

# The Concept of “Memento Mori” and the Photographic Documentation of Death

## “Memento Mori” Kavramı ve Ölümün Fotoğrafik Belgesi

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### ABSTRACT

Some concepts in human life have continuously occupied a place in individuals' minds due to their profound meanings. Some of these concepts do not remain solely at an individual level but also hold significant importance at a societal level, even becoming fundamental elements that shape societies' value judgments, cultural norms, and daily life practices. In this context, the concept of death stands out as one of the most fundamental phenomena that has profoundly influenced both individuals' mental worlds and social structures throughout human history. It is a concept that prompts existential questioning, influences the construction of social order, and affects both individual and collective levels deeply. Based on this foundation, this research employs qualitative research methods. In addition to literature and document reviews, qualitative data analysis methods have been utilized. The study focuses on the concepts of death and *memento mori*, examining them in detail. Furthermore, notable examples of oral and visual representations throughout human history have been analyzed. The power of photography to compellingly reflect the reality of life has been associated with the *memento mori* concept. Accordingly, in the history of photography, interpretations have been made based on representations that can be considered photographic documentation of death.

**Keywords:** Photography, Memento Mori, Death, Post-Mortem, Documentary Photography

### ÖZ

İnsan yaşamında yer alan bazı kavramlar, sahip oldukları derin anlamlar nedeniyle bireylerin zihninde sürekli yer edinmiştir. Bu kavramların bir kısmı, yalnızca bireysel boyutta kalmayıp toplumsal düzeyde de önemli bir yer edinmiş, hatta toplumların değer yargılarını, kültürel normlarını ve gündelik yaşam pratiklerini şekillendiren temel unsurlar haline gelmiştir. Bu bağlamda ölüm kavramı, insanlık tarihinin her döneminde bireylerin zihin dünyasını olduğu kadar toplumsal yapıları da derinden etkileyen, hayatın anlamını sorgulatan ve toplumsal düzeni inşa eden en temel olgulardan biri olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Hem bireysel hem de kolektif düzeyde derin etkiler yaratan bu kavram, insanın varoluşsal kaygılarına cevap aradığı ve aynı zamanda toplumsal normlarla şekillenen bir olgu olarak kendini göstermektedir. Bu temelden yola çıkılarak gerçekleştirilen bu araştırmada, nitel araştırma yöntemlerine yer verilmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında, literatür ve doküman taramalarına ek olarak nitel veri analizi yöntemlerine başvurulmuştur. Araştırmanın odak noktasını ölüm ve *memento mori* kavramları oluşturmakta olup, bu kavramlar detaylı bir şekilde incelenmiştir. Bunun yanı sıra, araştırmada insanlık tarihinde öne çıkan sözlü ve görsel temsil örnekleri analiz edilmiştir. Fotoğrafın, yaşamın gerçekliğini etkileyici bir biçimde yansıtmaya gücü, *memento mori* kavramıyla ilişkilendirilmiş ve bu doğrultuda fotoğraf tarihinde, ölümün fotoğrafik belgesi olarak nitelendirilebilecek temsiller üzerinden çıkarımlar yapılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Fotoğraf, Memento Mori, Ölüm, Post-Mortem, Belgesel Fotoğraf

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## Introduction

Throughout human history, the individual's limited existence between life and death has been a stage for an ongoing struggle under the shadow of the unknown. In this process, the ways in which humankind copes with the fear of death have varied depending on societal and cultural codes; individuals' cultural myths, beliefs, and traditions have played a decisive role in addressing this fear. The concept of death, in light of all these factors, has been examined from philosophical, psychological, sociological, cultural, literary, and artistic perspectives for centuries and has been interpreted within different disciplines. During this journey, people have produced various verbal and visual representations of the theme of death, and these forms of representation have established a common ground for expression through intercultural dialogue. One of the remarkable elements among these representations is the concept of *memento mori*, which serves as a reminder of the inevitability of death.

