

Looking at Death

Preface: I just had a party for my sixty-ninth birthday. My wife, three friends, and I sat outside in our little backyard garden, drinking champagne, eating hors d'oeuvres, and talking about death—a topic that I brought up and that I constantly steered the conversation back to when we had veered off into more lively topics, like how we ex-pats living in Spain might get our COVID vaccines. Macabre? Most certainly. But no more so than the Roman ne'er-do-well freedman Trimalchio, who gave a dinner party where a servant brought out a jointed skeleton made out of silver; the servant went around the room, placing the skeleton on everyone's table, whereupon it repeatedly folded up on itself into various gruesome poses. After this, as Trimalchio's Dinner is described in the 1st cen. AD Petronius Arbiter's fragmentary novel *Satyricon*, Trimalchio recited a poem on this *memento mori*:

Poor man is nothing in the scheme of things
And Orcus grips us and to Hades flings
Our bones! This skeleton before us here
Is as important as we ever were!
Let's live then while we may and life is dear.

So it is in this depressing, but playful, context that I conceived this essay.



Back in the day, by which I mean for 99% of the time that our human species has existed on this planet, almost everyone had seen death up close at some point in their lives. More recently, when I was growing up in the second half of the 20th century, death had become more hidden, more sequestered. But now, as the George Floyd murder has so graphically demonstrated, the technology of body cams, citizen cell phones, and the ubiquitous surveillance cameras under which urban life is now lived has transformed the American landscape to the point that we see violent death on almost a daily basis.

In earlier times, it wasn't just human death that was part of daily life. Our ancestors obviously had a closer connection than we do to the animals they ate. Whether they were Paleolithic hunters or Neolithic pastoralists, our forebearers regularly butchered, or watched being butchered, all the animals that they consumed—far different from how we pick up packages of cellophane-wrapped, de-boned meat in our grocery stores today. And for those

Paleolithic hunters, the successfully killed mammoth might come back to the campsite together with dead or dying hunters.

And, of course, with the high infant mortality rates of the past, many would have had the experience of holding a dying sibling or child in one's arms. And given all the dangers of the pre-penicillin era, especially for youths who had to hunt wild animals or go to war, or for women of child-bearing age, there were plenty of occasions when one lost older members of one's family. But the low average life expectancy we estimate for previous generations is a bit misleading; if one managed to survive one's childhood and early adulthood, one stood a good chance of living to seventy or eighty—the life-span of humans given in the Biblical *Psalms* 90:10. [In my lifetime, life expectancy rates in the US rose from seventy to eighty years.]

But now, with the COVID 19 pandemic, world life-expectancy rates are falling; in America, this lowering of life expectancy because of COVID is especially affecting Black and Latino communities, exacerbating the gap between how long people of color in the United States can expect to live and how long the white majority can expect to live. And so many of our COVID victims who perished in hospital intensive care units died and were buried alone, isolated from family members who couldn't hold their dying hands or mourn their passing.



The first death I remember seeing was Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald. It was 1963, and, as school was closed after JFK's assassination two days before, I was at home. My mother was watching television on the B&W set in the basement den. I

remember hearing her cry out and when I went down to investigate, there was Oswald slumping over, his manacled hands clutching his abdomen.



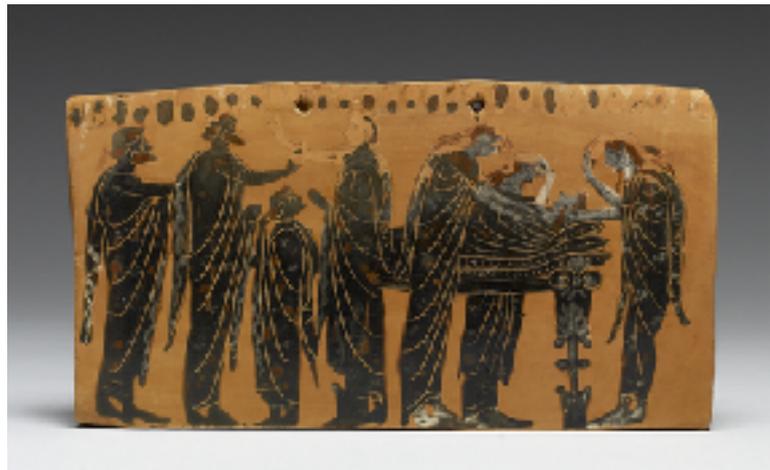
As a more-or-less typical American eleven-year-old boy, I had by that time seen plenty of fictional deaths, on TV and in comic books. But, like Wile E. Coyote being blown up by Acme dynamite or the offensive shooting of Native Americans, these depictions were clearly fictional. The coyote was always going to chase the road runner again, and the “Indians” falling off their horses were obviously stunt men. [In the culture in which I grew up, there was no talk about the genocide of Native Americans and playing “Cowboys and Indians” was acceptable, even encouraged.]

