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## FELIX NUSSBAUM'S *TRIUMPH OF DEATH* AS A POWERFUL VOICE OF DISSENT AGAINST WARTIME

**Abstract:** The work of Osnabruck-born Felix Nussbaum comprises highly narrative works that show us the world seen through the eyes of a Jewish artist persecuted by a totalitarian system. The paintings, especially those with political overtones, are a peculiar diary of the Holocaust and at the same time an unusual form of showing resistance and opposition to war crimes and the dehumanisation of humankind. This article focuses on the artist's last known work, in which Nussbaum depicted the destruction of humanity in an unusually reflective and melancholic way. Currently on display as a culminating work in the labyrinthine museum space of the Felix-Nussbaum-Haus (Osnabruck), *Triumph of Death* (1944) should provide an important voice in the discussion about humanity: what we are capable of as humans, or how easily the foundations of civilisation are destroyed when demons triumph in our minds. It is worth leaning harder into the content of this eloquent image, especially when, once again, the end of Western civilisation seems to be at hand.

**Keywords:** Felix Nussbaum, Jewish art, Second World War, triumph of death, Holocaust

*If art perishes, humanity will return  
to a state of barbarism.*

Sir Edward Herbert Read<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Żuławski, *Studium do autoportretu*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1980, p. 95.

Depictions of the triumph of death have been a reminder of the transience and insignificance of human existence. Its first significant examples appeared in large numbers after 1348. The French historian Michel Vovelle, who analysed depictions of death over the centuries, noted that it was initially shown in the form of “a hairy and clawed dragon or a demon with the wings of a bat”<sup>2</sup>. Over time, the image of death was transformed into a skeleton on horseback, which was inspired by the description of one of the knights of the *Book of the Apocalypse*<sup>3</sup>. The frescoes by Buonamico Buffalmacco<sup>4</sup> in the Camposanto cemetery in Pisa, probably created after the experience of the plague, show a whole arsenal of horrors served up by death and devils hunting for the souls of the unfortunate. On the other hand, in a multigure fresco (c. 1446) from the Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo, death, in the form of a horseman, tramples over representatives of privileged classes dressed in costly robes<sup>5</sup>. What Vovelle's great predecessor Philippe Ariès<sup>6</sup> wrote about is that the depiction of death's triumph is not just a direct clash between humankind and death, but above all a testimony to its universal power. He considered the motif to be the epitome of blind fate and seemingly “a negation of the individualism of the *artes moriendi* and the dances of death”<sup>7</sup>. However, when related to collectivity, it remains “a deeply human, physical, irrevocable death”<sup>8</sup>. Undeniably, the “official narrator of the apocalypse”<sup>9</sup> was Pieter Breugel, who (to quote Michał Walicki) “looks through the eyes of a conquistador encompassing conquered lands with his gaze”<sup>10</sup>. Wolfgang Stechow, a researcher of Breugel's work, believed that at

<sup>2</sup> M. Vovelle, *Śmierć w cywilizacji Zachodu. Od roku 1300 po współczesność*, transl. T. Swoboda, M. Ochab, M. Sawiczewska-Lorkowska, D. Senczyszyn, *Słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2004, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> The question of authorship was disputed. As late as the 1970s, Francesco Triani was still considered the artist. The Italian art historian Luciano Bellosi only negated it in his work *Buffalmacco e il Trionfo della Morte*, Einaudi, Torino, 1974. L. Bellosi, *Buffalmacco e il Trionfo della Morte*, Einaudi, Einaudi, Torino 1974.

<sup>5</sup> According to Eberhard König, the painting depicts the confrontation of the inhabitants of medieval Europe with the devastating power of the plague, but it is not an instance of classic immortalisation of the triumphant death motif. E. König, *Der Triumph des Todes, Der Schwarze Tod der Zeit um 1350 oredwie Kunst auf aktuellen Schrecken reagiert*, “Seuchen und Plagen” 2002, no 1. [https://www.fu-berlin.de/presse/publikationen/fundiert/archiv/2002\\_01/02\\_01\\_koenig/index.html](https://www.fu-berlin.de/presse/publikationen/fundiert/archiv/2002_01/02_01_koenig/index.html), [accessed: 09.05.2024].

<sup>6</sup> P. Ariès, *Człowiek i śmierć*, transl. E. Bąkowska, Aletheia, Warszawa 2011, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> M. Vovelle, *Śmierć w cywilizacji...*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> P. Weiser, *Co raz stało się rzeczywistością, zawsze pozostanie możliwe... Śmierć według Nussbau- ma z przypisem do Breugla*, “Teksty Drugie” 2012, no. 1-2, p. 255.

