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*Lire avec l'image: le memento mori à l'œuvre: The Next Big Thing d'Anita Brookner*

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# Reading with Images: Anita Brookner's The Next Big Thing as Memento Mori

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Liliane Louvel

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Something is going to break down . . . something  
has broken down (adapted from Delmotte)  
'Et le printemps m'a apporté l'affreux rire de  
l'idiot'  
Rimbaud *Une Saison en enfer*, 'Prologue' (245–46)

- 1 Ruins are the result of a process. They are testimonies, the fragments of a long gone presence before its complete disappearance. The teleology of architecture is ruins and that of man is death. Ruins display a disappearance 'in progress'. They stand for what is left of the original and what will not be any more. Both a presence and an absence it is an instance of in-betweenness. One of its painterly equivalents could be *memento mori*, still life painting or *vanitates*.
- 2 The oscillating movement inherent in the word/image relation is part and parcel of what is currently called intermedial criticism the object of which is to study to what extent image shapes text, 'informs' it and gives it its 'pattern' for instance (see Louvel 2010, 2011). Many subjects or painterly models have inspired literature among which: veronica, anamorphoses, polyptychs as well as *memento moror* Dance of Death.
- 3 The intermedial reading of Anita Brookner's novel *The Next Big Thing* thanks to the aesthetic category of the *memento mori* is particularly fruitful. Anita Brookner was an art historian; she taught at the Courtauld Institute of London. No wonder then that her vision should be deeply shaped by the visual, and painting in particular. The novel is replete with references to paintings by Claude, Turner, Titian, Delacroix, Rembrandt, etc.

- 4 The novel tells the last weeks of 73-year-old Julius Herz, from the point of view of impending death. 'Remember death', the original meaning of *memento mori* (and not 'remember you have to die' as Benjamin Delmotte recalls in his essay that will constitute the backbone of this paper) is a speech act. The hero's heart threatens to break down thus provoking his ruin. Herz's heart—and the onomastic trait does not escape us ('Herz' means 'heart' in German)—plays the part of focalizing spot instead of the skull in its pictorial equivalent, the famous painting which is a portrait, a vanity and a *memento mori*, the painter visually signed with a hollow bone or *Holbein* in German. The *memento mori* here carries the weight of an individual destiny and of a national one, for History and personal history are linked as we shall see.

## The Memento Mori

- 5 Still life painting, *vanitates* and *memento mori* stand in a gradation. The *Dance of Death* and the *Triumph of Death*, two favourites of medieval times, also represent impending death (*Three Farmers on their way to a Dance* by R. Powers makes use of this long tradition and of August Sander's well-known photograph). *The Triumph of Death* allegorically suggests a monstrous apocalyptic power. *The Next Big Thing*, which rests on World War II and its consequences subtly instilled within the text from beginning to end, might also belong to the genre. We might offer that the novel is a *memento mori*, on the character's personal level, and on the level of collective History, a *Triumph of Death*. For Delmotte: 'What is essentially exhibited in *vanitates* and *memento mori*, is less the havoc wreaked by death (with the added value of the fantastic or of horror which often goes hand in hand with this type of representation) than the fragility of life on earth, which is often represented under the guise of a mere skull' (Delmotte 15, my translation).
- 6 Confronted with the fragility of life and the horror of the certainty of one's impending end the *memento mori*'s spectator stops in his tracks. Let it be recalled that *memento mori* was an injunction whispered by a victorious Roman general's slave during his triumph. Thus it was a maxim uttered by an acousmatic voice (*i.e.* the origin of which is unknown), a speech act which justifies our use of it in art transposition when language aims at giving rise to an image and vice-versa. One of the variants of *Memento mori*, *Et in arcadia ego* ('I was too in Arcadia', Le Guerchin, Poussin) was studied by E. Panovsky (for whom it meant: 'even in Arcadia I am') then by Louis Marin. In both instances ruin and death, ruin as death too, figure(s). Ruin being the in-between testimony of what was and what is bound to disappear, is of a teleological nature. Then meeting the dead-living subject triggers fright, a shock between opposite forces, 'the in-betweenness of a life already promised to death already wrought upon by death' (Delmotte 58). The skull becomes a mask (*persona*) behind which no one hides. The skull is the surviving ruin of what was, an empty bone box: masks, voices, skulls echo the fear and fascination of death. The *memento mori* turns into 'pure resounding sound . . . at the bottom of a voice' (Delmotte 48), an echo and an appeal. And Brookner's novel starts and ends with an appeal. In the incipit, Herz is dreaming that his cousin Fanny Brauer, his first love, has just called him to take her to the cinema. This dream which expresses a wish for a call, is echoed by a synthetic voice in the explicit: 'When his flight was called he got up' (Brookner 247), a call Herz will not be able to answer. This last call is 'pure resonance', the echo of which reverberates in this 'non-place' an airport is.