Particularly prominent in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, *memento mori* is a deeply meaningful idea that calls people to distance themselves from worldly ambitions and prioritize spiritual values. This understanding has influenced fundamental areas of human thought and creativity, such as art, literature, and philosophy, gaining a significant position in these disciplines. In works dealing with humanity's existential anxieties and confrontation with death, *memento mori* has functioned both as a thematic cornerstone and as a moral lesson. By reminding individuals of the transience of life and the necessity of accepting death as a natural phenomenon, it encourages them to embrace life with a spiritual perspective. This notion not only advocates for accepting death but also promotes making one's lifetime conscious and meaningful. Thus, *memento mori* emphasizes the importance of cherishing every moment of life and guiding one's existence with this awareness. With its multidimensional thought system, *memento mori* has created a deep cultural layer within social life, becoming a doctrine that reshapes the socio-cultural structures of individuals and communities. As a result, *memento mori* has become an integral part of daily life throughout history, serving as a guiding principle that supports humanity's effort to make sense of its temporary existence.

### Methods

In order to interpret the social world from various perspectives, it is essential to effectively utilize theoretical approaches within the social sciences today. In this context, this study aims to comprehensively examine the subject using qualitative research methods. In addition to different conceptual definitions of the *memento mori* concept, oral representations from Roman, Egyptian, and Turkish civilizations have been reviewed, and the findings obtained have been analyzed and shared.

Beyond oral representations, visual representation examples were also examined to explore the subject in greater depth, and visual data were collected within this framework. Specifically, examples containing the *memento mori* theme were selected from artworks such as miniatures, paintings, sculptures, and mosaics from the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods in art history. The selected examples were interpreted using iconographic analysis for data analysis purposes (Duncum, 2016, p. 12). During the interpretation process of visual data, the influence of subjective approaches was evaluated, and different perspectives were considered in the analysis. In this context, it can be said that the process of data analysis and interpretation is one of the most fundamental and distinguishing elements of qualitative research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018, pp. 237-238). In line with the applied methods,

the analyses conducted using visual representation tools from various disciplines have further expanded the conceptual framework of the study.

Another significant finding of the study is related to the photographic representation of the phenomenon of death, revealing how these representations have been shaped within cultural, historical, and artistic contexts. Within this framework, images representing the moment of death from the history of photography were examined, and appropriate example photographs were selected and analyzed. The obtained visual data were approached with a documentary perspective, leading to detailed photographic interpretations. Within the scope of these interpretations, the selected visual examples were associated with the *memento mori* concept, allowing for a comprehensive examination of its representation in the photographic medium.

### Memento Mori as a Concept and Its Oral-Visual Representations in History

The Latin term *memento mori* has been translated into English as "remember mortality" or, in a more direct expression, "remember that you must die" (Bennett-Carpenter, 2017, p. 2). In Turkish, this concept has found a place in socio-cultural life with expressions such as "remember death" or "remember that you are mortal" (Yöndemli, 2007, p. 140). Beyond its literal meaning, *memento mori* has been established throughout history as a system of thought emphasizing the inevitability of life's end. It has appeared as a symbol, motif, or narrative device in various events, situations, and works of art. These metaphorical representations have served as reminders of life's transitory nature for individuals and societies, bringing the often-forgotten notion of death back into awareness.

On the other hand, Western philosophy has conducted significant analyses regarding the impact of death on individual existence. For example, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, emphasized that people have not yet come to see death as a celebration and stated that for death to be embraced as a festivity, individuals must live their lives with complete awareness (Nietzsche, 2017, p. 84). In line with Nietzsche's view, it can be said that individuals consciously attempt to avoid thoughts of death in their daily lives. However, *memento mori*, as a doctrine that reminds one of the transience of life and the concept of nothingness, serves as a reminder that every temporary phenomenon one encounters will eventually come to an end. In contemporary social life, *memento mori* continues to exist with the same meaning, functioning as a reminder for individuals to recognize the impermanence of life and act with this awareness. Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, explains existence with the

term Dasein and argues that human existence is a structure that constantly moves toward its own death. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes death as an inseparable part of existence, defining and limiting life through death (Heidegger, 2004, pp. 339-372). Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, highlights death as an inevitable end and underscores the ultimate meaninglessness of existence (Sartre, 2010, p. 821). According to both Heidegger and Sartre, death is as natural a phenomenon as life itself, and in essence, the purpose of life is to come to an end to be completed through death.

The concept of *memento mori* has found a strong place in various cultural narratives and socio-cultural practices throughout human history. The descriptions of the Egyptian civilization by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus are significant examples regarding these concepts. According to Herodotus, during feasts in Egypt, as a person was about to leave the dining table, they were shown a wooden statue inside a coffin, realistically representing a dead person. The participants of the feast were advised to look carefully at this wooden figure and to enjoy the moment by eating and drinking, while also being reminded that one day they, too, would become lifeless just like the statue (Herodotus, 1973, pp. 163-169). This cultural practice reveals the Egyptian civilization's perspective on death; it served as a reminder to the participants of the transience of life, encouraging them to appreciate what they had. This Egyptian ritual, which intertwines daily life and the contemplation of death, represents an early example of the *memento mori* concept.

