotion and symbolism that captivate the viewer's soul. Each hue holds a unique significance, orchestrating a symphony of feelings and meanings that dance across the painting's expanse. Just as a composer carefully selects notes to evoke emotions, Bruegel wields colors like a maestro, infusing his work with layers of depth and complexity. From the somber depths of black to the ethereal glow of white, every shade serves a purpose, speaking to the human psyche in a language of its own.

The Black is often associated with power and authority, it also harbors a darker side, symbolizing mystery, fear, and the unknown. In Bruegel's hands, black becomes the canvas upon which the drama of life and death unfolds, a shadowy realm where mortality meets eternity. And the white, radiant, and pure, while it may traditionally symbolize innocence and light, Bruegel subverts expectations, infusing it with layers of meaning. Here, white isn't just a color, it's a beacon of hope amidst the darkness, a fleeting moment of purity in

¹⁴ <https://www.vincianelacroix.net/fernand-leger-la-couleur-est-une-necessite-vitale/>

¹⁵ Florence Rougerie, « Écriture et peinture dans le Journal de Paul Klee », *Marges* [En ligne], 07 | 2008, mis en ligne le 15 juin 2009, consulté le 30 avril 2019. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/marges/595>; DOI : 10.4000/marges.595

¹⁶ A. Binet, *Rembrandt d'après un nouveau mode de critique d'art*, *L'Année psychologique*, 1909, 16 pp. 31-50.

a world tainted by mortality, marking both the genesis and culmination of life's journey. It signifies transitions from nothingness to existence, from vitality to stillness. White embodies the passage in tranquility, a hue of serene crossing. Its presence conjures feelings of calm, peace, and solace within the human spirit.

Yet, the symbolism of white is not confined to simplicity; it embodies a rich complexity. It is all light colors merged into one, a spectrum encompassing both presence and absence, diversity and uniformity, beauty and desolation. This duality is vividly portrayed in cultural representations, where ghosts are often depicted clad in white garments, symbolizing the ethereal realm between existence and oblivion. Against the prevailing view that ghosts in antiquity were "achromatic" (in the sense that they were only black or white), I want to suggest that black and white ghosts signaled not only a perceptual problem of color in terms of pigment, but indeed even a problem of perception itself. The kind of color that I have in mind here thus includes what the Greeks called the *chrōs* and the Romans *color*, that is, the skin or surface of things on which color appears and becomes itself visible¹⁷.

But beyond their individual significance, colors in Bruegel's painting serve as conduits for emotion, stirring the soul and sparking introspection. They invite us to contemplate the fleeting nature of life, the inevitability of death, and the fragile beauty of existence. In the end, Bruegel's use of color isn't just about aesthetics, it's a profound exploration of the human experience, a journey through the complexities of emotion and meaning that transcends time and space.

The painting communicates with us silently, and the image we're examining is a collection of signs and meanings. According to Charles Peirce, these signs consist of a signifier, a signified, and a reference. Peirce makes this structure of deferral and referral an aspect of his definition: a sign is "anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself [sic] refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on ad infinitum¹⁸. The semiotic sign system focuses on the idea that things differ from how they appear visually and materially. They are subject to specific laws and intellectual systems that interpret them, and humans construct this interpretation. It also explores the relationship between the signifier and the signified, which is an inseparable connection except for study and analysis purposes.

¹⁷ Patrick R. Crowley, *the phantom image seeing the dead in ancient Rome*, The University of Chicago Press, 2019, p. 123.

¹⁸ Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1982. p. 188.

A symbol or terminological sign is an agreement among a group of people based on a specific convention. The value of a symbol lies in society's emotional reaction to what it represents. Martine Joly explains in her book "Introduction to Image Analysis" that a sign must convey multiple ideas to be effective¹⁹. In the painting "Triumph of Death," we observe various elements such as imposing gallows, raised bayonets, bare trees, and columns of smoke. These elements, along with the use of a high horizontal line, signify the dominance of death and its authority over its surroundings. This portrayal can be interpreted as a series of distress signals directed towards the sky, drawing on Umberto Eco's theories of meaning systems²⁰.

The Surreal Depiction of Reality in Bruegel's Painting:

The movement of Surrealism embarked on a multidimensional journey, encompassing realms of thought, literature, art, and even politics, challenging established norms and traditions, including religious beliefs. Embracing the mantra of dreams as a pathway to liberation, Surrealism envisioned a world where individuals could fully exercise their freedoms within a harmonious and integrated society.