- 7 For Delmotte the shock produced by the words of the *memento mori* rests in what it hides more than in what it utters: 'One knows nothing about the circumstances and the practical side of what is going to happen' (Delmotte 49) which is also what Brookner's narrator remarks: 'Even then the prospect of death would be unreal, its details hidden' (Brookner 242). Even when the narrator pretends she is revealing them this is a *trompe-l'œil* for the end is enigmatic: the old man feels a new sort of pain, he gets up, fumbles for his pills which fall on the floor. He 'lurched forward, crushing the pills beneath his feet. With the empty box still clutched in his hand, the ghost of a smile still on his face, he struggled mightily exerting his last strength to join the other travellers on their journey' (Brookner, 247). The key to this suspended end is provided by a metatextual device, when Herz first feels sick:

This unfortunately coincided with the Thomas Mann story he had most recently read, in which a poor lunatic makes his unsteady way to the churchyard to visit his graves and in so doing excites the mirth of passers-by, who witness his eventual collapse and call an ambulance. The story ends inconclusively although the reader knows that the man's fate is sealed. (Brookner 87)

- 8 Allegedly, *memento mori* has such a strong grip over us because it stages an oncoming death; and this is Brookner's main subject. It produces a seizure like the one experienced by Prince Michkine in front of Holbein's *Dead Christ* (in *The Idiot*). 'Remember death' sends a warning similar to the one ruins send. B. Delmotte offers to apprehend *memento mori* in the framework of an aesthetics of anguish and 'to apprehend this anguish as a strength changing the being-in-the-world' (Delmotte 49) marked by awe, truth and its pathos. It is also replete with a power of desolation. The aesthetic object transposed into intermedial literature shows to what extent the novel resorts to an aesthetics of anguish similar to the apparatus staged by *memento mori*. It sends out forces which transform the reader/spectator confronted with his/her own ruin and mortality. Nostalgia, melancholy and the chronicle of a programmed death pertain to both novel and art object. A sensation of disjunction, of distance, of separation 'like that of the exiled from true life' as apprehended by Delmotte are perfectly consistent with the novel. The brutal rupture from an illusory quiet life is followed by a fall in the abyss of the ultimate truth, for Herz, his last fall on the airport tiles. And the acousmatic voice—that of the loudspeaker's—introduces within the being the exterior constraints (Delmotte 27). Delmotte acknowledges a kind of affinity with *memento mori* in some of the paintings of artists such as Hans Baldung Grien, Hammershoi, Morandi, and I will argue Félix Nussbaum. In Brookner's book, which chronicles Julius Herz's ruin, the end of a family and of a certain idea of humanism and humanity in the twentieth century also figure *sotto voce* in front of the grim figure of the skull.

### ***The Next Big Thing* as *Memento Mori*: Julius Herz, British Citizen**

- 9 The title of the novel seems to come from nowhere in terms of enunciator: it bears the traces of an acousmatic voice. 'The' pinpoints the deictic value of the foretold event, 'next' an imminent threatening future, 'Big' calls attention onto the importance of the event. As for 'thing', it bears the weight of its awe-inspiring dim contours. 'Remember death', first uttered by a Roman general's slave, here is the omniscient narrator's choice. The time-bound paradox is puzzling: 'remember what is going to happen to you'. Past and

future are mixed up and trigger anguish. The formula verges on that of an ill-omened prophecy. In the novel, Ostrovski, an exile himself and the family's benefactor, utters the sentence (and the book title) when not well:

'Tried to overlook it, as one does, but there's no doubt about it now. I'm looking at the end. The next big thing.'