For the general American public, the assassination of JFK and the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald were quickly followed by images of death and suffering emanating from Vietnam. In 1963 we saw the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức set himself on fire in Saigon. By 1968 we had seen photographs of the South Vietnamese Gen. Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing a Vietcong officer, and the dead bodies from the My Lai massacre, only to be followed by one of the most influential photographs ever taken: the naked, napalmed, running children in Huynh Cong Ut’s 1972 *Vietnam Napalm, Trang Bang*. We did *not* see any of the 58,000 Americans who were killed in the Vietnam War, except for the flag-covered wooden coffins off-loaded at the Andrews Air Force Base. [And, now, the coffins of the dead from the endless Afghanistan War are not being filmed as they are brought back to American soil!]





The inevitability of death is a part of the human condition that has informed much of literature and art. The dead are depicted in the earliest narrative art, from the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead to Archaic Greek vase painting. As Ashby Kinch points out, Medieval Europe was especially visually haunted by the dead—by the *Imago Mortis*.



Left: Ptolemaic papyrus fragment with Anubis mummifying a corpse; Museo Castello Sforzesco, Milan. Right: Clay plaque (pinax) with Black-Figure “prothesis” scene of laying out the dead, by the Gela Painter, later 6th century BCE; Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.



At bottom left, an angel and a demon wait for him to expire on his deathbed while a woman emerging from a flower prays for him.

Detail from a Book of Hours, Spitz Master, Paris, ca. 1420. J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. 57, fol. 194.

It should go without saying that the spirit of *memento mori* can be found throughout Western literature. As Macbeth says after learning of Lady Macbeth’s death:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time.
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.



But the obscene images of Black men being killed by police using excessive force is nothing like we have ever seen before. These videos are brutal and gut-wrenching. It is inconceivable that a parent would have to watch a recording from a body cam worn by a police officer who killed his or her child. If racism in America survives by the lack of sympathy and compassion racists have to the “other,” the pain we all felt seeing George Floyd being murdered has united us to try to stop these killings and to transform the systemic racism of the country.

The new video recording technologies have spurred an introspective reflection on the probity of disseminating images of brutal death. The cruelty of having family members watch their loved ones killed by the police is now widely decried. It has been pointed out that, if Black Lives Matter, the depiction of Black death and suffering that is so pervasive in the movies and on TV shows is no longer appropriate. The author and activist William C. Anderson worries that “reproducing and repurposing brutal visuals carries the risk of desensitizing, and further reinforcing the terrorizing normalization of what shouldn’t be mundane.” On the other hand, the British scholar David Campbell argues against “conventional views that see the media as replete with images of death and thereby contributing to a diminution in the power of photography to provoke.” Campbell, instead, worries

that the intersection of three economies (the economy of indifference to others, the economy of “taste and decency” whereby the media itself regulates the representation of death and atrocity, and the economy of display governing the details of an image’s production) means we have witnessed a disappearance of the dead in contemporary coverage which restricts the possibility for an ethical politics exercising responsibility in the face of crimes against humanity.

But, even if we do succeed in making the murder of Black men by the police a thing of the past—something, like lynchings, that we only see in the history books—we are clearly going to keep on being bombarded by images of violent death that TV news hosts will preface with “these images are disturbing” trigger warnings.



The Internet has also played a role in bringing death into everyone’s home. If you google “images of death” you will be bombarded by pages of websites that collect pictures of dead people; gettyimages, for instance, lists 1,257,197 entries for “images of Death.” And, as Penelope Green has documented, a new Facebook trend is to post death photos of one’s recently departed kin.

But this recent explosion of photographs of the dead in the news and on social media is nothing new. Old 19th-century photographs of deceased young children in their coffins, like those that Michel Lesy documented in his influential 1973 book *Wisconsin Death Trip*, show that the practice of making a photographic memento of one’s dearly departed is well over a century old.

Cell phones and surveillance cameras have certainly brought death closer to home than it was in the mid-20th century, although perhaps not as much as it was in our species’ more distant past. Death is no longer hidden away like it was when the parents of my sister-in-law would not allow her or her sisters to go to funerals. Death is now part of modern life. We even have a Museum of Death, founded in 1995, whose website describes it:

Now located in Hollywood, California and New Orleans, Louisiana, the Museum of Death houses the world’s largest collection of serial killer artwork, antique funeral ephemera, mortician and coroners instruments, Manson Family memorabilia, pet death taxidermy, crime scene photographs and so much more!

So my birthday party obsession with death might not have been such an aberration after all. Still, I think that I might choose a more cheerful topic at my next birthday party.



Additional Reading

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