A similar expression can be found in the Orkhon Inscriptions, one of the oldest written records of oral culture. These monuments, belonging to the Turkish civilization, contain the phrase: "Öd Tengri aysar, kişi oğlu kop ölgeli törümüş", which is translated as "Only the Eternal Heaven lives forever; mankind is always created as mortal" (Radloff, 1895, pp. 28-29). This statement carries a profound meaning in Turkish culture, emphasizing the inevitability of death. The inscription serves as a reminder to Turkish society that human beings are mortal and that this reality is inescapable. Through this phrase, the ruler of the time, the Khan, conveys to his people that life is limited and transient, and that humanity is defined by its mortality. In this context, the expression in the Orkhon Inscriptions aligns with the fundamental function of the *memento mori* concept, reminding society of death and emphasizing the impermanence of existence.

An important example of *memento mori* from the Roman era can be seen in an event involving Marcus Aurelius, one of the generals of the period. During the celebrations following his victorious return from battle, a slave standing beside him and holding his crown repeatedly reminded him: "Look behind you! You are only a man; remember death" (Redwine, 1977,

p. 666). Aurelius's experience of this phrase represents the Roman understanding that, despite success, one must always remember mortality. This saying emphasizes that even in moments of triumph, a person should not ignore their own impermanence, drawing attention to the transient nature of victory, glory, and fame. Thus, the verbal representation of *memento mori* in Rome took shape as a piece of wisdom that reminded individuals of the fleeting nature of achievements and life itself. Having persisted throughout history, this concept has played a significant role in human life, shaping perspectives on existence. These examples demonstrate that the *memento mori* concept has existed with similar functions across different civilizations in human history. Spanning from Ancient Egypt to Turkish culture, from Rome to modern societies, this idea serves as a reminder of the inevitability of death, encouraging people to appreciate life and develop an awareness of its transience.

One of the most striking examples of the *memento mori* theme in cultural history is *The de Lisle Psalter*, a royal manuscript that successfully reflects the Gothic artistic style of medieval Europe and was produced during the reign of Edward II in England. The manuscript contains miniatures illustrating the story of *The Three Living and the Three Dead*, which visually express the concept of *memento mori* in a powerful way (Figure 1). The narrative follows three young noble hunters who suddenly encounter three decaying yet symbolically still "living" corpses in a forest. The young aristocrats are deeply shocked by this horrifying scene, while the corpses remind them of the transience of life, the futility of worldly values, and the inevitability of death. The corpses warn the noblemen to recognize the mistakes they have made in life and to correct their behavior while they still have time. This allegorical tale materializes the medieval notions of death and mortality through the art of miniature painting, emphasizing that death is the ultimate fate of every individual. Carefully crafted with the miniature techniques of the period, these scenes go beyond mere textual representation, using symbolic imagery as a visual form of expression. By doing so, they offer the viewer an opportunity to confront the inescapable reality of death (Bennett-Carpenter, 2017, p. 4).