'The next big thing?' Julius had echoed. (Brookner 53)

10 And Julius will take up the sentence while evoking the precious pills prescribed by his physician to protect him against 'a condition from which there might be no recovery, the next big thing to which Ostrovski had alluded. In due course the mystery might be solved. Or not, as he supposed' (Brookner 110).

11 The confrontation with death takes place by dint of a mirror as in those paintings where a young girl gazing at her beautiful face is only met by that of an old wrinkled woman, if not a skeleton holding an hour-glass like in H. Baldung Grien's *Les trois âges de la vie* in Vienna. Herz undergoes the mirror trial:

In the mirror he saw a sombre thin-faced man who could no longer be confused with his younger self, his eager smile eclipsed, more by solitude than by experience. . . . He knew that he stooped, that he tired swiftly, that he could no longer walk as far as he had been accustomed to do, that he felt the cold to an abnormal extent (Brookner 26)

12 This is a painful realization of decay in progress, of impending solitude and old age. His physical ruin is one of the novel's leitmotif: 'he shied from the evidence of his own physical decline, his tall sparse body, his large red hands, the thick veins that marked his dry sapless arms' (Brookner 127). This description might also apply to the old skeleton-like men and women painted by Grien or the Maître souabe in Strasbourg's *Amants trépassés*.

13 The call of death present both in the incipit and explicit frames Herz's (and our own) point of view. The world appears as alien. For Delmotte, 'One could say that the spectator of *memento mori* experiences a kind of aesthetic seizure which is close to the point of view of one expecting death' (Delmotte 110), that is to say standing in-between the moment when one is going to lose this world and the latter's still ongoing presence. It is an experience conducive to the emergence of nostalgia. One then loses one's bearings when the world gradually deserts one. This is what happens when Herz collapses:

The pain began quite suddenly, unlike anything he had experienced before. When his flight was called he got up, fumbled for his pills. His shaking hands sent them flying, rolling across the dirty floor. Making an effort not to gasp he lurched forward, crushing the pills beneath his feet. With the empty box still clutched in his hand, the ghost of a smile still on his face, he struggled mightily exerting his last strength to join the other travellers on their journey. (Brookner 247)

14 Herz's becoming-a-corpse joins the character's becoming-a-skull when emptied of his thoughts. And the novel details the devastating power of death ruining family and friends: Herz's brother Freddy, a talented but neurotic musician is chronically depressed. His mother, frustrated by her failed musician of a son is bitter, then his father cuts the pathetic figure of a passive victim. The friends of the family, Bijou Frank, an old exiled German friend of his mother's, and Ostrovski, another rich emigrant, are all grim figures.

15 The gradually increasing anxiety which characterizes *Memento mori* is at the core of Brookner's novel together with destruction, decomposition, as in some still life paintings. Everything is damaged, broken, ruined: Herz loses his flat, his landmarks. Sleepless he does not feel like living any longer, gives up eating, going to the National Gallery for 'he

has lost faith in painting'. He whiles time away on a bench in a park stranded with other old people near Paddington Street, turned into a mere observer of other people's lives. This is the sad promise of an end to come, the teleology of matter being ruin and extinction.

