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Dances of Death: From Trans-genre to Media Phenomenon

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Abstract

L'articolo mira a rendere conto dell'interesse suscitato dalle *Danze della Morte* nel quadro degli studi semiotici, ponendo particolare attenzione alla vita sociale dei generi discorsivi e a quella della mediatizzazione di "lungo percorso", il che significa che questo fenomeno viene considerato come costituente l'essere umano inteso come specie biologica. Dunque, nel saggio affrontiamo il percorso prospettico che esplora il fenomeno e la sopravvivenza delle *Danze*, in qualità di trans-genere, fin dal loro consolidamento nel Medioevo, ed inoltre, prendendo in considerazione quanto questo fenomeno oggi sia fortemente oggetto di studio, concentriamo l'analisi su quei casi in cui tale genere è rappresentato attraverso due modalità di espressione proprie dell'arte contemporanea: il cinema e la videodanza.

The article aims to give an account of the interest aroused by the *Dances of Death* in the framework of semiotic studies with a focus on the social life of the discursive genres and on that of the mediatization of "long journey", that is to say that we consider this phenomenon as constituting the human being as a biological species. Therefore we will address the prospective path that explores the phenomenon and survival of the *Dances* since their consolidation in the Middle Ages, as a transgender, and then, considering their re-emergence as an object of study in the present, we will focus the analysis on cases in which this genre is called through two modes of expression typical of contemporary art: cinema and video dance.

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Dances of Death: From Trans-genre to Media Phenomenon

Introduction

*And death begins to order
a dance resisted, from which you can not,
in any way, escape¹*

In his master treatise, *Gesture and Speech*, Leroi-Gourhan² briefly refers to the *Dances of Death* of the Middle Ages, an art form founded on the syncretism of Northern European pagan traditions and Middle Eastern religious customs, which took hold and became widespread in Christian Europe between the 14th and 16th centuries. According to the researcher, this form of artistic expression offered a profound evocation of the contrast between biological reality (in which the spiritual and zoological are blurred) and the symbolic apparatus of human social life. This was made possible via a simple and sufficiently raw theme: death calls to each and every individual, of all social strata, without exception, and invites them to dance its dance as a precursor to the end of life.

The strict indoctrination of the necessity of saving one's soul, imposed on societies where death by war, plague, and great famines was commonplace, activated the iconographic operative in visual and literary media in such a way that, since the Modern Age, the *Dances of Death* were recognized as the trans-genre through which a "culture of death" was documented over the course of three centuries.

Problem Presentation

A great deal of research has been done on the phenomenon of the *Dances of Death*, the *To-*

1. «Ya la muerte encomienza a hordenar una dança esquivia, de que non podedes por cosa ninguna que sea escapar» (Anonymous, *Dança general de la muerte*, in Andrés Roselló, *La "Dança general de la muerte": texto y contextos*, tesis de grado, Universitat de Illes Balears, Palma de Mallorca 2015-2016, p. 19).

2. See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1993 (orig. ed. *Le geste et la parole*, Albin Michel, Paris 1964).

tentanz, or *Dances Macabres*. Such are the names that point to the establishment of the genre across regions of Europe, where it thrived during the Middle Ages.

However, within the copious arsenal of studies and comments that have emerged in academic and artistic treatments of the *Dances of Death*, most of this work, in addition to accounting for the pre-iconographic and iconographic aspects that make this phenomenon a popular genre, addresses issues related to and inferring clues about the *Dances'* origins. This approach ultimately leads effort and erudite persistence to a dead end, since the search for hermeneutic clues ends at the moment when reliable archival documentation runs out. At this point, these retrospectively focused investigations come to a fork in the road: one detaches itself from the scientific method and jumps to the realm of speculative opinion for which there is no proof, while the other simply limits itself to organizing the conjectures of the first group, as if they themselves constituted the phenomenon of the *Dances*.

The fact is, these reconstructive efforts trace a possible beginning of the genre to folkloric beliefs about the *Zurückkommen*, or *revenants*, in liturgical speeches and sermons by mendicant monks, in the mysterious and isolated dance epidemics, attributed to cases of intoxication or poisoning (ergotism and tarantism). Bordering on methodological disorientation, a culture of death, generalized and held through three centuries, is even considered a foundation for the *Dances*.

The following discussion serves a different purpose. Far from choosing from either of these two paths, the intent here is to account for the interest generated by the *Dances* in the framework of semi-otic studies, focusing on the social life of speech genres and of “long-term” mediatization. That is to say, we will consider this phenomenon as constitutive of human beings as a biological species³. Therefore, we will embark on the prospective path of exploring the phenomenon and the prevalence of the *Dances* from their consolidation as a trans-genre in the Middle Ages. Then, considering the form's rebirth as an object of study in the present, we will focus on cases that summon this genre through two forms of expression that are typical of contemporary art: cinema and videodance.

On this path, we will try to elucidate the role of dance in the resulting web of meaning. One of the questions we will try to answer at the end of the analysis is this: Why is the interjection from Death to the Living an invitation specifically to dance and not some other action? And, regarding this performative dialogue, what are its modes of thematization and of prevalence in formats, mediums, and languages through the centuries?

Dances of Death: The Trans-genre

3. The presentation of this perspective is found in Eliseo Verón, *La Semiosis Social, 2. Ideas, momentos, interpretantes*, Paidós, Buenos Aires 2013.

From a semiotic point of view, the *Dances Macabre* have acquired a trans-genre form that has persisted fundamentally in two languages: pictorial and literary. In their communicational function, the *Dances Macabre* consist of an adaptation of the *Ars moriendi* treatises⁴, which proliferated in the field of art in the early 15th century. Their distinctive feature is that the written text is accompanied by illustrations.

In their figurative versions, the *Dances* are presented in frescoes, panel paintings, engravings, and even relief sculptures on walls, bells, and columns. The textual aspect responds to not just one pattern; it ranges like Infantes say, from a brief footnote to a poetic composition of an indeterminate number of verses and rhymes, going through the legend, the Latin couplet as a motto, the *comento* in prose or the biting epigram⁵.

A copious number of studies on the origins of the *Dances* address the phenomenon of multiplication of visual genres that were characteristic of medieval art and that would represent the production conditions of the trans-genre. Specifically, these studies mention the pious representations of the Virgin and of Jesus Christ on the Cross, the Three Living and the Three Dead, and the Triumphs of Death.

