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Vorüber! Ach, vorüber!
Geh, wilder Knochenmann!
Ich bin noch jung, geh Lieber!
Und rühre mich nicht an.

Matthias Claudius, *Der Tod und das Mädchen*

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‘Death and the maiden’: *vanitas* and *voluptas*, transience and the erotic in Hans Baldung Grien

‘*In Voluptas Mors*’ is a whimsical portrait of Salvador Dali by Philippe Halsman, a Latvian-born American photographer. It shows Dali beside a large skull, which is in fact an elaborate *tableau vivant* composed of seven female nudes. Halsman and Dali were clearly familiar with a *vanitas* type of painting, intended to exhort the viewer to reflect upon the vanity of worldly pursuits and the transitory nature of human life. This type of painting almost always included a skull, the ultimate reminder of mortality. What sets

this image apart, though, is the inclusion of a *voluptas* motif in the very structural makeup of the *vanitas* symbol (the skull), and in the title of the composition ('*In Voluptas Mors*'), which doubly creates a striking interplay between the two, *vanitas* and *voluptas*, and places in the context of mortality.

Mortality can be viewed as a fundamental structuring element in human life[1] and, not surprisingly so, an important and enduring part of human culture(s). One cannot achieve a complete or meaningful life, or any kind of 'authentic existence', unless one confronts one's own mortality. This dictum of existentialist thought owes much to Heidegger's monumental opus 'Being and Time' [2] (1927), where he advocates full and active awareness of the fact that a human being is a temporal being, a mode which he calls 'being-towards-death.' [3] In his words: *"Death is not something not yet present-at-hand, nor is it that which is ultimately still outstanding … Death is something that stands before us - something impending"* [4]

For Freud, death is even more than the impending finitude that stands before us; he saw it as the *todestrieb*, the 'death drive' residing inside us, ever ready to manifest itself, presupposing the stifling of the *lustprinzip*, the 'pleasure principle', which drives one to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. Eros, then, according To Freud, and our manifested principal drives remain in a state of restless negotiation. Further discussion of this otherwise interesting Freudian concept of a tension between the two is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. However, it can be put into interesting use as leading us towards an understanding of an interplay between *vanitas* and *voluptas*, and death - and the erotic, which is at the core of this paper.

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[1] Life and Death in Freud and Heidegger. Carel, Havi, Amsterdam/New York, NY, 2006 The ordinary view of life and death regards them as dichotomous and separate. This book explains why this view is unsatisfactory and presents a new model of the relationship between life and death that sees them as interlinked.

2 Heidegger, *Martin, Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie and E.Robinson (transl.), San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962

[3] "As soon as man comes to life," he says, "he is at once old enough to die" (Heidegger, op. cit., p. 289)

[4] Heidegger, op. cit. , p. 294

The aim of this paper is modest: I hope primarily to point towards observing a striking sensual element recurrent in the Medieval moralistic imagery resurfacing in Renaissance and, with luck, provide some fresh insight into a multiform functioning of the erotic in the artistic imagination of the period, especially as evidenced in the work of Hans Baldung Grien, a prolific German Renaissance artist and an innovative exponent of the *memento mori* iconography, itself dating back to the Medieval times.

Fascination with death extends far back into human history. The inescapable reality and the terrifying banality of death has always provided novel ways of perception and representation. Both the perception and reception of death - the concepts, motifs, shapes and images, have changed through the ages, revealing a people's evolving sense of themselves. Through music, poetry and painted multiform images of death we can peer into the collective unconscious and trace the changing cultural styles with which the fact of human mortality is approached, anticipated and met.

Historian Philippe Ariés describes how societies in the Middle Ages sought to 'tame' their deaths by preparing for them. [5] The understanding was that if and when people were forewarned of their inevitable deaths, one could await one's end and follow the 'proper protocol' of living and dying well, in order to be sufficiently ready for God's judgment. *Ars moriendi* ("The Art of Dying") (1450), and its original longer version entitled *Tractatus* (or *Speculum*) *artis bene moriendi* (1415) are two widely-translated illustrated Latin texts which offer advice on how to live well and prepare to die well, according to Christian precepts of the late Middle Ages. [6]

In this context, the Latin term *memento mori*, literally meaning 'remember you will die', has long served as a reminder of mortality, and has traditionally been linked with related images and didactic stories. The *memento mori* motif was extraordinarily popular in Europe in late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance with the images of the Triumph of Death and that of the Dance of Death – known also as the Totentanz and Danse Macabre,

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[5] Ariés, Philippe, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, tr. Patricia M. Ranum , Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975

[6] N.F. Blake (1982). "Ars Moriendi". *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. v.1, pp 547-8

which featured skeletal figures leading people of every rank - from pope to peasant - into that final dance. *Mors omnibus communis* was the message – 'death is common to all'.

