

## BOOK REVIEWS

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CRISTINA BOGDAN, *Moartea și lumea românească premodernă. Discursuri întretăiate/ [Death and the Premodern Romanian World. Intersected Discourses]* (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2016).

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The book entitled *Moartea și lumea românească premodernă. Discursuri întretăiate (Death and the Premodern Romanian World. Intersected Discourses)*, authored by Cristina Bogdan, brings an essential contribution to the Romanian thanatology literature. It enriches the author's research on the death theme in the iconography of the Romanian cultural area, a theme on which she has published many studies since 2002. Cristina Bogdan's scientific interest refers to a subject to which important Romanian contributions have been brought during these last three decades, by historians like Toader Nicoară, Alexandru-Florin Platon or Marius Rotar, by philologists like Mihai Moraru and Dan Horia Mazilu, and also by art historians like Andrei Paleolog and Nicolae Sabău. At the same time, the theme has been researched from different perspectives by anthropologists like Ion H. Ciubotaru, Ion Ghinoiu, Nicolae Panea, Ștefan Dorondel, Corina-Viorica Șeran, Cosmina Timocea-Mocanu, Cosmina-Maria Berindei.

Cristina Bogdan's volume, divided into ten chapters, stands out through an interdisciplinary approach, i.e. the junction of cultural studies, art history, literary and sociological studies. In the first chapter, the author makes a thoroughly documented historical analysis of the community attitudes towards death and its representations in time in both the West European states and Romania. This first chapter, *Un tabu convertit în disciplină științifică (A Taboo Turned into Science)*, begins with an overview of death's representations and the research upon the subject, mentioned in Annales School and highly developed during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cristina Bogdan emphasizes Philippe Ariès' stages of the attitude's avatars towards death during historical periods, starting with the timeless death, characteristic to ancient history, and ending with death's transformation into taboo, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Late Middle Ages with all its calamities induced by wars and plague brought about the dichotomy good death – bad death. The first was the foreboded death that would happen in public, the dying man being surrounded by loved ones, while the bad death was the unexpected one, "placed under the auspices of clandestinity and shame."<sup>1</sup> A period of the self-

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<sup>1</sup> Cristina Bogdan, *Moartea și lumea românească premodernă. Discursuri întretăiate* [Death and the Premodern Romanian World. Intersected Discourses] (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București,

death paradigm followed, which lasted until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a paradigm that laid stress on the everyday preoccupation of living with the constant thought of death. The Romanticism, with its emotional interest for the exceptional beings present in every person's life, shifted the emphasis from the self-death to the death of the other. The last stage analyzed by Philippe Ariès is the one of a tabooing attitude towards death, displayed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Death is banned from the community, drama takes place silently, together with an increase in the number of discourses on death in mass-media and scientific literature.

Going on with the report on the way in which the scientific research recorded the attitude towards death, the author presents the reading approach proposed by Michel Vovelle who suggested three analysis levels: endured death, lived death and the discourse on death.

Concerning the present research mainstream, the author observes the blending of the old quantitative methods with the case studies that focus on point aspects. She also notices the proliferation of the researches on death and its multitude of aspects (mourning, euthanasia, incineration) in post-communist Romania, as well as the way the present technologies are used to preserve the memory of the dead, turning their profiles on the social media into real places of memory (p. 26).

The next chapter, *Lumea românească premodernă și spectacolul perisabilității (The Premodern Romanian World and the Spectacle of the Perishable)* tries to answer the following research questions: "how does one die (...) and which are the fundamental causes of mortality, how did the ancient Romanians see the «final passage» and which were their gestures to face or to avoid it?" In this respect, with chronicles, notes on old books, stories of foreign travelers, archeological and iconographical proofs, Cristina Bogdan leads the reader on a fascinating journey through time and space, in which she demonstrates how improper attitudes towards the plague facilitated its spreading or how the magic and popular therapy solutions always accompanied the sanitary measures. The author notices that within the Romanian area, the period between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was marked by discourses meant to prepare the human being for the unpredictable end. In this regard, the popular books, the sermons and the iconography often presented Death humorously and ironically, and protective characters, rites and amulets were used. The third chapter analyzes the funeral rites from an entirely atypical perspective, through other cultures' filters, placed under the amazed or ironic lens of foreign travellers. Paul de Alep, Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, Anton Maria del Chiaro, Giovanni Maria Ausilia are only a few of these foreigners who narrated the inhabitants' funeral traditions in their notes or diaries.

The fourth chapter focuses on the attitude towards death as it appears in Romanian literary discourses, emphasizing the baroque tensions in Miron Costin's poem, *Viața lumii (The World's Life)*, the popular books on eschatology, and noticing the connections between the various motifs in the traditional culture or iconography. The author suggests that the

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2016), 14. If not marked otherwise, all translations from the volume were made by the author of this review.

recirculation of the popular books highly read by the society's middle classes greatly contributed to the genesis and understanding of the iconography.

The chapter *Chipurile Morții în iconografia din Țara Românească (Death's Faces in the Iconography in Wallachia)* approaches this "unrepresentable" character's iconographical illustrations on the facades of the churches in the researched area<sup>2</sup>. The author analyses the context of their genesis between 1780 and 1870 and records "the liberties the painters took in decorating the exterior of the monuments and in the subjects' approach, without yet being the case of a manifest deviation from the norms of the post-Byzantine iconography imposed by the interpretations."<sup>3</sup> Cristina Bogdan observes the copybooks with models and the conditions that facilitated – in the previously mentioned period – the spread of Death's representations, who sometimes appears on horseback, sometimes on foot. Its representations can be grouped in types like: *Death with Scythe*, *Death with Wings*, *The Old Man and Death*, *The Lady Queen and Death*, *The Death of the Unmerciful Rich Man* etc. Death's props are also important, they include a scythe, a bag and a goblet in most of the cases, and different other tools used in a household. This chapter includes also 27 coloured reproductions of Death's iconographic representations which successfully complete the ekphrastic reading. The author offers along the way numerous examples from her field research, establishing connections between the different iconographic representations and between the elements of death's faces and aspects of the traditional culture, popular books or Western iconography.

