

Realtime Reactions to Suicide and Martyrdom vs. the Visual Record

Death is a uniquely personal yet universal experience, one that has long been shared with others through artistic processes. Throughout history and across mediums, artists have further explored the theme of death in a myriad of ways. In our study we use examples of historical art representing suicide and martyrdom to question how the act of viewing might influence the thoughts and feelings of observers. Do controversial modes of death represented in art mitigate feelings of death-anxiety or exacerbate them? Are there connections between a participant's demographics and their feelings on these subjects? Additionally, we explored how death and sex are often inextricably related, and respondents were asked to gauge erotic overtones in the images. An online study conducted using Amazon's MTurk examined these questions. Individuals ($N = 450$) completed personality and individual difference measures regarding their perceptions of various forms of death, religious faith, violence, and religion in visual art. Participants were shown artwork chosen to stimulate thoughts about suicide, martyrdom, and eroticism as well as neutral control images. The study further examined how viewing artistic expressions of certain modes of death, sometimes with overtones of eroticism, can influence an individual's outlook on mortality. Analyses of the data also informed researchers whether engaging with images led respondents to further reflect about anxieties and other emotions associated with death, and how these might differ between personality types. More broadly, this study provides insight into the role that viewing art can play in helping people cope with mortality.