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Satire and Stoicism: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Triumph of Death

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From the Author: Unlike the majority of seniors who graduated this past December, I actually continued my residency at the William T. Young Library...since my research was accepted to the National Conference for Undergraduate Research at the same time as I received my Bachelors in Art History from the Art Department. My research began in a seminar focused on the artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Dr. Jane Peters inspired my fascination for the art and culture of the Northern Renaissance, that later became my main area of study. Dr. Alice Christ helped me develop an affinity for research methodology and an ambition to contribute to academic discourse. Both were invaluable influential to my work, but it was after deadlines and grades were no longer the objective, that I developed a true passion for the research process. After presenting this research at Weber University in Utah for NCUR 2012, I have since presented at the “*Creativity and Innovation in Art: Indiana University Undergraduate Symposium in Art History*” in Bloomington and the “*Dr. Jonathan Riess Undergraduate Art History Colloquium*” at the University of Cincinnati. Concentrating within the Northern Renaissance of the Low Countries, I plan on studying the impact the Italian Renaissance and humanist movement had on the artists of the Netherlands, and how the Netherlandish artists incorporated both into their visual culture. I now plan to continue my research in graduate school with an interdisciplinary study encompassing the history of art, culture and literature of the sixteenth century northern renaissance.



Faculty Mentor, Dr. Alice Christ: Ms. Gisselberg has been a pure pleasure to work with. As a returning non-traditional Art History major,

she has had to develop a whole new mode of expression, completely different from her skills as a print-maker and artist. In Art History we translate artistic expressions into words and it is through language that we try to convey results of investigating their cultural and historical meanings. It was most rewarding for me to see Ms. Gisselberg progress in achieving this for such a visually complex and culturally laden painting as Breughel's Triumph of Death. The topic came from a seminar paper for Professor Jane Peters. Perhaps being able to pursue this intense process of developing it into something of her own statement contributed to Ms. Gisselberg's interest in pursuing graduate study in Art History.

Satire and Stoicism: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Triumph of Death*

Introduction

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Triumph of Death* embodies the popular humanist philosophy—death as a perspective on life. Following the aftermath of the 14th century's Black Death and the violence of the Reformation, northern Europe was left with a morbid awareness of its own mortality or *memento mori*. Renaissance humanist believed the *memento mori* tradition allowed death to emphasize the fleetingness of earthly pleasures and immoral behavior (Silver, 2004, p.265). The *Triumph of Death* captures this philosophy through the meticulous placement of commonly depicted *memento mori* legends throughout its landscape. Bruegel, however, used deliberate manipulation of these readily recognized images to reference the violence and disorder he was witness to in the sixteenth century Netherlands, thereby innovating the *memento mori* tradition. (figure 1)

Discourse Analysis and Methodology

Bruegelian academia offers varying interpretations of this Netherlandish artist and his influences. Through recent comprehensive studies of Pieter Bruegel's works, scholars have provided compelling arguments that refute his classification as a painter of peasants or Second-Bosch (Gibson, 1992, p.205). Like many artist of the Netherlands, Bruegel was known for the peasant scenes and landscapes he produced throughout his career. Contemporary discourse, however, studies his distinct departure from this topos in the late 1550's. Margaret Sullivan argues that within the concentrated period of 1559 and 1563, Bruegel combined elements of classical philosophy into vernacular traditions, an element not previously used in his work. The originality in this process was his ability to depict imagery similar to his contemporaries, yet through his adaptations, convey a vastly different concept (Sullivan, 200). In a recent review of Sullivan's book, Todd Richardson argued that her claim relied heavily on classical literary sources with inadequate visual evidence in the work itself, and that her correlations to antiquity lie solely in the motif of death (Richardson, 2011, p.605). Richardson's study published the following year, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, also focused on the interaction of Bruegel's artistic process within the Netherlandish tradition. Richardson's argument was built on "analysis of the visual grammar", using images as a primary source, while Sullivan's was largely based on contextual analysis (Richardson, 2011, p.13). Though they take separate methodological approaches, both scholars emphasize that Bruegel's process involved the adaptation of Italianate and classical style, form, and iconographies into the Netherlandish visual tradition⁸. Expanding upon their assertion, my aim is to show how his *Triumph of Death* also depicted this deliberate manipulation of preexisting imagery. By implementing classical satire and stoic philosophy, Bruegel created an innovation in the *memento mori* genre. Though death is the visually dominant subject, this analysis of the image will show Bruegel's witty yet abrasive execution of widely recognized images makes satire a central theme of *The Triumph*. By utilizing both methodologies present in recent discourse, Bruegel can be seen as neutral observer as well as a social commentator; and the *Triumph* as a stoic's view of the apocalypse in which Death, satire's ultimate weapon overcomes mankind.