### Figure 1

*Three Living and the Three Dead,*

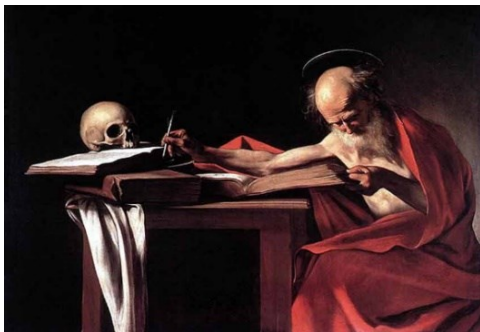


Note: *The de Lisle Psalter*, 1308-1340

The concept of memento mori has frequently appeared as a theme symbolizing awareness of the inevitability of death throughout the historical development of painting and has attracted the interest of many renowned artists. From the Middle Ages and the Renaissance onward, artists have placed this concept at the core of their works, using symbols to remind viewers of human mortality. Iconographic elements such as skulls, skeletons, hourglasses, and withered flowers were commonly used to visualize memento mori. Through these symbols, painters invited viewers to reflect on the transience of time, the limitations of life, and the inescapable reality of death. By doing so, they endowed their artworks with profound philosophical meanings beyond mere aesthetic objects (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 128; Cohen, 1973, pp. 1-11). One example of this metaphorical approach is Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's painting of Saint Jerome, created between 1605-06, which remains one of the iconic figures of Western painting (Figure 2). In this work, Saint Jerome is depicted in his secluded study, working on a sacred text and preparing to take notes. The table, adorned with books symbolizing knowledge and divine enlightenment, and Saint Jerome himself are highlighted by light, while the rest of the scene is shrouded in deep darkness. This use of light and shadow, characteristic of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro technique, adds a dramatic depth to the space and emphasizes the illumination of spiritual wisdom. A strikingly placed skull on the table serves as an iconographic representation of the memento mori concept. The skull urges viewers to contemplate the transience of human life and the inevitability of death while symbolically conveying that sacred knowledge transcends time and that God's words remain eternal. Through this iconographic composition, Caravaggio contrasts human mortality with divine wisdom, suggesting that the pursuit of sacred knowledge signifies a process of enlightenment independent of the material world (De Rynck, 2016, pp. 224-225).

**Figure 2**

*Saint Jerome Writing*



Note: Da Caravaggio, 1605-06

With the Age of Enlightenment, the emergence of realistic and dynamic styles in painting, combined with symbolic narratives, added a rich dimension to the artistic structure of

the period (Hodge, 2022, p. 88). Alongside these symbolic expressions in painting, similar examples can also be found in sculpture, and the memento mori concept can be associated with many significant works throughout world art history. One of the most striking representations of this concept in sculpture is found in the works of Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, renowned for his flawless anatomical precision. Michelangelo completed his Pietà between 1498 and 1500, a masterpiece that earned him great fame and is considered the first major work of his career (Ormiston, 2014, pp. 32-33). In Pietà (Figure 3), the Virgin Mary is depicted as a young woman, symbolizing her representation as an embodiment of unblemished purity and an eternally youthful divine being. Jesus, the source of knowledge that would lead humanity to enlightenment, is portrayed lifeless in Mary's arms. Michelangelo blends themes of death and youth with notions of fate and beauty, creating a deeply symbolic narrative (Farthing, 2017, p. 167). Although Jesus is a figure who conveys divine wisdom to humanity, his confrontation with death serves as a depiction of the impermanence of life. In this context, Michelangelo's Pietà can be interpreted as a powerful representation of the memento mori concept, reminding viewers of the inevitability of death and the finality of mortal existence.

**Figure 3**

*The Pietà*



Note: Michelangelo, 1498-1500

In 2013, a partially preserved figurative floor mosaic was discovered during a rescue excavation carried out by the Hatay Archaeology Museum. This mosaic provides a significant representation of the socio-cultural life and mindset of Late Antiquity. Decorated with symbolic depictions, the mosaic is particularly noteworthy for its visual expression of the memento mori concept (Figure 4). The mosaic portrays a skeleton figure reclining on a cushion while holding a goblet. Additional elements such as an amphora and bread are depicted beside the skeleton, forming other symbolic components of the artwork. At the top of the mosaic, the inscription appears in two parts as "EYΦPO" and "CYNOC," forming the word EYΦPOCYNOC, which derives from the root Euphro and translates to "rejoice" or "enjoy" (Pamir & Sezgin, 2016, pp. 260-265). Considering that the

average human lifespan in Late Antiquity was significantly shorter than in the modern world, the message conveyed by the mosaic emphasizes the necessity of living joyfully while remembering the inevitability of death. This symbolic approach has solidified its place in history as an artistic and cultural reflection of the memento mori concept.

**Figure 4**

*Floor Mosaic*



Note: Hatay Archaeology Museum, M.S. 276-337

### The Photographic Document of Death

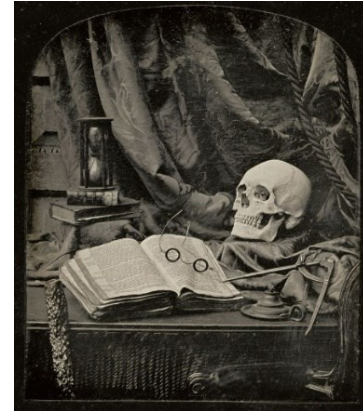
Throughout art history, artistic works have been used as a means of constructing socio-cultural life, contributing to the representation of daily existence through various art forms such as painting, miniature, sculpture, or mosaic. However, fully capturing the multifaceted and complex nature of life through art is a challenging task. A painter or sculptor can only depict a specific aspect or a limited fragment of life. In contrast, due to its direct relationship with reality, photography holds a privileged position in representation. From its invention, photography has carried the quality of “evidence” and, as art critic Susan Sontag describes it, serves as a “visual document that shows what reality is” (Sontag, 2011, p. 27). With this inherent quality of reality, photography provides viewers with direct and explicit information about events or situations. In this context, photography functions not only as a work of art but also as a powerful form of documentation, preserving and conveying past events with strong evidentiary value.

