

Maja Piotrowska-Tryzno

Department of Aesthetics, Institute of Philosophy
University of Warsaw
maja.p.to.ja@gmail.com

THE LIVING DEATH: 'TRICK OR TREAT!' THE VIVID PRESENCE OF DEATH SYMBOLISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF ITS EXISTENTIAL ROLE

Abstract: The paper covers the symbolism of death, which seems to be largely overlooked, trivialized or narrowly read both by the public and by some authors of texts on contemporary aesthetics. Numerous artists of the 20th and 21st century, including those widely known and commented on, try to restore the theme of mortality to the culture of the West, often showing it in the form of intercultural symbols, present in art from the beginning of its documented existence. The aim of this essay is to summon some meanings of such symbols, which are in a comprehensive way traditional, but invariably attractive for contemporary artists and thus freely transformed, and to sketch the possibility of their potential existential impact. The exploration of the possible causes of these meanings has been conducted on the basis of the selected proposals of interpretation in visual anthropology and depth psychology. The symbolism of death and its alleged role in contemporary art and contemporary Western culture have been also confronted with the selected proposals of the philosophy of life.

Keywords: contemporary aesthetics – philosophy of life – visual anthropology – depth psychology – art; symbols of death – intercultural symbolism.

“A rare occurrence in the art of the last one and a half century of paintings and sculptures depicting death is surprising”¹ – wrote Arnold Berleant in his essay *Death in Image, Word and Idea* in 2004.² I am going to focus here on

¹ A. Berleant, *Śmierć w obrazie, słowie i idei*, in: *Przemysłość estetykę: Niepokorne eseje o estetyce i sztuce*, transl. M. Korusiewicz, T. Markiewka, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. 179.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 175-192. First edition in: *Re-thinking Aesthetics, Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2004.

the creative aspects of human activity mentioned in the above quotation – paintings and sculptures, which, I think, fall in the category of so-called high art, despite the fact that the category itself is nowadays rather fuzzy. Having followed the author's line of thinking, one can come to the conclusion that when he writes about art, he means the kind of art that can be considered high – also in the case of photography – often using iconographic schemes, sublime (Anselm Kiefer, Matthew Brady), or aestheticizing the phenomenon of death (Robert Capa), the art through which we can see our death more clearly than in the very moment of death itself (when we can be anaesthetized, ignorant, or asleep, etc.). In this context, it is necessary to consider whether it is in fact legitimate to say that paintings and sculptures of death are not so rare within the specified time period.

Having gone through quite an extensive iconographic material, I have chosen a few themes that struck me as distinctive and simultaneously characterized by certain continuity, and therefore possible to be treated as still alive in the European culture. In this way, I came to the conclusion that the majority of the artists valued today whose works we reproduce in numerous publications and who fall within the time limit set by Berleant, tackled the representation of death in different ways.

Trying to mention only the most vivid examples of the world's best art works, one should take into account at least such names as Marina Abramović, Francis Bacon, Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, James Ensor, Damien Hirst, Kate Kollwitz, Gustav Klimt, René Magritte, Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, Egon Schiele and Odilon Redon. At this point an important question arises: Why does the author of the *Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* seem to ignore spectacular representations of death within the time and the areas of his interest? The answer seems initially hidden in the following: "Death is not a kind of an object, but a sophisticated set of dramatically ordered events leading to a climax, followed by the end. Works of art depict each of these stages, and a lot can be understood by comparing various methods of handling of its individual phases (...)"³ This statement (and other statements contained herein) seems to imply that Berleant regards only the visible process of dying, or – preferably – the moment of dying, or the image of a dead human body as an adequate contemporary presentation of death in art. However, even with such a selection of topics, he omits many vivid examples. Additionally, the presented examples do not always meet the requirements of the formulated definition (for example, we rarely find human figures in Kiefer's paintings, but they are full of symbolic elements). It is still puzzling why Arnold Berleant ignores some types of representations of death

³ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

as old as human iconographic tradition, such as symbolic and allegorical representations or personifications. To solve this riddle, I will try to clarify his possible hidden assumptions, discussing them in the context of some selected proposals of the philosophy of life and of depth psychology. But first, I would like to point out the spectacular richness of the iconographic tradition not taken into account by Berleant.

