

Dances of Death in the Small Parishes of Rural Lucerne

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The small Swiss merchant-town of Lucerne and the remote neighbouring valley of Entlebuch display a striking density of monumental Dances of Death, a *memento mori* art-form displaying a representation of all social ranks of society.¹ Lucerne houses not less than three of these, and the Entlebuch region – in Wolhusen and Hasle – another two examples. How can this be explained? They must be the most sinful places in seventeenth-century Switzerland! No other conclusion is possible, following the widespread assumption that Dances of Death served one purpose only: filling its morally-mislead audience with awe and fear in order to urge everyone to prepare themselves for the unforeseeable moment of Death. But is this dramatic teaching really the only purpose of Dances of Death, especially in the small communities of Wolhusen and Hasle? The following description and analysis focus on the peculiarities of those two Dances of Death to place them in their local context. I will relate them to the cultural and religious capital Lucerne, which I expect influenced them on a major level, and I will look for any local adaptations of the art-form. How culturally dependent were they on the capital that was only a day's walk away? Of course, this article cannot provide an integral and holistic view on the interactive development of Dances of Death all over Europe; it is solely an illustrative example of local agency in religious, artistic and political matters. In addition to that, it provides a view of a cultural network at the seventeenth-century European religious frontline between Reformed and Catholic Switzerland, where geographical and political entities were so small that confessional struggle was truly fought by neighbours.

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Dances of Death, also known as Totentanz or Danse Macabre, are a cultural exploration of human mortality that most commonly appears as a painting on walls or as print in books. Usually they feature several encounters of a figure representing Death having a dialogue with a living person (in most cases portraying a whole social class or profession) in his or her absolute last moments of earthly life. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Dances of Death developed from and were parallel to other religious art forms dealing with death, dying and redemption (Corvisier, 1998, pp.8-11; Lüders, 2004, p.36). All these art-forms have an obvious common message: Death is mightier than any power on earth – be prepared and contemplate!

Most of the first authors and artists of the Dances of Death can be found in the social environment of the mendicant orders. Many historians claim that the ‘true’ Dance of Death ceased to exist with the coming of the Reformation because the above named message had lost its momentum (e.g. Rosenfeld, 1984, p.299f.; Corvisier, 1998, p.70). It is clear, though, that the genre has a strong continuous base as many fine examples were crafted in the centuries after the Middle Ages. This continuity is based on a distinctive quality of the Dances of Death art-form: through the visual and verbal encounter between Death and the living person, it offers an accessible way to criticise a great variety of things on multiple levels. In my opinion, this possibility to express critique is also responsible for Dances of Death’s tremendous popularity. However, I do agree that in the *Ständereihe*, the Death-figure and the dancing-element are constitutive elements of the genre (Schulte, 1990, pp.67-69), but not in the uniform and static manner in which they have been interpreted by historians until now.² Most researchers are only interested in the aesthetic and artistic aspects of the genre and thus stand in the way of new scholarly insights (e.g. Kurtz, 1975; Hoek, 1989).

² The *Ständereihe* is an artistic-literary style element, which represents the strict hierarchical social order of the Late Middle Ages. It is the summa of all social ranks and offices, lining them up from the highest to the lowest rank, mostly alternating between religious and secular officeholders and starting with the Pope.

Still, nobody has yet made a true attempt to analyse the development of the genre's textual and pictorial content. The messages that were transported by this genre, either explicitly in text and in images or implicitly through their timing, placement or artistic appearance, are all related by being 'critical', though on very diverging levels. My general focus on the wide variety of things that were criticised in Dances of Death promises interesting insights in the fields of cultural, social and religious history.