<sup>10</sup> J. Białostocki, *Breugel - pejzażysta*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Poznań 1956, p. 13. [quoted after:] M. Walicki, *Przed ślepcami Breughla*, “Nowiny Literackie” 1947, no 33; W. Mischke, *Wizerunek własny w twórczości Breugla Starszego*, in: *Portret. Funkcja - Forma -*

the heart of its interpretation is the essence of sin ('the wages of sin') rather than mere human weakness<sup>11</sup>. It should be noted that this painting was undated and unsigned by the Flemish artist and is a neat synthesis of the motifs of the triumph and dance of death. Strechow noted that "conflagrations and catastrophes of all kinds heighten the impression of this painting as a *Theatrum Mundi* under the leadership of a prince of total destruction"<sup>12</sup>.

Almost 400 years later, Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944), a German Jew, experienced the tragedy of war. His fate became an example of a life story of a lost generation artist – one of many who did not stand a chance in a clash with the ruthlessly operating totalitarian machine. Nussbaum, born in Osnabrück and educated in Berlin and Rome, did not have the career that German art critics of the time predicted for him. Instead, he spent the last years of his life in exile, primarily in Belgium, and hid in a Brussels townhouse after the German aggression (1940). Nussbaum was murdered in the Auschwitz concentration camp in the second half of 1944 (the exact date of death has not yet been established). His various paintings have remained, although nowadays he is primarily associated with those constituting a kind of a diary of the time of the Holocaust. He was rediscovered in the 1970s, mainly thanks to the involvement of his cousins, Auguste Moses-Nussbaum (1923-1921) and Shulamit Jaari-Nussbaum (1925-2019) as well as local historians, art historians and journalists gathered around Manfred Meinz (1931-2007), director of the Kulturgeschichtliches Museum<sup>13</sup>. Since 1998, Osnabrück has been home to the Felix-Nussbaum-Haus, built to a design by Daniel Liebeskind, which exhibits more than 200 works by the artist. Among them is the last Nussbaum's painting we know of, forming the climax of the exhibition – *Triumph of Death*, dated (18.04.1944) and signed. In terms of content, it is based on traditional elements of the iconography of the dance of death, combined with contemporary motifs. It has so far only been referred to in Poland by Piotr Weiser, who, juxtaposing Nussbaum's work with that of Pieter Breugel, perfectly conveyed its atmosphere, writing that: "[...] in Breugel's work things are going on, in Nussbaum's it is over. It's as if they set their clocks differently: on one it's five past twelve, on the other it's five past midnight"<sup>14</sup>.

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*Symbol. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, ed. A. Marczak-Krupa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Toruń 1990, p. 248.

<sup>11</sup> W. Strechow, *Bruegel*, Thames & Hudson Ltd, New York 1990, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> Those involved in restoring the memory of Felix Nussbaum and recovering his paintings included the art historian Karl Georg Kaster (1943-1997) and two journalists – Peter Junk (1940-2009) and Wendelin Zimmer (1936-2012).

<sup>14</sup> P. Weiser, *Co raz stało się rzeczywistością...*, p. 256.

Indeed, Nussbaum precisely cropped his work as if the epicentre of a catastrophe was right there. He placed the landscape of the war just after the triumph of death on three planes of the canvas. In the foreground, he painted a still life constructed from the belongings of the victims of this spectacle, which marked the end of Western civilisation for the artist. Interestingly, in working on this fascinating juxtaposition of objects, Nussbaum may have been suggested by earlier depictions. Indeed, the composition conforms to a Baroque scheme in which attributes defining the portrayed person were shown along-side him or her<sup>15</sup>. Among a pile of now useless things, the artist placed a crumpled page of sheet music in the bottom right-hand corner. Nussbaum's German biographers<sup>16</sup> have established that these are the opening bars of the refrain of a popular song entitled *The Lambeth Walk* from the musical *Me and my Girl* (lyrics: Douglas Furber, L. Arthur Rose, music: Noel Gray), which premiered two years before the outbreak of the Second World War. It seems unusually interesting that the "Picture Post" magazine, which covers reportage photography, published a satirical article in early 1939 about *the Lambeth Walk phenomenon*. It stated that one of the differences "between the English and those who follow Hitler and Mussolini" is that the former are able to follow their leader in a dance rather than in a march<sup>17</sup>. After one of the bombings of the British capital, the "Daily Sketch" newspaper published a photograph of Londoners performing the Lambeth Walk amidst the ruins of tenements<sup>18</sup>. Nussbaum may have been familiar with the events mentioned here, as he was in contact with his uncle who lived in London<sup>19</sup>. Thus, the juxtaposition resorted to by the artist, where he deliberately combined the dance of life (*Lambeth Walk*) with the dance of death, should make a shocking impression on the viewer. With this, Nussbaum was asking why people had fallen into a stupor and why they pretended, still dancing to the tune of this musical song, that genocide did not happen. Hence, one can conclude that the artist thus earned the right to openly criticise the attitude of Western European societies. Nussbaum