Some art historians happen to derive whole periods of artists' creative activity from deeply experienced encounters with death. This path is followed by Matilde Battistini, writing about the Blue and Pink Periods in the art of Picasso⁴. A friend of Picasso, Casagemas, committed suicide in 1901. The artist first painted his corpse twice on a bier, and then the theme of death turned into the figure of a Harlequin. The Harlequin character can be interpreted as a psychopomp, a guide. During his artistic career, Picasso painted many characters of such type. Compared with the first two images, created probably still in shock after his friend's suicide, *Death of Harlequin* of 1905 shows perfectly the evolution of this theme: the recumbent figure is similarly composed, but dressed in a diamond-patterned costume. We can no longer see the dignity of the corpse; on the contrary, the figure seems to be merry and – what is most significant here – lively. A psychopomp in religions and mythologies is a creature whose task is to escort the soul of the deceased to the afterlife. Such characters in art have made the viewers conscious of the inevitability of death. Although Battistini is writing about Picasso, the following may also refer to other contemporary painters and sculptors, such as Kiefer or Francis Bacon, mentioned by Berleant: “the phantom of death from which the artist tries to break free defines the relationship between his life and work. Painting images with magical features meant for him finding the original meaning of the creative act (...). This (...) concept of life and art evokes his fascination with Harlequin, Minotaur, Hermes and Dionysus.”⁵ Today, the symbolism of the psychopomp remains largely unnoticed (a notable exception in this regard is the Jungian school) although it is still present in some manifestations of the visual culture: in carnival performances, the forms of Major Arcana in tarot cards and in popular culture. Finally, it is very clearly visible in the fascination of art with the circus, magic and shamanism. The role of the psychopomp in the most recent art can be played by Damien Hirst's diamond skulls or by the genuine *Blue Morpho* butterflies used as the material for his “stained glass” windows and mandalas⁶.

⁴ M. Battistini, *Klasyki sztuki: Picasso*, transl. D. Łąkowska, „Rzeczpospolita”, Warszawa 2006, pp. 28-60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶ This subject is developed in one of my published articles; M. Piotrowska-Tryzno, *W stronę drzwi percepcji. Filozoficzna problematyka autentyczności a praktyka artystyczna Damiana*

In his essay *Image and Death*⁷, Hans Belting tries to interpret the meaning of the presence of the skull in human culture as an image reaching back to Neolithic sources: “Mankind has only a few images older than the skulls of Jericho. They are images, as they are coated with a layer of limestone and painted. They are an image of death, they could not be an image of life even with the coat of paint. The right question to ask here should be: what is the purpose of these images?”⁸ Further on, Belting formulates the hypothesis: “The new face, which has the social signs of a living body, is nevertheless the face of a stranger, because it deposes the incomprehensible transformation caused by death.”⁹ He concludes strongly: “The Neolithic cult of the skulls secured a ritual communion between the living and their ancestors.”¹⁰ Belting’s argument results in the assumption that the artistic material of the skull-object, crafted to preserve life, became itself a vehicle of the active imagination that created another form of existence projected on the object which was once a man – we had to fail in our attempt to preserve life in its ‘living form’, but we have succeeded in preserving the sense of the presence of life while looking at the image of “life after death”. A similar phenomenon – the projection of strange mental life leading to communication can be also observed in the case of contemporary kids playing with dolls, as it is described in the lyrics of Suzanne Vega's popular song: “As a child / You have a doll / You see this doll / Sitting in her chair / You watch her face / Her knees apart / Her eyes of glass / In a secretive stare / She seems to (...) / Have a life.”¹¹ I do not attempt to arbitrate what seems to be more primordial: the human ability to animate inanimate objects in inner conversation, or one’s acceptance of the view that it results from the experience of death and the awareness of our own and all living creatures’ mortality, as this issue reaches far beyond the confines of this essay.