Astoundingly, many historians established the very first monumental Danse Macabre as the epitome of all Dances of Death. This static and romanticizing assumption is characteristic of many discussions on the subject in the existing literature. The first Dance of Death was the one painted at Cimetière des Innocents in Paris. It was made in 1424, but has not survived to the present day.³ Thanks to a contemporary travel report and the translated copy of the Paris text by John Lydgate (cited in Warren, 1931, pp.xxi-xxiv), we know that the Danse Macabre des Innocents already combined all of the most defining characteristics of the genre, as it develops throughout the next centuries. First of all it carried the obvious religious *memento mori* message that everybody has to prepare themselves for their inevitable death. However, this message had already been put in artistic form since the thirteenth century, when the ideas of Purgatory and the Last Judgment (*judicium particulare*) were being introduced to Western Christianity. Secondly, it used the *Ständereihe* to represent the social structure of the *ordo christiani* and as a metaphor for the equality of death. In the third place – what made it truly new – it was placed in a public space, thus addressing a greater public using the local idiom and powerfully illustrating its message with images that brought together the dialectic antipodes 'fear of death' and 'joy of life' (Saugnieux, 1972, p.98f). Additionally, the dancing element, which stood not only for the joy of life but generally for craziness and social frenzy was strongly associated with

³ Currently, it is thought that the monumental Dance of Death of the Abby of Chaise-Dieu (France) could be of an older date.

carnival culture. In this way, the content of Dances of Death was linked with the cultural framework of the *verkehrte Welt* (Schulte, 1990, pp.134-139).⁴ This was an imaginary world where critique of authorities was rarely punished. Dances of Death never lost this association even long after the visual dancing slowly disappeared out of the images.

The Dances of Death that I would like to discuss here are made more than two hundred years later in a radically different historical setting. In the mean time, the European Reformation had been the most important caesura for the genre. It would, of course, be beyond the scope of this article to discuss the development more thoroughly. To summarize, the inventors of Dances of Death up to the Reformation belonged for the larger part to the humanist critics of the church. It seems that most of them joined the ranks of the Protestants and started to use the Dances of Death more openly as a platform for their propaganda. On the Catholic side, the production of Dances of Death had practically come to a halt between 1535 and 1600. After that, especially the Jesuit order began to grasp the usefulness of the popular genre and engaged in the ‘planting’ of Counter-Reformation Dances of Death (Odermatt-Bürigi, 1996, pp.35-36). From their colleges, they orchestrated the formation of the clergy and the implementation of the doctrine of Rome. They encouraged the making of Dances of Death that showed the respectability of the church and its functionaries, the dignity of all sacraments and the truth of the theory of Purgatory.

Lucerne, surrounded by Zwinglian Zurich and reformed Berne, was the capital of Catholic Switzerland and it was here that the Jesuits enjoyed the fullest protection of the local regents. Thus, the presence of no less than three monumental seventeenth-century counter-reformatory Dances of Death in the city of Lucerne is no coincidence. That brings us back to the two rural Dances of Death that I analysed. As I shall explain below, both places were in the direct sphere of influence of the above mentioned city of Lucerne.

⁴ ‘world upside down’.

Short portrait of a rebellious hinterland

Wolhusen is an ancient settlement with no town charter that lies at the entry of the Entlebuch valley. Until the beginning of the fourteenth century, it was home to the family that ruled the Entlebuch valley and other parts of Central Switzerland, the 'Freiherren von Wolhusen'. Then they sold their lands to the Habsburgs. When the Swiss Confederation won a decisive battle against the Habsburgs in 1386, the lands came under control of the town of Lucerne (Arnet and Müller, [n.d.]). Furthermore, the town created a hinterland for itself through the steady acquisition of juridical rights over rural communities. At the end of the 15th century, Lucerne made the Entlebuch valley a governmental entity, including political and judicial powers over the former gateway Wolhusen.

Hasle, which lies in this valley, is a small settlement of farmers, mentioned for the first time in 1236 (Horat, 1984, p.3). In order to illustrate roughly the political potential of the region and the general circumstances in the aftermath of which the Dances of Death in Wolhusen and Hasle were made,⁵ it is necessary to mention the following points. From the fifteenth century onwards, the inhabitants of the valley rose several times against their rulers in the town of Lucerne. Time and again, they claimed that it taxed them unbearably, deprived them of any political participation and enforced all laws tyrannically (even though many of these laws were developed for the merchant city and were inappropriate for the rural valley). The most renowned rebellion was the 'War of the Farmers' that started in 1653 in Hasle, and developed into a broad alliance of farmers – both Catholic and Reformed – against urban rule through large parts of German-speaking Switzerland. Wolhusen also played a prominent part in this rebellion. It was put down by the unified patrician cities. During this conflict many more died in the cities' dungeons and on the gallows than on the battlefield (Messmer, 2003, pp. 4-11).

