Recognizing the Interplay between History Painting and the Mexican Print Tradition in Pieter Bruegel’s and Artemio Rodriguez’s The Triumph of Death

Isabella Falla

Professor Christiane Hertel, Advisor

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I. Introduction

Artemio Rodriguez is a printmaker currently based in Michoacán, Mexico, whose work has drawn influence from medieval European woodcuts and Mexican printmakers such as José Guadalupe Posada.¹ He is currently represented by Davidson Galleries in Seattle, and has also founded a print artists’ collective in Michoacán, La Mano Gráfica.² Until recently he managed La Mano Press, a collective based in California dedicated to the distribution of print art. One of the largest pieces by Rodriguez is The Triumph of Death, a monumental work that appropriates Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s 1562 oil painting, also titled The Triumph of Death, that is currently housed at the Prado Museum in Madrid (figs. 10 and 11).³ Created in 2007, Rodriguez’s work features nine individual woodcut prints (each 31 5/8 x 47 3/4 in.) that, when arranged appropriately, create a version of the Bruegel painting that is about twice the size of the original (96in. x 144in. to the Bruegel’s 46in. x 63.8in.).⁴ The woodcut has been exhibited at the Oberlin Allen Memorial Art Museum, at the Phoenix Art Museum, and at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

Bruegel's The Triumph of Death works within the Northern tradition of the dance of death, which was popularized by woodcuts.⁵ The painting is commonly described as depicting skeletal figures, some in the guise of human clothing, in the

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² Artemio Rodriguez, “Quienes Somos,” La Mano Grafica.
³ Peter Bruegel. The Triumph of Death. 1562. Oil on panel. The Prado Museum, Madrid.
process of massacring the living. It features an array of characters, such as a dying king, skeletons ringing a large bell, and, mostly notably, a large skeletal army confronting an anguished mass of humans. The painting has been widely interpreted, both as an apocalyptic work and as a religious and political one. The Rodriguez version also contains skeletal figures attacking ‘living’ subjects in a similar arrangement to that of the Bruegel, but here is where the visual similarities end. Rodriguez substitutes Bruegel’s king for the contemporary figure of ‘Burger King.’ The bell rung by skeletons has been labeled, “LIBERTY”. He inflects the Bruegel painting with contemporary elements of dress and cultural symbols. Rodriguez’s piece also differs from Bruegel’s painting in that it is monumental; in its scale, it is comparable to a history painting.

Rodriguez’s work is further tied to that of Bruegel through the status of dance of death imagery in modern Mexican art, and especially in modern Mexican printmaking. In the early twentieth century, printmaking in Mexico served as a link between art and political and social reform. From the Mexican Revolution onwards, Mexican artists used prints as a medium through which to document and disseminate social commentaries. The Taller de Gráfica Popular, a printmaking collective that developed prints around a communist agenda, was founded in 1937, strengthening the ties of printmaking to political activity in Mexico. Seminal printmakers such as José Guadalupe Posada used skeletal imagery, a tradition

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6 Mark McDonald, “Printmaking in Mexico, 1900–1950 | Essay | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” The Metropolitan Museum's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.
connected to the Mexican Day of the Dead and reminiscent of the dance of death tradition, to address contemporary cultural and political topics.\footnote{McDonald, “Printmaking in Mexico, 1900–1950,” Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.}

Artemio Rodriguez’s woodcuts could in this way show him to be an inheritor of a tradition that marries dance of death imagery—both Mexican and European—and political expression. His interpretation of this visual tradition, in its heavy use of cultural symbols tied to the United States, can be seen to be informed by Rodriguez’s own experience as an immigrant artist working in California. The woodcuts can also be read within the context of an interplay of the European tradition of history painting and the Mexican print tradition. The description of the woodcuts themselves, provided by Oberlin College’s Allen Memorial Art Museum, acknowledges the legacies from which the work derives its inspiration. It states:

Rodriguez’s massive woodcut The Triumph of Death blurs the line between modernity and antiquity, exposing how certain aspects of the human condition endure. Based on Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s 1562 painting of the same title, Rodriguez’s print has allowed his version of death some modern updates. As the army of Death descends upon the inhabitants of the woodcut, we see crude oil barrels being spilled, the Burger King lying dead against a pile of corpses, protests, smokestacks, and atom bomb explosions. This is Rodriguez’s statement on our slow cultural decay and demise; as the world changes, so do the forms of death. Rodriguez’s medium—the woodcut—lends an antiquated feeling to the work and creates an interplay between the old and the new in both form and substance. He has crafted something that at once can be viewed through lenses of the past, present and future, for the themes he is tackling have continued throughout human history, and will persist as culture, society, and technology evolve.\footnote{Artemio Rodriguez, “The Triumph of Death,” TIME AND THE HUMAN CONDITION. Oberlin College Libraries.}