The *Dances'* nature as genre⁶ lies in the fact that it is a category of discourses, that is to say, a bundle of texts that share common properties and which are held together by accompanying meta-texts. Both aspects make stable appearances, to the point of highlighting intrinsic regularities. In this way, this category makes up a system simultaneously with other figurative and literary genres and identifies itself as social satire by presenting elements that reveal a moralizing intent, but subsumed in a tone of mockery. As Infantes notes:

By *Dance of Death*, I understand a succession of text and images dominated by Death as a central character (generally represented by a skeleton, a corpse or a living person in decay) and that, via a dancing attitude, converses with and drags, one by one, a row of characters, typically representative of social classes most diverse⁷.

The first *Dance of Death* that critics refer to as such is the *Danse Macabre du Charnier* from Paris, which dates to the year 1424. It is a fresco painting on the walls of the porch of the charnel house of the Holy Innocents' Cemetery. In 1669, during the reign of Louis XIV, the wall on which it was

4. The purpose of these texts was to comfort the dying at the moment of feeling death's arrival, to help them go in peace and with their earthly matters resolved.

5. See Víctor Infantes, *Las Danzas de la Muerte: Génesis y desarrollo de un género medieval (siglos XIII-XVII)*, Universidad de Salamanca, Salamanca 1997.

6. In relation to this, see Oscar Steimberg, *Proposiciones sobre el género*, in Id., *Semiótica de los medios masivos*, Atuel, Buenos Aires 1993.

7. Víctor Infantes, *Las Danzas de la Muerte: Génesis y desarrollo de un género medieval (siglos XIII-XVII)*, cit., p. 21.

found was taken down. Nonetheless, the painting was not completely lost. It was transposed to paper by the book printer Guyot Marchand, along with a very reliable copy of the original fresco. To it he added a lyrical text composed by Jean Gerson, which also has survived, thanks to its reproduction (printing was already a part of discursive life) in 1485.

Other *Dances* considered to be seminal are as follows:

The *Dança general de la muerte* is preserved in the Library of El Escorial⁸. It is a codex in four parts, in a box measuring 198 by 140 mm, in which two types of writing stand out: Gothic and cursive, both characteristic of 15th-century Spanish. The poem, composed of a very brief prologue in prose and 632 *versos de arte mayor*, grouped in 79 *coplas de arte mayor*⁹, is associated through this structure with the Danse Macabre of the Holy Innocents' Cemetery and Lübeck's *Totentanz*.

Lübeck's *Totentanz* was painted on wood by Bernt Notke and has been dated to 1476. Here, too, the original work was not preserved because of the bombing of St. Mary's Church in Lübeck in 1942, where it was displayed (paintings of the *Dance* in Lübeck made up the decoration of seven walls that could be observed while walking around the chapel). Today we know this *Dance* through engravings and photographs. In them we can see the following scene: the Pope and the Emperor are being dragged by skeletons to dance with Death, while at the foot of every character a dialogue between both parts can be read, following the same structure presented by *La Dança General de la Muerte*. To the left, Death can be seen playing the flute while wearing a wide hat, calling on mortals. Facing the gravity of the living, characterized by their archetypical attributes, Death adopts postures that recall the motive of the *Dance*.

Figuration of Body and Dance in the *Dances Macabre*

What understanding of body does this genre refer to? To answer this question, it is useful to broaden our gaze to two forms of body representation that were at their peak in the 15th and 16th centuries: the coat of arms and the portrait painting. According to Belting¹⁰, both function as *body media* in the sense that they stand in its place through time and space. Nonetheless, each of them operates on the basis of a different understanding of body.

In the case of the coat of arms, it is a heraldic abstraction characterizing the bearer of family or

8. While presently the original work is not available and the author's name is not known, we do have a piece of information claiming that Hernando de Briviesca, royal jewel keeper, gave the work to El Escorial in 1575.

9. In Spanish poetry, *verso de arte mayor* (literally, "major verse of art" or "verse of higher art") is a verse with nine or more syllables, while *copla de arte mayor* is a poetic form consisting of eight verses.

10. See Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011 (orig. ed. *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, Fink, Munich 2001).

territorial genealogy, meaning that it defined a body with rank, not a person (fig. 1). This subject is the “model” of a social body, and, in this sense, the shield functions by contiguity as a physical medium of manifestation of genealogy.

The portrait painting (unlike the coat of arms) bears the physical aspect of the person portrayed (fig. 2). Yet it also owes its functioning to genealogical and legal situations, not the individual. For instance, Phillip the Good, according to the description of chronicler Georges Chastellain, carried *le visage des ses pères* as inherited facial physiognomy.

In terms of the communicational device, both share a similar quality: the portrait relates to the viewer by displaying the portrayed figure frontally (and, later, also its gaze), and, equivalently, the *en-face* disposition of the shield before a subject indicates that they, with only a gaze, must confirm their loyalty to the object bearer.



Fig. 1: Count Ekkhard and his Wife (13th century), Naumburg Cathedral.

In summary, in these two genres (which also operate as media) the represented body is expanded toward the institutional via an analogue-based form in the case of the portrait (that is, established on the physiognomic features of the subject) and via an indexical means in the case of the coat of arms. It is only in this framework that it acquires meaning.

Now, what is the figuration of the body in the *Dances of Death*?

The *macabre* aspect of the *Dances*, which certainly implies favoring the bodily and the material over the spiritual, guides the exploration of new paths for representing death, not as the beginning of a possible life in Glory (as is portrayed by other medieval genres), but rather as the end of earthly pleasures.



Fig. 2: Jan Van Eyck, *Portrait of a Jeweler* (1436), Museum of Vienna.