- 16 The description of Herz's plight is reinforced by the fantastic motif of the double and the lure and illusions of reflection games. The theme of the double (a favourite one of *memento mori* too) is represented here by the two brothers, by Herz's own splitting up between the still life-loving person he is in the morning and his sad disenchanting self in the evening. Thus, he writes two letters to Fanny according to his two moods. Doubles also stand as the organizing principle of a kind of medieval painting: *le Dit des trois morts et des trois vifs* in which each character doubles as a skeleton meeting death. The three dead of the novel are Freddy Herz's father and mother. The three living ones: Herz's wife, Sophia and Bernard Simmonds. Herz stands in-between already ready to depart from this life. The reader has a feeling of *unheimlich* confirmed by the strong presence of dreams and the reference to Freud's visit to Athens when he felt sick in front of the Parthenon, a feeling Herz thinks he experiences. But his physician feels there is a more morbid cause to it for what is actually lurking in the background . . . is nothing: 'What is pronounced in *memento mori* is peculiar in as much as what is conveyed is nothing more than a message or a positive injunction. Why is there nothing rather than something in *memento mori*?' (Delmotte 48). Perhaps because nothing deals with the living-dead, with the fascination of ambiguity as in the painterly genre of *The Maiden and Death*, where the young girl is confronted with her awful double, with the threat of losing it all when one has it all.<sup>1</sup> 'Nothing' might be 'the name of the unnameable' for Louis Marin (Marin 29–30). In *The Next Big Thing*, Herz's pills stand for a poor shield against death, like as many small skulls crushed under his feet.
- 17 Retiring from the world, feeling powerless, accompany the fear of death and they both figure in the pictorial work and in Brookner's. The frontiers between life and death are gradually erased and death gnaws away at the living's flesh. The reader/seer is 'seized'. For Delmotte, one of the literary equivalents of *memento mori* might be the obsessive repetition of leitmotif and the novel is replete with those: the exiles, the oncoming death, the presence of painting, the too quick beatings of the heart, Herz's smile which characterizes him from beginning to end. On family photos it is a kind of senseless smile: to please the others? To be loved? At least it is an enigma for this mask-like smile conceals nothing, except for the wreckage of meaning.
- 18 Time plays a major part in *memento mori* when 'the future intrudes in the present' and within the living part of ourselves. It 'gives access to the impossibility of death' (Delmotte 16), to what is shapeless and unnameable thanks to an 'untranslatable imperative future'. The temporal twist reveals the aporia of 'the memory of the future', the memory of what is lying in wait, of providing a visual echo in keeping with the latin phrase. The spatio-temporal ambiguity pertaining to the plastic figure is evoked in the novel in the see-saw movement between past and present, with Herz's remembrances of his youth and bourgeois education in Germany revisited thanks to the contemplation of old photos he keeps in his London two-room flat. His ruin in progress still holds something of the past but already foretells the future. He is in-between in a transitional state which keeps undoing itself. The character then may grasp the impossibility of his own death announced by what is advancing, *i.e.* the ultimate event. No wonder then that the ruin

should throw its last rays of light in a sublime encounter and that the body should find itself ablaze, what Herz sees as 'his recent awakening' (Brookner 123).

## The Old Man and Love

... And the old man falls in love with the young woman who has just moved into the flat below his and whose first name is Sophie,<sup>2</sup> a testimony to her wisdom, and her (biblical) surname is Clay. What he calls 'the advent of Sophie Clay', 'the life force' he feels, 'the wild desire', before it is too late in his 'unlived life', push him to reach out to her and touch her. She violently rejects him and condemns him to stay away from her. Worse Matthew, her new companion, appears and Herz accepts to let him rent his own flat to show his good will, thinking he is going to go away to see Fanny Bauer for in a last surge of life he chooses to meet again his first love:

He had fallen in love with her. And he had no need to point out to himself how ludicrous a late love would always be. ... He had survived it in the only way he knew, by further confinement. ... yet the ardour ... had taken the not quite logical shape of a late idyll with yet another woman, to whom, he now discovered, he was almost indifferent. (Brookner 123)

But Fanny too undergoes the cruel mirror confrontation as she writes it to Julius:

I had thought that my looks would last me all my life, and this is perhaps an illusion from which women suffer, until they look in the glass one day and see that some sort of fading has taken place, as if a veil had obscured the original brightness that no amount of added colour will restore. Your visit to Nyon occurred just before I had had such a revelation. (Brookner 123)

- 19 The young girl with the mirror of truth gazes at her ruined face, the veil obscuring its original brightness, a true revelation as in *vanitas* with mirrors or *memento mori* and their heralded piece of news. *Fanny and Julius with a mirror* could be compared to the double portrait of the *Urgkmair couple* (1527) as painted by Laux Fürtenagel in Vienna. The old people are looking at themselves and see two death heads.
- 20 Sly progress is being made while Matthew gradually moves in bringing his belongings one by one inside the flat: Herz is 'surrounded', 'absorbed', 'engulfed', by it and the flat filled with another one's life. Herz lives this gradual invasion on an absurd or fantastic mode for the flat is taken over without the intervention of any visible presence. Even Matt's big radio dislodges Herz's old one: 'In Chiltern Street he seemed engulfed in a rising tide of luggage, mostly Matthew's, his own modest suitcase a mere adjunct to the possessions of the new and rightful owner. ... Now it seemed strange already filled with another life' (Brookner 234). Exiled from his own home, outcast once more he gives way as his family had to flee in front of Nazi Germany.