In this paper I will be utilizing the description proposed by the Oberlin College Libraries as a foundational premise on which to continue my own interpretation,
given that it accompanied *The Triumph of Death* when it was initially displayed. Due to the woodcuts’ connection to Bruegel across time and space, the statement proposes that the Rodriguez woodcuts illuminate a certain stagnation of progress. Though the “forms of death” may change, the living, both in 1562 and in the present day, have always been subjugated by destructive forces: “certain aspects of the human condition endure”. In this manner, the prints seem to stem from a tradition of Mexican print culture as social commentary, and to interplay this tradition with sentiments found in the Bruegel painting. The description as a whole centers on memory, and seems to suggest that Rodriguez’s woodcuts are a refashioning of an older work, not for a modern purpose, but to highlight the similarities between the distant and the present time. Such a reflection encourages cross-historical comparison. Mark Salber Phillips’ recent book, *On Historical Distance*, speaks to the idea of the allegorizing of history throughout the history of art, and will be used to aid in the formulation of a genre for Rodriguez’s *Triumph of Death*.

It could be said that Rodriguez’s woodcuts are an appropriation of Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*. Use of the term “appropriation” is contentious. The Oxford English Dictionary states that to appropriate is to “take (something) for one’s own use, typically without the owner's permission.” The term is often associated with illegitimacy, and with theft. Yet in *Critical Terms for Art History*, citing Barthes, Robert S. Nelson argues that appropriation “is a distortion, not a negation, of the prior semiotic assemblage. When successful, it maintains but shifts the former

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connotations to create the new sign and accomplishes all this covertly...[the new work's potency] derive[s] from [its] previous associations." Rodriguez’s *The Triumph of Death* can be read through this lens to be an appropriation of the Bruegel painting in that it reworks the imagery found in Bruegel, and in that the meaning of the woodcut is informed by an association with the painting.

The definition proposed by Nelson extends itself to suggests that inquiry into the tone of Rodriguez’s woodcut is served by a comparison of the political attitudes that created both the prints and Bruegel's original painting. In “The Triumph of Death Reconsidered,” Peter Thon argues that the violent tone of Bruegel painting was informed by the political unrest coloring the Netherlands in the 1550s and 1560s. The *Triumph of Death* was created in the turbulent years leading to revolt against Hapsburg rule and the arrival of the Inquisition in the Netherlands. Such a context could reveal a political element in the painting; Thon argues that the bloodshed leading to these events may account for the “unusual violence and pessimism of [Bruegel's] conception.”

Unlike Bruegel's painting, Rodriguez’s woodcut does not deal in subtext. While the Bruegel painting does not visually hint at the motivation behind the skeletal attack, Rodriguez's skeletons, at least at first glance, seem to flesh out a particular narrative: that of capitalistic subjugation. However, this narrative is complicated upon examination of the figures. Bruegel's painting is firmly planted in

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the main conceit of the dance of death: death comes to all persons, regardless of their social standing.\textsuperscript{13} Kathil Meyer-Baer’s “Later Medieval Images: The Dance of Death,” and Elina Gertsman’s \textit{The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance} are texts concerning the Dance of Death tradition that elaborate on this central theme of the dance of death tradition.\textsuperscript{14} The presence of this conceit in the Bruegel painting can be gleaned from the tragedy befalling figures from widely different class stations. The painting displays a range of subjects from humanly-created hierarchies in opposition to the singular force of Death, here in skeletal form, as distributed evenly throughout the skeletal army. It appears that Rodriguez's focuses on a set of uncertain hierarchies; while a group of skeletons portrayed in the panel in the center of the right-most column can be seen flying a standard decorated with the symbol of a dollar bill in front of a bank, thus associating death with capitalism (an argument which will be expanded upon later in this paper), in the panel below a skeleton can be seen holding an hourglass, as a memento mori, next to other symbols of capitalism: a figure of a dying Burger King next to an upended barrel labeled “IRAQ CRUDE OIL.” Such a contradiction complicates questions of agency: what do the skeletal figures here represent? Is there any consistency?

