

Death as a Phenomenon Teaching About the Beauty of Life—In Four Pieces of Cosmological Art

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Cosmological art weaves artforms into their cosmic contexts. This paper examined four pieces of cosmological art and found a specific teaching in each. In Michelangelo's sculpture *Pieta*, Mary's face reflects more her understanding of what his son's sacred life meant than the brutality of his crucifixion. Mozart's *Requiem in D Minor* messages us not less than there is a caring soul for our life in the Universe, a listening spirit, however hard it is to sense its touch in the endlessness of space-time. Dovzhenko's film *Earth* proves that the intersection of life and death can be greeted with the smile of love. And Böcklin's painting *The Isle of the Dead* shows an arriving human as a graceful being standing tall, dressed in the whitest white's elegance. Thus, though Death cannot be perceived with emotion other than sadness, if seen with the tools of reason it can also teach us about the beauty of Life: a truth belonging to the divine—for the good and the bad.

Keywords: death, cosmological neuroscience, *Pieta*, *Requiem*, Dovzhenko *Earth*, *The Isle of the Dead*, Rachmaninoff

Introduction

Death might be defined as the irreversible cessation of an intelligently structured and safely bounded multilayer system's functioning used to exchange MatterEnergy with the outside world for growing in it, reproducing for it, sensing it, communicating through it and recreating it—that is, executing the cosmic program of Life. As such, the phenomenon of Death is one of the key products of the laws of the Soul of Multiverse (Ludvig, 2022a; 2022b; 2023a; 2023b; 2024; 2026); itself may or may not be inspired by a humanly incomprehensible God. Specifically, Death might serve the pre-physical/pre-chemical laws of Coexistence in Diversity and Divine—Evil Asymmetry, letting the always new and unique, thus necessarily diverse, waves of life flowing relentlessly with each wave rising on the cessation of the previous one. Indeed, Steve Jobs perfectly captured this cosmic law in his 2005 Commencement Address at Stanford University: “Death is very likely the best invention of life. It's a life change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new”.

Thus, the phenomenon of death is also a teacher for us. Here is what Kahlil Gibran was taught through the poem “On Death” in his book *The Prophet*: “For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one”. And Rabindranath Tagore recorded this in his *Gitanjali*, poem 91: “O thou the last fulfilment of life, Death, / my death, come and whisper to me! / Day after day have I kept watch for / thee; for thee have I borne the joys / and pangs of life”.

True, along with destruction, discord, and degeneration, Death is a tool of evil however controlled by the Law of Divine—Evil Asymmetry (Ludvig, 2023a; 2023b). As such, Death has been—as it is and will be—behind

the most horrible tragedies accompanying human history, letting the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* killing more than 100 million people with the bubonic plague of the 14th century; letting the superintelligent Nazis design the murder of millions of people, mostly Jews, in concentration camps during World War II; letting the hater, the jealous, the resentful assassinate, execute, imprison the best of mankind from the wise fourth caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib and Jesus' faithful servant Thomas Becket to the great chemist Antoine Lavoisier, the genius musician John Lennon and the champion of social justice Nelson Mandela.

Yet, as indicated above, all of these tragedies also gave lessons to the human Soul. Like the lesson that Death can also serve the world, as humankind was served by the dying bacteria in Albert Schatz's and Selman Waksman's experiments in the 1940s that showed Streptomycin could kill such Gram-negative bacteria as the bubonic plague's *Yersinia pestis*. Or the lesson that superintelligence can be present in such amoral minds as the minds of Nazi leaders—and therefore this aberration must always be recognized before its crimes spread and conquer. And the lesson that the blessed with supreme qualities, whether to excel in politics, science or art, are almost never free of enemies determined to kill them.

But this paper is about another, less frequently seen lesson of Death. It is about how Death can teach us about the beauty of life—via the power of cosmological art: a field of human creativity weaving an artistic work under progress into its cosmic context.

Michelangelo's *Pieta*

In his famous book *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, published in Florence in 1550, Giorgio Vasari wrote this about Michelangelo: "... the most benign Ruler of Heaven in his clemency turned his eyes to the earth, and... became minded to send down to earth a spirit with universal ability in every art..." (Vasari, 1976, p. 3). And one of the greatest works of this spirit was titled *Pieta*, a marble sculpture depicting Mary, mother of Jesus, holding his dead son taken from the cross (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Michelangelo's *Pieta* in the St. Peter's Basilica of Vatican City.

The art historian Gilles Néret perfectly captured the unique feature of this work: “The *Pieta* is dominated by the calm beauty of the child-like Madonna. The body of Christ lies across her knees like that of a sleeping infant... Beauty takes precedence over tragic declamation” (Néret. 2024, p. 12).