However one attempts to answer this question, it may be observed that aside from the type of image based on the perception of human dead body or the imaginative ability to animate objects, one of the most primal forms of the psychopomp, which also appears in contemporary painting and sculpture, is the form of an animal. Shamans used to come into contact with the spirit or consciousness of such a psychopomp when in a trance. They wore ritual

Hirsta, in: *Między autentycznością a udawaniem: Postawy twórcze w kulturze współczesnej*, ed. A. Kawalec, W. Daszkiewicz, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2013, pp. 173-185.

⁷ H. Belting, *Obraz i śmierć*, in: *Antropologia kultury wizualnej*, transl. M. Bryl, ed. I. Kurz, P. Kwiatkowska, Ł. Zaremba, WUW, Warszawa 2012, p. 77.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ S. Vega, “As a Child” [lyrics], in: *99.9 F°* Album, A&M Records, NYC, LA 1992, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/as-a-child-lyrics-suzanne-vega.html> (10.07.2013).

animal masks to unite with the life that was “already dead” (which meant for them that it had changed its form of existence) or with the one that had eternally resided in a different form. Such relationships can be easily found in folk stories about local gods and various animalistic spirits. A bird mask or a birdman’s head have been present in human culture since the times of the Lascaux cave.

However, one could ask here whether Berleant was right after all, narrowing (in the majority of cases) the range of the manifestations of death to those that are considered to be close to the realism of common intuition? This kind of realism seems to be very close to the Heideggerian reality of *das Man*, which, of course, does not deprive the representations preferred by Arnold Berleant of any formal, artistic and historical value or a dose of emotional impact. One can call into question the relevance of the symbolism of the “Living Death”, the items with a potential to be “animated”, such as a diamond skull with a third eye in the middle of its forehead (Hirst), affecting us like Egyptian sculptures and masks with their eyes of shiny stones, as the signs of “projection”. Do our eyes need to meet with theirs, and if so, what for?

Berleant is trying to approach death quietly. According to the claim of Epicurus, quoted by him and highly valued in his text despite of some reservations (the most important of which is that we experience death through art), death does not apply to the living (for whom the sensation is impossible) nor the dead (who no longer exist). Berleant’s attitude seems to be symptomatically modern: it emphasizes the presence of death in art as a model of its experience for the living. But the purpose of this model is to reduce death in a certain sense to non-existence. It seems that according to Berleant, death remains valid for us living to make us “able to show our support and assistance. It is death that we embrace in revery”.¹² Judging from the degree of his emotional involvement in his description of *Pieta* by Michelangelo, experiencing death in art is considered by the author to be the most constructive. Yet, this approach risks the exclusion of the dying (leaving no space for their potential fear, horror, objection). As a common phenomenon of the Euro-Atlantic culture and regardless of the ontological assumptions, it seems very alarming. Philippe Ariès describes it accurately: “When the last means of defence against death and sex disappeared, medicine was able to take over their role in the community. (...) Feelings were to be banished. Under these conditions, it was better to silently agree to the mutual conspiracy of lies. Thus we see that the sense of separation between an individual and his or her identity, what we mean by talking today about the

¹² A. Berleant, *Przemyślenie estetyki...*, p. 182.

right to one's own death, was suppressed by the care for the family."¹³ The French writer points to specific contemporary expectations for the dying, who above all are not supposed to cause trouble to their families and/or medical services, must be calm and should experience their feelings about death in silence and solitude to satisfy the demand for participation in a unique game – the game of pretending that they do not know what is happening – without any protest. Thus death can ultimately be converted into an abstraction for the living, thanks to its medicalisation and to pretending that death is “only” a not too important incident of the failure of medical art. The great drama of the dying is often ignored, which is the symptom of the tendency to displace anything personal, authentic, deeply experienced and unique for an individual (who should become, especially in the case of death, the centre of attention) by a hypocritical, pseudo-collective show. Thinking of death as something that does not apply to us may also result from the tacit consent of the majority of the living to the negative ontological assumption of the possibility to continue one's conscious existence after crossing the border of life. But we should not forget that such social practices affect everyone, regardless of their beliefs. Fortunately, art has been playing a critical role for some time and one of its important tasks is to tackle cultural taboos. Regardless of the assumptions concerning death promoted by medical experts, personifications of death and their symbolic and allegorical images crop up in contemporary art, affecting the viewers with some intensity, which is evidenced most clearly by the work of such well-known artists as Damien Hirst, Marina Abramović or Bill Viola. Performances rooted in the centuries-old iconographic tradition, bringing in the awareness of the necessity of personal death do not have to be visually explicit. Death can be represented symbolically both in a subtle and shocking way equally convincingly – we are dealing here with a range of possibilities, but we should consider the individualization of the message stemming out of the deep introspection of the artist.