Several questions arise that could be asked of either the painting or the woodcuts, though to very different ends: who in the work is given agency? Are the


\textsuperscript{14} Elina Gertsman, \textit{The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance} (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2010).
skeletal figures allegorical, and if so, what do they allegorize? Who or what is redeemed through these images, if anyone, or anything? And if no redemption can be found, what purpose do these works serve—political criticism, or social nihilism? Although the present study will not pretend to offer complete answers to these questions, this paper seeks to clarify the allegorical meaning of the skeletons in Rodriguez’s *The Triumph of Death*, the purpose served by appropriating the imagery of a work as nihilistic as the Bruegel painting, and the way this appropriation is informed by skeletal imagery in the Mexican print tradition.

Given that Artemio Rodriguez’s *Triumph of Death* consists of several arranged woodcuts, it is important to inform the reader as to how the individual woodcuts will be referred to in this paper. The piece is arranged in a 3X3 grid, and for the purposes of this paper each individual woodcut has been labeled, following the movement of the panels from left to right, top to bottom (figs. 1-9). The woodcuts, labeled with their figure number, are presented individually in the figures section.

II. A Brief Overview of Bruegel’s Social and Political Critique

Although it cannot be definitively stated that Bruegel's painting was entirely informed by the political context in which he painted, this supposition opens a clear channel to Rodriguez’s culturally explicit insertions into the Bruegel, and relates the intentions of both works thematically. During the years leading up to
the painting of *The Triumph of Death*, Philip II of Spain united “those who fought for political, with those who fought for religious, freedom” to the end of extinguishing heresy.\(^{15}\) In “Bruegel and the Revolt of the Netherlands,” Irving Zupnick presents the evidence that has been provided regarding Bruegel’s political stance. He states that, given that it is known that Cardinal Granvelle, a prominent minister under the Spanish Hapsburgs, and Philip II heavily collected Bruegel paintings, it is likely that Bruegel was not suspected of subversion, and thus did not, at least overtly, include political messages in his works. Zupnick also cites a contemporary of Bruegel, who states that Bruegel had many of his drawings burned for fear of the repercussions that would befall his family should they be discovered after his death.\(^{16}\)

Zupnick ultimately argues that regardless of how contradictory these pieces of evidence may seem, it only seems fair to expect that Bruegel possessed “traits of humanity, common sense and a normal desire for self preservation,” and that it is fair to assume that these traits would not lead him to create outrightly political depictions.\(^{17}\) He argues that the fact that Bruegel’s “most overt criticism of events appears during the period from 1559 to 1564, which preceded the period of direct [political] action, and that he turned himself to landscapes and other more neutral subjects after 1565, as the situation ripened into open rebellion, affirms the argument that he was a cautious man...”\(^{18}\) Although the dating of *The Triumph of


\(^{16}\) Zupnick, “Bruegel and the Revolt of the Netherlands,” 283

\(^{17}\) Zupnick, “Bruegel and the Revolt of the Netherlands,” 283

\(^{18}\) Zupnick, “Bruegel and the Revolt of the Netherlands,” 284
Death has been contentious, it is thought to have been painted in 1562, placing it in the realm of works that Zupnick would have considered political.

III. Social and Political Critique in Rodriguez

As with the Bruegel painting, it should be stated that Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death does not reference any specific political event. It could be said that, as in the Bruegel painting, it chooses to synthesize a feeling of helplessness in the face of the contemporary political and social context of its creation. However there are several elements in the woodcuts that present an indictment of certain aspects of contemporary society, such as the elements in the woodcuts that project a negative view of society's preoccupation with the consumption of goods. The skeletal army, which is taken in the Bruegel painting as a harbinger of death, could be seen in the Rodriguez woodcuts to be advocating consumerism. A group of skeletons in Woodcut 5 can be seen to be holding signs, a gesture incongruous to their activity in the Bruegel painting. Two of the signs read, “BUY BUY BUY,” and “EAT GET FAT,” as if to suggest the bloated nature of consumerism (fig. 12). The association of these signs with the skeletal figures, and thus with death, seems to stoutly declare Rodriguez’s political position: consumerism leads to cultural decline.

The phrase “cultural decline” is one that will be continuously returned to in this paper. The “cultural decay and demise” referred to in the Oberlin College Libraries’ description is never fully defined.  

Rodriguez’s oeuvre is required to best understand the phrase. A substantial portion of Rodriguez’s work presents open condemnations of structural or political systems. *The Beast that Sees it All* (fig. 26) depicts a figure handing a bag of money anchored to a many-eyed beast to another figure, lying distraught on the ground, the implication here being that fiscal responsibility is both inescapable and overpowering. *Do As Your Told* (fig. 27) depicts President George W. Bush telling resigned soldiers to go to war over a caption, “LIFE OF THE SINNER.” There is an explicit critique of structures of power and authority, and the viewer is left to assume that, to Rodriguez, these structures contribute to a continuing erosion of liberation and autonomy. This is not to assert that Rodriguez’s believes these systems of power are necessarily culpable, but that their very existence implies a degradation of the spirit, and reveals a continuing sadistic human/anti-human dichotomy.