<sup>15</sup> E. Berger, I. Jaehner, P. Junk, *Felix Nussbaum. Art Defamed, Art in Exile, Art in Resistance*, Bramsche 1997, p. 440. The Belgian painter Pieter Boel used a similar scheme in his 1663 painting *The Vanitas Allegory of the World*, which is now in the Palais des Beaux Arts in Lille. Here, Boel painted the symbols of art (painting, music, sculpture), valour (armour, sabre, bow and arrows), spiritual values (cross) or knowledge (books, globe), among others. P. Boel, *The Vanitas Allegory of the World*, 1663, [https://pba.lille.fr/Collections/Chefs-dOEuvre/Peintures-XVI-sup-e-sup-XXI-sup-e-sup-siecles/Allegorie-des-vanites-du-monde/\(plus\)](https://pba.lille.fr/Collections/Chefs-dOEuvre/Peintures-XVI-sup-e-sup-XXI-sup-e-sup-siecles/Allegorie-des-vanites-du-monde/(plus)) [accessed: 11.05.2024].

<sup>16</sup> Eva Berger, Inge Jaehner, Peter Junk, Karl Georg Kaster, Manfred Meinz, Wendelin Zimmer.

<sup>17</sup> E. Berger, I. Jaehner, P. Junk, *Felix Nussbaum. Art...*, p. 190.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum mentioned London-resident Salomon Frederick van Dyk as a person who has continuously supported him financially during his Belgian emigration.

did not directly refer to any political events in his works, perhaps following the artistic attitude of Karl Hofer, a master he admired, and hence did not address political themes. Therefore, this fact may indicate that he sensed his impending death. At that point in his life, Nussbaum was most likely on the verge of a nervous breakdown due to months of hiding from the Gestapo and compounded by information about the Holocaust of his own people. Thus, in the painting *Triumph of Death*, the Jewish artist was trying to show where such insensitivity, indifference to the misery of others, to a world engulfed in war and hatred, leads. Significantly, however, in this painting he used parody as an artistic means to get rid of the fear that had been building up inside him. This is not new to his artistic stance, as Nussbaum, drawing on historical sources, had repeatedly sought to include pictorial motifs that were clearly intended to convey both information about his erudition and artistic craftsmanship in his paintings. Nussbaum has also consciously alluded to the vanitas motif. In the past, objects exposed on canvas served as personal belongings. Some of them probably belonged to the artist himself, such as the sheet music for the *Lambeth Walk* or a damaged typewriter<sup>20</sup>. Philippe Ariès wrote that the absence of the owner makes the things in question a reminder of rapidly passing time and an inevitable end<sup>21</sup>, and when we identify vanitas with death, "it becomes one of the most essential elements of human existence"<sup>22</sup>, as things bear traces of the hands that touched them. Hence, in this painting, the Jewish artist indirectly showed the history of Nazi murders. The traces of their crimes were made into silent objects, so eloquent in their visuality, forming a cemetery piled high – a mass grave of humanity built from the relics of civilisation. It is worth quoting here the words of the Holocaust traces researcher Bożena Shallcross on her analysis of the work of the Warsaw Ghetto poet Władysław Szlenger: "Forced to exist in this order of things, people thought only of survival. To show the scale of regression, Szlenger chooses a doorbell, a passport, a cylinder, a hat, a brush and a window as the protagonists of his poems [...] He used still life to paint the liminal experiences of poverty and death. The incidents removed from representation – the suddenness of the Germans' entry, the confusion, the shouting, the beating rush – are suggested by the language of chaos and things"<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, in the context of Christian Boltanski's work, Ele-

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<sup>20</sup> Felix Nussbaum typed some of the letters on a typewriter, which he mentioned in one of his last letters to the Klein family.; P. Junk, W. Zimmer, *Frage zeichen an jeder Straßenecke. Zwölf Briefe von Felix Nussbaum*, Rasch, Bramsche 2003, p. K.3.

<sup>21</sup> P. Ariès, *Człowiek i śmierć...*, p. 330.

