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Return of the memento mori: Imaging death in public health

Estelle Noonan, Miles Little, Ian Kerridge, 2013

Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine (VELiM), Sydney University, Sydney, NSW
2006, Australia

Corresponding author: Estelle Noonan, estelle.noonan@sydney.edu.au

Death has always held a morbid fascination for humans. Indeed, awareness of one's own mortality may well be one of the defining features of the 'human condition' – symbols of death appearing in most civilizations since artefacts have been made. The Latin phrase *memento mori*, meaning literally 'remember to die', encapsulates a rich and varied artistic tradition, dating back to the Middle Ages, of figuring death by symbolizing its literal processes and remainders. From the decomposed effigies of 15th-century 'cadaver tombs', to the humorous medieval iconography of the skeletal *dance macabre*, the works of this genre draw on the destructive physical changes that are a part of our understanding of death. Prolific within its morbid imagery are the use of skull, skeleton and verminous or rotting flesh as 'trope' or symbol of the processes that eventually take away the person who lived, and who was once like us.

At the height of its popularity between the 16th and 18th centuries, Church walls, tombs, jewellery, paintings, and so on frequently depicted death and decay. The entreaty to 'remember' death in *memento mori* was more than simply a call for 'therapeutic contemplation'¹ or the banal acceptance of the imminence of death; it was a call to piety, to conformity. Damnation would be added to death if the individual transgressed the rules of Catholic doctrine, such that scholars often trace a continuity between the motives of *memento mori*, and the biblical injunction: 'Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end, and thou shalt never do amiss' (Ecclesiasticus 7:36).² Even within the iconophobic Protestantism of the post-Reformation era, the *memento mori* trope persisted as a privileged mode of pious warning. In the visually secular effigy monuments of the Elizabethan gentry, inscriptions urging the reader to '(r)emember the last things and...not sin again' signified that death would come to everyone – but only spiritual public health would reduce the risk of eternal punishment and separation from God.³

The *memento mori* trope survives into the present day, albeit in differing locations. Loosely discernible in the 'corpse chic' of contemporary haute couture, and entrenched within the aesthetics of punk and gothic subcultures, the skull and skeleton loom large as Western symbols of cultural rebellion.⁴ Similarly, the fully enflashed 'corpse' continues to haunt the zone of

contemporary representation – saturating the realm of Hollywood film and ‘hard news’ reportage alike, and asserting its dominance in forensics-inspired television programmes such as CSI. Representing death, it would seem, has never been more popular. Indeed, depictions of death have emerged as ‘mainstream advertising strategy’⁴ – their gore and horror satisfying a perverse voyeurism that many would attribute to the alienating effects of mass media saturation. While the ‘pornography’ of suffering⁵ in contemporary culture appears to have little in common with classical *memento mori*, if one looks closely, certain elements particular to this once-spiritual genre of death depiction can be unearthed, most notably in the secular arena of public health.

In contemporary health policy, the spiritual is, unsurprisingly, secondary to the corporeal, and the emphasis has shifted from avoiding damnation to deferring death itself. Nonetheless, there are visible continuities between these differing approaches to depicting death. Both infuse aesthetics with a moral and disciplinary logic – portraying death in order to provoke conformity with doctrine. Sin, it would seem, has been replaced with ‘risk’, where the modern message of public health promises that you, the watcher, can avoid this particular mode of death, if and only if you follow the instructions of the secular scientific authorities. Don’t smoke. Eat well. Drink ‘sensibly’. Attend cancer screening checks. And comply with medical advice.

Both genres also rely on gruesome imagery of death and dying to make their point. As with the classical *memento mori*, the message of deferring death in contemporary fear campaigns is often conveyed by ‘graphic images’⁶ and ‘fearsome metaphors’.⁷ Consider the following Australian examples: the lights go out in the brain of a drunken driver whose car crashes; a large sponge drains cigarette tar from a smoker’s lung into a beaker; a surgeon shows us a lung cancer through an endoscope and tells us that he ‘can’t operate’; a neurosurgeon in an advertisement for safe driving tells us he wishes he ‘wasn’t in this ad’; a gangrenous foot makes a brief appearance on the leg of a smoker; a brain-damaged girl warns us that smoke alarms may prevent deaths from house fires; and, in an infamous 1980s advertisement, a 10-pin bowling Grim Reaper reappears from the bowels of the traditional *memento mori* to ‘strike’ down men, women and children with AIDS.⁸ Similar messages have been reinforced by print and online media, and also cigarette packaging – recently stripped of its conventional ‘branding’ in Australia, such that images of the sick, dead and dying now occupy the commercial icon’s place.⁹