Joseph Koerner would believe this to be a very Brueghelian idea. In *Bosch and Bruegel: from enemy painting to everyday life*, Koerner states that, “[instead] of [Bruegel] revealing the Devil lurking behind the mask, he shows him to be a humanly fabricated mask. The horror remains, but it becomes the abyss of a humanity caught precisely in the vicious cycle of hate.” In this vein, Rodriguez’s oeuvre, including *The Triumph of Death*, showcases the idea of cultural decline as the result of human systems of power, such as capitalism, being socially self-imposed, and leading to a detrimental end.

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Other visual symbols in the woodcuts seem to point to the idea of capitalism specifically as advancing this cultural decline. In Woodcut 9, An upturned barrel lying by the side of the figure of ‘Burger King,’ leaking a dark liquid and labeled “IRAQ CRUDE OIL,” replaces an overturned barrel that in the original Bruegel painting is full of silver coins and belongs to a dying king (fig. 13). Rodriguez here is referring to Iraq’s status as one of the modern world's largest producers of crude oil. An article in the Atlantic states that according to the United Nations “99 percent of Iraq's revenue comes from oil. That essentially means that oil has to pay for everything from salaries for government workers to infrastructure projects and defense spending. And given the amount lost to corruption, there is little money left over do anything else.” This sentiment is echoed in another sign held by a skeleton in the central panel which reads, “CHEAT LIE.” In appropriating the imagery of the dying king and his wealth, Rodriguez is equating the barrel of oil to the riches of a king, and associating the wealth derived from oil with the figure of a large United States corporation. While the specific figure of ‘Burger King’ perhaps has less to do with the oil itself, as a king lying among his riches the figure can be interpreted as a symbol of corporate greed.

Another visual element of the woodcuts that refers pointedly towards capitalism as a system immoral can be found in Woodcut 6 (fig 6). The skeletal figures in this section can here be seen to be occupying a tower labeled “BANK,” complete with an ATM machine and a banner with the United States Dollar symbol

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flying outside of it in order to further emphasize the purpose of the structure. The skeletons gathered here blow trumpets triumphantly. A skeleton towards the left of the group is shown torturing a non-skeletal figure (fig. 14). The complementary image in the Bruegel painting depicts a type of neck torture, similar to a form of torture that is described in Fox’s Book of Martyrs, where a person was “ordered...to be hung up by the feet, with a weight tied about his neck, and a gag in his mouth.”

In Rodriguez’s woodcut the weight tied around the person’s neck is a bag of money, labeled “$”. Through this visual element Rodriguez associates money with torture and death.

IV. Interpretations of Capitalistic and Consumerist Imagery in Rodriguez

Here I would like to propose two separate interpretations, the difference between them being conditional on how the activity of the skeletons gathered by the bank is perceived. It could be said that the skeletal figures ‘run’ the banks, given their positioning by the bank, and their association with capitalist signs and symbols. In this interpretation, the banks themselves are associated with the image of death, and the skeletons act as agents of capitalism, and therefore can be equated to people in power; as in the case of the skeleton torturing the living person with a bag marked “$,” Rodriguez’s work may imply that these agents have the power to hang and kill by forcing a dependence on capitalism and, to relate this

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interpretation with one made earlier, by aggravating their consequent preoccupation with consumerism.

An element appropriated from the Bruegel painting that would support this claim can be found in a detail in Woodcut 6 (fig. 15). In the original painting, Bruegel includes a visual reference to an earlier print of his which has been titled Big Fish Eat Little Fish (fig. 16). This work visually depicts a proverb that cynically highlights systems of social hierarchies by allegorizing them through the natural hierarchy present in a food chain. This proverb has a long history of use. Stephen Langton, an eleventh-century English cardinal, explained it by saying: “Just as in the sea the greater fish devours the smaller one and digests it [maior piscus devorat minorem et absorbet] so in this sea, the world, the greater fish (princes and nobles) devour lesser folk and digest their wealth.” Big Fish Eat Little Fish holds a clear parallel to the systems of power the Rodriguez appears to be criticizing, if one substitutes the “princes and nobles” for large corporations. Rodriguez inserts the proverb into the woodcuts to highlight, as the Oberlin Libraries description states, the hierarchies that have “continued throughout human history.”

However, Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death could also be interpreted to show the skeletons as having ‘overrun’ the banks, thus suggesting that institutions and systems of power are not themselves immune to decay and decline. This interpretation is supported by the image of the dying Burger King; the capitalistic

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23 “Big Fish Eat Little Fish.” The Metropolitan Museum’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.
figure is shown in decline, even though the skeletal aggressors in Rodriguez’s woodcuts seem to advocate for the capitalist agenda, as evidenced by the signs “BUY BUY BUY” and “EAT GET FAT.” There is even a skeleton behind the figure of Burger King holding an hourglass: an explicit memento mori to the icon. To the same point, a figure wearing a shirt with the slogan “I ♥ M” —the M being here marked with the characteristics of the M of the McDonalds logo— is ushered by skeletons into a large box in Woodcut 4 (fig. 4), a box that Bruegel scholars have interpreted as a coffin (fig. 17). This assessment complicates the prior interpretation, and further confuses the ideologies from which the skeletal figures may derive their agency.

Therefore, solely joining Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death to its political context forecloses the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretation. There are several other visual elements that do not align with the political message outlined above. Other signs held by the skeletal army read, “STEAL RAPE” and “BE CREEPY” (fig. 12). In Woodcut 7, a skeletal figure can be seen attempting to rape a woman dressed in a nun’s habit (fig. 18). In Woodcut 4 a figure dressed as the pope can be seen running into the coffin. All of these elements can be taken as markers of some degree of social indecency, and the inclusion of these elements further seems to suggest that the cultural decay mentioned in the Oberlin Libraries description is not linked causally or specifically to systems of capitalistic power.

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V. Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death as History Painting

Although the description of Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death provided by the Oberlin College Libraries does not detail if the written interpretation exhibited with the work aligns with the intent of the artist, the description tellingly frames the work as delivering a indictment of culture as constantly in decline, across time. The description argues that the work retains and will continue to deliver meaning throughout the “past, present and future, for the themes [Rodriguez] is tackling have continued throughout human history, and will persist as culture, society, and technology evolve.” This perspective, as well as the monumental scale of the work, encourages one to look at Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death, though a woodcut, as crossing into the boundaries of history painting.

The definition of a history painting has evolved as the context in which they were painted changed. It could be argued that Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death fits an early neoclassical definition of a history painting. According to Mark Salber Phillips, history painting “was not confined to depicting the historical past, since its subjects were as often biblical, mythological, or poetic. From the vantage of distance, the distinguishing feature was not so much that the past was ancient rather than modern, but that it was conceived in exemplary terms and narrated with symbols

and allegories.\textsuperscript{28} The similarities between this definition of a history painting and Oberlin’s description of Rodriguez’s \textit{Triumph of Death} may at first seem limited. Here Phillips is writing of works that are vastly different from Bruegel’s \textit{Triumph of Death}—he is referring to works depicting a particular moment in a mythological, poetic, or otherwise already established narrative, such as Delacroix’s \textit{The Death of Sardanapalus} or David’s \textit{Oath of the Horatii}. And indeed neither \textit{Triumph of Death} references a specific moment that has been catalogued through mythological or poetic means.

Yet given that the dance of death tradition encompasses a spectrum of literary and visual works for artists to reference (much as neoclassical artist drew from “biblical, mythological [and] poetic” works) perhaps Rodriguez’s \textit{Triumph of Death} can be reconciled with the idea of a history painting. Of course, working within a tradition is different than working towards the end of depicting a specific subject. But if Rodriguez’s woodcuts present a vision of cultural decline that, according to the description provided by Oberlin, has continued across history, then it could be argued that he is to some degree, creating an allegorical interpretation of historical happenings. His woodcuts allude in type to a history painting in that their focus, as Phillips states, is “not so much that the past was ancient rather than modern.”

Phillips also argues that “[in] the vocabulary of neoclassical art, “history” carried meanings that have grown unfamiliar. As painting’s highest form, “history”

\footnote{28 Mark Salber Phillips, \textit{On Historical Distance} (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015): 158.}
connoted formal complexity and an elevated subject, rather than historical depiction in the ordinary sense.” In this way, the creation of history paintings served as an “affirmation of art as the domain of intellectual or general truths,” rather than as mere depictions of narrated subjects. If the fundamental premise of the dance of death tradition—that death comes to all—is taken as one of these “intellectual or general truths,” then Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death can be analyzed as related to the realm of history paintings.