<sup>22</sup> M. Gutowska, *Taniec śmierci*, Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, Warszawa 2010, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Władysław Szlenger, poemtitled *Things*, B. Shallcross, *Rzeczy i Zagłada*, Wydawnictwo Universitas, Kraków 2010, pp. 56-57.

onora Jedlińska concluded that they refer to “absence, memory, forgetting, lack of identification, premonition and experiencing death”, and that with the death of the owner “the object becomes a memory”<sup>24</sup>. One might be tempted to reflect on how many individual and anonymous biographies the foreground of Felix Nussbaum's *Triumph of Death* conceals. Certainly, we have here things belonging to members of his family – Philipp's car, Felka Płatek's<sup>25</sup> tailor's dummy, the bicycle of a boy named Jaqui<sup>26</sup> and his parents' radio<sup>27</sup>. This combination may signal that the artist's painting (his greatest love) has also succumbed to the destructive force of the apocalypse. It lies buried among the ruins of civilisation, for things contain within them the story of “man and his death”<sup>28</sup>, which gives them a special significance as connectors between the present and the past, situated “between the collection of surviving objects and the totality of life”<sup>29</sup>. It is noteworthy how important the personal objects of the persecuted proved for be for victims of the Nazi regime to salvage their memory and identity, as other Jewish artists have also emphasised. A reflection of unhappy fate was seen in things left behind by, among others, Zuzanna Ginczanka, who in her best-known poem wrote<sup>30</sup>:

Non omnis moriar – my noble estate,  
My fields of tablecloth and expansive sheets,  
My steadfast wardrobe bastions, still replete  
With pastel-colored dresses will outlive me yet.

The scene captured in the frame of Nussbaum's *Triumph of Death* is a battlefield, which is particularly evident at the edge of the horizon emerging from behind the skeletons celebrating victory. The battlefield is visible from the left edge strewn with fragments of barbed wire and chain. A leaning telegraph pole, an abandoned cannon and trees stripped of their branches are visible in the distance. From behind the trees emerges the outline of the artist's father's car,

<sup>24</sup> E. Jedlińska, *Kształty pamięci*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2019, p. 172.

<sup>25</sup> Felka Płatek (1899-1944), Jewish painter born in Warsaw, wife of Felix Nussbaum.

<sup>26</sup> Felix Nussbaum painted a portrait of a seven-year-old Jewish boy named Jaqui in early 1944. This boy was also hiding in one of the Brussels townhouses.

<sup>27</sup> E. Berger, I. Jaehner, P. Junk, K. G. Kaster, M. Meinz, W. Zimmer, *Felix Nussbaum. Art...*, p. 442.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> The poem on the website: <https://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/ginczanka-przeciw-falikazali-ci-plynac-non-omnis-moriar.html> [accessed: 11.05.2024].; English translation of the poem: <https://evebigaj.com/2020/07/15/an-angel-against-her-will-zuzanna-ginczankas-non-omnis-moriar/> [accessed: 11.05.2024].

next to which we can see a silhouette of a rider on horseback. This is another interesting intervention by the artist. Firstly, it is a juxtaposition of a period of technology with a time when humankind was not yet motorised. On the other hand, the figure on horseback may refer to one of the horsemen of the apocalypse: "I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death"<sup>31</sup>. However, in Nussbaum's work, the rider looks completely devoid of vitality and resigned. Hence, it may have been the artist's intention to paint not one of the horsemen, but the lone Don Quixote, whose figure had already interested him<sup>32</sup>. It should also be noted that the knight and his horse are the only living beings in the painting. By contrast, in the painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, death is on horseback. An interesting comparison of both works was made by Peter Weiser, cited above, when he wrote that "the differences between Triumph according to Breugel and Death by Nussbaum's brush are created by history"<sup>33</sup>.

When discussing the horizon line in Nussbaum's work, it is impossible not to refer to the motif of the wall, which he often used in his works<sup>34</sup>. This time, however, the wall covers only a small part of the image, thereby letting us know that ultimately, both on one side of the wall and on the other, collapse and ruin are to be expected. No one will be spared in this war of human against human, the artist seems to be saying. The mystery of the wall is thus laid bare. Other architectural elements that complete the visual act of destruction are a fragment of a staircase, a ruined building entrance and a shattered column, which, according to the authors of *Art of the Holocaust*, are Nussbaum's apparent inspiration from Surrealism – Magritte and De Chirico<sup>35</sup>.

Returning to the objects in the foreground of the painting, we can deduce that justice has no place in this apocalyptic world. A statue symbolising it is also among the haphazardly scattered objects visible in the lower left corner right next to a broken scale<sup>36</sup>. Thus, in Nussbaum's version of the triumph of death, there is no place for the Day of Judgement. However, since there will be no judgement, who will separate the victims from their executioners?

<sup>31</sup> *Objawienie św. Jana*, 6,8, in: *Biblia to jest całe Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu*, Brytyjskie i Zagraniczne Towarzystwo Biblijne, Warszawa 1976, p. 1338.

<sup>32</sup> Nussbaum painted his portrait of *Don Quixote* in front of windmills in 1937. There are many indications that it may be his self-portrait in disguise.

<sup>33</sup> P. Weiser, *Co raz stało się...*, p. 235.

<sup>34</sup> The motif of a wall appears in many of his self-portraits.