Coupled with wars and failing crops, the plague years greatly stirred and reshaped the late Medieval and Early Renaissance unconscious. In all its forms, the *memento mori* was adopted to collectively remind people of the *ars moriendi*, the 'art of dying well'.

In a like vein, in the visual arts, the *vanitas* flourished as a type of painting intended to exhort the viewer to reflect on the brevity and ephemeral nature of life, the futility of earthly pleasures and achievements, and the certainty of death. Typical *vanitas* canvases consisted of a collection of objects that symbolize death e.g. a human skull, a mirror, an hour glass. The *vanitas* genre was especially apparent in 17th-century Dutch still lifes, with their extravagant flowers, overripe and rotting fruits, skulls and timepieces. The Latin word '*vanitas*' corresponds to the meaninglessness of earthly life. Ecclesiastes 1:2 from the Bible is often quoted in conjunction with this term: 'v*anitas vanitatum omnia vanitas'*, translated as '*vanity of vanities; all is vanity* (King James Version of the Bible).

The *vanitas*, or *memento mori*, themes - a moralising reminder that life's pleasures are transient and that death is inevitable, continued to preoccupy painters long into the eighteenth century. The painter of a *vanitas* composition could draw upon a wide array of symbols, used alone or in a variety of combinations, all suggesting the transience of the material world; including objects symbolic of earthly pleasures, such as musical instruments, alongside a human skull. The subject allowed artists to indulge in an extravagant and seductive representations of these pleasures, and then to subvert the representation through various moralizing touches.

When *memento mori* images appear in a symbolic form, they are legible - but remain nonetheless fairly ambiguous. This old and prolific motif took a new form at the end of the 15th century, when it came to include the theme of 'Death and the maiden', with the focus on the body and the 'erotic'. This highly original take on the *vanity* type of symbolism culminated in Renaissance Germany.

Mythologies, folklore, art and literature abound in visually rendered personifications of death, those most familiar and readily recognisable being that of the Grim Reaper, the skeleton wielding an hourglass and the apocalyptic Rider on the pale horse from Revelation 6:8.

The late medieval allegory of the Totentanz, the Dance of Death, served to remind of the universality of death, which unites all, regardless of status. Totentanz iconography is in itself abundant and very varied, but it typically consists of the personified death leading a row of dancing figures of men from all walks of life, to the grave. Death was typically represented as an animated skeleton, often accompanied by a band of miscellaneous skeletons playing musical instruments. Numerous Dances of Death already figured representations of Death with a woman: a nun, an empress or a queen, a fine lady or a bride. Images of women were also not that uncommon in numerous vanitas – related representations – as in this composition entitled 'Death and the Devil surprising worldly women' [7] (c. 1520) by Daniel Hopfer, a German Renaissance artist widely believed to have been the first to use etching in printmaking. Images of beautiful young women were also found in the allegorical depictions of 'the ages of man' and Death. However, in all the above cases, there existed no trace of eroticism.

This work of Niklaus Manuel Deutsch painted in 1517, could be viewed as a visual transition between the Dance of Death and the theme of' Death and the maiden' itself. Death as lover was now to become a fairly common motif , and the new element was an erotic subtext. Here, Death is a rotting corpse which gropes and kisses the young woman aggressively. She doesn't seem to resist the deathly lover. Deutsch also created one of the few existing Dances of Death what looks like an erotic relationship: in his fresco of Berne, a skeleton kisses the maiden on her cheek and grabs her breasts.

This engraving by Hans Sebald Beham (1548) features a winged skeleton holding an hour-glass, leaning towards a young girl who fell asleep in a suggestive position.

[7] Daniel Hopfer, 'Death and the Devil surprising worldly women' (c.1520), David Winton Bell Gallery, < http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/David_Winton_Bell_Gallery/hopfer.html>

In all these earlier depictions, Death appears as a malefic force, a terrifying seducer, harking back to analogous representations in the Medieval Dances of Death, whence Death is visualized as a skeletal figure. While it needs to be noted that personifications of Death as female are not uncommon, it is worth observing that Hans Baldung Grien's Death is most 'human-like' - and also most 'masculine-like' in form. His figure of Death is not a naked skeleton, but an 'un-dead' desiccated corpse-like figure.