⁵ The circumstances during the post-Thirty Years War period were aggravated by what proved to be the last waves of Plague in Central Switzerland and an endemic shortage of food.

The Dance of Death in Wolhusen

At first sight, the Totentanz at the ossuary of Wolhusen, made in 1661, seems extraordinary because the unknown artist used real skulls for the heads of the dancing Death in his mural painting. Still, the *Ständereihe* that begins with the high offices of the Roman Church (even though it can be assumed that they were quite rarely seen by the local villagers) indicates a traditional approach. It starts with the Pope, the Cardinal and the Bishop and it concludes with the priest. They are followed by the representatives of the worldly order: Kaiser, King, *Kurfürst* and Noble Man, who hardly had any influence on daily life in Wolhusen. The third and final row is formed by the Innkeeper, the Usurer, the Baker and the Monk. Concisely stated, the choice of characters is far from being representative of the local people and seems to place this Dance of Death thoroughly in a Counter-Reformation tradition. A tradition that is morphologically conservative and abstractly focuses on the dignity of human office and the most objectionable sins of mankind.

It was the local priest Leodegar von Meggen, a long-term scholar of the Jesuit college of Lucerne, who gave the order to paint the ossuary in 1661, only a few years after Wolhusen had become a parish in its own right. It is therefore plausible that the Dance of Death, together with the other paintings and sculptures in the building that all bear a religious salvation theme, were objects of prestige for the new parish. The fact that the Bishop of Constance himself came to Wolhusen to give the ossuary its blessing strengthens this line of thought. Influential parts of the community took an interest in the ossuary, as much of it was financed by the local brotherhood of St Wendelin, who, together with two local holy men, was assigned to be the protective patron of the building. Evident also is the direct involvement of the local community in the representation of the figures of the Baker and that of the Priest, that have the characteristics of a portrait (Maeder-Steffen, 1988, [n.p.]). So far, nothing seems out of the ordinary.

Here then comes the surprise: the pictures in Wolhusen are for a large part directly inspired by those of Rudolf and Conrad Meyer (1650, [n.p]), two Zwinglians who created a new version of the Dance of Death in the picture-hostile town of Zurich. As far as we know, the printed pictures take no example from any of the Lucerne Dances of Death. The text that accompanies these pictures is a mixture of the one at Lucerne's Mill Bridge, which we find in Hederlin's print ([Anon.], 1635, [n.p.]) and the Meyers' Zurich example. This is less rare than it appears, for the text of most of the characters of the Zurich and Lucerne murals vary only slightly. This is due to the fact that the propaganda war in religious art between the Catholic faction and the Reformed movement was a war of subtleties. The major difference between the Zurich and Lucerne examples was that Meyers' Dance of Death also has an extra text which speaks clear reformatory language.⁶

It is astonishing that the Wolhusian makers (presumably the priest, the St Wendelins-brotherhood and the artist) took their inspiration directly from Meyers' reformed Dance of Death since Wolhusen was culturally and politically dependent on the city of Lucerne and the known background of the parish leader. Precisely how, then, was the Wolhusian Dance of Death different from those in Lucerne and Zurich? In the following chart, in a very brief analysis of the characters, I want to show the interaction of the Wolhusian Dance of Death with 'Lucerne' (LU) and 'Zurich' (ZH):

⁶ This text was placed outside the basic, traditional framework. There is always one page of additional text per character in ZH. The prints in ZH are clearly inspired by LU, but are often not entirely identical, as is the case for the short (not the additional!) texts that accompany the prints.