<sup>35</sup> J. Blatter, S. Milton, *Art of the Holocaust*, Rutledge Pr, New York 1981, p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> *Allegory of the Last Judgment, justice*. D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej. Leksykon*, transl. Wanda Zakrzewska, Paweł Pachciarek, Ryszard Turzyński, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1990, pp. 433-434.

Another extremely interesting group of objects are those related to alchemy and astrology. In the painting, we have a retort (a round glass container with a long neck used for distillation, the symbol of the alchemist), a thick notebook with a record of alchemical symbols<sup>37</sup> and a drawing of a solar eclipse on another page. Astronomers played an important role in royal courts, especially in Italy, and as those who could interpret phenomena occurring in the sky, they had a unique status. With his reference to this tradition, Nussbaum probably wanted to say that none of their prophecies had warned the world of doom. Art critic Donald Kuspit sees the Holocaust as “the alchemical ambition of the Germans to make the world a pure place”<sup>38</sup>. Science also failed humanity, which is why we have research tools in the rubble: a microscope, a tape measure, a compass, an eccentric, a globe and a compact. Technological advances did not save humankind, and although everything had become easier and more accessible to a wider public, among the ruins we have a film camera, a telephone and a light bulb. The last group is made up of vanitas objects<sup>39</sup>: dice, cards (including the ace of hearts laid on a rolled piece of cardboard symbolising a painting – the value of painting, according to Nussbaum, was also degraded), chess and a pearl necklace. Another interesting juxtaposition is the placement of a female nude and a fragment of a male statue next to each other, which may symbolise the destruction of human relationships and love. The last object worth noting is a clock without hands, which may signify the end of time and the passing of all things. Eleonora Jedlińska noted that humans surround their lives with attributes referring to temporality and fragility, and “time, by means of precise devices, becomes a measurable sign of transience”<sup>40</sup>. The concept of building the world on the rules of mathematics and geometry also proved

<sup>37</sup> These are likely to be (from the left): first row – Sun, antimony, Jupiter, salt; second row – Mercury, Mars, Saturn (most likely), a six-pointed star (transmutation), third row – Venus, full moon (or Sun), Uranus, new moon. Nussbaum included here seven stars known in Jewish beliefs. B. Wodecki, E. Śliwka, *Religia i kultura żydowska. Materiały z sesji judaistycznej*, Muzeum Misyjno-Etnograficzne Seminarium Duchownego Księży Werbistów, Pieniężno 1986, p. 113.

<sup>38</sup> J. Stoniewski, *Wątki mistyki żydowskiej w twórczości Anselma Kiefera*, Warszawa 2014, p. 7, [https://www.academia.edu/37164229/W%C4%85tki\\_mistyki\\_%C5%BCydzowskiej\\_w\\_tw%C3%B3rczo%C5%9Bci\\_Anselma\\_Kiefera\\_Traces\\_of\\_Jewish\\_Mysticism\\_in\\_the\\_Oeuvre\\_of\\_Anselm\\_Kiefer](https://www.academia.edu/37164229/W%C4%85tki_mistyki_%C5%BCydzowskiej_w_tw%C3%B3rczo%C5%9Bci_Anselma_Kiefera_Traces_of_Jewish_Mysticism_in_the_Oeuvre_of_Anselm_Kiefer) [accessed: 07.05.2024], quoted after Donald Kuspit, *The Spirit of Gray*, in: Anselm Kiefer: *The Salt of the Earth*, exh. cat. *Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova, June 1 - November 30, 2011*, ed. G. Celant, Milano 2011, pp. 181-182.

<sup>39</sup> Białostocki believed that the symbols of vanitas would not pass away, unlike people and their fates. J. Białostocki, *Symbole i obrazy w świecie sztuki*, vol.1, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1982, p. 102.

<sup>40</sup> E. Jedlińska, *Motywy śmierci w malarstwie XIX wieku na tle obecności tego tematu w sztuce europejskiej*, (manuscript of a doctoral thesis), Łódź 1993, p. 34.



misguided and wrong. It is also worth noting that Dutch painting combined objects of temporal life, such as books and scientific instruments (symbols of *vita contemplativa*) and precious objects from the category of *vita voluptuaria* with symbols of transience<sup>41</sup>. The French philosopher Roger Caillois prophetically stated in his book *Man and the Sacred*, published in the year the Second World War began, that “paradoxically, the boons of civilisation pale in the face of the terrible horror that is their price, and at the same time reveal their fragility”<sup>42</sup>.