One attempt at accounting for Death's, otherwise perhaps 'obvious' male gender in this context and at explaining the male/female duality in the personifications of Death, is Gert Keiser's 'Der Tod und die schonen Frauen' 8. Kaiser cites a clue from the Dances of Death in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period where Death-figures seem to appear as 'mocking figures', demonstrating, according to him, Death's 'ability to change to conform to his victims', 9 whence everybody encounters the Death-figure that best 'befits' him/her. This argument, however tenuous, if applied to elucidate Baldung Grien's depictions of young maidens encounters with Death, might be that his is the Beauty-meets- horror, sensual carnality – decay type of configuration.

Hans Baldung Grien (1484/85-1545) was a German painter and graphic artist, at one time, probably a member of Albrech Dürer's workshop. [10] His work is extensive and varied, ranging from religious paintings and secular portraits to designs for tapestries and stained glass. His paintings are equaled in importance by the extensive body of drawings, engravings and woodcuts of an intense vitality. Both the Totentanz and the 'Death and the maiden' themes frequently feature in his works.

The earliest depiction, entitled 'The Knight, the Young Girl and Death' (1505)[11] This early depiction harks back to analogous representations of a couple in the Medieval Dances of Death, whence Death appears to snatch away the maiden in her prime. This

[8] Kaiser, Gert, Der Tod und die schone Frauen, Frankfurt: Campus, 1995

[9] Op. cit., p. 123

[10] His brilliant color, expressive use of distortion and taste for the gruesome seem to bring him closer in spirit to his other great German contemporary, Grünewald.

[11] 'The Knight, the Young Girl, and Death' (1505) Oil on wood, 355 x 296 cm; Musee du Louvre, Paris

early canvas of his is remarkable for its story-telling dramatic intensity, so reminiscent of those staple Totentanz depictions.

In 1517, Hans Baldung Grien painted this - his most celebrated painting, entitled 'Death and the Maiden', in which Death seizes a girl [12] by the hair and forces her down into the grave dug at her feet, which he indicates with his right hand. The naked girl does not try to resist. Her hands are clasped as if in a prayer, her mouth is distorted in horror and tears run down her cheeks. Baldung Grien painted another picture much like this one, entitled 'Death and the Woman' (1518-20)[13] - in this version, Death is equally aggressive, this time also sexually. Being physically overpowered by Death, the voluptuous woman reacts with sheer horror.

This, much earlier (c. 1510-1515), depiction of 'Eve, the Serpent and Death', [14] is one more of Baldung Grien's highly evocative and provocative eroticised canvases, where lust and death are linked. Here, Eve, apple in hand, grasps the tail of the serpent while casting a flirty glance at Death standing behind her.

The three share very similar blatantly eroticized dynamics. Nudity is always instigating and surprising. In all three, the full-frontal strikingly pale female nudes appear in the foreground, as center-points of the painting. Death appears from behind, as a frightening amorous aggressor, making the depicted nude scene all the more stirring, disquieting. The maidens response ranges from passive tearful submission, helpless horror to tacit acceptance. Eve's story clearly sets her apart, thematically at least, and yet if we look at this configuration as representing a young woman's encounter with Death - which it is, we will observe that she is the only female who feels comfortable, even amorous in the encounter with Death.

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[12] Death and the Maiden (Der Tod und das Mädchen), 1517, oil on wood, 30 x 14.5 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel http://www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/de/collection/virtual-collection/epochen/15-16-jahrhundert/baldung-gen-grien-hans.html

[13] Death and the Woman (Der Tod und die Frau), oil on wood, 29.5 x 17.5 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel http://www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/de/collection/virtual-collection/epochen/15-16-jahrhundert/baldung-gen-grien-hans.html

[14] Eve, the Serpent, and Death c. 1510-1515 oil on linden , 64 x 32.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/search/artwork_e.jsp?mkey=9023

In 1510, Baldung Grien, completed his enigmatic allegory of Vanity, which depicts four figures, most commonly referred to as 'The Three Ages of Woman and the Death' 15 The young woman in the foreground may have been indeed intended as the allegory of Vanity. She stands out against the gloomy background of the canvas. To her right, Death holds up an hourglass; but she appears to be taking no notice of him as she regards herself in a mirror – itself a symbol of vanity. Death in this picture is not claiming possession of the young lady, he seems merely to be imparting a polite *memento mori* message to her. The hourglass he is wielding seems to have not yet run out for her. The other two characters are an old woman holding her hand up, as if trying in vain to ward Death off. The child on the ground embodies the first, immature stage of human life.