Both Richardson and Sullivan maintain Bruegel's work shares in the visual and literary traditions of the Northern Renaissance humanist. Though his connection to the humanism cannot be directly substantiated, due to the lack of documentary evidence, humanist philosophy is

visually prevalent within his works. As humanists developed an interest in the ancient world's philosophies and literature, they looked to the knowledge left by antiquity to understand and resolve contemporary issues. The humanist's revival of this knowledge coincided with the burgeoning of printing markets in the Netherlands, providing the northern humanists tangible sources of these classical texts and philosophies. Satire became a popular literary device adopted from these ancient sources, so understanding satire's etymology and evolution is critical in interpreting its use by Bruegel in the *Triumph of Death* (Sullivan, 2010).

According to Sullivan, classical satire was defined by its function. It was seen as a means of uncovering truth. Horace described satire as a way to "rub the city down with salt" (Horace and Kraemer, 1936). Salt references both the abrasion and wit ancient satirist employed to unmask the sins and folly of man. In uncovering a vice, they enforce its opposing virtue (Aden, 1981). Satire during the Renaissance, however, referred to this same unmasking, but in an entertaining way. It exposed the vice, but under the pretext of humor (Sullivan, 1991). This vernacular style of satire through mockery used obvious contradictions and inversions of the colloquial, not only revealing truth, but in a palatable form for a pedestrian audience (Mehl, 1994). Northern Renaissance writers like Erasmus adopted this style to create works in which a sixteenth century audience could access these classical philosophies in both the Netherlandish dialect and newly acquired macaronic Latin (Sullivan, 1991). These writers and artist's emulation of antiquity causes the line between the classical satire and its contemporary successor to become blurred, allowing many scholars to disregard the classical and humanist elements within Bruegel's work (Sullivan, 2000). His execution in the *Triumph* follows closer to the earlier classical style. It reveals truth using cleverly brusque imagery, and though morbidly amusing, does not convey the blatant humor of the later vernacular style.

Bruegel's apocalypse used this style of satire to manipulate images of the *memento mori* tradition, beginning with the paintings namesake: The Triumph of Death.

Manipulations of the *Memento Mori*

The *memento mori* tradition's most prominent metaphorical form was the skeletal revenant that began its appearance in fourteenth century Italian tomb sculpture (Milne, 2007, p.393). This animated corpse within the beginning stages of decomposition played a key role in many legends including the *Triumph of Death*. (**fig. comparison 2**) The earliest Triumph of Death archetype from Camposanto di Pisa originally depicted an angel as death ominously stalking the living. It is not until the later Triumph from Palazzo Sclafani that death began to be personified by the skeletal figure, depicting death both physically and antagonistically more aggressive. Bruegel's *Triumph* appropriates imagery from both of these visual predecessors, but it is the incorporation of another Triumph that reflects his adaptation of classical and humanist philosophy. On a tour of Italy, Bruegel worked alongside miniaturist Giulio Clovio on an illuminated manuscript (De Tolnay, 1978, p.394). In the lower left of the illumination is a cloaked figure holding a spindle and shears. She represents a Petrarchan personification of Atropos, the Fate who cuts the thread of life (Guthke, 1999). Francesco Petrarca, often referred to as the father of humanism, similarly described Fate as this black-cloaked woman in his poem *The Triumph of Death* (Moxey, 1973). (**fig. 3**) Phillip Galle's engraving of the Triumph epitomizes the common artistic interpretation of Petrarch's *Triumph* used during the sixteenth century, which depicts Fate or Death on top of a classical triumphal chariot, as it indiscriminately crushes mankind beneath its wheels. Horace wrote that "pale death knocks with impartial tread at the hovels of the poor and the towers of kings" describing the universal and indiscriminate nature

of death (Horace and Kraemer, 1936). Bruegel integrates this Horatian perspective in the ironic placement of Fate in the *Triumph*. (**fig. 4**) Instead of atop the chariot, she crawls desperately beneath the hooves of a pale horse attempting to avoid Death's impartial tread. Through his inversion of the common depiction of Petrarch's Triumph, Bruegel implements classical thought into a vernacular convention, illustrating both the universality of Death and the futility of escaping fate.