Located to the right of the painting, an entrance to a ruined building, a metaphor for a gate, is blocked. The gate and door are a symbol of the transgression between life and death. Jan Białostocki wrote that the door is an ancient symbol of death “conceived as a transition from one reality to another”, with clear “eschatological ideas”<sup>43</sup>. In a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish manuscript of an architectural treatise by Simon Garcia, the last page depicts a door surmounted by a classical abutment. A skeleton sitting on the ground in a melancholic pose is placed against the background. Białostocki believed that this was a typical Door of Death<sup>44</sup>. In Nussbaum's painting, apart from the figure on horseback, there is no room for the living. From the left, the artist arranged the figures in a 2-2-3-2 sequence that give rhythm to the triumph of death. These are *transi* in varying degrees of decomposition. Their figures were carefully covered with robes in a mannerist style, which adds a sense of theatricality to the performance. Johan Huizinga believed that “initially in the Dance of Death, the central figure is the deceased – *transi*, so that it is actually a dance of the dead. The viewer sees himself in the perspective of *vanitas*”<sup>45</sup>. This shaping of the performance was influenced by the parable of the *Three Dead and Three Alive*, popular since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until around 1500 that an expressive allegory of death, a human skeleton, appeared in art. Aričs noted that the dead as *transi* appeared in prayer books intended for pious lay people, especially in prayers for the dead<sup>46</sup>. In Nussbaum's case, it is most likely that the clarinets (infernal pipes) on which the *transi* figures are blowing may have been modelled on the fifth engraving from *The Dance of Death* by Hans Holbein the Younger (1525). In the referenced depiction of the dance, the beat is set by skeletons beating timpani, while in Nussbaum's painting by a figure striking a drum, visible in the

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41 M. Bernacki, *Próba Hermeneutycznej Interpretacji obrazu Otokara Kubina “Zatysi”*, “Slavica Litteraria” 2009, no. 12, p. 87.

42 R. Caillois, *Człowiek i sacrum*, transl. Ewa Burska, Agnieszka Tatariewicz, Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, Warszawa 1995, p. 205.

43 J. Białostocki, *Obrazy i Symbole...*, pp. 160-161.

44 Ibid.

45 J. Huizinga, *Jesień średniowiecza*, transl. T. Brzostowski, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1992, p. 175.

46 P. Ariès, *Człowiek i śmierć...*, p. 120.

central part of the scene. It is worth mentioning that klezmer music, popular among itinerant groups of Jewish musicians, made use of instruments such as the trumpet, percussion instruments, the violin and the clarinet during sacrificial rites. Jedlińska, citing the words of Pascal Quignard, noted that “music was the only one of the arts that took part in the extermination of the Jews carried out by the Germans between 1933 and 1945”<sup>47</sup>. The first two figures from the left are clad in white and black robes. One of them seems to be making victory sounds and the other one with a demonic smile is accompanying her. The fourth figure from the left, standing on a platform made from a fragment of a staircase, may have been inspired by a skeleton from a representation of *the dance of death* from Heidelberg, and its raised foot clad in a white ballet flat suggests the former profession of this *transi* or is a reference to the dance itself<sup>48</sup>. Nussbaum’s work may tip the viewer towards the conclusion that, since in the most ancient representations *transi* referred more to previously living people than to death, then “people dealt this fate to people”<sup>49</sup>. To the right of the representation, a violinist (*transi*) is standing on a shattered column in a triumphant pose<sup>50</sup>, listening to this cacophony and waiting to join in the joyful playing, although the strings of his instrument are plucked. The thought taken from Holbein’s description of the work that “the dance of death cannot do without music, and the truth of human life without penetrating irony”<sup>51</sup> seems apt. It is possible that this figure is meant to be an allegory of the death of Western culture<sup>52</sup>, as it is elevated above the “ruins of cultural artefacts”<sup>53</sup>. According to German scholars, this prominence of the violinist on the column is reminiscent of old German representations of Christ rising from the grave to triumph over death. Thus, it is the reverse of an old motif – the Antichrist<sup>54</sup>. In

<sup>47</sup> E. Jedlińska, *Kształty pamięci...*, p. 203; P. Quignard, *Nienawiść do muzyki*, transl. E. Wieleżyńska, “Literatura na świecie” 2004, no. 1-2, pp. 184-185.

<sup>48</sup> Felix Nussbaum may have also been inspired by figures from *the Dance of Death* (1460) in St Mary’s Church in Lübeck.

<sup>49</sup> Z. Nałkowska, *Medaliony*, Wydawnictwo Greg, Kraków 2011.

<sup>50</sup> The column is a symbol of strength and durability. D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej...*, pp.381-382.

<sup>51</sup> G. Trościński, *Icones Mortis - Emblematy Georgiusa Aemiliusa i Hansa Holbeina w nieznanym polskim przekazie z XVIII wieku. Z dziejów toposu tańca śmierci w Polsce*, “Bibliotekarz Podlaski” 2013, no. 27/2013, p. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Death playing the violin was depicted by an anonymous artist in an engraving entitled *Couple Making Music and Death* from the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. S. Oosterwijk, *Morbid morality. The Danse macabre motif in Dutch art of the Golden Age*, in: *Mort n’espargne ne petit ne grant. Etudes Autour de la Mort et de ses Representations*, ed. I. Hans-Collas, Édition du Cherche-Lune, Paris 2019, pp. 180-181.