In this way, according to Rosselló, from the variety of death-oriented topics that characterized discursive productions from these centuries (*Tempus irreparabile fugit*, *Ubi sunt?*, the *Contemptu mundi*, the *Homo viator* by Saint Augustine, *De putredine cadaverum*, the *Vanitas vanitatum*, and the *Memento mori*) and that operated on a thematic level in the *Dances*, we can say that *De putredine cadaverum* is the theme anchored in the body physiognomy that characterizes the *Dances*, especially in its poetic form. It recreates aspects of death on the “matter decay” axis, which goes from the decline of physical appearance and vital capacities to the rotting of the flesh. In *Dança general de la muerte*:

...’tis worse, my friends, that without tongue I die:
 death has encompassed me, I cannot speak
 I have from her [Death] a disturbed brain; now my limbs are all crooked,
 I’ve lost my sight and cannot hear; I see in the scales
 my life shortened and my senses lost; without tongue I die; I shall fall; my perception
 is completely lost with great affliction; truthfully I tell thee that, when the rooster crows,
 thine appearance shall turn:
 thou will lose thine beauty¹¹.

In Figurative works, there is also a prevalence of decomposed flesh, laughing skeletons, and, in the background, skulls and bones all around, whose *macabre* movement contrasts with the rigidity of the body of the living.

Another aspect worth noting regarding the Figuration of the body is that in both the *Dances Macabres* and in the Lübeck *Dances*, Death, shaped as a skeleton, leads the procession, in which all

11. A rough translation from the original text in Ancient Spanish: «...peor es, amigos, que sin lengua m uero: / abarcome la muerte, non puedo fablar / ya tengo della todo el seso turbado; agora mis mienbros son todos torvados, / que pierdo la vista e non puedo oir; veo en balança / acortarse mi vida e perder los sentidos; sin lengua muero; vome a caer; mi entendimiento / se pierde del todo con grand aflicción / mas verdad vos digo que, al cantar el gallo, / seredes tornado de otra figura: / allí perderedes vuestra fermosura» (Andrés Roselló, *La “Dança general de la muerte”: texto y contextos*, cit., p. 119).

characters are presented arranged from higher to lower levels of social hierarchy. In this way, by focusing on the aspect of the living in these works, it is possible to identify each and every one of them according to where they stand in the feudal social system.

Thus, the *Dance of Death* makes up a system in sync with the portrait panel painting and the coat of arms in terms of the Figuration of a body that, far from representing a subject, acquires meaning only as part of a system whose logic is found in the validity of the sign as unit of value and understanding the latter attribute as a “differential” value.

Now, regarding dance and the mortuary, there are various theories explaining such movement action. One of these theories, however, seems to be the most plausible one: it is a dance with its roots in folklore, especially in the territories of Central Europe.

«The oldest mention of a “dance of the dead” is found in a Dutch imitation of the *Maugis d’Aigremont* (*Madelghis Kintsheit* [*Madelghis’ Childhood*])», from the mid-14th century¹².

The view here is that dance related to death is first a popular belief: the medieval superstition of late-night revelry in the cemeteries. Nonetheless, Infantes tries to put geographic borders around this folkloric thinking: «This superstition is not valid in Spain, where Death entices the living in its dance, and is meant as allegorical, while, in Germany, it is more a Dance of the Dead»¹³. This refers to the idea that the bodies of the dead crawl out of their graves at night and dance festively, as is observed in the wood engraving *The Dance of Death* by Michael Wolgemut (from the early 16th century) (fig. 3). As such, the dance would have a German origin.



Fig. 3: *Dance of Death* by Michael Wolgemut (1493).

12. Maximilian Kerkhof, *Notas sobre las danzas de la muerte*, in «Dicenda. Cuadernos de filología hispánica», n. 13, 1995, pp. 175-200: p. 185.

13. Víctor Infantes, *Las Danzas de la Muerte: Génesis y desarrollo de un género medieval (siglos XIII-XVII)*, cit., p. 41.

Other weaker theories associate the trans-genre of the *Dances* with the ergotism and tarantism epidemics that occurred in an isolated way in this period, and whose impact consisted not only in their causes being unknown but also in the fact that victims would execute movements similar to those in an endless dance, which led to their death by dehydration or heart attack.

In *La Dança general de la muerte*, dance is declared for the first time by the figure of the preacher, to exhort a hasty confession. The appeal to the immediacy of the dance is expressed through the adverb *ya* (now) and the paraphrase *encomiença a ordenar* (begins to order). In the dance, Death plays a dominant role as its orchestrator. The preacher refers to it as a *dança esquiva* (elusive dance), a rough and cruel dance whose first sign is the music of the *charanbela*.

Thus, the poem's reference to the dancers' disposition in a *corro*¹⁴ is completed by the idea of a "game". The *corro* implies a circle within which the living are slowly incorporated, and, as they pass before Death, they are made equal (given that the circle has no beginning or end). Thus they lose their distinctions of hierarchy that they enjoyed in life.

In terms of the configuration of the dance scene, the *corro* also appears in fresco paintings in such a way that, in terms of its expository configuration, it is presented as a surrounding spectacle, including in itself anyone who contemplates it. This is how it was presented in Saint Mary's Church in Berlin, and in the Kermaria Chapel, in Côtes-du-Nord, Brittany.

Another variant is the processional dance, in which characters appear in order of hierarchy led by Death or by its specular double, simulating a procession in which each of the dead seizes one of the living by the hand. This model was developed in the paintings of the Innocents' Cemetery in Paris and is common in miniatures and picture cards. The third variant is the chain dance. In it there are two modalities: either the living, holding hands, are led by the embodiment of Death, or they dance around a *transi tomb*, as occurs in paintings in Morella, Castellón (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: *Dance of Death* in Convento de San Francisco – Morella, Castellón (XV Century).

14. In Spanish, *corro* refers to a circle formation specifically used in children's singing games and circle dances.

Regarding the latter pre-iconographic aspect, we can observe a specific disposition of the bodies, where a living body is alternated with a skeleton or forms a duo. In this way, the contrast and mirror-like contiguity relate to the viewer through the equivalent of the literary motif «as you see me you shall see yourself, and as you see yourself I once saw myself». To this we can add the motifs of movement and vitality characteristic of dance. It is, nonetheless, a dance whose invitation is met with resistance since, in literary as well as in Figurative works, only the dead are gifted with movement. The living, by contrast, are represented in a static fashion, as if they were already suffering *rigor mortis*.

In the contrast between the figuration of the living and of the skeletons (in the case of paintings and engravings, and in the call to dance by Death in poems), the irony is found in the humorous consequence brought about by the progressive distancing between the constitutive elements of fiction (a festive scene) and the ongoing discovery of the conflict (the moment of death of the human being). The search for harmonizing opposite elements, dance (vitality) and death (annihilation of vitality), is then presented as a base rhetorical operation.

