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The light at the end of the tunnel or how Bosch interpreted near-death experiences

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Description of Bosch's work

The year 2016 marked the 500th anniversary of Hieronymus Bosch's death (1450-1516). This disturbing painter was one of Philip II of Spain's favourite artists and a large part of his work can be seen at Madrid's Prado Museum.[1] In celebration of this anniversary, the Prado Museum curated an exhibition of his paintings, including a piece usually displayed at the Accademia Gallery of Venice, which caught our attention: *Visions of the hereafter* (1490), a series of four panels depicting the terrestrial paradise, the ascent to heaven, the fall of the damned into hell, and hell. The paintings are believed to date from circa 1490, although this is not certain. The scenes depicted are part of a lost polyptych that included four panels known as *Terrestrial paradise*, *Ascent of the blessed*, *Fall of the damned into hell*, and *Hell*. They narrate the history of humanity, from paradise to the final judgement, which probably would have been the central panel of the polyptych. *Ascent of the blessed* shows how, after the final judgement, the blessed are carried to heaven accompanied by angels, whereas the damned fall to hell. In the original arrangement, this panel is believed to have been hung below *Terrestrial paradise*, set on hinges to the left side of a missing central panel of the final judgement (Figure 1). The identity of the person who commissioned the piece remains unknown. In his 1521 book *Notizia d'opere del disegno*, Marcantonio Michel suggests that it belonged to the Venetian collection of Cardinal Domenico Grimani.[2]

The panels illustrate the following scenes: *Terrestrial paradise* shows the characters, accompanied by angels, looking to the fountain of life at the top of a hill; *Ascent of the blessed* shows how souls are led to the light by angels, through luminous concentric circles, beyond which they continue alone; the *Fall of the damned to hell* depicts how the damned sinners fall into the darkness; in *Hell*, the central scene shows a damned sinner and a demon against a backdrop of darkness where the only source of light is a fire, a setting often depicted by Bosch.

These panels are believed to be the wings of a missing polyptych,[3] with the side panels arranged one above the other, with *Terrestrial paradise* and *Ascent of the blessed* to the left and *Fall of the damned into hell* and *Hell* to the right. Another hypothesis suggests that the composition may have consisted of two smaller triptychs linked to one another. In this interpretation, *Terrestrial paradise* and *Ascent of the blessed* would be the wings of a central panel depicting the resurrection of the flesh, and the *Fall of the damned into hell* and *Hell* would be located either side of a final judgement.

The appearance of the "light at the end of the tunnel" in the *Ascent of the blessed* has been observed previously, and even appeared on the cover of McGregor's *Images of afterlife beliefs from Antiquity to Modern Times*.[4] However, we would like to contribute to the knowledge of near-death experiences (NDE) by underscoring the obvious representation of the "light at the end of the tunnel" reported by many patients who have experienced this phenomenon, and which is so well depicted in Bosch's painting.

Born into a family of painters, Bosch belonged to the Flemish School of painting and developed a unique style, creating dreamlike figures and scenes replete with fantasy. He was the painter of demons, hell, torture, fires, creative and grotesque figures, anthropomorphic animals, the capital sins, corruption, and the vices of his time. Some scholars believe that Bosch was left

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Figure 1. *Visions of the hereafter* (1490). © Accademia Gallery of Venice

traumatised as a child after witnessing a fire in which more than 600 people died, which would explain the representation of hellish and hallucinatory scenes in his work.[1]

Near-death experiences

Although for his *Ascent of the blessed* Bosch may have found inspiration in the tradition of miniatures of the Lower Middle Ages or in *The spiritual espousals* by Jan van Ruysbroeck,[1] it is considered one of the artworks best depicting NDEs due to its representation of a passage through a cylinder of concentric circles with a light at the end.[5]

NDEs are the experiences narrated by people who have been near death or clinically dead and have finally survived. In intensive care units, the Greyson NDE scale is used to assess these experiences.[6] NDEs are not paranormal phenomena. Recent studies have described how patients' accounts of the tunnel and the encounter with deceased loved ones may be explained by visual activity during retinal ischaemia. The encounter with deceased relatives or angels may be explained by hallucinations secondary to brain ischaemia. Visions of spirits or ghosts may be related to decreased dopamine levels, and the sense of separation from the body is explained by a phenomenon resembling REM sleep; patients even see themselves shortly before they awake.[6]

Since the dawn of humanity, interest in the afterlife has been constant. Some authors associate it with our belief or disbelief in God, which would reflect our belief or disbelief in the afterlife. Lastly, the common human belief in an afterlife points to the belief in a divine Creator, which would justify the existence of another world.[4]

Bosch's works and other works associated with near-death experiences

In his doctoral thesis, Alan Pew[7] analyses other artworks depicting NDEs, such as the illustration *Vision of the*

empyrean (1868) from Dante's *Divine comedy*, in which Dante and his guide Beatrice face a brilliant celestial light through a vortex of angels.[8] This vortex could be seen as suggestive of the tunnel, while the angels may represent the encounter with spiritual beings.