<sup>53</sup> E. Berger, I. Jaehner, P. Junk, K. G. Kaster, M. Meinz, W. Zimmer, *Felix Nussbaum. Art...*, p. 445.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445.

addition, the figure is clad in a red robe, a centuries-old symbol of power. It is worth recalling here Alfred Rethel's *Dance of Death* (1848), the last link in the development of the Old High German version of this motif<sup>55</sup>.

In the centre of the painting, Nussbaum placed a group of three figures in a triangular arrangement characteristic of the Renaissance. Among them is most likely *the alter ego* of the artist himself, portrayed as an organ grinder<sup>56</sup>. He gives the impression of being the 'most alive' of the dead. In addition, there is interaction between his organ grinder and the triumphant violinist, achieved through the red colour of both the bedspread on the instrument and the torn robe of the musician with the violin. Nussbaum, if we accept this interpretation of the figure, is not interested in playing and his instrument has a broken crank. He is presented in a characteristic pose of a melancholic. Perhaps the artist then already existed in a similar situation on the brink of life and death, expecting the worst at any moment. On the other hand, a *transi* is sitting on the left, timing the rhythm of the entire triumphal procession. The last figure of this group is the most mysterious one. Remarkably, she hypnotises the viewer with herself. Here, Nussbaum employed a baroque device to draw the potential viewer of the work into the picture, as the mysterious figure is the only one who maintains contact with the space beyond the scene in progress. She is looking towards the viewer – towards the future. Dressed in a black toga, the figure is the only one with snow-white wings. In her hands, she is probably holding a paper flute (in medieval plays, Death played the flute) and waiting for something. There is a great deal to suggest that this is an allegory of the angel of death. Interestingly, a representation very similar in shape and pose can be seen in Edvard Munch's painting *The Angel of Death* (1893). In his poetic cycle *Triumphs* (1351-1374), Francesco Petrarca described a figure with outspread wings, symbolising the time that had to come<sup>57</sup>. Thus, it can be thought that Nussbaum (as already mentioned) was prophesying his death soon.

Instead, the kites in the sky are intended to visualise a specific natural phenomenon, the wind, which is "a symbol of the divine breath of life"<sup>58</sup>. At

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<sup>55</sup> This dance of death was created after the suppression of the Dresden uprising and represents an ovum in terms of the depiction of this motif, due to the highlighting of political content and the reportage form. J. Voegelé, L. Ritterhaus, *Danse Macabre - Totentanz - Dance of Death. 40 Jahre Graphiksammlung Mensch und Tod der Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf*, Düsseldorf 2016, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> In July 1943, Nussbaum painted a portrait of the *Organ Grinder* against the background of a ruined city. It is most likely a self-portrait in disguise.

<sup>57</sup> M. Battistini, *Alegoriaisymbole. Leksykon: historia sztuki*, transl. Karolina Dyjas, Arkady, Warszawa 2005, p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> M. Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych*, transl. Kazimierz Romaniuk, Pallotinum, Poznań 1989, p. 259.

this point, it is worth noting that when Nussbaum painted this work, the mood in Western Europe was already relatively optimistic after the successive Allied victories. So, on the one hand, the artist must have hoped to be saved; on the other, the extermination of the Jewish people was still being continued on a massive scale. Tadeusz Kielanowski claimed that “man does not believe that death will reach him too. Otherwise, he would not know how to live”<sup>59</sup>. On the other hand, in her book *Holocaust and Remembrance*, Barbara Engelking wrote that Jews were “between two extremes: a catastrophic conviction of inevitable death and denial of the testimony of their own eyes”<sup>60</sup>. However, the kites may also be a loose reference to Paul Klee's watercolour *Angelus Novus* (1920), or rather its description by Walter Benjamin, in whose collection the work was placed. It is worth mentioning that this Jewish thinker frequented the famous *Romanische Caf e* located not far from Nussbaum's Berlin studio<sup>61</sup>. Benjamin wrote about Klee's watercolour as follows<sup>62</sup>:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

The kites may have just been such witnesses and angels of history for Nussbaum.

Death has set in for good in Nussbaum's work, heavy clouds have covered the sky and the world will no longer receive an epiphany. The collapse of Western civilisation became the catalyst for the triumphant march of infernal beings. In the works of Otto Dix or Frans Maesereel, it was unsettling that death in a technological world seemed no longer unstoppable, but this was merely an epilogue<sup>63</sup>. Felix Nussbaum took the motif of the dance or triumph

<sup>59</sup> E. Jedlińska, *Motyw  mierci w...*, p. 68.