## From Memento Mori to The Triumph of Death

- 21 For if ruin is heralded on an individual level, it is also that of a family, of a nation and even of a part of 'humankind'. The end of a man and of his family (he is the last survivor) is bound to that of the last century's traumatic History.
- 22 All through the novel runs the red thread of the Second World War horrors, the Shoah and their apocalyptic consequences. Covertly, in allusions discreetly scattered here and there the novel reconstructs the story of the family of Jewish exiles in London.<sup>3</sup> Oblique references to 'the other' religion, the 'other' country, Berlin, Baden-Baden and a looming threat are made. Herz repeatedly defines himself as an exile, a survivor, whose 'feeling



that he had escaped still puzzled him'. He evokes his family's exodus the 'maelstrom of their changing fortunes' and 'was grateful that [his grandparents] had died naturally, in their own house, a fate denied to so many of their kind' (Brookner 106). On the eve of leaving for Switzerland, he grasps the meaning of his place in his own people's history contrary to Fanny who, safely in Switzerland, 'had dropped out of history' (Brookner 167):

He saw that he had lived his life as if he were under threat, as if he still bore the marks of that original menace, and of the enormity of the fate that might have been his. This, he was convinced, made transience the only option, exile, impermanence, the route indicated for him so long ago. And it had taken a lifetime for him to understand this! At last he would take his place in history. In making his home in a country famed for its neutrality he would be obeying ancestral impulses. In that direction lay the safety he might yet come to desire. (Brookner 182)

- 23 The Herz family will die out, Herz being childless. By leaving Berlin, Julius's well-off bourgeois parents who used to go to Baden-Baden every year, lost their social status and were condemned to live in smaller and smaller flats they owed to one of their relations, Ostrovki, till they ended up in cramped surroundings in the flat above Ostrovki's record shop that Julius's father (then Julius) kept—an irony of fate as the other son of the family, Freddy once was cast in the role of a prodigal violinist. When Ostrovski feels too old for business, Herz must stop working in his shop. But once more Ostrovski provides for him and helps him buy a small flat. The Herz are described as apathetic people, depending on others, leading a restricted social life. With Bijou Frank, an old friend from Germany, they used to meet every Friday night. The British kept away from those they saw as Germans. Cast aside of British society, financially and socially frustrated, physically ruined, the family gradually weakened. Herz's favourite writer, Thomas Mann, one of whose short stories he reads, enables him to find refuge in a lost but still remembered past. He recommends Fanny the reading of the *Buddenbrooks*, another story of a decadent family. The two brothers, Freddy, the artist, and Julius, the shopkeeper, both represent the two sides of one coin, as was often the case in Jewish middle (and upper) class families as Stephan Zweig recalls in *Le monde d'hier*, his autobiography and his last book.<sup>4</sup> A fact we also find in the family of another Jewish artist who also met a tragic destiny. Félix Nussbaum: he the painter, and Justus his brother who was a business man.
- 24 For what this novel stages, thanks to the 'domestic genre' (see Lloyd) of this particular type of still life painting *memento mori*, is the end of a man and the greater ruin of humanism: the catastrophe of the 20th century. This *memento mori* which reminds one of his doom is on a par with another pictorial form, that of *The Triumph of Death*. A medieval pictorial representation of horror, it is taken up by Félix Nussbaum in 1943, as an echo of Picasso's *Guernica*, which the painter had seen. Death under the shape of an orchestra composed of a dozen skeletons in rags, is making an awful noise under the guise of giving a deafening concert, while tramping the instruments of knowledge, measure (time), communication (telephone, games), creation and culture (paintings, statues, films, music), all kinds of objects we could find in other vanities such as *The Ambassadors* as well as in Dürer's *Melancholia*. One of the skeletons, its hand holding its head, stands in the attitude typical of *acedia*. Frightened kites fly away while planes menacingly appear: they have the same triangular shape as the light windpowered toys.
- 25 Félix Nussbaum<sup>5</sup> painted a premonition of extermination: exiled in Belgium when Hitler came in power, he was held in the camp for Jewish people in St Cyprien, France, in 1940. He managed to escape during his transfer to Germany and led a hidden life in Belgium. He painted his experience in the camp which strongly resembled extermination camps