In effect, in *La Dança General de la Muerte*, the untimely arrival of the dance is one of the most frequent complaints made to Death by the different participants. For example, the duke says that it is not a good time, since he had thought of going into battle; the abbot does not consent to participate in the dance because of his attachment to the earthly, the tasty delicacies he had in his cell; the canon rejects going to the dance for living in comfort on Earth; and the sacristan begs Death for mercy: «For I am a lad of few days», since the dance comes too soon. The same occurs in pictorial cases, where the moment of the dance is figured, and the summoned living are bodies that, far from dancing, resist being dragged by the movement, while those who dance are the skeletons.

At this point, having suggested pleasant festiveness and enabling mocking effects, it is worth pointing out the role played by music and singing. Death and the skeletons are represented bearing some musical instrument, an aspect related by many authors to the genre of *ars morendi*. This can be seen with the presence of the trumpet in *La muerte [Death]* by Gil de Ronza, the flute in Lübeck's *Dance of Death*, or Death's bell in Holbein's Engraving XXII. And, as is presented in the strophe where Death addresses the usurer in *La Dança General de la Muerte*, he rejects the dance and the song equally («I don't want your dance, nor your black song»).

The varied descriptions that accompany the term *dance* in the poem emphasize the rejection that each character holds toward it, especially in the central *coplas*. The King is the first to provide a minimal description: «I would not attend such poor dance»; the Cardinal, «O, Mother of God, I never thought to see such a dance as this which they are making me go to!»; the Patriarch speaks of a dance *so unmerciful*; and the Constable of «the dance they say die». The Count laments, «O, what bad news is this, without failure, that now it brings to me, to go to such game!» and the Knight calls it «black dance, full of tears».

In summary, it is possible to observe that the dance serves as a rite of passage. This positioning, observed from a narrative perspective, indicates that the act of dancing will operate as a transformation point, as the place of manifestation of a change of state.

From this point on, the dance, whether in a circle or procession, where death contrasts with the living and dances festively while the living resist being dragged into the ritual, appears as an effect of meaning to be reconstructed by the receiver of each work as the nucleus of a confrontation of forces where, of course, Death will always come out triumphant, in three articulated modalities:

1. As an act of communion, it is a group dance, and it only bears meaning in this fashion. Nonetheless, the participants are each called individually.

2. As an equalizing social mechanism, in the sense that all, irrespective their lineage, are or will be invited to dance. In any case, in the case of the procession arrangement, the most powerful are the first to be summoned.

3. As an inevitable scenario, since nobody can escape from it, and, nonetheless, each and every one of the characters will try to resist.

The Symbolic Density in the *Dances Macabre*

Based on his studies on the cultural aspect of *Homo sapiens* as a species (and the absence of an “exceptional quality” of it, in relation to other pluralities of living beings), Jean-Marie Schaeffer¹⁵ states that the possibility of diffusion of all cultural property in a human group depends on aspects of content and on certain cognitive and emotional biases that work as selectors. He also refers to the fact that the universalization of this property can be viable, in effect, as a result of analogue causes that act in different communities:

Thus, if all populations of the same species living in related ecosystems, can develop equivalent behaviors without this universality being due to a geographical spread or a genetic heritage. The same social and existential problem, for example, that of the mortal nature of humans, could very well motivate beliefs of the same kind (in this example, the belief in a form of survival after death) in different cultures, without these cultures being in contact with each other and without these representations being genetically coercive. After all, if one admits that all men share the same mortal destiny, and that, on the other hand, their cognitive and emotional architecture is the same beyond the society in which they live, the mental solutions to the anguish of death... are not numerous¹⁶.

Ultimately, in the context of this thesis, the researcher notes that denying mortality, and, as a consequence, postulating a sort of afterlife following the death of the body, was and is a universal solution, given that it is a belief that takes shape in practically every culture.

15. See Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *La fin de l'exception humaine*, Gallimard, Paris 2007.

16. *Ivi*, p. 179.

In relation to these thoughts, the question regarding the symbolic in the trans-genre of the *Dances of Death* in a way emphasizes aspects of human identity in not just a cultural sense but also in a biological one.

The engravings printed by Guyot Marchant in 1485 that reproduce the *Danses Macabres* of the Holy Innocents' Cemetery in Paris account for the disposition of thirty characters, alternating between one from the religious series and another from the secular series. The complete index of characters is as follows:

...le pape, l'empereur, le cardinal, le roi, le patriarche, le connétable, l'archevêque, le chevalier, l'évêque, l'écuyer, l'abbé, le bailly, l'astrologie, le bourgeois, le chanoine, le marchand, le chartreux, le sergent, le moine, l'usurier, le médecin, l'amoureux, l'avocat, le ménétrier, le curé, le laboureur, le cordelier, le petit enfant, le clerc et l'ermitte¹⁷.

Thus we find ourselves before one of the constitutive characteristics of the genre of the *Dances of Death*: the participation in the dance of a group of mortals as individuals, representatives of all social orders.

As in the *Vado mori*, members of any social origin have a place in the *Dances*. The idea behind this is the *Memento mori* and the universalizing power of Death. Thus, an ordering is presented based on two criteria: social and economic hierarchy on one hand, and alternation between the religious and the secular on the other. The progression of characters obeys the social scale of feudalism: the characters who appear first are usually the ones found in the pyramid's apex, and as it goes forward, the Dance descends, until arriving (in works with a most rigid structure) at the lower strata: the outcasts and the classless, including the lunatic and the hermit.

However, it has been noted that the hierarchy criterion is not pure in some *Dances*. While the Pope, representing God on Earth, initiates the characters' procession before Death, other characters who are difficult to order on the basis of this logic also appear in this chain. For example, the *petit enfant* and the *amoureux*, or the *dos donzellas* that appear in *La Dança General de la Muerte*, and the *Jüngling*, the *Jungfrau*, and the *Kind* in Lübeck's *Totentanz* are characters who are typified not by the labors they execute, nor by the position they occupy within society (fig. 5). Their function in the *Dances* is to point out that death comes at the wrong time, even in situations of plenitude, happiness, and youth.