| Character in Wolhusen Dance of Death: | Wolhusen painting inspired by: | Wolhusen text taken from: |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Pope | none/not known | ZH |
| Cardinal | ZH | LU and ZH ⁷ |
| Bishop | ZH | LU and ZH |
| Priest | none/not known | LU and ZH |
| Kaiser | none/not known | LU and ZH |
| King | none/not known | LU and ZH |
| <i>Kurfürst</i> | ZH | ZH |
| Noble Man | ZH | LU and ZH are identical |
| Innkeeper | ZH | ZH |
| Usurer | ZH | ZH |
| Baker | none/not known | ZH |
| Monk | ZH | mixture of LU and ZH |

Table 1: Artistic interaction between the Wolhusen, Lucerne and Zurich Dances of Death⁸

First of all, the chart reveals that the Dance of Death in Wolhusen features a picture-program that was partly its own invention and partly inspired by Reformed Zurich but not by neighbouring Catholic Lucerne. Secondly, the textual divergence between Wolhusen and the example of the regional capital takes place in the important figure of the Pope, but also in the *Kurfürst* and the local representatives, which are not to be found in the

⁷ 'LU and ZH' signifies that the text of Lucerne and Zurich are identical

⁸ We have to keep in mind that there is little known about two occasions in which the pictures of Wolhusen were 'renovated' before 1875 (Birchler, 1988, [n.p.]). The Dance of Death at Lucerne's Mill Bridge was renovated even more often (Horat, 1996, p.80). It is therefore very difficult to make statements as to their exact appearance in 1660.

extensive *Ständereihe* at Lucerne. That is why I will turn my attention shortly to these differing figures.

We find the most profound difference on religious grounds between Wolhusen and Lucerne in the very first line of the text of the Pope. Whereas in Lucerne, it says ‘even I am the head of the World’ ([Anon.], 1635, [n.p.]),⁹ Wolhusen recalls the Zurich version: ‘Even I call myself the head of the world’ (Meyer, 1650, [n.p.]). Obviously, this is a significant difference in attitude towards the Pope’s position in the world. It is surprising that this important variation went unnoticed by church officials in Lucerne and Constance and hardly conceivable that it would not matter to them. Using ‘Zurich’ certainly is a strong statement of independence from Lucerne, but it is difficult to explain due to a lack of relevant sources. The other figures must be viewed in the light of local agency. The integration of the figures *Kurfürst* and Baker can easily be read as part of the representation of local pride. This is because Death addresses the *Kurfürst* by prominently mentioning the equality of the latter’s high office and the peasant’s low social rank (Meyer, 1650, [n.p.]). The Baker in his turn – a proud portrait of a donor to the ossuary – is the only person that is promised salvation. It states: ‘the bakerman who is blessed with happiness can eat his bread without envy and guile with God and honour’ (Wolhusen ossuary painting, 1661). The use of the Usurer, who does not appear in the Lucerne Dance of Death, is suspicious as he is a clear statement against greedy moneylending. The Wolhusen ossuary painting says ‘your greed plunges you in Devil’s tyranny’ (Meyer, 1650, [n.d.]). Whether this statement was aimed at the fairly rich town of Lucerne can only be guessed. Last of all, the figure of the Monk shows that the Dance of Death in Wolhusen reflected on contemporary local developments and was certainly perceived by some critical public. This text is a mixture of the Lucerne and Zurich examples, for both aimed at the Benedictines who were depicted as grossly overweight to emphasize their rich and luxurious lifestyle. Wolhusen, however, took the

⁹ All the translations from German and Swiss Dialect to English in this article are my own.

picture of Zurich, left the content of the message unchanged but linked it directly to the Franciscans by hinting at a ‘tight knot’, both in the image and the text (Wolhusen ossuary painting, 1661). This was very probably done in ‘honour’ of the neighbouring Franciscan’s convent of Werthenstein, which in less than thirty years after its founding in 1630 was made part of the newly established Wolhusen parish. Art historic research around 1875 brought to light that the text of the (Franciscan) monk was the only one that showed signs of an attempt to forcefully erase the face of the figure and the accompanying text. Again, it can only be guessed who might have had any responsibility for this deed. I conclude that the Wolhusen Dance was a prestigious object for the new parish. It displays a significant local influence through the portrait-character of some figures. Moreover, it shows a remarkable local independence from Lucerne, that is expressed in the choice of Zurich instead of Lucerne as a role model for many characters of the painting in the ossuary.