Let us get back to art for a moment to look closer again at some selected traditional motifs. In *commedia dell'arte*, the already mentioned Harlequin is a clown in a black mask, dressed in a chequered costume; he plays one of the main male roles – the comic one. His role is to flee the characters, who make great efforts to catch him. It seems no coincidence that we meet a tightrope walker in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. The Harlequin, a tightrope walker, an acrobat and a clown co-occur in the images of Picasso and are related in meaning in our iconographic tradition. The Harlequin used to be a beggar, a ragamuffin with a purse for unfair income and a wooden sword – he was presented in this way until the end of the sixteenth century. Later he acquired

¹³ P. Ariès, *Człowiek i śmierć*, transl. E. Bąkowska, Aletheia, Warszawa 2011, p. 609.

the chequered costume in which we know him today. The Harlequin is false and unpredictable. He is believed to originate from Hermes or Hellequin, King of Hell, ruling a band of corpses in the forests of Northern Europe. "... the answer [to the question of the nature of these figures – M. P.-T.] can be given only in the form of an image, a comparison, a metaphor. The essence of death lies in the fact that it cannot be seen or comprehended. The name of the Greek god of the dead, Hades, comes from *aides* and means 'Invisible', which is also marked by the cap of invisibility in his possession. In Old Irish, death is called *cel* and it is derived from the Indo-European root *kel* meaning 'to conceal, to hide', which found its reflection in Old Norse *hel*. Hel is the kingdom (...) into which people who died of old age and disease fall; in literature this name is also used for the queen of the kingdom 'and the House of the Dead', 'concealed' and 'hiding' in the depths of the earth."¹⁴ The Harlequin's costume is meant to symbolize the dual nature of death-life, the combination of opposites (as in the yin-yang symbol) – in this case the symbolism of the chequered pattern is, as it seems, above all a combination of presence and absence, the alternation of the states of life and death as the image of the universal rule.

In one of the famous paintings of Picasso, an acrobat is balancing on a ball – this is also the motif easily and frequently found in the art of the first half of the twentieth century, inspired perhaps by the representations of the wheel of fortune, symbolizing the volatility of fate, the inevitability and the unpredictability of change, periodicity – in other words: death and transience, but also consecutive and equally inevitable renewal of life. Also in one of Dürer's engravings Cupid is trying stunts – he attempts to get on a ball on stilts. His performance refers i.a. to the symbolism of the famous *Melancholy I*. The theme of melancholy is linked¹⁵ to the figure of Saturn, who is often identified with Cronus, which also means the temperament marked by the awareness of passing. Dürer's melancholic is perhaps a scientist – a philosopher and an alchemist; the scene with Cupid would mean then the inability to discover the ideal laws of both the cosmos and the human world, but one of its meanings may be also the inability to stop time – the whole scene is very dynamic.

Saturn was often depicted with a scythe or a sickle, as the patron of ancient harvesters – it is one of the well-known prefigurations of death as a skeleton with a scythe. The complex meaning of "Living Death" can be connected with the importance of such manifestations of the psychopomp as

¹⁴ M. Lurker, *Przesłanie symboli w mitach, kulturach i religiach*, transl. R. Wojnakowski, Aletheia, Warszawa 2011, p. 375.

¹⁵ R. Kilbansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn i melancholia: Studia z historii, filozofii, przyrody, medycyny, religii oraz sztuki*, transl. A. Kryczyńska, Universitas, Kraków 2009, pp. 297-309.