In the 15th-century painting *The final judgement* by Fra Angelico, the sky is depicted as a garden full of beautiful flowers where friends meet as spirits.[9] The scenes depicted in the painting may be correlated with the scenes of paradise reported in many modern near-death experiences, including encounters with the spirits of loved ones, the sensation of peace and well-being, and the beauty of the surroundings. Similarly, many representations of hell contain images correlated with some stories of hellish near-death experiences, with lifeless or threatening, monstrous, or dangerous apparitions and the possibility of violence, torture, or fire.[10] These images of hell are very clearly depicted in Bosch's *Garden of earthly delights* (1503), which includes three scenes: the left panel is dedicated to paradise, with the creation of Eve and the fountain of life; the right panel depicts hell (Figure 2); and the central panel shows the garden of earthly delights, after which the triptych is named. Between paradise and hell, the "delights" allude to sins, such as lust. The painting was acquired by Prior don Fernando, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Alba, and Philip II took it to El Escorial in 1593 to display it in his room.

The separation of body and spirit is reflected in the engraving *The soul hovering over the body reluctantly parting with life* by the English artist and poet William Blake. Created at the beginning of the 19th century, it represents the soul as a female figure hovering above a dead body. A similar separation of body and spirit is suggested in an area of the 14th-century painting *Triumph of death* by Francesco Traini.[11] In this fresco, however, souls are dragged by terrible demons from the mouths of the dying.[12]

Bosch and Philip II

Bosch was an unusual painter who never failed to make an impression. Philip II was a great patron of the arts and had a special predilection for the Italian and Flemish schools. In words of Carmen García Frías: "Italian painting best reflected the official character of the royal court, and Titian was his favourite artist for this kind of paintings. Flemish painting was more in line with

Figure 2. Hell as depicted in *Garden of earthly delights* (1503)

the compassionate interests of his dynasty."[13] For this reason, Philip II was fascinated by Bosch's paintings. The religious and moralising character he observed in Bosch's works was crucial in his decision to move the majority of the Bosch paintings he owned to the monastery of El Escorial. Brother José de Sigüenza, an El Escorial historian, attributes Philip II's preference for Bosch's works to his fascination with the painter's singularity and depth, which made him unique[14]:

> The difference between paintings by this artist and those from others is that other painters tried to paint the man from the outside, while Bosch was the only one who dared to paint the inside.[14]

The main novelty of Bosch's paintings is the "new path" that, according to Brother José de Sigüenza, consists of the use of humorous elements, "placing in the middle of those jokes many angels and oddities."[14] The aim was to teach moral concepts by means of provocation, dreamlike images, and satire. Brother José de Sigüenza himself tells how on the day of Philip II's death, on 13 September 1598, the king awoke in the middle of a terrible nightmare. Brother José came to his bedside, and the king shouted "the black dog and the man in black."[14] Philip II had nine of Bosch's paintings in his room. He had saved them from being burned, as they and their author were considered heretical by the Spanish Inquisition.

Dominicus Lampsonius so defined it:

> What does it mean, O Hieronymus Bosch, that awe-struck gaze of yours? Why is your face so pale? Is it that the lemurs, spirits flying up from Erebus, offered themselves to your eye? I would rather think that miserly Dis [Pluto] gave you free entrance through hell to his dark dwelling. However it came to pass that your penetrating spirit, your deep sense of our future date was revealed to you there, your masterly endeavour inventively to make this understandable to us.[1]

The first description of an NDE may be that authored by the French army physician Pierre-Jean du Monchaux (1733-1766), who died on the island of San Domingo at the age of 33. He reported how an Italian patient, who was undergoing several blood-letting treatments due to fevers, suffered a very prolonged syncope; when he awoke, he reported having seen a powerful light and experienced a sensation so pleasant that he believed he was in heaven.[15]

Considering that the main milestones of 15th-century medicine were the great advancements in anatomy, the separation of surgery from clinical medicine, the birth of modern pharmacology, and the syphilis epidemic that struck Europe, it is surprising that Bosch should represent the light at the end of the tunnel, one of the experiences most frequently reported today by subjects who have had an NDE and are able to recall it. Bosch was a visionary painter whose works reflected neurological concepts ahead of their time. The light at the end of the tunnel, as an NDE, was already known in the 15th century.

Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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