Relating Rodriguez’s woodcuts to the idea of history painting helps support the theory presented by the Oberlin Libraries: that cultural decline is pervasive and continuous. The dance of death tradition’s fundamental conceit can now be taken as one of Phillip’s “general truths,” thus granting Rodriguez permission to work with them across time to support his theory of cultural decline. Associating Rodriguez’s woodcuts with history paintings presents Rodriguez’s appropriation of Bruegel’s Triumph of Death as only one aspect of the woodcuts; they can now be read as a playing with genres, appropriate for an artist whose work is informed by multiple traditions. Yet in this exploration of genres, it is important to acknowledge the limit to which Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death can be related to a painting genre, given it’s medium. There is also the limitation of subject matter; while, according to the Oberlin libraries description, Rodriguez’s is commenting on social decline across time, in including certain contemporary symbols he is marking these woodcuts as somewhat informed by the present, not solely the historical past. This intentional

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29 Phillips, On Historical Distance, 159.
30 Phillips, On Historical Distance, 160.
tension between the historical past and Rodriguez's historicizing of the present further allows for the analysis of the woodcuts within the more recently developed Mexican print tradition.

VI. The Apocalyptic Nature of the Bruegel and the Rodriguez

Bruegel’s painting has also been described as intensely apocalyptic. Skeletal figures are seen pillaging, murdering, and destroying other figures and their belongings. The dead are seen raising coffins from the ground, amassing an army. If the premise of the Rodriguez woodcuts as history painting is accepted, viewing Rodriguez's woodcuts as apocalyptic does not hold. In order to view either the painting or the woodcuts as apocalyptic, the chaos of the scenes must be accepted as pertaining to a singular event. Rodriguez's woodcuts could be seen to be staking a claim in this debate, and with their reinterpretation of the Bruegel painting, seem to argue towards the idea of the Bruegel painting as representing a history of social violence, and against the idea of the painting representing a singularity. By insinuating that the destruction here caused by skeletal figures has “continued throughout human history, and will persist as culture, society, and technology evolve,” Rodriguez’s work is emphasizing the time-based continuity inherent in the dance of death’s fundamental conceit: Death comes to all, continually.
VII. Mexican and European Perceptions of Skeletal Imagery

It remains to be said that skeletal images signify differently in a European context than in a Mexican one. Although Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death appropriates Western imagery in its use of the Bruegel painting, it does not necessarily appropriate the Western sympathies towards death that have been interpreted in the Bruegel. Paul Westheim, a German art historian, commenting on the reaction of a Parisian audience to an exhibit on Mexican art in the 1950s wrote the following:

The skull as an artistic motif, a popular fantasy that for millennia has found pleasure in the representation of death,... this was a tremendous surprise and almost traumatic for visitors to the Exposition of Mexican Art in Paris... they looked at the engravings of the popular artists, Manilla and Posada, who resorted to skeletons in order to comment on the social and political events of their times. They found out that in Mexico there are parents who on the second of November give their children presents of sugar and chocolate skulls ...and that these children eat the macabre sweet, as if it were the most natural thing in the world... For Europeans, the thought of death is a nightmare, and they hate to be reminded of the brevity of life; thus, to find themselves before a world that seems free of that anxiety, that plays with death and even mocks it, can only lead them to wonder about the strangeness of a place with such an inconceivable attitude.31

Although this paper has until now defined the skeletal figures in Rodriguez’s woodcuts as terrifying aggressors, as they have been interpreted in the Bruegel, perhaps that label needs to be reassessed when speaking of woodcuts that stem from both a European and a Mexican tradition.

Several writers comment on how Mexican sensibilities associate death with humor, not with terror. Luis Alberto Vargas, a prior Academic Secretary of the

Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, writes that “[the] Mexican does not hide in front of death, instead he lives with it, he makes it an object of jokes and games and attempts to forget it by transforming it into something familiar.” Such a statement finds itself reflected in the two explicitly humorous visual elements that can be found in the Bruegel painting. A skeleton playing the lute adds a comic backdrop to two lovers singing to each others, oblivious of the carnage taking place around them. A skeleton seated next to the trumpeters by the bank contemplates and laments a dead bird lying next to him while his comrades kill humans. Rodriguez appropriates both of these elements in his woodcuts (figs. 19 and 20). The comical morbidity of these two details, though they were originally found in a work of European art, relate to Vargas’ assessment of a Mexican perspective on death, in that they portray the viewing of death as a reflexive exercise.