Surrealism emerged as a literary movement deeply rooted in Art and Philosophy. It sought to transcend the limitations of ordinary reality by positing the existence of a profound, subconscious reality lurking beneath the surface. This subconscious realm, believed to be confined within the depths of the human psyche²¹, spurred a call for its liberation and exploration through various artistic and literary expressions. However, the Surrealists aimed beyond mere artistic pursuits; their ultimate goal was to emancipate humanity from the constraints of a society overly focused on practicality and utility.

In the realm of visual arts, the exploration of surrealism is characterized by two distinct perspectives: the first revolves around the notion of spontaneous artistic expression occurring in the liminal space between wakefulness and slumber, often referred to as "automatic writing" of André Breton²². By stripping away stylistic conventions and delving into the depths of the subconscious, they aimed to tap into a realm of unconscious creativity buried within the self.

¹⁹ Joly Martine, *Introduction à l'analyse de l'image*, Paris, Nathan, coll. 1994, p128.

²⁰ Eco Umberto, *Le signe*, Paris, Le Livre de poche, 1988

²¹ Silvano Levy, 'Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality', (Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 2-5

²² <https://fahrenheitmagazine.com/en/modern-art/art-letters/the-automatic-writing-of-andre-breton-a-transcription-of-his-dreams>.

On the other hand, the second perspective adopts a stance of natural realism, which echoes and complements the former viewpoint by emphasizing the rearrangement and reinterpretation of reality through the incorporation of realistic elements. In both cases, the key is to detach oneself from conventional perceptions and regard things in their purest form, allowing their inherent significance and multiple layers of meaning to emerge. Consequently, attributing imaginative interpretations to these objects transcends mere amusement, evolving into a philosophical stance of profound significance, as noted by Luis Aragon²³. This philosophical approach challenges the conventional understanding of reality, introducing an interplay between reality and unreality that ultimately yields a new conceptual framework.

This new reality, born from the fusion of reality and unreality, serves as a conduit to explore the depths of the subconscious mind, which, according to André Breton, may hold the key to addressing fundamental existential questions. Breton ponders whether dreams could offer insights into solving life's most profound mysteries, prompting reflection on the nature of consciousness and the boundaries between waking life and the world of dreams²⁴.

The pioneer of surrealism, Dalí painted the unreal with absolute realism, with scientific accuracy, and photographic details, and yet his paintings depicted the interior state of his mind²⁵.



Fig. 3. Comparison with „The Horseman of Death” by Salvador Dalí (1935)

²³ <https://headstuff.org/culture/history/terrible-people-from-history/louis-aragon-surrealist-poet-and-communist/>

²⁴ Picon, Gaëtan: *Le Surréalisme 1919-1939*, Editions D'Art Albert Skira, SA, Genève, 1983, p. 61.

²⁵ Asta Sutton, *Art and the Unconscious. A Semiotic Case Study of the Painting Process*, Lapland University Press, Finland, 2014, p. 196.

Painted in 1935, 375 years after Bruegel's "The Triumph of Death," "The Knight (or Horseman) of Death" emerges from a period of political unrest in Europe, particularly in Spain, and personal transformation for Dali. This ethereal depiction of a ghostly encounter between three spectral figures and death on a desolate plain captures the unsettling atmosphere of its time, perhaps even foreshadowing the events to come. It is part of a remarkable series of paintings where Dali's dreamlike landscapes are haunted by shroud-covered specters, skulls, and other symbols of mortality, decay, and dissolution.

Initially experiencing unknown anxieties that manifested in his dreams as amorphous skulls or decaying horses, Dali soon realized that these images spoke not only to his personal fears of death but also forewarned of the looming Spanish Civil War. Similarly, in Bruegel's socio-existential context and through surrealist representation, the inevitability of death finds expression.

In the distance, forming a peculiar triangle with the horseman's contemplation of death, a shrouded specter emerges from the land. Part ghost, part geological formation, this figure symbolizes paralysis and immobility, echoing the theme seen in the disintegrating horse and the inert figure. Thus, the central theme of "The Knight of Death" suggests that pondering mortality itself leads to a state of paralysis and petrification.

Through this comparison, we can discern the potential impact of Bruegel's compositions on Dali's artworks, gathering and aligning them with formal analyses of the two paintings. Furthermore, consolations can be linked to archetypal symbols. In these cases, a probable unconsciously experienced consolatory element can be found hidden in both artists' paintings.