Though Bruegel's incorporation of the classical into the vernacular can be argued for throughout the *Triumph*, it is most pointedly executed in his adaptations of the *memento mori* tradition, namely in the Three Living and the Three Dead, the Legend of the Grateful Dead and finally, the Dance of Death.

The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead

The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead was a moralistic tale of the inevitability of death. Three noblemen come across their dead counterparts in various stages of decay, providing the living a morbid yet timid warning (Gibson, 1991). (**fig. comparison 5, 6**)

Though depictions of the legend vary, its most substantial deviation appears around the time of the Reformation. Between this fifteenth century Book of Hours produced prior to the Reformation and another of Clovio's miniatures from the sixteenth, the legend intensifies from an ominous warning into a battle between the living and the dead. Bruegel's *Triumph* further escalates Clovio's battle of the Three Living and Three Dead by presenting them in a militarized front (Gibson, 1991).

He uses a high vantage point and intense war-like images similar to the battle scenes in his *Suicide of Saul*, also from 1562. As Bruegel's *Triumph* is both unsigned and undated, scholars like Larry Silver use the formal elements of this militarization in both to argue the *Triumph's* date. Among these elements is Bruegel's organization of a vast skeletal force into the tactical elements of contemporary warfare. The confrontation is not a chaotic scene of retribution, but a calculated extermination by separate regiments of cavalry, hand-to-hand combatants, and an armed barricade (Silver, 2004, p.265). But unlike the *Suicide of Saul*, all the battalions in the *Triumph* carry a form of the Cross. Bruegel escalated the legend by incorporating sixteenth century warfare tactics, but by including these references to religion, he transforms the *Triumph* into a visual representation of the bloodshed and extreme actions of the Reformation.

Previous Triumphs depicted a single scene of Death's retribution, but Bruegel's battle embodies the apocalyptic fall of mankind. He does this by incorporating eschatological elements associated with the Last Judgment (Deblaere, 1977, p.180). However, the *Triumph of Death* is not his interpretation of the Last Judgment. Four years prior, Bruegel produced his etching of the *Last Judgment*, which follows the narrative and pictorial conventions used by other artist during this time. (place figure 7) Similar to his etching, Bruegel's *Triumph* shows the end of days, but the *Triumph of Death* is void of judgment or redemption, creating a secular apocalypse (Silvers, 1994). Instead of removing religious themes from one of these Last Judgment depictions, Bruegel incorporated elements of Revelations into a secular scene. By appropriating this imagery, but stripping it of its theological context, he created a contradicting narrative where the elements were recognized, but the action was not. He further deviated from these conventions by using skeletal aggressors instead of the Boschian metamorphic body (Moxey, 1994). Keith Moxey noted how Hieronymus Bosch used animal and human hybrids as the demonic minions in his Vienna *Last Judgment*. (**fig. 8**) These creatures became prevalent in the works of most

Netherlandish artist, including many of Bruegel's. In the absence of the metamorphic hybrid, Bruegel's skeletal figures in the *Triumph* assume another role. Each corpse in the army represents a future image of their living counterpart. Instead of an apocalyptic take over by demonic creatures, humanity is being destroyed by itself. Bruegel presented a secular end of days, brought forth by mankind's own hand. Incorporating both martial and religious elements into a secular scene, he depicted the futility and eventual outcome of the Reformation's violence. Mimicking the subtle yet harsh irony of classical satire, Bruegel used this inversion to reveal truth.

The Legend of the Grateful Dead

By visually referencing an earlier work, Bruegel executes this same ironic inversion in his depictions of punishment as well. *Justicia*, from his print series *The Seven Virtues*, portrays the female allegorical personification of justice, but she holds uneven scales and wears her blindfold askew while surrounded by torture techniques used during the Reformation (Milne, 2007, p.544). (**fig. comparison 9**) *Justicia* represented the miscarriage of justice, even though it was produced in a series of virtues. Its alteration comments on the vast difference between the ideal of justice and its actual execution (Sullivan, 2010, p.156). Both *Justicia* and the *Triumph* show bodies being removed from the gallows or lashed to torture wheels and a lone man clutching a cross beneath the executioner's sword. By using identical executions, Bruegel combined the indiscriminate punishment of humanity in the *Triumph* while alluding to the violence of justice during the Reformation. He juxtaposes these punishments of heresy into the second *memento mori* depiction, the Legend of the Grateful Dead. Sullivan documents how the bodies of accused heretics, some even removed from their graves, were raked or displayed as both punishment and a warning to others (Sullivan, 2010, p. 156).

