

Personal Memento Mori: The Iconic 9/11 Footage and the Threat of Death

To not cower at apparently insurmountable odds calls for courage, and the need to “hang together” and advance creative action is crucial for human life. In the context of national and global challenges, life as a mortal on a personal level is perhaps as challenging as ever, though in distinct ways from bygone eras. In this penultimate chapter, I seek to increase attention toward individual viewers as they face a threat of death.

How does each one of us assimilate the things we have experienced in life, particularly those mediated through documentaries, segments of documentaries, and documentary footage, as they present us with mortality? In this penultimate chapter I look to how the phenomenon of memento mori may strike close and how it in fact did strike close as mediated through news footage I saw in the United States on CNN a day after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City.

I discuss here the levels at which memento mori is referenced by this now iconic 9/11 footage, first as “symbolic, ideational, and composed” and then as “mediated mortality-index”. I elaborate on personally transformative points of memento mori experience as I see it and as referenced by the footage. Then, in closing, attention is turned to a prominent form of memento mori today as “death threat” in extremist YouTube videos. In the end, I suggest, perhaps there is nothing more clarifying and motivating in life than the threat of death.

7.1 The Viewer as Contemplative Seer of the Threat of Death

On 12 September 2001, I sat with my sons, Nicolas and Gracey, ages 3 and almost 1 at the Comet Burger diner in Royal Oak, Michigan, USA. We ate chicken strips and peanut butter and jelly while CNN played on the overhead TV. Nico was perched on his knees on the chair so he could reach the tabletop and Gracey sat in the buggy next to the table. None of us had yet seen the footage.

The day before I had received the news from our friend Joyce who had been visiting us and got stranded in metropolitan Detroit because the airport had shut down all flights. She was catching an Amtrak train from Ann Arbor back to Denver. She called mid-morning on September 11th asking if we had heard

the news. I was at home with the boys, while Lynn, my wife, was in her first days at Cranbrook Academy of Art. I turned the radio low and never turned on the television, hoping to shield my boys from scenes of catastrophic death.

But the next day, sitting at Comet Burger, we saw the footage, and I thought to myself, “This will forever change the world my boys will grow up in”. We were just three individuals among several billion that witnessed the planes crash into the World Trade Center buildings in New York by way of live or replayed footage on television and later via internet. “Never have so few people ... caused so much fear in so many”, says cognitive anthropologist Scott Atran (Malcolmson 2016; see also Atran 2010). The event of 9/11 is probably beyond any ability to adequately “interpret” it, as Jacques Derrida has suggested (Borradori 2003; cf. Elsaesser 2014, 310). Yet one powerful idea that may emerge in Western and global society from the now iconic 9/11 news footage is an aggressive *memento mori*: remember that at any time even where you least expect it, death may strike. Thus, beware. The threat is real.

7.1.1 *The 12th of September, 2001, Comet Burger Diner, USA*

When referencing news or other footage of the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York, Washington DC, and what ended up being the Pennsylvania countryside, there need not be any *one* particular filmed source, and there are many, many possible news and individual sources that could be referenced. For me, my primary source – in terms of timing, immediacy, and longevity of influence – was, is, the CNN (Cable News Network) footage I saw that morning (the day after the attack) at approximately 11 o'clock at the Comet Burger diner with my sons and now accessible on YouTube (CNN 2001, September 12).¹ By singling out the attacks on September 11th in the USA, I by no means intend to overlook or slight the many other attacks around the world and on other occasions, including but not limited to Oklahoma City (19 April 1995), Bali (12 October 2002), Madrid (11 March 2004), Amsterdam / Theo Van Gogh (2 November 2004), London (7 July 2005), Mumbai (11 July 2006), Karachi (18 October 2007), Breivik, Norway (22 July 2011), Boston (15 April 2013), Paris (13 November 2015), San Bernadino (2 December 2015), Brussels (22 March 2016), Orlando (12 June 2016), and Istanbul (1 January 2017). This is not to

1 “CNN 9/11 LIVE TV Coverage (9/12/01) 10:45 A.M – 11:00 A.M”, posted by The 9112001 on 9 January 2012. From the Cable News Network. Retrieved at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJeqN_-QvpU on 19 September 2016. [Images starting at 4:20 / 14:59.] Incidentally, Royal Oak, Michigan, in metropolitan Detroit, was known in those years for Dr. Jack Kevorkian and his efforts toward assisted suicide for patients that sought him out (Lessenberry 2016, 20), sometimes referred to as Dr. Death.