Humanity’s relentless pursuit of reality, its desire to seek, follow, and present it as evidence, can be attributed to its inherent drive to gain more knowledge about life and to prove its existence. The power of photography to verify and provide evidence makes the photographic representation of one of life’s unavoidable truths—death—an important subject of exploration. Throughout the history of photography, the memento mori concept has been explored across different periods by various artists, standing out as one of the significant themes that, through its realism, evidential nature, and representational power, has shaped the artistic and intellectual landscape of its time. In this context, *The Sands of Time*, a photograph created by Thomas Richard

Williams, emerges as one of the most striking examples of this concept (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*The Sands of Time*



Note: Williams, 1855

Williams’ work stands out with its still-life elements and draws its foundations from the still-life painting tradition that was widely practiced in Northern Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries (Lewis, 2018, p. 48). The elements within the composition of the photograph were carefully selected and arranged by the artist. In particular, objects such as the skull and hourglass carry profound philosophical meanings rooted in the symbolism of allegorical tradition (Cohen, 1973, pp. 1-11; Hacking, 2015, p. 65; Wilkinson, 2011, p. 128). A closer examination of these symbols reveals that the flowing sand in the hourglass signifies the impermanence of life and serves as a reminder that everyone will ultimately reach this inevitable end. The skull on the table directly represents the memento mori concept, reminding individuals of their mortality and the transient nature of life. Additionally, the prominently placed book highlights the knowledge one can acquire throughout a lifetime, while the glasses on the top of the book symbolize the inevitable changes that occur over time in human life. All these elements in the composition prompt the viewer to contemplate the meaning of life in the face of death’s inevitability. At the same time, they serve as a reminder that individuals should make the most of their time. In this context, the underlying message of the photograph can be interpreted through a semiotic reading as: “Use your time wisely, for it is not infinite and will continue to flow irreversibly” (Hacking, 2015, p. 64). Williams’ *The Sands of Time* transcends the realm of mere artistic creation, functioning as a profound intellectual tool that explores human existence and the connections between life and death. As an artistic representation of the memento mori concept, the photograph seeks to raise awareness of the inevitability of death on both an individual and societal level while simultaneously offering a powerful philosophical commentary on the fleeting nature of life.

A critical period for the birth and development of photography took place between 1800 and 1900, during the reign of Queen Victoria of England (Otter, 2008, pp. 22-61). This era was marked by advancements in photographic techniques, diversification of aesthetic perspectives, and an intense artistic production that significantly shaped the future of photography (Bate, 2009, pp. 26-27; Green-Lewis, 2017, pp. 21-34; Honour & Fleming, 2016, pp. 681-685). The Victorian Era is recognized as a time of profound transformation in photography, both in terms of aesthetics and content, and one of the most striking approaches that emerged within this transformation was post-mortem photography. The term post-mortem literally means "after death," and in the context of photography, it refers to the practice of photographing deceased individuals. Influenced by the socio-cultural structure of the period, this practice was adopted as a way for grieving families to commemorate and remember their lost loved ones (Harris, 2020, pp. 20-39; Smith, 2018, p. 165). Within the cultural codes of the Victorian Era, such photographs were regarded as a means of remembrance and immortalization, becoming a widely accepted tradition in society. One of the most notable works of this period is *Fading Away*, a photograph by Henry Peach Robinson, which reflects the Victorian approach to post-mortem photography (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Fading Away*



*Note:* Robinson, 1858

The photograph depicts a young girl suffering from tuberculosis spending her final moments with her family. For Victorian-era viewers, this image was seen as a striking representation that reminded them of the disturbing reality of a fatal illness (Hacking, 2015, p. 113; Hirsch, 2017, p. 126; Marien, 2018, p. 88). However, unlike many other death-themed photographs of the period, Robinson's work was entirely staged (Clarke, 2017, p. 51). For audiences of that time, such photographs could be interpreted as memento mori, serving as reminders of the inevitability of death. Additionally, they placed the concepts of death and mourning within an aesthetic framework, making them a part of social norms and rituals. While visual representations of death were considered an ordinary practice in the