The Legend of the Grateful Dead is the didactic tale of a righteous man who came across an unknown corpse, but still provides proper burial and prayer (Gerould, 1908). Later when the man is being attacked, the dead man arises to protect him, as depicted in Jean Colombe's miniature. (**fig. 10**) As the Church developed this and other legends for assimilation into the newly converted north, the Grateful Dead was altered to promote prayer and integrate the doctrine of purgatory. If devout followers provided prayer or purchased indulgences, they would in turn be protected (Milne, 2007, p. 476). In the *Triumph*, skeletal figures with ropes and shovels are seen next to fresh graves. (**fig. 11**) Though, the Grateful Dead legend has the righteous burying the dead, Bruegel has the dead digging up the righteous. Using a morbidly clever conversion of folklore, he referenced a controversial church doctrine within depictions of these acts of desecration.

Similar to this Grateful Dead legend, an early Teutonic feast in honor of one's dead ancestors, *totenmal*, was also altered to promote offerings (Milne, 2007, p.535). (**fig. 12**) The Reformation's unrest motivated secular rhetorical societies like the *rederijkers* to parody the Church's alteration through theatrical performances. They enacted humorous inversions of the feast where the actors were depicted feasting on the dead, instead of feasting in honor of the dead (Moxey, 1982). Bruegel alludes to these theatrics at his feast table in the lower left of the *Triumph*. In the contemporary assed-eared hood of a jester, Bruegel shows this *tottenfressen* parody by disguising Death as the fool serving a cannibalistic dish to the table (Milne, 2007, p.534). Bruegel visually references folly at this feast from both popular literature and contemporary theatre. Bruegel's living fool, diving beneath the feast table in escape, pictorially quotes Sebastian Brant's satire *Ship of Fools*. "For Death...never spares our hide, by ignoring

this we are but fools with donkey ears because the truth of this we must see. From death we must, can, should not flee.” (Brant and Barclay, 1874). Directly below this fleeing fool, Death appears in a *Fraus* mask. The *Fraus* mask, or mask of deceit, was used by actors to portray Death or other antagonists (Pinson, 1997, p.313). As Bruegel used it to disguise Death, as Death, he was unmasking truth by using a contemporary theatrical convention. This pictorial irony criticizes the overtly theatrical approach some took to serious issues in the Reformation. Both the Grateful Dead and *totenmal* were designed to honor the dead, yet Bruegel turns the Grateful Dead into a defiling mob and a devotional feast into Death’s macabre offering. His satire removes the reverence of both through sixteenth century depictions of the madness of violence and the folly of theatrics. Thereby condemning both the violent and humorous extremes and exhibiting a stoic approach to his satire (Sullivan, 1992, p.155).

The Dance of Death

The Dance of Death, the most popular of the *momento mori*, is a late medieval allegory of death’s universality. It depicts every walk of life paired with an animated corpse counterpart that mimics the living’s appearance, dress and other attributes. In the Dance, the dead led the living in a procession toward the grave (Milne, 2007, P.526). Printmakers and artist like Bruegel and Hans Holbein the Younger made these images of moralistic caution popular in the sixteenth century. Similar to Pieter Bruegel’s work, Holbein’s prints illustrate the strong link between humanist literature, philosophy, and the visual culture. Holbein’s book, *Pictures of Death*, included prints inspired by Sebastian Brant’s satire, *Ship of Fools* and Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* (Sullivan, 2007, p.152). Bruegel perpetuated this contextual interaction of writers and artist of the Netherlands in his Dance of Dance. Many of Holbein’s characters appear in the Triumph, but Bruegel intensifies Holbein’s ominous procession by depicting the living being slaughtered by their mimicking counterpart. Bruegel included specific Dance of Death characters that embodied the polemic issues of the Reformation. (**fig. comparison 13,14**) The king is shown reaching out to his wealth in the face of death; visually reversing the aristocracy’s deployment of its subjects to war, where they faced death for the accumulation of this wealth. In the center of the *Triumph*, a dying pilgrim adorned with bloated money pouch and pilgrimage regalia, while his penitential garment is being worn by his revenant, represents the hypocritical pilgrim, with an outward Christian appearance and contradictory actions (Sullivan, 2010, p.146). Bruegel used these sins of excess to not only condemn the vice itself, but comment on political and religious controversies in the Netherlands.

