

“Still Death” by Hmilar: Intermediality and Intertextuality in Creating the Image of Passing

Iraida Tombulatova

Odessa I. I. Mechnikov National University, Ukraine
tombulatova@ukr.net

ABSTRACT: The article focuses on the problem of creating the image of Death by contemporary artists. It deals with the process of transformation of a traditional image/images of Death, that is influenced by different cultural, social and religious codes. Being influenced by varied philosophical theories and arts' masterpieces contemporary artists try to create their visualization of such basic concepts as Life, Death, and the Afterlife. Taking as an example the painting “Still Death” (2020), this article's purpose is to attempt to discover an intertextual context and the impact of intermediality on creating of an eternal image. The significance of the research is dwelling on the determination of creating the image and possibilities of its being decoded. As the artists all over the world currently are influenced by different artifacts of synchronic and diachronic perspective, the problem of interpretation becomes one of the most actual in the understanding of the functioning of the cultural codes and their impact on society and reception later on through art works.

KEYWORDS: concept of death, intertextuality, intermediality, interpretation, contemporary art, philosophy, cultural code

Introduction

The image of Death can be different not only for various epochs or nations, philosophies or religions but for any person. Undoubtedly, it is a very popular

image, motif and concept among writers, artists, composers and other creative people, often uniquely represented in their works. In general, this research deals with the concept, which is – on the one hand – quite universal, basic and traditional one, but – on the other hand – it is imagined differently by any individual. Contemporary artists are not an exception and, in fact, they propose their variants of the image of Death in their works.

It is important to state that in the 21st century any artist (despite age, nationality, gender, religion, etc.) can be known just using his or her smartphone wisely. We even have new generations of artists, who are popular because of having their public in social media. They exhibit and sell their works via the Internet and quite often galleries and art dealers need to search for new interesting creative individuals exactly by monitoring and analyzing the World Wide Web. Of course, contemporary artists are rather different (maybe, even extremely opposite) in their manner, doctrines, creative style and philosophy, but, nevertheless, their paintings reflect our reality and they are some kind of visual storytellers, dwelling on today's life, society and its values.

Still, in spite of the fact of having an enormous quantity of such "visual texts", currently it is interesting to decode such artifacts as they usually deal with some allusions or quotations. That makes any of such representations of the image of Death a kind of enigma with an infinite abundance of senses. Actually, in this situation, the researchers need to understand the phenomenon of intertextuality and how it works in the process of analysis. Moreover, it is clear that all those representations of the image of Death created nowadays will construct some basic concept of it for the future generations. Thus, this article is an attempt to understand the role of intertextuality (and in addition – intermediality) in the works of contemporary artists and try to decode just one of such masterpieces made by one Ukrainian artist in 2020.

The Concept of Death: Universal but Unique

Death is considered to make people equal: it is universal as it happens with everybody and unique as it is different for everyone. By the way, philosophers and creative people of all the times have various representations of the

concept of Death. One of the most curious versions of the perception of this concept was made by Michael Foucault in his "The History of Sexuality". In the fifth part of it ("Right of Death and Power over Life") it is stated that "... starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms; these forms were not antithetical, however; they constituted rather two poles of development together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations. One of these poles – the first to be formed, it seems – centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species of the body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, birth and mortality, level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: the biopolitics of the population" (Foucault 1998, 139). As can be seen, a philosopher makes brief research on the concept of Death through the history of humanity and has his own conclusions on that issue, whereas artists as creative individuals always have their own images of basic or traditional concepts. The image of Death and Passing varies and mortality motifs are usually noticed and depicted quite differently according to the artist's identity, life experience, dependence on style, manner and sometimes even purpose of the creative act and its result.

Obviously, there exist plenty of scientific articles and papers on this problem, to mention the main representations of Passing in art briefly we can get to the research made in "Widewalls' under the title "How Art Dealt with Death Throughout its History": "During the medieval period, extremely popular were vanitas paintings, a category of symbolic works of art, which typically took shape as elaborate still life paintings. Common in the medieval funerary art, such works frequently included symbols such as the skull, decaying flowers, bubbles, hourglasses, musical instruments, and watches. Each of these carried various allegorical and symbolic meanings

and as such skull was a reminder of the certainty of death, the rotten fruit was used to represent decay, while bubbles stood for the suddenness of death and fragility of life... during Renaissance, such motifs gradually became more indirect and many of still life paintings or portraiture held a certain detail symbolizing our mortality among rich representation of the earthy delights" (Silka 2017). Moreover, later, especially in the 20th century, modern artists changed the paradigm and found other ways to show their interest in the idea of Death. In the article, it is stated that: "During the 20th-century, as avant-garde ideas and experimentation rebelled against the traditional cannons of art history, the birth of abstract art and expressionistic approach to art making forever changed the representation of death in art. The idea of death or of tragic end no longer needed to have such typical symbols... With the birth of postmodernism and contemporary art, the macabre thematic was approved and death art images moved from being symbolic to a quite literal representation as did Andy Warhol Car Crash series or works of Damien Hirst or a number of street artists display" (Silka 2017). Finally, here we are in the 21st century and the artists' works are even more complicated, sophisticated and challenging as they absorb and implement the experience and knowledge of the whole history of art in their paintings, transforming it uniquely. That is why sometimes it can be rather hard to decode the sense of the painting correctly and adequately to the idea of the author. Sure, some scores of people need only impressions, but nowadays more and more people need to interpret the masterpiece they see and the emotions they feel. To do it they sometimes need to deal with the phenomena of intertextuality and intermediality, as typical for contemporary art.