Minotaur and Dionysus. In the case of Dionysus we can speak about ancient harvest feasts, the death of the god of vegetation or of grain and his rebirth as a symbol of the revival of the world due to the natural annual cycle (similar interpretation is proposed by J. G. Frazer in *The Golden Bough*). The story of the Minotaur can be traced back to the idea of the sacrificial bull of Mithraic Mysteries or to Egyptian Apis associated with the death and resurrection of Osiris. M. Lurker sees the labyrinth as the symbol of the underworld, from which one cannot escape. Let me add – not unaided...

There is no need to interpret in details the multiplicity of the possible links among these symbols. What should be pointed out from the point of view of the history of images is that Dionysus was replaced in the role of a psychopomp in art by Christ – the iconographic shift is clearly visible in the early Christian catacomb art. The idea of circular time, the transition of life into death and death into life are replaced in Christianity with the soteriology of salvation “once and forever”. Death has been set in opposition to life, symbolically separated. Still, Christ can be also read as one who is “born again”, especially rising brightly on the wing of the Isenheim altar, mentioned by Berleant in his essay. We still have here a representation of death balanced with the visually spectacular revival. However, at this stage life and death are already contrasted with each other, presented separately, though we should note that they still represent on the two sides of the altar the two sides of the same existence.

However, the symbol of the bull in art has preserved the ancient ambivalence of death-life, so to speak, in one body. The images of bullfighting by Goya and Picasso show the vitality of the animal on the one hand, and the theme of sacrifice, death on the other; the bull is ritually killed instead of a man, as in the Mysteries of Mitra. It is interesting that when it seems that the artist is shocked, thrilled, deeply moved by the personal aspect of death, representation of the sacrificial death of an animal seems to be no longer sufficient. When death begins to affect the artist himself, there appears a representation of the death of a man in addition to or instead of the death of an animal, or we are dealing with a hybrid – animal-human death, in the form of masks, costumes, images of fantastic creatures, partly humans – partly animals.

A psychopomp can be sought among different species of animals; it seems that when we see an unusual representation of an animal (by which, as you might have guessed, I do not mean only bodies bathed in blood, images of dead animals and bodies decaying plus other such obvious images), we can assume initially, that it relates to our individual death. In Western iconography animals symbolizing the proximity of death (besides bull) are a dog, a cat and a horse – black and white, black and white birds (although the white

birds have been largely symbolically and allegorically assigned to some fixed Christian meanings), also a snake and a deer. In this category we can include the animals accompanying witches: "...widespread is the theme of witches, accompanied by (...) especially black birds or birds of prey. About those animals one had to speak with the utmost caution, as uttering their names was attracting their attention. They were not supposed to be killed by other means than ritual (...), otherwise they were taking a revenge."¹⁶ An animal of magic killed in an improper way was gaining, as it was believed, large freedom of movement among worlds. One should reflect again on our modern tabooing of death as associated in a way with this kind of archaic, unconscious attitudes. They seem to be especially explicit in situations, in which we try not to see death and not to talk about it too much in order not to 'make it return' for us or not to 'get infected' with its excessive proximity. The inevitability of death of an individual, when we are forced to see it, or rather when we are forced to note the inevitability of our own death as a result of the death of the other, is being hidden in different ways – for example as 'deserved punishment' – we often hear 'arguments explaining' somebody's death by 'too much eating, drinking, smoking, getting nervous', etc. – as if death could be avoided by appropriate behaviour. This type of pseudo-obviousness of the world of *das Man* is a spectacular confirmation of the actuality of warnings contained in the thought of Martin Heidegger. Berleant rightly states at the beginning of his text, that the media have created the 'mega-death'; theatricality caused anaesthetic effect which has already gone so far that death has become unrealistic and turned into entertainment. By all means we try to downplay and deindividualize death. This tendency is accompanied by the disappearance of funeral rituals and care for the dying, which is constantly condensing itself as the shadow of the anxiety in the unconsciousness of the living. This way the mechanism of repression and fear is being set in motion over and over again.

