

## Memento Mori as “Consciousness of Mortality” and as a Cultural Phenomenon

Memento mori as a phenomenon is both a cultural product and an indicator of an existential fact. That is, along with the appearance of memento mori artifacts – including images, texts, and ideas in art history, in literature, and in particular films such as *Powers of Ten* – memento mori points to empirical death itself. To highlight artistic or cultural aspects but then overlook empirical death in regard to memento mori may be like mistaking the finger pointing to the moon in the night sky for the moon itself (an analogy that is raised in the context of Zen Buddhism; cf., e.g., Suzuki 1949, 19). As an identifiable phenomenon, memento mori relies upon human consciousness and memory in particular to bring about awareness of mortality. Granted, this awareness as well as the stark reality it presents do not come about in an unmediated way. We may highlight that, when pointing to the moon, without the finger and the person to whom it is attached (including his or her brain) the moon could not be deciphered as such.

At the same time, memento mori is also then necessarily an “artificial” human convention: an artifice with a history, or a cultural genealogy, that relies upon particular social reception. “Memento mori” is not simply “out there” in a vacuum, but rather it relates to various and specific genres, media, and material. Most of all, I suggest that a fuller understanding of memento mori, as we have begun to see in *Powers of Ten*, recognizes its operations as a composed transformative experience of the empirical and existential facts of the mortal condition.

### 3.1 Memento Mori is an Index of Death

A primary reason for memento mori’s wide appearance in art and culture, including film, owes to its indexing of the starkest limits of human existence. If, with *Saint Francis*, *Hamlet*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *Powers of Ten*, the viewer follows from the symbolism to the line of reasoning of memento mori, the viewer *really* comes into awareness of the empirical fact of dying and death. Memento mori texts and pictures point to that which is both prior to, and beyond, imagining. This is the existential or empirical reality defined by birth,

or conception, as a starting point, and death as an end point, after which there is, even for the Christian Samuel Johnson, “nothing”.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, human involvement with empirical reality, including death, is constituted for humans by human artistic convention and is not merely immediate. But once the awareness of mortality is there, given in part through memory, there is no denying the reality without absurdity, mystifying antics, and utter abnegation of intellectual responsibility. The encounter with a memento mori artifact, no matter how it happens in a particular case, is defined by its bringing one into some contact with, or offering an indication of, the reality of death. That “reality of death” is empirically real death as opposed to imagined death or death as depicted in artistic forms. And that encounter is defined by the person’s becoming conscious of the fact of his or her own mortal existence.

### 3.1.1 *Memento Mori (in Any Form) Refers to Death*

As is becoming increasingly clear, to study memento mori in a substantial way, whether in documentaries or in anywhere else, is to come into significant contact with the reality of death and its implications for life as a mortal. Most generally, and minimally, memento mori artifacts arguably share a place among other human efforts to facilitate survival. Part of their distinctiveness, however, is to directly reference the fundamental issues of survival or non-survival for human beings as individuals and as groups. In these terms, memento mori items belong to an evolutionary history, both biological and cultural, with fundamental personal and social implications. To engage a serious study of memento mori artifacts including documentaries is to engage with the starkest limitation of human biological capacity – that is, death.

Human beings have common sense about what death is, though some differences do appear in determining its significance either generally or specifically. In common understanding, what “death” means is quite straightforward, and, when someone is dead, there normally is no question that life has come to an end. Once closer attention is paid to the terminology of death, however, complexities do arise as to its precise meaning. Nevertheless, common sense is usually enough. As medical ethicist Robert M. Veatch (1989) describes,

For most of human history, of course, people have not been concerned with [the definition of death] at all. They have had a clear enough idea

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1 As a twist on this theme and noted above, Bloom (1994) has emphasized the literary artist’s effort to “evade” awareness of this reality. Other twists and turns on this theme include conceiving death as a radical material reconfiguration or hoping for, and working toward, a new form of existence, one that brings about “immortality”.