where he would end up after being denounced on August 2 1944. He thus 'renders' what was impossible to do: a pictorial testimony as an anticipation of what was and would be going on. The irrepresentable for a Jewish painter in a concentration camp, for the painter had no access to the necessary material and being quickly killed he could not leave a pictorial trace. Photographs, poems written in pencil, even drawings have reached us, like those of Zoran Music in Dachau, some made in diluted ink to make it last longer. We do have here a surviving image 'in spite of it all'<sup>6</sup> showing the particular status of painting and giving Nussbaum's work its singular value. That of nostalgia, horror, degradation and the irrepresentable by the one who, put on the last convoy from Belgium on 31st July 1944, would be assassinated in Auchwitz two days later just before the arrival of the Allies.

- 26 Herz and his family thought they had found refuge in Great Britain but *et in Arcadia*, in Arcady too death is: although they were refugees and escaped their people's catastrophe, they were marked by their terrible history. None of them would escape eventually.<sup>7</sup>

## Coupling Text and Image

- 27 Let us now try a return to intermedial criticism. What kind of conclusion can we derive from this essay which draws its inspiration from the modelling power of images? I have tried to show it might be possible to see the genre of the *memento mori* as formally and thematically shaping a literary work. Bringing it the superimposition of 'double exposure', 'double vision' realizing the 'pictorial third' at work in *memento mori*: between enunciation and image. The reading of the text strongly imbued with pictorial presence as numerous references to painting accompany Herz's course, provoke a 'voyure' effect, a kind of mark on the reader's inner eye something in-between what s/he is reading and what s/he sees in his/her mind's eye. In-between, an image finds its own space in the third space of the pictorial what I call 'the pictorial third'. Neither text nor image but word/image, it is a phenomenon which pertains to intermedial reading, like a remanence, a trace, a double vision or 'double exposition' that of superimposition in photography, the surviving of image in the reading activity. Death here plays the part of the main organizer of the text, of what shapes it in the manner typical of *memento mori*: the seizure of the reader/spectator, ambiguity, disjunction, fright, the revelation of truth, which delineate an aesthetic experience of anguish common to both artistic forms. To give up this dimension would mean giving up the intrinsic dimension of some texts strongly pregnant with the visual.
- 28 If 'the spectator of *memento mori* is an immobile traveller . . . who crosses as a mere visitor the lands of the condemned'<sup>8</sup> in *The Next Big Thing*, Herz stands up to enter a journey which will be the last one, a condemned man too. This traveller seized by the Other attempts to move one more step further but collapses. And with him his memory flickers out. Something has broken down . . . remains the ruin of a body that was.