Carl Gustav Jung called symbols that can be traced down to their archaic roots natural (opposing them to cultural) and considered them a non-negotiable component of the human subconsciousness. He saw the attempts to remove them or to cover them up as not only potentially, but historically dangerous: "Such tendencies form an ever-present and potentially destructive «shadow» to our conscious mind. Even tendencies that might in some circumstances be able to exert a beneficial influence are transformer into demons when they are repressed. This is why many well-meaning people are understandably afraid of the unconscious, and incidentally of psychology.

¹⁶ J.C. Cooper, *Zwierzęta symboliczne i mityczne*, transl. A. Kozłowska-Ryś, L. Ryś, Rebis, Poznań 1998, pp. 316-317.

Our times have demonstrated what it means for the gates of the underworld to be opened. (...) Not only has civilized Germany disgorged its terrible primitivity, but Russia is also ruled by it, and Africa has been set on fire. No wonder that the Western world feels uneasy.”¹⁷ This opinion seems to be still valid; problems caused by dehumanized rationalization not taking into account the vital needs of the individual still grow on the global scene, caused also by the current form of globalization.

Shouldn't we therefore assume that the best way to restore the image of individual death in Western culture in this situation is to draw attention to the diversity still present in the symbolism of death in art? Although even if contemporary artists still use the images of 'Living Death' rooted in the iconographic tradition, their meaning has become blurred for the viewer. However, perhaps exactly because of the uncommonness of consciousness of their traditional meanings, those images are able to hit us – to surprise, move or shock. Natural symbols of individual death still manifest themselves in new, vivid openings. For an author as uncompromising in every aspect of his creative strategy as Damien Hirst, serving cow's head with flies in a closed box or shark in formaldehyde has most likely become insufficient at a certain point of his creative path; he finally reached the 'natural symbolism' of representations of life-death and death-life, drawn up from different cultures. Of course, one has to make an effort of interpretation to discern the symbolism of death-life mandala created from real butterflies of specific meaning in one of the world's local traditions. However, doesn't the widespread presence of scenes with people losing their lives in every possible way – especially in movies, TV broadcasts and computer games – indicate the legitimacy of the assumption that the artistic strategies of the path Berleant tries to follow has already expired? Is it possible that also for this reason the author is unable or doesn't want to see continually being renewed symbols of life-death and death-life?

'The natural symbolism' is still in play in art of the last one and a half century. One of the particularly distinctive themes – death and the girl, especially in the art of German Expressionists (after all death is the 'master from Germany' and masculine in German language), is a satisfactory representation of the inseparability of life-death and death-life. This symbol almost immediately puts on the border of our awareness the simple fact that there is no physical or mental hygienic strategy, which could prevent us from dying. This kind of image is also seductive – the grip of death arouses ambivalent feelings, perhaps even perverse – at the same time one can feel the

¹⁷ C.G. Jung, *Approaching the Unconscious*, in: *Man and His Symbols*, Picador, London 1980, pp. 83-84.

thrill of a delight and horror or disgust. The head of *Medusa* by Caravaggio is similarly seductive in an ambivalent way – the more seductive, the more one responds to her gaze – we are drawn to her because she still has a life, when at the same time she semantically must be placed unambiguously on the side of a death. To look into the eyes of this creature is to look into the eyes of one's own death itself; we look in the mirror and the force of shock of this surprising self-identification actually opens us to confront the prospect of our own death in the wholeness of its ambivalent reality. The shock is possible and does not turn into trauma and displacement due to the fact that there is maintained intensive contact with life and death at the same time. Death in art needs 'to be looked in the eyes' in order to regain the experience; just assisting the death of someone else who is able to leave politely is not enough. A. Berleant would eventually like to find in performances of art a way to escape from the chill of death into a humanitarian gentleness of community¹⁸, but unfortunately – it is only the community of the living, the ones located unambiguously on the side of life. Imagine this kind of reaction at a deathbed as the response to panic – it resembles the attitude of a medical worker. But death is not a disease. The only kind of reaction that seems to be promising enough is the intense compassion in the face of the horizon of existence in anticipation of one's own death, even if it means (though not necessarily it must) a thrill of horror. The other – the dying, becomes the head of Medusa, a dancing skeleton – he or she is still alive, but we've placed him or her already onto the death's side. If we sometimes can bear this truth and the truth of our own finiteness, it may be possible thanks to art. Individualized, diverse and reaching the deep-rooted symbolism art opens us up to experience our limits mainly due to the presence of vivid aspect of life in the symbols of death, regardless of what at the other side of the final border we unknowingly design. Showing us our horrors art pre-tames them. Consistently displaced they can suddenly turn us into stone. Is it not what by surprise the mythical Medusa does?