The oeuvre of printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, who Rodriguez cites as an influence, contains various images of skeletons in the midst of activity that would to the Western viewer appear incongruous with their tragedy their deathly figures connote. Prints such as A sprightly and amusing "calavera" of Doña Tomasa and Simón the water carrier and Happy dance and wild party of all the skeletons appear to utilize skeletal imagery to create a comic memento mori (figs. 21 and 22). Guatemalan art critic Luis Cardoza y Aragón, who wrote about Posada’s prints

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32 Luis Alberto Vargas G., “La Muerte Vista Por El Mexicano De Hoy,” Artes De México, no. 145 (1971): 57. Trans.: “el mexicano...no se esconde ante la muerte, sino que vive con ella, la hace objeto de burlas y juegos e intenta olvidarla transformándola en algo familiar.”

while living in Mexico, states that “in the face of the absurdity of death there is no room for tragedy, only for humor, and the questions arising from death should be responded to merrily. Death responds to its own questions. Its response: the certainty that it, death, is for forever.”\(^{34}\) Such a reflection directly speaks to the central conceit of the dance of death tradition, though with a comic twist.

Westheim’s interpretation of skeletons in Mexican art creates a framework through which to view Rodriguez’s interpretation of *The Triumph of Death*. He states: “The psychic burden that gives a tragic tone to the lives of Mexicans is not the fear of death... but the anguish of life, the awareness of being exposed, and with insufficient means of defense, to a life plagued with danger, filled with the essence of evil.”\(^{35}\) This sentiment is reflected throughout the woodcuts; it is important to note that in both the Bruegel and the Rodriguez, the skeletons wear the garments of the living. The skeletons therefore are not presented as ‘other’ to the living—as they are in the guise of the living, they are depicted as inextricably linked. The “anguish of life,” as presented through a human in future skeletal form, is thrown into sharp relief. Is the “danger” here presented in the woodcuts due to the actions of the skeletons, or due to the fact that the actors here are not so different from those they destroy?


Rodriguez also cites enough capitalistic and consumerist elements that, though they perhaps could not be stretched to fit the idea of the “essence of evil,” still indicate a moralistic indictment of these systems, and their hold on society. It could then possibly be asserted that Rodriguez’s appropriation of Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death* does not center on its nihilistic aspects, but on its moralistic ones. In his study of Bruegel prints, H. Arthur Klein argues that Bruegel “was aiming at improvement of human understanding, attitude, outlook. And these improvements are moral. Bruegel’s art held up a mirror to a topsy-turvy world. He portrayed crazy and perverse situations.”\(^{36}\) Such an argument portrays Bruegel himself as far from nihilistic, and seems to relate, cyclically, to Phillips’ statements about history painting, in that Phillips believed that history paintings contained a moralizing aspect since they were “not confined to depicting the historical past...but [instead] conceived [it] in exemplary terms and narrated with symbols and allegories.” In this way, Rodriguez can be seen to be bending the rigid categories of artistic genre in inflecting the moralizing aspects of history painting into print art.

Following this interpretation, the Rodriguez woodcuts, amidst their portrayal of skeletal terrorism, could be seen to provide some moral illumination. Zupnick writes that in Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death* there is the “pessimistic implication that it is pointless to struggle against the inevitable.”\(^{37}\) Rodriguez’s *Triumph of Death* however inserts visual elements that seem to run counter to the painting’s nihilism.

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\(^{37}\) Zupnick, “Bruegel and the Revolt of the Netherlands,” 286
In Woodcut 4, by the heads of the skeletal army, Rodriguez placed a dove holding an olive branch, a widely recognized symbol of peace (fig. 23). The dove is small and blends in with the angular bodies of the skeletons, so much so that it’s almost imperceptible. A skeleton in Woodcut 3 can be seen ringing a bell marked “LIBERTY” (fig. 24) In Woodcut 1, two people can be seen looking into the distance, away from the carnage below (fig. 25). Larry Silver argues that Bruegel’s painting presents “the devastation of war by arming the irresistible forces of Death against the vain resistance” of the living.” Such an argument resonates with the typical interpretation of the Bruegel painting. Yet the arguments above support an alternative interpretation.

Rodriguez may be seen to be appropriating Bruegel's painting in order to negate this idea of a “vain resistance”; though the skeleton, by its presence, announces death, in ringing the bell it announces certain freedom. Though the skeletal army acts as an aggressor, through the inclusion of the dove and olive branch, it acts as a source of peace. The two unscathed humans surveying the land can be seen as symbols of future promise. This presentation of life amongst destruction seems to relate to European origin myths such as The Rape of Europa, a subject widely known through it’s depiction in Titian’s history painting, in that it reiterates the idea that violence gives birth to civilization and culture. In engaging with the cyclical nature of history, Rodriguez perhaps presents an addendum to the dance of death's conceit, and illustrates a paradox: it has been stated that death

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comes to all, this is an immovable fact. But in order for death to continuously come to all, there must be birth as well as death. The tension initially displayed in the skeletons’ destruction of culture is slightly resolved by the notion that out of the cultural decay comes a newly cleared space, and with that space, freedom.