17. Joël Saugnieux, *Les Danses Macabres de France et d'Espagne et leurs prolongements littéraires*, Vitte, Lyon 1972, p. 20.



Fig. 5: Lübeck's *Totentanz* (copy 1701, original 1463).

Another detail of the variations in bodies can be seen in the fact that only men appeared in the primitive *Dance of Death*. The design that connects with warning about the end and vanity of all earthly things and with the lesson of social equality before death was naturally aimed toward men first, keepers of social functions and dignity. However, Guyot Marchant himself published, as a continuation of his previous edition, a macabre dance of women. In it the sensual element appears, which had already impregnated the theme of lamentations on beauty, as part of *vanitas vanitatum*. As Huizinga notes:

Now it was impossible to enumerate forty dignities and professions of women. After the queen, the abbess, the nun, the saleswoman, the nurse, and a few others, it was necessary to fall back on the different states of feminine life: the virgin, the beloved, the bride, the woman newly married, the woman with child. And here the sensual note reappears, to which we referred above. In lamenting the frailty of the lives of women, it is still the briefness of joy that is deplored, and with the grave tone of the *memento mori* is mixed the regret for lost beauty¹⁸.

David Le Breton points out that the body molded by the social and cultural context in which the actor is submerged is the semantic vector by which the evidence of the relationship with the world is constructed: «perceptive activities, but also the expressing of feelings, the conventions of interactional, gestural and expressive rites, the staging of appearance... the relation with suffering and pain, etc.»¹⁹. In other words, existence is, first, of the body. From the body, the traits that constitute the foundation of individual and collective existence are born and spread.

18. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Edward Arnold & Co, London 1924, p. 131 (orig. ed. *Frankrijk en de Nederlanden*, Tjeenk Willink, Haarlem 1919).

19. David Le Breton, *La sociologie du corps*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1992, p. 9.

The body, surface and vector of medieval thinking, is yet far from being placed in a Cartesian mind/body division. With no distinction between person and flesh, the body bears the image of a unified whole, as happens in most traditional societies with a communal component. In them, a person's status is completely subordinate to the human group as a collective. In this sense, the only individual hallmark of man is a body understood as a frontier, a limit that distinguishes him from the others. Considering Le Breton's assertions:

Through the body, man appropriates the substance of his life and translates it towards others by means of the symbolic systems he shares with the other members of his community. Within one social community, all the bodily manifestations of an actor are virtually significant to its members. They only bear meaning in relation to the symbolical data of the social group. There is nothing natural about a gesture or a sensation²⁰.

We can conclude that the bodies manifested in the *Dances of Death* bear meaning by leaning on neighboring elements. As we have seen, the objects, clothing, and actions that identify each character are noted (by the character of Death, in the case of poems, and carried by the living bodies, in the case of figurative works) in the exact moment when, by order of Death, they must be abandoned by their bearers.

Thus Death orders the Pope to «undress thine cape», and adds, «thine auburn mantle will serve thee not». To the Patriarch Death says, «keep thine golden cross»; to the Constable, «at ease, constable, leave thine horse»; to the Archdeacon, «take off thine cap»; to the Lawyer, «dance, lawyer, leave thine digest»; to the Canon «you, canon, leave thine breviary»; and to the Usurer, «dance, usurer, leave thine post».

The achieved effect of an invitation to dance and, as consequence, to die, appears as an equalizing element, removing the object-symbol and its semiotic charge from the scene. Like Leroi-Gourhan said,

human beings are only human to the extent that they are in the midst of others and clothed in symbols that give purpose to their existence. Naked and immobile, the high priest and the vagabond are no longer the vehicles of a symbolically human system, but mere bodies of higher mammals set in a time and a space without significance²¹.

Following this perspective, the figurative distinction of each character in the *Dance Macabre* – the pope and the emperor's clothing, along with the objects they handle and that are distinctive of their lineage and function – implies a double question. In addition to obeying the class logic of the call to dance, from which activation of a dogmatic discourse is possible, it represents the last bastion

20. *Ibidem*.

21. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, cit., p. 313.

of the individual's dance. Forced to leave behind their distinctive elements before entering the dance, each of the social types portrayed is, in effect, about to make its first step toward the irreversible loss of their identity.

Macabre Dances as a Media Phenomenon

In this discussion, we have seen that the *Dances of Death* possess trans-semiotic characteristics, an aspect that gives them a particular trait (given that crossing between languages, formats, and media is not typical of the discursive classifications that social life calls *genres*)²². This means that it will be present in more than one location. Concretely, this aspect will be found in paintings (mainly fresco paintings in cathedral and monastery walls, and also in the environment of nobility architecture), in verse poems and inscriptions, accompanying these paintings or in autonomous form, on paper, fit to be recited in church pulpits, and represented in that same context as *autos sacramentales*²³, as well as in mendicant pilgrimages.

While conjectures have been made about the life of this trans-genre also in theatrical manifestations outside of a religious context, historical data only account for the episode in which «the duke of Burgundy had it performed in his mansion at Bruges in 1449»²⁴ and for a certain representation in Saint-Jean de Besançon Cathedral, in 1453²⁵. In any case, no archival information that could be used for the analysis of these cases has surfaced.

Added to this (if we consider the strength of the *Dances* as a kind of discourse that is based on a wide field of art production from specific and persistent rhetorical, thematic, and enunciative features) is the way it operates in relation to the coat of arms and the panel portrait. In this sense, as we have seen, it is possible to return to the question of the *Dances* when observing them as part of a consolidated synchronic system of genres.

Now, the phenomenon of the *Dances of Death* does not stop in the prevalence and dialogue involving languages, materialities, media, and even other genres that characterized the Middle Ages; rather, its trans-semiotic force also takes place in the temporal axis.

When considering the phenomenon of the *Dances* diachronically, we could pause at the description of its multiple forms of existence centuries later, since they were especially prolific from the

22. Genres are types of discourse that are limited to a specific field of work. On this aspect, see Oscar Steimberg, *Semiótica de los medios masivos. El pasaje a los medios de los géneros populares*, Atuel, Buenos Aires 1993.

23. From Spanish, literally meaning "sacramental act", it is a form of religious play that originated in Spain.

24. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, cit., p. 130.