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## NOTES

1. Let us recall the Victorian usage consisting in taking pictures of the dead ones and keeping them in albums.
2. Another recent novel *The Humbling*, by American writer Philip Roth, also deals with the same last erotic upsurge in the life of an old man. But this poignant book is not a *memento mori*. It is of note that although the two books exemplify a thematic closeness, they each have chosen a different way of dealing with it. Anita Brookner has definitely chosen to impart her novel with a pictorial subtext and a discreet although powerful reference to the horrors of World War II.
3. I thank Laurence Petit for pointing out Anita Brookner's very close link with the Jewish community and the presence and impact of Shoah upon her work in various ways: from the most overt to the most covert.
4. 'La volonté réelle du Juif, son idéal immanent, est de s'élever spirituellement, d'atteindre à un niveau culturel supérieur . . . même le plus misérable colporteur qui traîne sa charge par toutes les intempéries s'efforcera, au prix des plus lourds sacrifices, de faire étudier au moins un de ses fils, et l'on considère comme un titre de gloire pour toute la famille d'avoir en son sein un membre qui se distingue manifestement dans le domaine de l'esprit, un professeur, un savant, un musicien, comme si lui seul par sa réussite, les anoblissait tous. . . Si un lord Rothschild est devenu ornithologiste, un Warburg historien de l'art, un Cassirer philosophe, un Sassoon poète, ce n'est pas par hasard; ils ont tous obéi à la même tendance inconsciente à se libérer de ce qui a rétréci le judaïsme, de la froide quête de l'argent, et peut être même que par là s'exprime la secrète aspiration à échapper, par la fuite dans le spirituel, à ce qui n'est que juif, pour se fondre dans la commune humanité' (ZWEIG 26–27).
5. The work of Félix Nussbaum was exhibited in Paris during the winter 2010 at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du judaïsme.
6. See the pictures Georges Didi-Huberman evokes in *Images malgré tout*, pictures taken from inside the camps, even from inside the ovens. The picture here takes up again its value as testimony, as a quick snapshot and is not valued for its aesthetic quality (Didi-Huberman 2003). He uses them again in *Écorces*, which evokes his journey to Birkenau (DIDI-HUBERMAN 2011).
7. The whole of the Nussbaum family will be executed in Auchwitz in 1944: his parents, his brother and his wife as well as their daughter whose portrait Nussbaum painted.
8. See Delmotte 109. If this sentence is Delmotte's last one, it finds an echo in Brookner's last one ending up on Herz's last journey when he is condemned too and 'struggled mightily, exerting his last strength to join the other travellers on their journey' (BROOKNER 247).

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## ABSTRACTS

The intermedial reading of Anita Brookner's *The Next Big Thing* thanks to the aesthetic category of the *memento mori* is particularly fruitful as far as ruins are concerned. *Memento mori* is a very 'particular' kind of still life, it is also the enunciation/annunciation of impending ruin. Herz's heart, a leitmotiv in the novel (to wit onomastics), is also a focalizing point similar to the skull in its pictorial equivalent.

Together with still life and *vanitas*, *memento mori* stands in a gradation towards the macabre, ruin and utter dissolution. *The Dance of Death* and *The Triumph of Death*, both specific pictorial representation in medieval times, also figure forebodings of death. *The Next Big Thing*, built on the ruins of the Second World War, the Shoah and their consequences, conjures up their persisting images from start to finish: thus it can also partly be read as a literary actualization of a kind of Triumph of Death. A necessary line has to be drawn: on the personal level the novel is akin to *memento mori*. On the Historical level it is close to a Triumph of Death. Both are met in the notion of ruin, reminiscent of some of Nussbaum's paintings, a persecuted Jewish painter who fell a victim Nazism. The Triumph of Death plays its ugly act on a mound of ruins.

La lecture intermédiaire d'un roman d'Anita Brookner, *The Next Big Thing* à l'aide de la catégorie esthétique du *memento mori* s'avère particulièrement fructueuse en ce qui concerne la ruine. Nature morte très « particulière », le *memento mori* est aussi l'énonciation/annonciation d'une ruine prochaine. Le cœur de Herz, leitmotiv du roman, joue le rôle de point de focalisation à la place du crâne dans l'équivalent pictural.

Entre la nature morte, la vanité, et le *memento mori* se joue une gradation vers le macabre, la ruine et la dissolution finale. *La danse macabre* et *Le triomphe de la mort*, plus particuliers à l'époque médiévale, sont aussi des représentations de la mort annoncée. *The Next Big Thing* qui se construit aussi sur la Seconde Guerre mondiale, la Shoah et ses conséquences présentes comme ruines et survivances du passé *sotto voce* du début à la fin du roman, se rattacherait aussi pour partie au triomphe de la mort. On différenciera bien les deux: sur le plan de l'histoire personnelle, le roman est un *memento mori*, sur le plan de l'Histoire, il est un triomphe de la mort. Les deux se rejoignant dans la notion de ruine un peu à la manière de certaines œuvres de Nussbaum peintre juif persécuté pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le triomphe de la mort se jouant sur un champ de ruines.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** A Brookner, F. Nussbaum, intermédialité, Memento Mori, nature morte, ruine, seconde guerre mondiale, Shoah, survivance, vanité

**Keywords:** A. Brookner, intermediality, Memento Mori, persistence, ruins, still life, *vanitas*, World War II

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