

Conclusion and Future Prospects

In the preceding chapters, *memento mori* has been identified as a broad, cultural phenomenon and experience, particularly in relation to documentaries, segments of documentaries, and select footage. Here one finds a sound basis for the study of *memento mori* beyond what ordinarily has been conducted in relation to particular *memento mori* items only. The terminology of “*memento mori*” has been drawn into the purview of a contemporary phenomenological rhetorical method that makes use of a classic schema for sorting out human experience and consciousness. This contemporary appropriation of a classic schema takes “fundamental” levels of human experience and consciousness as dynamic, not static, and transformative in ways that are thematized as intellectual, ethical, and affective.

Memento mori has been shown to appear widely in artistic and cultural history, well beyond medieval European folk culture that was understandably obsessed with the Plague. Importantly, *memento mori* also has been shown as a phenomenon that has a place far beyond that of a counterpart or footnote to the *vanitas* tradition, most often identified in art historical literature with sixteenth and seventeenth century Dutch still lifes and portraiture. Rather, as a cultural phenomenon and experience, *memento mori* assumes newfound, well-justified, and much overdue recognition. The next step in this effort could be a full, comprehensive study purely of *memento mori* not limiting one’s scope to particular items such as corpses or skulls as Koudounaris (2015) has done or to documentaries as I have done here. While that complete study of *memento mori* is beyond the scope of what has been accomplished here, this book sets good ground for this follow-up for whoever might be interested in doing it.

The present study also has shown that a particular form of *memento mori* may be pursued and how fruitful insights can come of it. In this case, a simple idea that perhaps should have been elaborated long ago finally is elaborated – that is, that documentaries are a contemporary form of *memento mori*. Furthermore, as a prime example of *memento mori*, it has been suggested that *documentaries offer a composed transformative experience in which the viewer is given occasion to renew consciousness of mortality*. My guess is that this assertion will be found as commonsensical to many people, yet now there is an analytical, critical, and philosophical case for sustaining that common sense. Likewise, lines of critiquing common sense ideas about documentaries have

been explicitly pursued to draw common sense into more critical thinking about documentaries within the context of contemporary philosophy of film and film theory.

8.1 *After Death in Documentaries*

Here I have shown that, as a broad cultural phenomenon, *memento mori* may be identified not only in religious imagery, still life, and portraiture, but also as a “visual quotation” that exists very widely in art, including photography and film, and in culture, including popular and ordinary imagery from the ordinary lives of individuals, their groups, and their environments. We have seen that *memento mori* can be identified not only as a verbatim quote, as picture nomenclature, or as a verbal instruction, but also an ideational reference that appears very widely in Western literature and culture, with a special emphasis on its appearance in film. A very interesting next step to a project such as this could be to explore non-Western traditions and culture, or those that overlap with the traditions that I have mentioned but that deserve focused attention in their own right. For instance, a full comparative study of *memento mori* tradition could be developed to include Arabic, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, African, and Native American or indigenous cultures, just to name a few. I do not doubt that the findings would be fascinating. Koudounaris (2015) has initiated this effort covering, among others, traditions from Egypt, Ethiopia, and Thailand.

Above also, I have presented a preliminary attempt to *theorize or philosophize memento mori*. I have argued that *memento mori* operates as an “index of death” or “mortality-index”, by which I have meant that *memento mori* really refers to death – while at the same time, the referencing of mortality or death relies upon human consciousness and is a human convention. We have seen how it may be useful and instructive to discuss *memento mori* in these terms, in part, as an exercise in sorting out the rhetorical status of epistemological claims and, at the same time, the epistemological status of rhetorical claims. For example, we discussed *memento mori* as an artifice with a history or cultural genealogy that relies upon particular social reception and relates to various and specific genres, media, and material. Throughout, it has been suggested that this “artifice” is not only no less real than what would not be an artifice, but that that artifice is part and parcel of what constitutes reality for human beings in the first place. As an inkling of where this thought could go next, one could get a hint from Noonan, Little, and Kerridge (2013) on what they call a “neo-*memento mori*”: a notion of *memento mori* within Baudrillard’s hyper-real proliferation of simulacra. Then again most will not be