Victorian era, modern audiences often perceive such images as both a violation of privacy and an unsettling reminder of mortality. However, during the Victorian period, this practice was widely accepted as a societal norm and was used as a way to honor the memory of the deceased with aesthetic elegance (Del Peru et al., 2005, p. 3). Robinson's *Fading Away* serves as an ideal visual representation of this perspective. While the photograph reflects an aesthetic expression of social norms, mourning culture, and the acceptance of death, it also provides insight into the Victorian perception of mortality. When examined within the context of contemporary socio-cultural norms, such photographs function as valuable historical documents that help us understand how death was perceived as a natural part of life and how society maintained its connection to it.

With the transition to the contemporary era, photography has distinguished itself from other art forms, gaining recognition as an independent artistic medium while also interacting with various other forms of art. This interaction has established photography as one of the fundamental elements of contemporary art, leading artists to adopt it as a creative means of expression across a wide range of artistic practices (Godfrey, 2023, p. 87). The widespread preference for photography among artists stems from its inherent evidential nature and its ability to represent reality, granting it a unique status since its invention. This characteristic has allowed photography to transcend its role as a purely aesthetic element, enabling it to serve as an effective tool for exploring the conceptual dimensions of contemporary art (Smith, 2018, p. 39). Due to its unique power, photography has become an indispensable medium for artists in conveying social, political, and cultural messages (Whitham & Pooke, 2022, p. 122).

In the contemporary era, as in various stages of human history, the memento mori concept continues to serve as a reminder of life's transience, maintaining its significance in artistic works. In this context, artists have used memento mori not only as a theme but also as a powerful way to remind people of the value of life, the inevitability of death, and the fleeting nature of time. One of the most striking contemporary examples of this idea is the *Life Before Death* project by photographer Walter Schels and journalist Beate Lakotta (Figure 7). In this project, Schels and Lakotta documented individuals suffering from terminal illnesses in hospitals across Germany. Through their work, they provided a profound contribution to the memento mori concept by witnessing and capturing the final moments of these patients' lives, as well as the immediate aftermath of their passing. In addition to photographing these individuals, they conducted interviews, recording both their life stories and their perceptions of death. The photographs were taken as black-and-white portraits, aiming to present the final

moments of life and death in a simple yet striking manner (Lakotta, 2003, pp. 126-132). Through these methods, the project not only portrays the end of life but also makes viewers feel the undeniable reality of death.

### Figure 7

*Life Before Death*



Note: Schels, 2003

The photographs taken as individuals approached death represent the physical and emotional transformations they experienced, while the images captured immediately after their passing starkly reveal the precise moment when life comes to an end. This project serves as proof of how powerfully the memento mori concept has evolved into a contemporary art form. The *Life Before Death* series presents the cold reality of death and the transience of life in a raw and unembellished manner, prompting viewers to deeply contemplate mortality. By documenting the delicate boundary between life and death, the project demonstrates that contemporary art is not merely about aesthetics but also serves as a philosophical inquiry into daily existence. Through this project, the duo has redefined the memento mori concept with the help of using photography as the universal language of contemporary art to convey the profound philosophical meanings of life and death to their audience.

Roland Barthes, a scholar known for his work on semiotics and social theory, describes death as the essence (eidos) of photography in his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Additionally, he explains that the sound produced when the camera shutter is pressed symbolizes the transition between life and death (Barthes, 2016, p. 27). The freezing of an ongoing moment in time through the shutter click serves as proof of reality. From that moment on, nothing comes closer to reality than a photograph (Dora, 2003, p. 113; Er, 2023, p. 54). This proof of reality has the potential to create significant socio-cultural effects both on an individual and societal level. In this context, the documentation of wars, uprisings, and major disasters by photographers has contributed to raising public awareness and reshaping society. The most effective medium for this purpose is documentary photography. The idea of photographers capturing and conveying the daily socio-

cultural life of people and society to different segments of the population gained importance and widespread recognition in the early 20th century (Bate, 2009, p. 45). From this period onward, the primary goal of documentary photography was not merely to aestheticize everyday life but also to produce visual representations that offer a critical perspective, deliver a message, inform society, and raise awareness. Documentary photographers have sought to make visible social inequalities, economic hardships, the devastating effects of wars, and individuals' daily struggles through their lenses. In doing so, photography has functioned not only as an artistic discipline but also as a powerful tool for social documentation.