25. See Víctor Infantes, *Las Danzas de la Muerte: Génesis y desarrollo de un género medieval (siglos XIII-XVII)*, cit., p. 38.

Modern Age on:

The neo-medievalisms of the 19th century revitalized the theme, a brilliant example being Camille Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*, *opus 40*, composed in 1874, inspired by a Henri Cazalis poem, and premiered in Paris on January 14, 1875. The posters, graphic humor and the great warlike convulsions of the 19th and 20th centuries explain a late revival of the theme, particularly in the inter-war period. Photography and cinema have also revived the macabre dance: in George Méliès' *The Magic Lantern*, from 1898, in an animated short film by Walt Disney from 1929 (*The Skeleton Dance*), and in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, from 1957. In contemporary literature, *Danza de la muerte* by Federico García Lorca is worth mentioning, from his *Poeta en Nueva York*, from 1929²⁶.

Based on this exhaustive breakdown of the path of the *Dances*, observed from the point of view of mediatization, we can fast-forward in time and go directly to the question: How do the *Dances of Death* reach us in the contemporary world? And what are the implications of their updating in the life of social discourses, five centuries after their emergence?

In this direction, it is important to take into account Schaeffer's point on the centrality of modes of transmission when describing a culture: «Although culture, as such, is a collective reality, the fact that the human being is a biological being makes the process of cultural reproduction dependent on the existence of individual acts of mental incorporation of information that circulates publicly»²⁷. There are many references that justify the origin of the *Dances* in a historical moment characterized by the abundance of plagues, wars, and great famines. Such references define this framework as a generator of a *culture of death*, and it is this culture that would have given the *Dances Macabre* the possibility of becoming one of the most popular genres in medieval artistic production.

Now, if we return to Schaeffer's position, the question that arises is as follows: How can we identify the individual acts of mental incorporation of information necessary to understand the cause and development of a culture of death? If we pay attention to this question, it is important to be clear that we are asking something that will lead us in the opposite direction, to the most popularized answer about the existence of a culture of death as the basis of discursive phenomena such as the *Dances Macabre*. And, if our interest persists in consideration of the *Dances* and, especially, of the role they assume in these modes of transmission of a culture of death, it seems more appropriate to bring up Eliseo Verón's thesis about the processes of mediatization:

Mediatization, from an anthropological point of view, is an operational result of a fundamental dimension of our biological species, which is the capacity for semiosis. This capacity has been progressively activated, for different reasons, in a variety of historical contexts and, therefore, has taken many forms. But some of its consequences were present from the very beginning of our evolutionary history and affected the social organization of Western societies long before

26. Herbert González Zymla, *La danza macabra*, in «Revista Digital de Iconografía Medieval», vol. VI, n. 11, 2014, pp. 23-51; p. 41.

27. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *La fin de l'exception humaine*, cit., p. 221.

Modernity²⁸.

This perspective will not only allow us to deepen the observation of the trans-genre in its social life in synchrony, that is to say, in that movement which encompasses the possible instances of mediated reception, characteristic of its period of origin (a wall in a chapel, an act of prayer of a mendicant procession, etc.). It will also allow us to advance in the response to the ways in which the trans-genre is summoned from time to time, even in the present.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning the work of Oscar Traversa, who was in charge of reconstructing the path and who gave an account of the multiple ways in which Salomé's dance of seduction and its consequence, the decapitation of John the Baptist, are presented in the long road of mediatization. This persistence of the biblical story allows the researcher to ask why, after thousands of years, certain insistences are perpetuated, and proposes the following approach to an answer:

Like any other process of textual transformation, be it that of *Don Quixote*, *Carmen* or *Ulysses*, it will always be subject to a tension: at one pole, the conservation of the properties that define the identity of the text (whether *Don Quixote*, *Carmen* or *Ulysses* are, in some way, such) and, at the other end, the unlimited diversity of the resources provided by time to make those distinctive qualities present²⁹.

It seems, then, that one of the keys lies in time, or rather in the production of semiosis in a timeline. And yet, in order to understand the complexity of this consideration, it is necessary to add Verón's reference to media phenomena³⁰, since the radial and transversal "effects" of media phenomena would be the result of their systemic nature, which implies an enormous network of feedback relationships.

We can now, together with both researchers, investigate the way in which the *Dances of Death* are presented in current works, corresponding to the audiovisual language, for example, *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman from 1957, and the videodance series *Dances Macabres*³¹.

Although Bergman's film obviously exceeds the allusion to the Medieval genre that we are working on, while it builds upon a series of multiple and heterogeneous operations of iconographic quote (characteristic that has elevated it into one of the most recognisable stamps of the world's cine-

28. Eliseo Verón, *Teoría de la mediatización: una perspectiva semio-antropológica*, in «Cuadernos de Información y Comunicación», vol. XX, 2015, pp. 173-182: p. 174.

29. Oscar Traversa, *El espectador inexperto*, in Silvina Szperling – Susana Temperley (edited by), *Terpsícore en ceros y unos*, Guadalquivir, Buenos Aires 2010, pp. 19-25: p. 23.

30. The definition of media phenomenon is that of the product of the semiotic capacity of our species as an exteriorization of mental processes in the form of a given material device. On the notion of the media phenomenon, see Eliseo Verón, *La Semiosis Social*, 2, cit., pp. 171-184.

31. Curated by Marisa Hayes and Franck Boulègue, Centre de Vidéo Danse de Bourgogne, 2016 (available online at: <https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque>, u.v. 29/7/2021).

matography³²), we'll set foot on just two of the many moments of allusion to the *Dances of Death* in *The Seventh Seal*.

Directly addressing the operations of allusion to the *Dances of Death* in *The Seventh Seal*³³. One of the intertextual operations refers to the production mode of the stage device of the trans-genre in its figurative aspect. Thus, the filmic story presents (the scene operates as a catalytic function) a painter intervening on the wall of a chapel. We can observe in close ups some uncomplete dancing figures who already form a chain while the very own artisan creator comments the evocative power that his work will equally impose to the eyes of both innocent and sinners, as well as a verbal description in which the character exposes features of his work in progress, such as the aspects that led him to diagram the disposition of the living bodies with the dead in a circle and the effect of fear that he seeks to achieve on the group of faithful attendees of the sermons at the moment of contemplating it. In this way, one of the specimens that would define the *Dances of Death* as a genre in visual art takes form in the diegesis, at the very moment of its materialization.