The deathly images described above invite us to contemplate our mortality. To this extent, their objectives remain consistent with the classical *memento mori*. And yet there is a curious and fundamental paradox that pervades the realm of the contemporary *memento mori* alone: whereas the historic *memento mori* draws its moral force from the universal inevitability of death, its present-day counterpart relies on an ethic of disavowal.¹⁰ Death, says the fear campaign, will happen to this person – but it will not happen to you, if you do as required. This is the logic deployed in a 2010 US anti-tobacco advertisement that pits viewing population against individual sufferer when it depicts a man merely hours, perhaps minutes, from death [<http://www.watoday.com.au/lifestyle/diet-and-fitness/cigarette-packages-to-show-corpses-20101111-170jy.html>].¹¹

In the image of this skeletal man, his eyes staring into the middle-distance, glassy, vacant and seemingly unable to meet our own, the accompanying epitaph – ‘Warning: cigarettes cause cancer’ – presents an individual’s death as contraindication. Our encounter with the image provokes something subtler and more evasive than ‘staring death in the face’. In the invitation to heed another’s demise we become conscious of death at the very moment where we would wish to place it at a distance. Indeed, this is precisely the psychological mechanism on which successful fear tactics are said to rely, mobilizing the fearful image so as to provoke disidentification and subsequent rejection of the behaviours perceived to have caused it.¹²

In the language of terror-management-theory (TMT), a branch of social psychology, this moment of refusal or turning away from the image, can be characterized in terms of ‘mortality salience’ – a defensive response to the encounter with death that is conceptually and psychologically distinct from ‘death salience’.¹³ Mortality salience, says TMT, is to acknowledge the theoretical, probably remote, reality of our own deaths. It is to view a map of the ground over which we must travel to reach that point. Death salience, in contrast, is the experience of being on the ground, and viewing the cairn that marks our end. One is conceptual; the other real. Graphic social marketing advertisements depicting death and dying may purport to evoke the real, to put us in touch with the medical possibility of a death sentence. However, they also rely (perhaps optimistically) on our desire to refuse this recognition, and with it death itself, by an insidious equivalence of healthy behaviour with death-avoidance. Death deferred by compliance: this is the memento mori in its contemporary form. This is the realm of the neo-memento.

Recognizing the contemporary neo-memento as connected with, yet distinct, from its historic predecessor, allows us to reframe longstanding questions surrounding the ethics of social marketing aesthetics in productive ways. Whereas the traditional memento mori relied on the individual artisan’s capacity to render death’s likeness, the neo-memento relies on the techniques of infinite reproduction that define the work of art under capitalism – the techniques of photography, film and (more recently) digital media.¹⁴ The neo-memento genre can be understood in relation to a general 20th-century move towards increased and widely disseminated ‘graphicality’, in which nightly images of death and disaster were made part of everyday expectation, and yet also curiously removed from the realm of everyday experience. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has described this paradox using the terms ‘simulacrum’ and ‘hyperreal’, which he uses to describe the play of media images or ‘simulations’ that pervert, mask, or entirely dispense with any relation to the reality of the things to which they refer.¹⁵ Saturated with media images which parrot the stereotypical words and images of previous stories to convey apparently new events as ‘fact’, he says, a ‘crisis’ of contemporary representation has opened up in which our connection with the materiality of the image (i.e. what it literally depicts), and even with history itself, has been eradicated.¹⁵

Let us accept, just for a moment, that the death images portrayed in fear campaigns can be understood within this broader mass media context of the ‘hyperreal’. If we do this, then we must confront moral questions surrounding the capacity of the neo-memento to distance us from the lived experience of the dying men and women it portrays, not only psychologically, but also at the level of the image itself. Beyond oft-posed questions around ‘effectiveness’ and potential desensitization from fear campaigns, lurk profound questions regarding the alienation

from self and others that circulates alongside the reproducible death imagery of public health. In the era of the neo-memento we must continue to probe the relation between means and ends in the struggle to raise health awareness. In particular, we must attend to the timeliness of Baudrillard's warning – that in a society where artifice lies at the heart of aesthetic and social reality, our images will need to drive towards increasing degrees of graphicality to do their work.¹⁶ In a paradigm where the deathly image is *de rigueur*, what more can public health portray? What moral wounds might we incur in the visual battle to elicit death 'saliency'?

Finally, we must ask ourselves about the seemingly paradoxical purposes of the neo-memento, which endeavours to defer by representing death. It is possible that we have lost integrity in the transformation of the memento mori from death reminder, to symbol of death's ultimate preventability.¹⁷ As we have always known, the Grim Reaper does not discriminate. For all of us, our time will come, where the traditional memento mori, on some level, invited us to prepare for this transition. We would do well to consider what is lost by turning away from the original injunction to 'remember to die' and perhaps, also, against death itself.

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