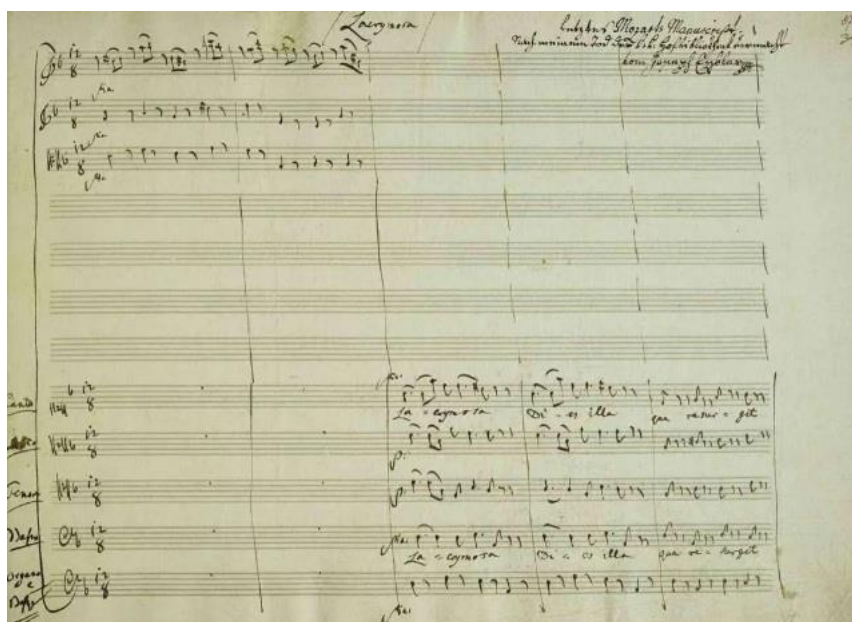
Indeed, it is striking to see that Michelangelo let Mary’s face reflect more her understanding of what his son’s sacred life meant than the brutality of his crucifixion. His wounds are insignificant parts of a young body admired for its divinity as much as for the divinity of its Soul—just days before. Michelangelo’s cosmological art could reveal that Death still belongs to a divine allness where a magnificent life’s end just illuminates the magnificence that life carried.

Mozart’s *Requiem*

In his letter of April 4, 1787, Mozart wrote this to his gravely ill father:

Death... this true and best friend of humankind that his image holds nothing terrible for me anymore, instead it holds much that is soothing and consoling. And I thank God that he has blessed me with this insight, you know what I mean, which makes it possible for me to perceive death as the key to our ultimate happiness. (Swafford, 2021, p. 538)

Four years later he himself felt he would die. Thus, Count Franz von Walsegg’s commission to him to write a requiem for the death of his wife Anna opened the inspiration for Mozart to create a *Requiem* for not just them but for all human beings including himself (Figure 2):



Dovzhenko's *Earth*

The Ukrainian filmmaker of Soviet times, Alexander Dovzhenko, made a masterpiece that at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair was listed as the 10th greatest film ever made. It was a 1930 silent film titled *Earth*, that conveyed its message and art solely via black and white moving images accompanied by the expressive music of Levko Revutsky. The film started with death. It showed the death of the peasant Semyon under his apple tree—without the slightest reference to the tragedy of the moment. Instead, Semyon's smiling face celebrated the life he was leaving behind, asking others to also "live well" (Figure 3):

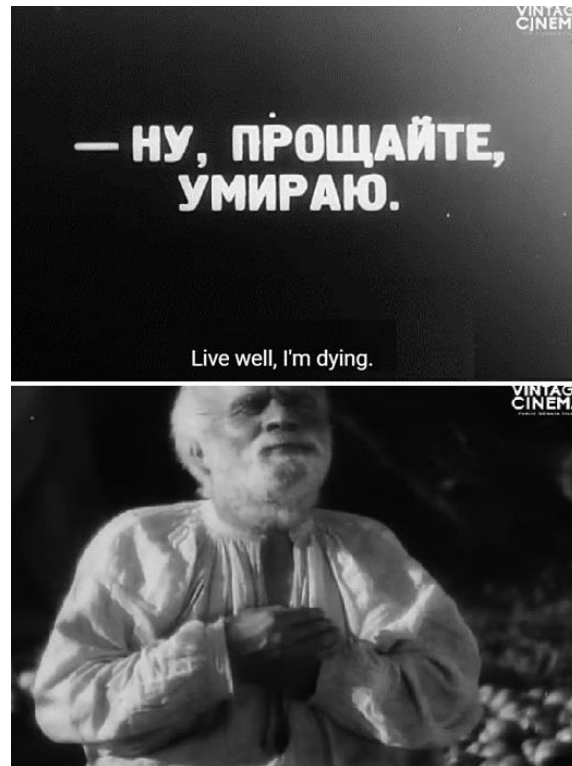


Figure 3. Two stills about the death of Semyon from the beginning of Dovzhenko's silent film *Earth*.