The Dance of Death in Hasle, 1687

The question that is of most interest now, is whether the makers of the Totentanz of Hasle looked for inspiration to the Lucerne, Zurich or even the Wolhusen example. After all, it was made less than three decades later in a place that was a few miles away from Wolhusen. The painting in the church’s ossuary was ordered by Franz Schmid, a Lucerne citizen. He became the new priest for the Hasle parish just after the Farmers’ Uprising against Lucerne. He had also been a student of the Jesuit College of the same city. It would be interesting, although it is not entirely clear from the available sources, if Schmid’s appointment was enforced by the town of Lucerne, thereby undermining the exceptional right of the community of Hasle to elect its own parish priest (Bitzi, 1979, p.26).

The ossuary in Hasle was originally built in 1574. Under Schmid, the infrastructure of the parish underwent large-scale expansion and

improvement. The last building that was ‘treated’ was the ossuary. In 1687, artist John Jacob Fleischlin painted the walls and an altar that was dedicated to the suffering Maria. Furthermore, there was a so-called antependium covering the front of the altar. It reflected on the theme of the ‘poor souls’, which is very often used in Counter-Reformation art (Horat, 1984, pp.5-9). The theme should remind the observer to pray for the poor souls that are suffering hellish distress. The Dance of Death, however, stands out amongst the other works of art in the ossuary because of its unique choice of characters. Although it differs radically from any supposed morphologic convention of making Dances of Death, it carries in its core – like the altar and its antependium - a traditional message.

The Hasle Dance of Death consists of eight characters only. To the left of the altar we find the Pope and on the other side the figure of the Kaiser. The other six figures represent the local community. On the left side it shows the villagers. The three persons are the Innkeeper, the Scribe and the Miller. The row on the right side shows the ‘peasant group’ consisting of the Young Farmer, the Lowland Farmer and the *Äpler* (Highland Farmer). The first striking thing is, that there is no obvious social hierarchy, no guideline for the public how to read the painting. Although it is part of the development of the genre to extend or reduce the number of characters in the *Ständereihe*, it is extremely rare to give up its main principle of hierarchy. I suspect that the Kaiser and the Pope were only painted in order to place the portrait of the villagers within a recognizable context: Dances of Death and the genre’s possibility to criticize. Hypothesizing further, it can very well be that this Dance of Death was adapted to its viewers’ rather traditional dislike of worldly authority, thereby using rather abstract characters of authority with no actual local power. I will elaborate some more on the Kaiser’s and Pope’s function further below.

As far as the picture-program is concerned, there is no evidence that the picture’s structure was directly inspired by any predecessor. Great

attention is paid to the faces and the clothing of the figures and we also find many names of donors in and underneath the pictures, making clear that they must be seen as portraits of contemporary villagers. This observation, as well as the choice and arrangement of figures, directs my attention to the text in search of clues as to what the possible intention of the makers/donors of the Dance of Death were.

The text is structured along the lines of the traditional *memento mori* message in which Death announces the end of a character's life. Pope and Kaiser strengthen the emphasis on the power of Death through their displayed helplessness. They uniformly acknowledge that 'Death's coming brings all to ruin' (Hasle ossuary painting, 1687). In so doing, they also help the viewer of the Hasle Dance of Death to understand the relationship between Death and the villagers. Yet, there is a very obvious separation between Death's approach of the Pope and Kaiser one the one hand and of the village characters one the other; Death addresses the Kaiser and the Pope from a sarcastic, superior perspective, whilst the villagers are approached by Death in an almost nonchalant, friendly manner. In the case of the Pope, Death's address can be described as harsh and impatient when he says 'please don't run [...] from thy head I rip the crown' (Hasle ossuary painting, 1687).¹⁰ Neither Pope nor Kaiser direct their answers toward Death himself but state a monologue. The villagers answer Death straightforward and show an astounding personal unwillingness to die. The Miller replies 'I cannot die', the Scribe 'has not the will to die right now', and the *Äpler* orders Death 'stop mocking me and let me go'. These blunt answers can also teach us something about the local thought on the values of life, age and profession. Here we see the Young Farmer telling Death to 'pick an old one'. The peasant reminds Death that 'there are many loafers to take instead', which emphasizes the respectability and honesty of this profession. The Innkeeper says that he wants to give up his 'good life [...]

