

The Art of Death: Recognizing Links Between Sex and Death in the Visual Record

A study by Luci Cook, Javier Cuenca, Nathan Furnas, Peter Helm, and Benton Kidd

University of Missouri – Columbia

INTRODUCTION

Death and sex are eternal themes of the human experience that have long been shared with others utilizing artistic processes throughout history and across mediums. For our research studies, we used examples of historical art representing sex, death, and violence to question how the act of viewing might influence the thoughts and feelings of observers. Would respondents recognize a link between sex and death, and if so, would the link be positive or negative? Are there connections between a participant's sexual identity and their perspectives on death and sex? To investigate these questions, participants completed personality and individual difference measures regarding their perceptions of various forms of death, violence, and eroticism in visual art. The second survey was structured to reveal whether responses differed between heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants.

METHODS

Two separate surveys were utilized to obtain results. The first survey was published on Amazon's MTurk (N=450). The second survey centered on MU students and used MU Info to recruit participants (N= 37). To further explore connections between a respondent's sexuality and their responses, 21 heterosexual and 16 non-heterosexual students were recruited. Participants were then asked to view a series of images and rate them based on prevalence of violence, death, sex, beauty, authority, and other themes. Participants provided demographic information such as age, religion, sexual activity, and relationships to violence and death. Pre-and-post surveys were used to establish correlations in data.

DISCUSSION

The studies focused on participant responses to viewing historical and contemporary art depicting themes of violence, death, and sex/eroticism, as well as control images. The aim was to observe differences in reactions to various images based on participants' sexual identities. Although our survey found that respondents did not recognize a direct link between sex and death, as we had predicted, we nonetheless discovered interesting correlations between themes of authority. Those who rated their anxiety about sex highly were more likely to see authority in the images. People who saw authority in images also saw violence and death more frequently. Those who were attracted to violence in media did not see authority as often in the images.

CONCLUSIONS

Going forward, this study would benefit from a larger and younger respondent pool. Analyses of the student survey found that those who were attracted to violence in media were less likely to see authority in the images, and those who perceived authority in the images were also more likely to perceive themes of death. This suggests a correlation between violent media images and desensitization to death imagery, a connection on which future studies could focus. It is our belief that the correlations between authority and modern-day images of repressive measures (i.e. BLM, police brutality, Capitol mob, global inequality and genocide) might be connected and justify further interrogation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the MU Honors College and the Office of Undergraduate Research, which made this study possible. We also very kindly thank Dr. Peter Helm for his support and assistance.