Picturing the different 'ages of men' (and women) was a common subject for Renaissance artists, as the symbol of evanescence. The Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum catalogue of 1896, describes the old woman in this painting as Vice, the young woman as Vanity and the child as Amor. In the catalogue of 1938, the painting is entitled 'Allegory of Transience', and 20 years later: 'Death and The Three Ages of Woman, Allegory of the Vanity of all Worldly Things'. The title in a catalogue of works exhibited at the Baldung exhibition of 1959 is laconic and reads: 'Beauty and Death'.

Baldung Grien returns to this basic foursome configuration in his much later (1533) allegorical rendition of the 'Three Ages of Man'. [16] In both canvases he presents a symbolic interpretation of the ages of (wo)man in the constant presence of death. It must be noted, however, that both representations of young women in these last two paintings bear no trace of eroticism we've witnessed in the previous three.

With 'Death and the maiden' theme, something new happened. This highly imaginative recurrent motif in the visual arts thrived in the 16th century (and later) in strikingly sensual variations, revealing, or pointing to a dark interplay between sexuality and death. In this type of iconography, the young woman is no longer one of the many participants

[15] Hans Baldung Grien The Three Ages of Man 1509/10 , Wood, 48.2 x 32.5 cm Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna http://www.khm.at/system2E.html?/staticE/page220.html

[16] Three Ages of Man and Three Graces , 1539; oil on panel, 151 x 61 cm (each); Museo del Prado, Madrid

in the Dance of Death; she is intimately involved in an erotic, or eroticised, intercourse with Death. This new kind of illustration may lack the dramatic intensity of the staple Totentanz depictions. Its didactic role, while still implicit, has also become less apparent and far less important. Highly intimate and sensual, this new genre still had a moralistic goal, but it overall seemed more of a pretext to focus on the nude female body, and on the ‘erotic’ element resident in the configuration of the female and the ‘masculine-like’ Death figure; it is the ‘erotic’ which is clearly the main protagonist here.

Baldung Grien was also intensely interested in witches and made many images of them in different media, including several drawings which are even more ‘erotic’ than his treatment of the female nude in other techniques. However, the aim of this paper was not to grasp the totality of his highly original work. Rather, it was to attempt to explore the challenging and paradoxical nature of the 'erotic' in the context of his imaginative canvases bringing Death and the maiden together, with the 'erotic' as a locus of attention.

What is interesting in this artistic encounter with the *tremendum* and *fascinosum* death, is exactly that it takes place in the context of the ‘erotic’, as an interplay of the grotesque and the erotic, reflecting both Grien’s idiosyncratic treatment of the pre-existing Medieval Totentanz motif - and providing a valuable insight into the Renaissance unconscious, the darker, deeper-set and lesser evident Geist of the period.

We started off with a modern *memento mori*; a photographic allegory of vanity of earthly (carnal) pleasures, featuring Dali and seven female nudes laboriously arranged to form an image of *vanitas* symbolising imminence of death. In the later years, the motif of ‘Death and the maiden’ resurfaced in Romantic art, a prominent example being Franz Schubert's musical composition ‘Der Tod und das Mädchen’ (1817). The lyrics are derived from a brief dialogue-like poem of the same title written by Matthias Claudius.

Das Mädchen:

Vorüber! Ach, vorüber!
Geh, wilder Knochenmann!
Ich bin noch jung, geh Lieber!
Und rühre mich nicht an.

The Maiden:

Pass by! Oh, pass by!
Go away, fierce man of bone!
I am still young, go my dear!
And do not touch me.

Der Tod:

Gib deine Hand, du schön und zart Gebild!
Bin Freund, und komme nicht, zu strafen.
Sei gutes Muts! ich bin nicht wild,
Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen!

Death:

Give me your hand, you beautiful and delicate form!
I am a friend, and am not come to punish.
Be of good cheer! I am not savage,
You will sleep softly in my arms!

Edvard Munch executed this engraving of 'Death and the Maiden' in 1894, a year after his oil painting of the subject. In his work, as in Matthias Claudius' poem, Death is not an aggressor. The maiden and the skeleton clasp each other in an erotic pose; sensuous and voluptuous, she passionately embraces Death.

Bozhena M. Czarnecka-Anastassiades, Nicosia, October 19, 2007

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