¹⁰ Despite the aggressive tone, the status of the Pope as the most powerful and honorable person is not questioned.

barrel and wine’ while the Scribe points out that there is ‘still much to be written’ (all cited from the Hasle ossuary painting, 1687).

Thus I reach an ambivalent conclusion. On one side, the images portray the community of the villagers nicely dressed and honourable in stature. In the text, a bluntly voiced local agency and maturity shows itself to the viewer through the unconstrained way of the villager’s interaction with mighty Death. On the other side, Death clearly remains the master and it is suggested that in the end, his will is laid unconditionally on them; the traditional message of Dances of Death. Thus, the villager’s manner of answering Death could also be read as an ill-advised lack of respect and faith that will not benefit them in the end.

I think that the makers of the Hasle Dance of Death were aware of the local sentiment and therefore adapted the theme. It was not only a portrait of a proud local community (Odermatt-Bürgi, 1996, p.50),¹¹ but also a pedagogic mirror of this community that carried a Catholic message of authority and contemplation.

Emancipation and adaptation of the small community Dances of Death

The Dances of Death in Wolhusen and Hasle were both made in the aftermath of the 1653 Farmer Uprising against the ruling city of Lucerne which was under the severe influence of the Jesuits, and both parishes invested heavily in the expansion of their prestige under the leadership of a Jesuit-educated priest and sponsored heavily by a group of leading local men. Both Dances of Death portray to some extent the local community – more apparent in Hasle than in Wolhusen. The Dances of Death show the self-esteem of the community in two ways. First of all, the very existence of a piece of art like the Danse Macabre in small-scale ossuaries was a sign of material resilience. Secondly, the choice, arrangement and verbalization of the depicted characters were meant to be evidence of some degree of critical independence from the centralized authority and the Lucerne lifestyle.

¹¹ This is especially the case with the faithful donors.

The example at Wolhusen is certainly artistically, in text and pictures, the more sophisticated Dance of Death of the two. It is striking that the artists in Wolhusen chose Meyers' Reformed Dance of Death to inspire their work. This remarkably emancipating blow toward Lucerne is difficult to explain due to the lack of direct sources. The spectacular artistic cross-over between painting and sculpture and the choice of text show that a large degree of local agency was indeed possible and that knowledge of the development of the Dances of Death genre was widespread.

Hasle's Dance of Death is the perfect example of a localized Dance of Death in which the religious artistic platform was used to express local pride and contemporary values of living. At the same time, the platform was adapted in order to recognize the traditional condemnation of authority. Still, the traditional Catholic message of the *memento mori* and the call for a solid, faithful life were knitted ingeniously into this portrait of the local community. Eventually the Dance of Death indeed became part of a traditional Counter Reformatory picture-program – an aspect that is more important for Hasle than for Wolhusen. Thus, without morphologically or explicitly paying any tribute to Lucerne, the Dance of Death still served as a prestigious instrument to promote the much-desired peace and quiet in the valley.

This short article shows the astounding possibility of the Dance of Death genre to adapt to local circumstances, to take on various forms, and to integrate subtle critical hints alluding to different points of view. Dances of Death can state critique upon the manner of living of the characters in the paintings and the intended viewers of these paintings. At least for Wolhusen and Hasle, these perspectives tend to overlap as recipients and portrayed are often the same. The art-form's possibility to express critique is put to use in the examples I analysed.

The density of monumental Dances of Death in the Lucerne region must be explained by the Jesuit's choice of spreading their ideas by the

popular Dances of Death art-form and the obvious local interest in using and adapting this art-form to portray the proud community. In this way, the confessional propaganda made in the Catholic capital of Switzerland, Lucerne, not only interacted with the surrounding reformed powers of Zurich and Berne, but also with the small parishes of its own hinterland.

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