Through the final couple in The Dance, Bruegel created a didactic comparison of his amorous couple and their counterparts, Adam and Eve. (**fig. comparison 15**) Bruegel used these lovers to mirror the first couple and birth of sin. Yona Pinson identifies Adam and Eve in Bruegel’s *Triumph* as the nude figures flanking either side of the Horseman of Death. She wrote “since folly, sin and death came together to the world with Eve and the fall of man... the history of the human race engendered folly and death from its very beginning” (Pinson, 1997, p.314). The Dance of Death enabled Bruegel to combine the original fall of man and volatile issues of the Reformation to create his vision of an apocalypse resulting from the madness he was witness to during the sixteenth century.

Conclusion

Bruegel’s approach to these excesses and extremes exhibits stoic philosophy’s focus on moderation and the artist as a neutral observer. The Greek philosophers Democritus and

Heraclitus embody the two opposing views toward madness and folly in the world: Democritus with laughter and Heraclitus with tears. Stoic philosophy condemned both emotional extremes in favor of temperance and restraint. "Endure and forbear, as is proper" (Sullivan, 1992, p.155). Bruegel's *Triumph* exhibits this by presenting the vehement actions of the Reformation with neither blatant humor nor emotional outrage. His use of extreme military action and religious symbols within a secular genre channels the classical satirist aim of uncovering the truth with abrasive correlation while maintaining a prudent anonymity. By integrating and adapting preexisting themes from contemporary and classical culture, Bruegel created a neo-stoic critique of the tumultuous climate of Netherlands in a visual vernacular for the sixteenth century viewer. In his *Triumph of Death*, Bruegel employed antiquity's stoic philosophy and classical satire... not only unmasking the folly of his time, but innovating the *memento mori* genre, and Netherlandish visual tradition.

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Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*, c 1566. Oil on panel, 117 x 162 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



Figure 2. Triumphs of Death

- (a) Master of the Triumph of Death. *Triumph of Death*, c 1345. Fresco. Camposanto di Pisa, Italy.
- (b) Anonymous, *Triumph of Death*, c 1450. Fresco. Palazzo Sclafani, Palermo.
- (c) Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*, c 1562. Oil on panel, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 3. Phillips Galle. *Triumph of Death*. 1565. engraving, 194 x 265 mm. Amsterdam.



Figure 4. Pieter Bruegel, *Triumph of Death (detail)*.



Figure 5. Master of Edward IV, *Book of Hours for Rome of Use: Three Living and the Three Dead*, c 1470-1490.



Figure 6. Giulio Clovio, *Stuart de Rothesay Book Hours: The Three Living and the Three Dead*. 1534.



Figure 7. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Last Judgment*, 1558. Etching, Graphische Sammlung, Vienna.



Figure 8. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgment*, Oil on panel Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna.



Figure 9. Philip Galle, after Pieter Bruegel, *Justicia*, 1559. Engraving, 23.3 x 28.7 cm. Bibliothèque Royale Belgique.



Figure 9b. Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*(detail)



Figure 10. Jean Colombe, *Tres Riches*



Figure 11. Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death* (details).

Heures: *The Grateful Dead*, 1485.



Figure 12. Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*(detail).



Figure 13. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Dance of Death: Duke*, 1526. Woodcut.



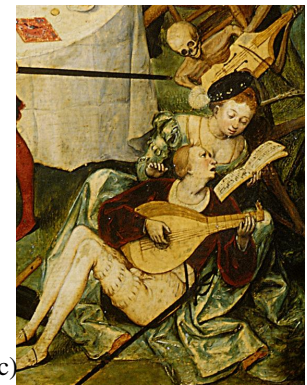
Figure 14. Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death* (detail).



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 15. Adam and Eve

(a) Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Great Dance of Death: Expulsion*, 1562. (b) Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*, Adam and Eve. (c) Pieter Bruegel, *Triumph of Death*, amorous couple.