"Still Death" by Hmilar: Intertextual and Intermedial Dimensions

To prove that the image of Death in contemporary art can be complicated and simultaneously beautiful and sophisticated, to show the mixture of tradition and originality, it was decided to take as an example the painting "Still Death" (2020) by Hmilar.

Figure 1. "Still Death" (2020) by Hmilar



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB5kvYQDd3t/>

First of all, we need to talk about colors and symbols. They are quite obvious as for the painting dealing with mortality motifs. Black has been always one of the traditional colors to depict the image of Death, while red in this painting is the color of pomegranate`s juice, which is still easily associated with blood. Two unspoiled pomegranates are surrounded by white and blue, so they can still be called "almost alive", but the movement of the red shadow is a kind of hint that they are somewhere "near death". Grey perspective cracked with black leads an eye to something bright and orange, even to some kind of "fire", which is infinite. Uncertainty of this "fiery flaming" can make an interpretation ambivalent. For instance, it can be treated as a "solar fire" of another, new life or – on the contrary – a "killing fire of hell" and an absolute end. However, the image of Death here gives the feeling of being somewhere "between", showing the process of passing or transforming Life into the Afterlife. One of the symbols in the painting is the book. The color of it is not a true, exact

color, the book is "faded". Interestingly, it is not closed or destroyed, torn or something else and we can even feel the wind touching its pages, turning them. It is written, read, "tired of life" and gives an impression that somebody is given a chance to look at the whole life for a moment and leave it as a story, filled with knowledge, emotions and experience. Evidently, another important detail is a sword as a metaphorical tool of Death, which is mainly black (a traditional color to represent mortality), but it is not so straightforward. This sword has two parts: blade and handgrip. Blade is a "dangerous" one, "killing" one and it is black, smeared with red, as death can be associated with a tragedy, suffering, pain, while the handgrip of the sword is a "safe" part of it. Actually, it is black, but with yellow, blue, and green incarnations. They can symbolize the energy of life (yellow), spirit (blue), and harmony with nature (green). In this case the sword isn't just an instrument of death, but even the symbol of continuity from birth to death.

Although the interpretations of any recipient can be more or less traditional or rather original, looking at this painting and its understanding deals with the phenomenon of intertextuality. Any person, who is interested in the cinema, will consider all the symbols and details of the "Still Death" to be the allusions to the movie "The Color of Pomegranates" (1968) – the film written and directed by Sergei Parajanov.

This is a poetic story about the life and creative work of Armenian poet Sayat-Nova. Understanding such kind of reference makes the painting "Still Death" not just a picture, but a story, told by a painter. By means of intertextuality and allusions to the movie, the public can see not only the colors and symbols but the narration about the life of a poet, his death, and – eternal life of his spirit, which continues to live with his poetry. In addition, the audience can see the everlasting fire of life and the power of Muse, which is immortal.

Furthermore, even more interesting is the impact of intermediality on this creation. As it is known, intermediality is "for example references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing. Other examples include the so-called musicalization of literature..."

(Rajewsky 2011, 52). In fact, this research deals with musicalization of visual text or musicalization of painting.

The attention must be paid to the album "Pomegranates" (2015) by Nicolas Jaar (inspired by Sergei Parajanov's film either and made as a kind of an original contemporary soundtrack for it). The artistic manner of a painter coincides with a music flow of a composer perfectly. Anyone can hear the wind in the pages of the book, see the perspective of the passing time, feel the power of spirit and believe that Muse is something outstanding, something above Life, Death and Afterlife, something boundless and unlimited, something beyond time and space. This parallel should be noted: Muse stays immortal in Parajanov's movie, while the last track of Nicolas Jaar's "Pomegranates" under the title "Muse" is exactly different in style from the others, as bright and catching is a distant color of "an eternal fire" in Hmilar's painting.

As for Jaar's creation, the concept of Passing is quite clearly reflected in the titles of some tracks: Pass the Time, Nothingness, Near Death, Fall into Time, Spirit, etc. The album is various in style of music and quite an experimental one. It is important to notice that the drawing technique of "Still Death" is different as well. The painting can be divided into some parts: significant, massive strokes of black, fractured grey, accurate fiery-orange, rather a traditional drawing of still life with two pomegranates and a sword and almost real, "suffering" pomegranate with raised elements. All these patterns prove the similarity between music and painting.

Pomegranate, for sure, is the central symbol and image for these three masterpieces: film, music album, and painting. Full of energy of life it is bleeding and passing, being somewhere near death.

Conclusions

To sum up, the image of Death interested creative people throughout history. It has its own symbols, colors and representations in the mindset of people, religions, philosophy, and arts. Nevertheless, the concept and image of Death are constantly changing, especially in the works of contemporary artists, which nowadays often exhibit their paintings via the Internet, constructing even new perception of mortality.

An analyzed painting shows the originality of representation of the image of Death, which sense becomes even broader while dealing with the phenomena of intertextuality and intermediality. This contemporary work of art (2020) was influenced by creations of 1968 and 2015 and it is not just a picture of Passing. "Still Death" is a storytelling artifact dwelling on Life, Death and the Afterlife throughout colors, manner, symbols, allusions and interpretations.

Acknowledgments

The picture of the painting "Still Death" is taken from <https://www.instagram.com/hmilar/?hl=ru>.

References

- Foucault, Michel. 1998. *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. London, England. Penguin Books.
- Rajewsky, Irina O. 2011. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermedialities*. August 10. DOI 10.7202/1005505ar.
- Silka, P. 2017. "How Art Dealt with Death Throughout its History". *Widewalls*. May 13. <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/death-art>.