The next chapter contains the dialogue between literature, mythology and iconography, each with its contribution to the observation of Death's iconography evolution within the Romanian area. The discussion on Aesop's fable *The Old Man and Death* and the scenes of macabre dance hold an important place in this chapter. Cristina Bogdan notices that contrary to the Western iconographic compositions where Death is represented as a sexless character, the macabre dance scenes identified in the Romanian area show characters of both sexes. This could be an illustration of the death-wedding allegory present in the *Miorita* motif in ballads or carols, which gave a different meaning to the macabre dance scenes.

The seventh chapter, *Accidentele unui dispozitiv de siguranță (The Accidents of a Safety Device)*, makes a subtle analysis of the situation in which the iconography of death is situated. Most of the monuments on the Romanian territory constantly deteriorate, but the eschatological illustrations also become the victims of social emancipation. Their content is not up to the times: "Placing the illustration of Death on the Southern or Northern facades of the churches in Wallachia (especially in the Vâlcea and Argeș areas) reveals a type of mentality that mostly disappeared nowadays. (...) The present way in which the rural communities relate to death's representations is eloquent for the mutations of the collective mentality, these being the cause for certain reactions and behaviours that led to the deterioration or disappearance

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 157.

of a significant number of wall paintings.<sup>4</sup> The field revealed to Cristina Bogdan some unexpected social realities, surprising from the perspective of the contemporary reference to Death's illustrations, realities that were presented in this chapter. We can see here genuine anthropology texts elegantly written by an author who can and does understand everything, even if the arguments could "melt" the understanding, turning it into revolt. Never does this happen in these pages, even though they include the urge to cherish history and to preserve the heritage. The author's endeavour is anthropological, where there is no other truth but that of the researched community. That is why all the transformations of Death's iconographic illustrations suffered because of certain iconoclast gestures are subjected to a reading grid that includes all beliefs, feelings and experiences which caused them.

The study ends with a *Post scriptum* where the author emphasizes the conclusions she reached, in her attempt to understand the motivation of the assumed destruction of important Death illustrations presented in the research, but she offers the reader certain details from her laboratory. The rigorous, serious and skilled researcher hands over the quill to the sensitive woman who writes about the research motivation, the search excitement of the *man with the key*, the way in which she designed the research, "at the crossroads of scientific domains, at the intersection of literary, visual, folk discourses, on the border between the foreigner's and native's views, at the boundary between the old world (still influenced by late Middle Ages) and the dawn of the modern one."<sup>5</sup> In the end, the author announces a future album containing the representations of death, an album that will include iconographic compositions from Transylvania, Banat and Maramureș<sup>6</sup>

Chapter nine contains a *Catalog al reprezentărilor Morții în iconografia din Țara Românească (Catalogue of Death's Representations in the Iconography in Wallachia)* that records 76 iconographic compositions, grouped in the alphabetical order of the villages. Each church in which a representation of death was identified is carefully documented regarding the period in which it had been built and painted, and the names of the founders and painters. At the same time, each previously mentioned representation is accompanied by a succinct description and its inscription, where there was one. The catalogue also includes certain representations which no longer exist; in these cases, the ways in which they disappeared was worth mentioning. In certain cases, information about a representation's state is offered, or, when the field research or the bibliography allowed it, observations about the consequences of certain more or less successful restorations are made.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 263. Original text: "Situarea întruchipării Morții pe fațadele sudice sau nordice ale lăcașurilor de cult din Țara Românească (mai ales în zonele vâlcene și argeșene) dezvăluie un tip de mentalitate, astăzi în mare parte dispărut. (...) Modul actual de raportare a comunităților rurale la întruchipările thanatice este grăitor pentru mutațiile produse în mentalitatea colectivă, acestea devenind cauza unor reacții și comportamente care au provocat deteriorarea sau dispariția unui număr semnificativ de fresce."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 277. Original text: "la răscruce de domenii științifice, la intersecția discursurilor literare, vizuale, folclorice, pe linia de demarcație dintre privirea autohtonului și cea a străinului, la granița dintre lumea veche (încă tributară medievalității târzii) și zorii modernității."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 284.

The value of the present research which ends with a rich bibliography chapter lies in the fact that it approaches the iconography of certain secondary heritage monuments from an interdisciplinary perspective and on a theme with deep emotional and social implications. Most of the recorded monuments had not been founded by Voivodes or boyars but built by the villages' communities and painted with iconographic representations by church or peasant painters. That is why until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this iconography was not considered important by the art historians. As a matter of fact, the value of the iconographic compositions does not rely on the exceptional artistic execution, but on their closeness to the traditional culture of the peasant. It represents the purest trustee of the imaginary, unspoiled by rules, norms or patterns. That is why a look at Death's representations completed by a survey of their metamorphoses in time and a reading of all the conditions that allowed these metamorphoses becomes a fascinating excursion into the Romanian spirituality.

*COSMINA-MARIA BERINDEI*

cosminamariaberindei@yahoo.com

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