Photographic representations produced by photographers, whether as a means of recording history or as direct representations of life, have the power to convey the full reality of death to viewers, particularly within the context of the memento mori concept. Documentary photographers, from the moment they capture an image, freeze death onto a surface, halting the flow of time. With this, they leave behind powerful representations that remind humanity of its mortality. These works go beyond mere visual records; they carry deep philosophical and moral messages about life. A striking example of this is the iconic photograph *The Sacrifice* of Thich Quang Duc, taken by Malcolm W. Browne in 1963 during a protest in South Vietnam (Figure 8). The photograph documents the self-immolation of Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who set himself on fire in protest against the systematic oppression and persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government under President Ngo Dinh Diem (Boomhower, 2024, pp. 83-190; Giacosa et al., 2016, p. 110). This act became not only a sacrifice of the monk's physical body but also a powerful symbol of resistance against a corrupt government and the strength of faith. It remains one of the most silent yet powerful protests in history, immortalized through Browne's lens.

### Figure 8

*The Sacrifice of Thich Quang Duc*



Note: Browne, 1963

Seated in meditative tranquility amid the flames engulfing his body, Thich Quang Duc's final moments are frozen in Browne's photograph, capturing death in its most dramatic and striking form. This image immortalizes both the political

and human dimensions of the act. With this photograph, Browne created a modern memento mori, reminding viewers of human mortality while also presenting a visual manifesto of resistance and faith. Beyond merely depicting the physical reality of death, the image also symbolizes the meaning of life and the sacrifice of one's existence for ideals. The monk's decision to end his own life can be understood not only as an act of personal sacrifice but also as a powerful social and spiritual message. By capturing this dramatic moment in all its raw reality, Browne brought global attention to the persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam, pushing the issue onto the international stage. In this context, the photograph serves as a modern memento mori, illustrating both the impermanence of individual life and the enduring nature of human ideals.

Documentary photography, which allows us to become aware of lives and geographies filled with pain, drama, and suffering, does more than simply provide information about a subject. Beyond conveying knowledge or presenting reality, photographs serve as a medium for reaching mass audiences and representing ideologies. In this context, photography can be regarded as one of the most powerful tools for realistically and strikingly representing the memento mori concept. One of the most impactful examples of this is the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken by Eddie Adams in 1968 (Figure 9). This iconic documentary photograph, captured during the Vietnam War, depicts the moment when South Vietnamese police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes a suspected Viet Cong officer who was believed to be a leader of the Viet Cong commando unit and was dressed in civilian clothing (Fischer & Fischer, 2000, p. 62; Hacking, 2015, pp. 390-391; Mulligan & Wooters, 2012, p. 674). The image captures the critical moment just before the execution, with the suspect's hands tied behind his back as he faces imminent death. The visual documentation of Loan pointing his gun at the prisoner's head powerfully illustrates the thin line between life and death. This photograph, which shocked global audiences, serves as a modern memento mori representation, revealing the terrifying and harrowing nature of death in a way that deeply affects viewers both physically and emotionally.

### Figure 9

*Eddie Adams - Street Execution of Vietcong Prisoner*



Note: Adams, 1968

Adams' photograph is not just a war document; it can also be interpreted as a visual metaphor symbolizing the devastating impact of war on humanity. The image powerfully exposes the ruthless nature of war and the vulnerability of individuals caught in its midst. Furthermore, this frame-capturing the precise moment of execution-engraves the inevitability of death and the cold reality of war into the viewer's mind, delivering a universal message that compels reflection on violence and conflict. The impact of the photograph does not solely stem from its dramatic freezing of a moment of death, but also from its ability to force viewers into an ethical and emotional confrontation, prompting them to question the morality of war and human suffering.

Another striking photograph that dramatically represents death was taken by photojournalist Stanley J. Forman in 1975, during a fire in Boston, USA. This event stands as both a pivotal moment in photography history and a deeply symbolic representation of human tragedy. The photograph captures a critical moment during the fire, documenting the desperate situation of individuals trapped on the upper floors of a burning building as they await rescue. Firefighters attempted to safely evacuate a 19-year-old woman and the 3-year-old child in her care, but tragically, the fire escape collapsed, causing both individuals to plummet from great height. Stanley J. Forman captured this harrowing moment, creating a visual record that powerfully exposes the inescapable reality of death and the tragic dimensions of the event (Figure 10).