CONCLUSION:

It's unimaginable to consider Pieter Bruegel's works as mere products of a distant reverie, depicted in pictorial forms often diverging from reality. They evoke a surreal ambiance seemingly detached from actuality, yet in truth, they vividly capture the grim essence of a tragic era marked by personal experiences and the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition. Bruegel's artworks serve as poignant reflections of a harsh reality transformed into surreal dreams on the canvas.

The study concluded by highlighting the artist's remarkable precision in observing his social milieu directly, alongside the depth of his vision and his ability to extrapolate future stages in what seemed to be a proactive, avant-garde manner. This approach served as inspiration for many artists, particularly those of impressionism and surrealism. Even though Bruegel's other paintings showcased the technique of exchanging roles and the reversal of logic, depicting a man swimming against the current, another confessing to the devil,

and a third sitting between two empty seats, we cannot overlook the fact that he bestowed upon the power of death in his epic portrayal of victory, the full role, without exception and with all privileges, to recklessly reap the best from people. This painting stood out from his others because it seamlessly combined realism, expressionism, and surrealism.

The inevitability of death was at the origin of this painting, manifesting in ambiguity and a cascade of events that blurred boundaries, set against a backdrop of unified landscape amid chaotic frenzy. It's a frantic race against death to escape and find salvation. This chaos, in a positive and creative sense, dismantles to pave the way for a better future. The subsequent phase is marked by purity, symbolized by the white robes of judges who, like the condemned, have transcended earthly existence. From amidst this creative chaos, Bruegel communicated with the farmer, a humble child of the earth largely excluded from feudal halls and church corridors. In a stroke of rarity, Bruegel pioneered an artistic approach that would inspire and influence generations to come.

In our comparative analysis with Salvador Dali's work suggests a notable influence of Bruegel on surrealist artists. The examination highlights the potential impact of Bruegel's compositions on Dali's artworks, indicating a shared consolatory element that might be unconsciously present in both artists' paintings. This underscores the enduring significance of Bruegel's artistic vision and its resonance across different artistic movements and periods.

In conclusion, artists have consistently grappled with the theme of death, using their creative expressions to confront the inevitability of mortality. Through their works, they not only acknowledge the universal truth of human finitude but also critique the societal issues that contribute to untimely death. By exploring themes of mortality, artists offer poignant reflections on the human condition and invite viewers to contemplate the complexities of existence. Through their art, they navigate the delicate balance between life and death, inviting us to confront our mortality while advocating for social change and collective introspection.

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EKSPRESJA ŚMIERCI MIĘDZY REALIZMEM A SURREALIZMEM W OBRAZIE BRUEGELA „TRIUMF ŚMIERCI” (streszczenie)

Sztuka stanowi istotne narzędzie komunikacji i wyrażania stanów psychicznych artysty, jego obaw, pytań i poczucia zagrożenia, w zależności od otaczających go czynników naturalnych i okoliczności. Niniejsze badanie zgłębia subtelne przedstawienie śmierci w słynnym obrazie Pietera Bruegela „Triumf Śmierci”, badając interakcję między realizmem a surrealizmem. Bruegel mistrzowsko uchwycił nieuchronność śmierci, jednocześnie wprowadzając elementy surrealistyczne, które wykraczają poza tradycyjne granice artystyczne. Poprzez analizę kompozycji, symboliki i kontekstu historycznego obrazu, badanie to ma na celu rozwikłanie złożonej narracji utkanej przez Bruegela i rzucenie światła na filozoficzne implikacje śmierci przedstawione w jego dziele. Ukazując śmierć jako coś nieuchronnego, podobnie jak niezmienny miniony czas, z nieznaną przyszłością, sztuka staje się próbą zatrzymania czasu, z nadzieją na uniknięcie niepewności. Analizując szczegóły rzeczywistego życia społecznego w epoce artysty i podejście do nich z jego surrealistycznym, ekspresyjnym spojrzeniem. Badanie ujawniło różne spostrzeżenia, w szczególności dotyczące znaczenia śmierci w umysłach artystów i jej wpływu na ich twórczość. Ponadto, badanie podkreśliło pionierską naturę malarza Bruegela, który wyprzedził swoje czasy, płynnie łącząc elementy realizmu, ekspresjonizmu i surrealizmu w swoich artystycznych przedsięwzięciach.

Słowa kluczowe: Dialektyka życia i śmierci – Pieter Bruegel – Filozofia czasowości – Realizm i surrealizm

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