<sup>60</sup> B. Engelking, *Zagłada i pami c. DoÅwiadczenia Holocaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych*, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, Warszawa 1994, p. 193.

<sup>61</sup> More information on the history of the caf e can be found in the book: J rgen Scheber, *Damalsim Romanischen Caf e. K nstler und ihre Lokale im Berlin der zwanziger Jahre*, Westermann Lernwelten GmbH, Berlin 1988.

<sup>62</sup> W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, transl. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 1969, p.249.

of death to an extreme type of performance from which he removed living people. It is thus no longer a dance of the living with the dead, nor is it a dance to which death invites people. Through the painting *Triumph of Death*, Nussbaum perfectly combined traditional iconography with current events and the history of the war that had been going on for five years<sup>64</sup>. It is worth remembering that one of the most important messages of the dances and triumphs of death was the realisation that “man's death came into the world through his fall and has accompanied him ever since”<sup>65</sup>. Mechanical warfare resulted in the massiveness and randomness of dying. Almost two million Jewish children were killed in Nazi murders. Michał Mencfel wrote that the absence of victims in an artwork (he was specifically referring to Kiefer, but one can assume that his conclusion is universal) is an emphasis on the anonymity and inevitability of death in a collision with the machinery of the Holocaust<sup>66</sup>. To conclude the content of the painting, it is Nussbaum who includes the story of an entire generation to whom the war had set a benchmark. Fritz Steinfeld (1900-1950), a doctor, friend of the artist and author of memoirs dedicated to him, published in 1984 under the title *Vergast - nicht vergessen: Erinnerungen an den Malerfreund Felix Nussbaum*, quoted one of their conversations. Felix hoped that in 100 years' time people would still be visiting museums and, passing by his works, they would stop, take a moment to reflect, perhaps become enthralled by them<sup>67</sup>. However, the time in which Felix Nussbaum lived has made his universal powerful message stand out, above all, as a call for humanity for the world: then, now and at all times.

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<sup>63</sup> M. Steinkamp, *Und nochimmertanz der Todes. Felix Nussbaum und der Totentanzimfruchen 20. Jahrhundert*, in: *Danse Macabre. Totentanz. Katalog*, ed. Anne Sybille Schwetter, Kerber Verlag, Osnabrück 2017, p. 120.

<sup>64</sup> According to Joerg Voegele, the tradition of the dance-of-death motif remained alive after its heyday in the sixteenth and sixteenth centuries mainly in German-speaking countries, where artists continued to be inspired by Holbein's cycle and paintings from Basel. J. Voegele, L. Ritterhaus, *Danse Macabre - Totentanz...*, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> M. Mencfel, *Sztuka i melancholia. O problemie pamięci w twórczości Anselma Kiefera*, “Artium Quaestiones” 2004, no.XV, p. 205.

<sup>67</sup> The story took place in the second half of the 1920s. F. Steinfeld, *Vergast - nichtvergessen: Erinnerungen an den Malerfreund Felix Nussbaum*, Bramsche 1984, p. 27.



Fig. 1. Felix Nussbaum, *Triumph des Todes (Die Gerippe spielen zum Tanz)*, 1944. Prawa autorskie: domena publiczna

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## **TRIUMF ŚMIERCI FELIXA NUSSBAUMA JAKO MOCNY GŁOS SPRZECIWU WOBEC CZASU WOJNY (streszczenie)**

Twórczość urodzonego w Osnabruck Felixa Nussbauma (1904 -1944) obejmuje niezwykle naracyjne prace, które ukazują nam świat widziany oczami żydowskiego artysty prześladowanego przez system totalitarny. Obrazy, szczególnie te o zabarwieniu politycznym, stanowią osobliwy pamiętnik Zagłady, a jednocześnie są niezwykłą formą ukazania oporu i sprzeciwu wobec zbrodni wojennych i dehumanizacji człowieka. W niniejszym artykule zostanie przybliżona ostatnia znana praca artysty, w której to w niezwykle refleksyjny i melancholijny sposób Nussbaum ukazał obraz zniszczenia ludzkości. Obecnie *Triumf śmierci* (1944) jest wyeksponowany jako kulminacyjny w labiryncie przestrzeni muzealnej Felix-Nussbaum-Haus (Osnabruck), a jego antywojenny wydźwięk powinien stanowić ważny głos w dyskusji o człowieczeństwie, o tym do czego jesteśmy zdolni jako ludzie, czy też jak łatwo zniszczyć podwaliny cywilizacji, gdy w naszych umysłach zatriumfują demony. Warto pochylić się mocniej nad treścią tego wymownego obrazu, szczególnie, gdy znów kres zachodniej cywilizacji zdaje się być na wyciągnięcie ręki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Felix Nussbaum, sztuka żydowska, druga wojna światowa, triumf śmierci, Holocaust

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