### Figure 10

*The Fire Escape Collapse*



Note: Forman, 1975

This photograph does not merely document a tragedy; it also confronts the viewer with the fragility of life, human vulnerability, and the sudden, unpredictable nature of death. By capturing the exact moment of the event, Forman freezes and preserves the brief instant in which the young woman and child's lives come to an end. This image powerfully reflects the thin line between the struggle for life and the inevitability of death. As a representation of mortality, this frame was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, further cementing its

status as a testament to the power of documentary photography (Fischer & Fischer, 2000, pp. 105-108).

Capturing a moment of death and engraving it into history can be seen as one of the unique abilities of photography. Tragic events that the human eye can perceive only in an instant gain historical and social significance through photography's ability to freeze a specific moment in time. This quality allows such images to serve not only as historical documents but also as tools for shaping collective memory and critical reflection. Susan Sontag explains the impact of such photographs by stating: "A photograph that captures the moment of death embalms it, ensuring that it is always remembered" (Sontag, 2004, p. 59). Sontag's analysis parallels Forman's photographic documentation, emphasizing how visual narratives shape the perception of events and their place in collective memory. Photographs that reflect the reality of life are not just recording tools; they also create their own unique contexts, with the potential to construct new realities. In this sense, photographic representations go beyond mere documentation—they generate a particular perception and interpretation process for viewers, contributing to the construction of reality in multiple ways. Photography does not simply reflect the physical world; it extends beyond the moment it captures, offering viewers new meanings and emotions, thereby constructing a distinct and profound reality. This new reality is particularly evident in photographs that focus on death. Images that depict death do not merely serve as documentary records of events—they also present a powerful visual narrative that reminds viewers of life's transience and the inevitability of death. These photographs invite individuals not only to witness an event but also to reflect on their own existence, serving as a tool for existential contemplation. Thus, although photography captures a slice of life, its visual narrative offers a profound intellectual space for contemplating the relationship between life and death. In summary, this visual reflection of *memento mori* demonstrates that photography does more than just freeze a moment in time—it also constructs a universal and timeless message in the viewer's mind. In this way, photography transcends its role as a mere recording medium, evolving into an aesthetic and philosophical form of narration that contributes to existential inquiry.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout human history, the concept of *memento mori* has secured an essential place through oral and visual representations, offering a philosophical framework that deeply influences human existence by reminding individuals of life's transience. Today, while this concept has transformed into a popular discourse frequently encountered on digital platforms such as social media, it still fundamentally provides a profound intellectual perspective

that enables individuals to confront the inevitability of death. As a tool that encourages deep reflection amid the fast-changing and superficial nature of the modern world, *memento mori* continues to thrive as a powerful theme in art and culture. The ability of art to convey messages more effectively than textual narratives has allowed *memento mori* to be explored across various artistic disciplines. Although this concept has been frequently depicted in painting, sculpture, miniature, and mosaic art, photography has provided the most tangible and impactful visualization of *memento mori*. Photography's ability to capture the reality of death in an instant and carry this truth beyond time has made it the most powerful artistic representation of *memento mori*.

Since the early 20th century, the rise of documentary photography has created a significant space for the visual representation of *memento mori*. By documenting wars, natural disasters, and individual tragedies, documentary photographers have exposed the inevitable and striking face of death. These photographs have not only served as historical records of events but have also functioned as philosophical and aesthetic tools, prompting viewers to reflect on the fragility of life. The powerful realism of photography does not just confront viewers with their own mortality—it also compels them to question the social and universal dimensions of death.

In conclusion, the concept of *memento mori* stands out as an important intellectual framework that allows individuals to comprehend the transience of life and question the meaning of their existence. This philosophical perspective, which encourages the acceptance of life's impermanence, helps individuals reconstruct themselves and develop a deeper awareness of life's value. Photography, as the most realistic and impactful visual representation of *memento mori*, continues to serve as a powerful artistic expression that not only confronts individuals with their own mortality but also directs them toward existential inquiry. In this context, photography is not merely a documentary tool; it also functions as a profound artistic and philosophical medium that enables individuals to reevaluate their existential concerns and their relationship with death.

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