Fig. 6: *The Seventh Seal* (final scene). Director: Ingmar Bergman (1957).

Toward the end of the story, the minstrel (beneficiary of supra-terrestrial visions) can see on the horizon how Death drags the group of characters he was traveling with just days before. It is a wide shot that shows the diagonal line that divides the slope of a hill between heaven and earth, and, in a

32. To mention only one of the numerous critics that reopen the permanent comeback to analyzing *The Seventh Seal* since its premiere to the current day, we can mention Norman Holland's *The Seven Seals. The Film as Iconography*, in «The Hudson Review», vol. XII, n. 2, 1959, pp. 266-270.

33. Bergman's film presents intertextual operations that encompass other territories of the discursive universe characteristic of the Middle Ages, and especially the textual universe of the *Ars Moriendi* (e.g., the allusion to the fresco painting by Albertus Pictor in the Täby Church, in Stockholm. The fresco, located in the half-light of the choir, represents a nobleman playing a game of chess with death).

row, the silhouettes in a chain slowly advancing on that line (fig. 6). At the same time, the little man describes, almost in a prayer:

I see them! Over there against the stormy sky. They are all there. The smith and Lisa, the knight, Raval, Jöns, and Skat. And the strict master Death bids them dance. He wants them to hold hands and to tread the dance in a long line. At the head goes the strict master with the scythe and hourglass. They move away from the dawn in a solemn dance away towards the dark lands while the rain cleanses their cheeks of the salt from their bitter tears.

This last intertextual operation, unlike the one involving the explanation of the fresco painting in the chapel, is manifested in the form of an allegory. This rhetorical aspect, together with the situating of this scene as closure, gives it value as an epilogue, in such a way that this second allusion to the *Dances* operates as a conveyance of the ideological-critical organization and the evocative power of narrative.

Now, when we observe this scene from an iconologic perspective (inaugurated by Panofsky³⁴ and traveled, as well as transmuted, by several to this day) we contemplate the piece not only as a material object but as support of a complex network of meanings, ruled by an intricate confluence of internal and external relations. In this sense, the chain dance or dance in a circle is presented in this film as an *available image*, or as a motif that we could catalogue as one of double way: *outwards* because it addresses a cultural model, an identifiable historical perception. And also *inwards*, because any kind of interpretation obliges us to overtake the mimetic capacity of cinema and acquire consciousness of the mechanisms of the cinematographic language in all its complexity and polysemy.

For their part, the videodance cases are inscribed in the generality and simplicity of the title *Dances Macabres*, and in the transcription of the preface awarded to the Parisian 1424 fresco. These are five series of works gathered from Franz Liszt's 1874 symphonic composition *Dances Macabres* (fig. 7).

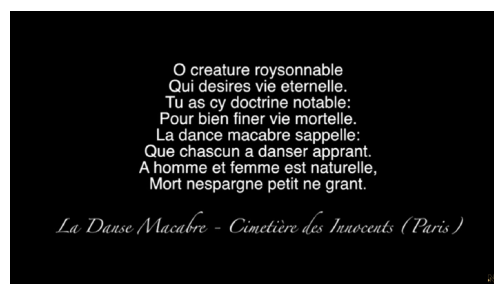


Fig. 7: Image from *Dances Macabres Videodance Cicle* (2016), Centre de Vidéo Danse de Bourgogne.

34. See Erwin Panofsky, *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*, in «Critique: A Review of Contemporary Art», vol. I, n. 3, 1947, pp. 5-28.

The perceptual element given by the combination of sound, along with the predominance of gray and black in the visual plane, as well as the configuration of the spaces drawn by diagonal lines of an expressionist nature, establish the idea of the macabre as the seminal motif. Moreover, to the frequency of the diagonal axis we can add the set of symmetries as a mirror, of splitting. Or, on the contrary, that of polarities of a formal and even conceptual type (living and dead matter, movement and stillness, joy and despair, etc.).

Regarding the scenarios or backgrounds, they vary between the naturalism of a desert landscape, of a forest, or of the enveloping and historical effect of a medieval church in ruins. From resources such as the flattening of the background, the display of technical features that exert the effect of seams on the texture of the image, and the exhibition of a non-place in the search for an effect of vertigo and oppression, a meta-enunciative proposal is made.



Fig. 8: *Digital Afterlives* – Directors: Richard J. Allen and Karen Perelman; *Dances Macabres*, edited and curated by Marisa Hayes and Franck Boulege (2016), Centre de Vidéo Danse de Bourgogne.

In most of the works, the theme of the dance of death and life (driven by various dance and performance techniques that include, in addition to the often contemporary style, pantomime and butoh) is highlighted in the operational approach of an “expanded” corporeality. Thus, in these *Dances*, the body is presented not only as the performer’s flesh identity, but also as a plastic element and malleable material, in pieces woven from a logic that relates to the technological material itself. The use of this possibility, which we can refer to as a grammar of the language of videodance, enables, in some of the works observed, the use of the very texture of the skin as an inscription surface.

Meanwhile, Death can appear personified by a dancer dressed in a black garment or tunic if it is a duo, or as an abstract element achieved by visual and sound coercion effects, as an invisible force that falls on the living body. In other cases that propose a collage of genres and bet on including a

humorous tone to the piece, Death is presented as a skeleton-like doll that dances as manipulated by the dancer.

Thus, from the implementation of this hybrid language built on the relationship between camera and body, and the exploration of a wide range of possibilities, the production of intertextual operations also occurs in multiple variants:

Graphic forms and rhetorical resources of digital animation, legends, dialogues, and monologues of the performers, ad hoc instructions aimed at immersion of the viewer in the work or from themes completely alien to the artistic universe [...]. These diverse operations that call for a multiplicity of discourses of heterogeneous universes relay to us the absence of a formal syntax of videodance, and its expressive freedom. In other words, it is to conceive of the intertextual nature of the work of videodance determined by its combinatory and at the same time expansive character in which corporality as matter occupies a central place³⁵.