VIII. Conclusion

Artemio Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death appropriates Bruegel’s Triumph of Death, utilizing the visual language of history painting as well as Rodriguez’s own inherited language of Mexican print art to reinterpret the European dance of death tradition for the modern age. In his woodcut, he implies the different structures from which the skeletal figures, in the processes of destroying living beings, may derive their agency. However, the woodcut, like the original Bruegel painting, does not seem to focus on the reasons behind the attack, making the scene read less like a specific event and more like an allegory of historical happenings; according to the Oberlin College Libraries, in utilizing the imagery of the Bruegel, Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death posits that the destruction of the living, and of the cultural tokens they embody, is indicative of a cultural decay that has continuously happened throughout history. Such an interpretation can be assisted by relating the woodcuts to the genre of history painting, and to the idea of an allegorized ‘past’ that speaks to the present. Yet relating the woodcuts to history painting illuminates the interplay of genres present in the woodcuts, a topic not covered in the Oberlin
Libraries description, which presents the possibility of an analysis of the woodcuts within another genre that influenced Rodriguez: that of the Mexican print tradition. And though the idea of destruction typically carries a negative connotation, viewed through the lens of Mexican perceptions on skeletal imagery, which introduce a comic element into what European sensibilities may typically find to be visually morbid imagery, Rodriguez’s woodcuts seem to be appropriating the Bruegel painting not to the nihilistic end to which the original painting has commonly been interpreted, but to a moralistic one. Skeletal aggressors are, to some degree, redefined as liberators. The “triumph” of death is reimagined, not as a pessimistic resignation to death, but instead as a moral victory; the dance of death conceit is reevaluated. Rodriguez’s Triumph of Death illustrates that the cyclical nature of life implies that life must follow death, and a death triumphant allows for the reemergence of the cycle.
IX. Bibliography


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Figure 1. Detail from Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. Woodcut 1.
Figure 2. Detail from Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. Woodcut 2.
Figure 3. Detail from Rodriguez, Artemio. *The Triumph of Death*. 2007. Woodcut 3.
Figure 4. Detail from Rodríguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. Woodcut 4.
Figure 5. Detail from Rodriguez, Artemio. *The Triumph of Death*. 2007. Woodcut 5.
Figure 6. Detail from Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. Woodcut 6.
Figure 8. Detail from Rodriguez, Artemio. *The Triumph of Death.* 2007. Woodcut 8.
Figure 9. Detail from Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. Woodcut 9.
Figure 11. Bruegel, Peter. The Triumph of Death. 1562. Oil on panel. The Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure 12. Detail from Woodcut 5 (fig. 5) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007.
Figure 13. Comparison of details from Woodcut 9 (fig. 9) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. and Bruegel, Peter. The Triumph of Death. 1562.
Figure 15. Comparison of details from Woodcut 6 (fig. 6) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. and Bruegel, Peter. The Triumph of Death. 1562.

Figure 16. Bruegel, Peter. “Big Fish Eat Little Fish.” Engraving; first state of four. 1557. Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.
Figure 17. Detail from Woodcut 4 (fig. 4) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007.

Figure 18. Detail from Woodcut 7 (fig. 7) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007.
Figure 19. Comparison of details from Woodcut 7 (fig. 7) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. and Bruegel, Peter. The Triumph of Death. 1562.

Figure 20. Comparison of details from Woodcut 6 (fig. 6) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007. and Bruegel, Peter. The Triumph of Death. 1562.
Figure 21. Posada, José Guadalupe, Chíspeante y divertida calavera de Doña Tomasa y Simón el aguador. A sprightly and amusing “calavera” of Doña Tomasa and Simón the water carrier.

Figure 22. Posada, José Guadalupe, Gran fandango y francachela de todas las calaveras. Happy dance and wild party of all the skeletons.
Figure 23. Detail from Woodcut 4 (fig. 4) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007.

Figure 24. Detail from Woodcut 3 (fig. 3) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007.
Figure 25. Detail from Woodcut 1 (fig. 1) of Rodriguez, Artemio. The Triumph of Death. 2007.
Figure 26. Rodriguez, Artemio. The Beast that Sees it All. Print on wood. 2004.
Figure 27. Rodriguez, Artemio. Do As You’re Told. Linocut. 2004.