"Being in general cannot dominate the relationship with the Other. The latter relationship commands the first. I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is. Already the comprehension of Being is said to the existent, who again arises behind the theme in which he is presented. This «saying to the Other» – this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an existent – precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being,"¹⁹ writes Levinas

¹⁸ For this thought I'd like to thank Professor I. Lorenc.

¹⁹ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1991, pp. 47-48.

and adds: "History would not be the privileged plane where Being disengaged from the particularism of points of view (...) is manifested."²⁰ Isn't a 'community fashion' in recent political philosophy to ignore – sometimes in the name of Heideggerian careful inhabiting the world – the dimensions of life both individual and metaphysical? Doesn't it seem in the light of the foregoing at least short-sighted? Heidegger meant uncompromising personal experience – the only one being able to awaken a genuine concern of what surrounds us. It is safe to assume that not only poetry, but also visual art – if you look at it from the Jungian perspective – is able to trigger such an experience. When it comes to direct contact with another person, Levinas seems also to be thinking especially about language – bestowing the Other by one's world set in words. But language is also the body language and facial expressions showing our actual experience; during the authentic experience of the death of the Other, we can consciously see and feel the death of ourselves – accommodating this experience is a prerequisite of participation in the experience of the Other. The symbolism of life-death and death-life, especially new symbolism of death-life in art (Hirst, Abramović) has a chance to become training of empathy, staying in fact all the time 'in action'. Only identifying our own death we have a chance to find a trace of inner truth about it, and to share it, in due time, with another individual. We can and should 'die together', be able to be a good company for the dying person, but this cannot be done when we stick to a false position of the survivor.

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²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

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**ŻYWA ŚMIERĆ: 'CUKIEREK ALBO PSIKUS!'
WYRAZISTA OBECNOŚĆ SYMBOLIKI ŚMIERCI W SZTUCE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ –
PRÓBA FILOZOFICZNEJ INTERPRETACJI JEJ EGZYSTENCJALNEJ ROLI
(streszczenie)**

Artykuł dotyczy symboliki śmierci, która wydaje się w dużej mierze niezauważana, banalizowana lub wąsko odczytywana zarówno przez współczesnych odbiorców sztuki, jak i przez estetykę współczesną. Autorka zakłada, że artyści XX i XXI wieku, również ci szeroko znani i komentowani, starają się przywrócić kulturze Zachodu tematykę skończoności życia, podając nam ją często „do widzenia” w postaci zestawień międzykulturowych symboli obecnych w sztuce od początku jej udokumentowanego istnienia. Celem pracy jest ukazanie niektórych znaczeń symboliki śmierci (nieodmiennie atrakcyjnej dla twórców, w sposób szeroko pojęty tradycyjnej, choć swobodnie współcześnie trawestowanej) oraz możliwości jej potencjalnego oddziaływania. Eksploracja możliwych przyczyn aktualności tych znaczeń przeprowadzona została w oparciu o wybrane propozycje interpretacyjne antropologii kultury wizualnej i psychologii głębi. Symbolika śmierci i jej domniemana rola w sztuce współczesnej i współczesnej kulturze zachodniej zostały także skonfrontowane z wybranymi propozycjami filozofii życia.

Słowa kluczowe: estetyka współczesna – filozofia życia – antropologia kultury wizualnej – psychologia głębi – sztuka – symbolika śmierci – symbolika międzykulturowa.