As if confirming what his *Earth* was about, less than a decade after the death of his father in the German-occupied Kiev among the deaths of millions of others, and when his Kiev Film Factory was still wearing the scars of WWII bombings, Dovzhenko wrote the following in the 29 October, 1952, entry of his Notebooks:

God, how much beauty there is in the world! Brother Dnieper, dear father, how much joy and precious feelings your native waters have brought my heart!... Simple people live on your banks, my brothers and sisters... tender and pure as your graceful wave, a clear drop of the universe... And when I die, blessing the lives of these people, my last breath, my last drop of love will be for you. (Carynnyk, 1973, p. 221).

Arnold Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead* With Its Translation to Music in Rachmaninoff's Symphonic Poem Op. 29

What might be the secret of the mesmerizing effect of this painting that forced even Böcklin to create 6 versions of it with the last finished by his son, Carlo? Freud kept a print of it in his office, Lenin placed another one in his apartment, Hitler spent 85,000 Reichsmarks for buying one of the originals, Salvador Dali created his

own work titled *The True Painting of “The Isle of the Dead” by Arnold Böcklin at the Hour of the Angelus*, Liam Scarlett choreographed a performance for the San Francisco Ballet on the painting’s theme, Vladimir Nabokov wrote about it in his novel *Despair*. And Rachmaninoff’s related music could not be left out of this very paper (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The third—and most famous—version of Böcklin’s *The Isle of the Dead*, oil on wood board, now at the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Link to Rachmaninoff’s music inspired by this painting is pasted under the image. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbbtmskCRUY>.

The painting’s secret may be that however it is about death—it still celebrates life. The passenger carried by that boat to the Isle of the Dead is not a broken man or woman—but a graceful being standing tall, not bowing to Death’s love of black, rather wearing the whitest white robe, even elegantly. And the dead harmony of the motionless sea, the empty windows, and the monotone wall of cypress trees remind the viewer nothing else than the beauty of Earth’s unstopping sea-waves, the joy of people observing and waving from their windows, and that the forests of Nature are full of millions of different trees with sunshine around each. Even if Böcklin, while never explained the painting, made this note on it: “... it must produce such a stillness that one would be awed by a knock on the door” (Breuel, 2017).

But such stillness may also help us see that this is not the Buddha’s Nirvana, nor Dante’s punishing Inferno or Homer’s Hades where even Achilles is reduced to a shade. It is a beauty outside of Earthly scenes, sensed only by the subconscious.

Discussion

Along with the necessary presence of commercial and entertaining arts, cosmological art has always been there for the human culture with plays like Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, books like Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, films like Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev* and Bo Widerberg’s *Elvira Madigan*, music like Wagner’s *Parsifal* and the Beatles’ *All You Need Is Love*, paintings like Munch’s *The Dance of Life* and Ben Enwonwu’s *Tutu*, buildings like Lahori’s *Taj Mahal* and Gaudi’s *Basilica de la Sagrada Familia*, poems like Rumi’s *The Guest House* and Tagore’s *I Hunt for the Golden Stag*, and surely thousands of other creations in this sphere.

Certainly, these creations are the products of the most noble faculties of the human species, of which appearance on Earth was seemingly guided by not just the laws of biology but also the “world of spirit”, at least according to Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin’s co-discoverer of evolution by natural selection (Wallace, 1889).

This paper took a look on a specific aspect of four works of cosmological art, Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, Dovzhenko’s *Earth* and Böcklin’s *The Isle of the Dead*. That specific aspect, whether in sculpture, music, film or painting, is the proof that the beauty of Life transcends through the darkness of death. It transcends, because however the Law of Divine—Evil Asymmetry lets both life and death work in the eternity of cosmos, it is the ever-renewing mystery of life that carries that allness’ essence and destiny. No one said it better than Einstein: “The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science... I am satisfied with the mystery and eternity of life” (see Winokur, 1984, p. 40).

Conclusion

For cosmological art, mastering the cosmic context of all artforms, Death is a phenomenon teaching the beauty of Life. That beauty, however belongs to worlds that passed away, does shine through the darkness of Death to embrace this link between the old and the new. It is this teaching that the present paper intended to highlight, examining four pieces of cosmological art—one by Michelangelo, one by Mozart, one by Dovzhenko, and one by Böcklin. Each taught that though Death cannot be perceived with emotion other than sadness, if seen with the tools of reason Death can also mirror the magnificence of Life: a truth belonging to the divine—for the good and the bad.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Statement on AI Use

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