Among these folds of quotations and references to medieval dances, and references to an *impossible corporality* fully inserted in the contemporary taste, the effect sought as a curatorial strategy takes shape, which we can outline as that which proposes an aesthetic enjoyment based on the way in which videodance, as a language characteristic of a “culture of experimentation”, takes on the material feature of a *culture of death*.



Fig. 9: *Vivre et Mourir* – Director: Adianna Apodaca; *Dances Macabres*, edited and curated by Marisa Hayes and Franck Boulege (2016), Centre de Vidéo Danse de Bourgogne.

In summary, from what has been observed in the *Dances of Death* in their videodance format

35. Susana Temperley, *Cuerpo e intertexto. La corporeidad como manifestación abierta en la obra de videodanza*, in Id., *Videodanza. Complejidad y Periferia*, RGC, Buenos Aires 2017, pp. 69-80: p. 77.

and in the film *The Seventh Seal*, it is possible to conclude that, in this area of contemporary art characterized by its inclusion in an audiovisual base, the updating of the trans-genre is carried out in a predominantly meta-discursive life. In other words, the works take on the original medieval genre (frescoes and poems) so that both film and videodance are able to take the trans-genre and make it their subject, and, in this same movement, they resort to it to give evidence and reflect on their own functioning as languages and surfaces of aesthetic inscription.

However, it is also possible to visualize another aspect: both the film and the videodance pieces are cases of activation of a double operation characteristic of media phenomena. It is a double exercise of transformation at a quantitative and substantial level: the rupture and the change of scale. In these two audiovisual cases studied, the rupture of scale operates by establishing differences with respect to their pictorial and literary origins. Representing the way in which the living are dragged into the dance from the multiple image of celluloid cinema and the technique of digital video results in the construction of a technical and diegetic reality which is very different from that caused by its original medium (the fresco complemented by a reference in the form of poetry).

The change of scale, on the other hand, manifests itself as a historiographic phenomenon, clearly visible in the factual plan. The difference between the receptive situation of a (more or less reduced) group of parishioners in a chapel and the one offered by the cinema of great masses is evident. This change is implied at the level of reception by the diversification of the audience and, consequently, by the multiplication of both discursive variants and constitutive possibilities. This is what video does as a medium (and digital platforms as a field of location) with the multiple possibilities of individual consumption that it generates.

Conclusion

Observing the phenomenon of the *Dances Macabre* in their original field of performance (frescoes, engravings, and poems), and then, five centuries after their birth, in the semiotic unfolding of new formats such as cinema and digital image, allows us to give an account of some interesting aspects.

1. In its trajectory, the genre shows very distinct modifications with respect to the modalities of figuration of the body, in terms of the body of death but even more so with respect to the living body. The latter, in its medieval location, is a body whose differential value lies in its clothing appearance and in the objects that surround it and point out its social hierarchy. Whereas in its location in the new technologies, it is going to acquire a type of functioning, rather than a figuration. Here the body operates as a surface, as a materiality enabled to sustain an enunciative invitation of aesthetic consumption. It is curious how the diachronic observation of the body of the *Dances* highlights, more

than the contour and the carnality of an individual, a corporality that expands beyond this contour and this carnality. One inscribes itself in its collective and social location, and the other disaggregates itself as a malleable and artifiable visual and sound element.

2. The genre of the *Dances of Death*, seen as a media phenomenon, manifests a triple density. It operates in the axis of mediatization as a cascade, involving at least three levels:

a) First meta-level, or the level of the medieval formats. The literary and visual pieces, as they work in an autonomous and permanent way, are enabled for their media functioning.

b) The discourse-object level. These phenomena of a first meta-discursive level in turn thematize a media phenomenon. The dance ritual (in a *corro*, procession, or chain) is in itself a primordial media phenomenon and functions here as an object discourse.

c) Second meta-level. The contemporary discourse manifestations of cinema and videodance thematize, quote, and allude to the two previous levels in such a way that, under the name of *Macabre Dances*, the recurrence of the unlimited semiosis is brought together.

3. In this density also lies the meta-allegory, since the fact of the thematization of the ritual device, that in turn is rhetorized as metallogism, as an operation in the logical order, subverts the *Dances of Death* in the spectacularization of a spectacle, as is possible to observe in the final scene of *The Seventh Seal*. According to Huizinga:

Symbolism expresses connection between two ideas, allegory gives a visible form to the conception of such a connection. It aids symbolic thought to express itself, but endangers it at the same time by substituting a figure for a living idea. The force of the symbol is easily lost in the allegory. So, allegory in itself implies from the outset normalizing, projecting on a surface, crystallizing³⁶.

The ironic and satirical also play their part in this process of mediatization that originated in the Middle Ages, although these types of humor do not manifest transformations according to a breakdown into levels, but rather in the shifting of an axis that we can call “of spaces”. In medieval life, the ironic and satirical component is oriented as mockery directed at the receiver of the works, and with this it seeks to mobilize him or her from fear and provocation, in equal measure. Centuries later, however, satire and irony will be reworked and thematized in the field of aesthetic distancing. Thus, the macabre humor, an effect of constitutive sense of the *Dances of Death*, will be subtracted from the religious instructive context to be transferred to the profane and be patented there, as the enjoyment suggested to the massive spectator and his or her alter ego, the hyper-individualized receiver of the digital era.

To conclude, all that remains is to emphasize that the operations and densities that could be

36. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, cit., p. 291.

glimpsed throughout this analysis account for one case among many possible ones, of what, in Leroi-Gourhan's terms, involves the ways in which time, space, and symbolic systems bring together our societies and, in short, our species. Likewise, these detected functions ratify what Traversa pointed out in his sixth letter: «Mediatization cannot be measured for the past with today's standards, since each moment in history is traced by a particular communicational configuration»³⁷.

Thus, today's *Dances Macabre* will never be comparable to those of yesteryear, and yet, ironically, as we experience their reception, an echo reminds us that we are all invited to the dance of death.

37. Oscar Traversa, *Carta VI – Cuerpo, danza, medios: reproches por Salomé*, in «Loïe. Magazine of Dance, Performance and New Media», n. 6, 2020, online: <https://loie.com.ar/loie-06/cartas-desde-mi-ventana/carta-vi-cuerpo-danza-medios-reproches-por-salome/> (u.v. 24/8/2021).

