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Death in the Image: Allegory, Autopsy, Ornament[1]

Keywords
death, visual regime, epistemology

Abstract
This article examines death in visual art as a process that exceeds mere representation; death is not treated as a passive theme but as an active structure that produces knowledge about violence, history, and collective relations. The analysis focuses on three distinct visual regimes in early modern European art. In Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, death appears as a mechanized system, where the serial repetition of skeletons and the absence of transcendence generate a sense of rationalized violence. In the painting *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*, death is depicted as the brutal autopsy of the political body. Vanitas still life presents death as an introspective reminder while simultaneously concealing the material conditions of luxury and its colonial background. In all three cases, the image of death operates as a visual regime that structures vision and as an epistemological apparatus that produces knowledge of historical, political, and economic processes.

Smrt v podobi: alegorija, avtopsija, ornament

Ključne besede
smrt, vizualni režim, epistemologija

Povzetek
Članek obravnava smrt v vizualni umetnosti kot proces, ki presega zgolj reprezentacijo; podoba smrti ni razumljena kot pasivni nosilec pomena, temveč kot aktivna struktura,

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ki proizvaja vednost o nasilju, zgodovini in kolektivnih razmerjih. Analiza se osredotoča na tri različne vizualne režime evropske umetnosti zgodnjega novega veka. V Brueglovem *Zmagoslavju smrti* se smrt pokaže kot mehaniziran sistem, kjer serijska ponavljanja okostnjakov in odsotnost transcendence ustvarjajo občutek racionaliziranega nasilja. V sliki *Trupli bratov de Witt* je smrt prikazana kot brutalna avtopsija političnega telesa. Vanitas tihožitja smrt predstavljajo kot introspektivni opomin, hkrati pa prikrivajo materialne pogoje razkošja in njegovo kolonialno ozadje. V vseh treh primerih podoba smrti deluje kot vizualni režim, ki strukturira pogled, in kot epistemološki aparat, ki proizvaja vednost o zgodovinskih, političnih in ekonomskih procesih.

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Introduction

Death has always haunted European art, not only as one of its most persistent themes but also as one of its most elusive problems. Never reducible to biological cessation, death emerges as a cultural and historical phenomenon, inscribed into images not only through symbols but also through the very structures of visual form. This article begins from the premise that death in art is not simply represented—as if the image were a passive mirror of reality—but is actively produced as knowledge through visual means. Composition, colour, perspective, and repetition do not merely illustrate death; they generate its intelligibility. In this way, death functions simultaneously as an aesthetic object and as an epistemological apparatus: it structures vision and organizes understanding, linking the act of seeing with the act of knowing.

While Panofsky's iconological method interprets the image primarily through external references, texts, myths, and cultural codes,[2] this article shifts the emphasis to the operative logic of visual composition. Symbols and contexts are not dismissed but examined in terms of how they are materially inscribed into the image itself. In this way, the analysis treats the image not as a passive bearer of meaning but as an active structure that produces its own epistemological effects.

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[2] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939); Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1955).

The article analyses three selected depictions of death through a double optic: visible representation and its reverse side—that which the image does not say, yet nevertheless shows. Iconography serves here as an entry point rather than the final aim of analysis. Instead of halting at the semantic values of symbols, the focus shifts to the visual mechanisms that determine how death operates within the image: how it is structured as a system, articulated as trauma, and concealed as aesthetic form. In this perspective, death emerges as an operative structure with concrete effects: it organizes vision, shapes affective responses, and establishes relations of power between what is visible and what remains hidden.

The analysis unfolds through three examples from European art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, Jan de Baen's *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*, and Dutch vanitas still life. In the first, death appears as a mechanized system that does not moralize but operates productively. In the second, the death of the body manifests as a collective traumatic rupture. In the third, death seems introspective, silent, aesthetically ordered—yet it is precisely this contemplative form that conceals colonial exploitation.

Bruegel's Allegorical Machine: The Visual Regime of Instrumental Death

Among the most monumental depictions of death in European allegorical painting stands *The Triumph of Death* (fig. 1), a work by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the Flemish Renaissance master. Measuring approximately 117 × 162 cm, the painting presents an apocalyptic scene saturated with symbols of death, triumphant destruction, and human helplessness. On the densely populated canvas, skeletons—allegorical figures of death—confront people from all social strata, underscoring the universality of mortality. Bruegel draws on the medieval iconography of the *danse macabre*, where death appears as an equalizing force that dissolves social hierarchies and privileges. Death here is democratic, relentless, omnipresent: before death, all are equal.

Although Bruegel relies on the tradition of death as a universal fate, he simultaneously distances himself from it. If we accept the premise of this article—that the painting does not merely represent death but produces it as a specific form of knowledge through visual means—then a perspective emerges that explains why the image instills in the viewer a sense of inevitability. This sensation is

Fig. 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death*, c. 1562, oil on panel, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

not only unsettling but also intellectually disruptive, arising from the realization that death in the image is articulated as an industrial process: rationalized, standardized, and mechanized.

This insight is revealed through the painting's visual regime itself. The landscape, once human, has become a stage of apocalyptic destruction, overrun by a mechanized invasion of skeletons marching with unwavering precision. The composition is built on rhythmic repetition: scenes of death unfold without a central focus, hierarchy, or narrative progression. Diagonals guide the eye through scenes of violence, yet never toward resolution. The colour palette is muted: earthy tones, bloody hues, grey contrasts. The spatial organization is dense, almost chaotic, yet simultaneously systematic. Each skeleton is a replica of another, each scene a variation of the same act. This serial logic generates a sense of mechanization—as if death operates according to a production plan, endowing it with instrumental power.

Here Bruegel surpasses classical depictions of the *danse macabre*, such as the fifteenth-century fresco in the Church of St. Margaret in Basel, where death in a grotesque dance unites all social classes. Similarly, the fourteenth-century *Trionfo della Morte* in Pisa portrays death as an allegorical force that destroys luxury. But Bruegel goes further: his death does not dance, does not warn, does not moralize. It acts. The skeletons do not appear as symbols of transcendence but as executors of historical violence. Their actions are systematic, almost bureaucratic: burning, hanging, drowning, smashing; pulling carts and dispatching victims with administrative precision. The tools in their hands are no longer metaphysical attributes but historically recognizable instruments of destruction: axes, swords, cannons.

The painting does not construct a narrative of the Last Judgment, does not weigh souls, does not open transcendence. In Hieronymus Bosch's *The Last Judgment* (c. 1482), death is embedded in an eschatological framework, where violence and grotesquerie reveal divine judgment. Bruegel dismantles this framework: his image leads not to judgment but to disintegration. Its apocalyptic quality arises not from a revelation of the future but from the disclosure of a present collapsing in on itself. Death does not advance forward but circulates in its own reproduction. This transformation of death from fate into operative system is crucial. Bruegel does not depict death as an end but as a process that reproduces itself. Death, which should signify rupture, here multiplies—destroying only in order to continue destroying. The painting does not construct a narrative of judgment or open transcendence; it is a machine without a redemptive horizon. While Bosch still painted hell as a metaphysical space, Bruegel, in *The Triumph of Death*, shows that hell is already here: structured, organized, reproduced.

Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* transforms allegory into a visual regime that, through its compositional logic, generates a significant epistemological effect: death appears as a system operating within history. The painting does not repeat stories familiar from biblical or didactic texts: the armed skeletons are not sent by God or transcendental punishment but are visual manifestations of a historical logic produced by humans themselves. Death here is humanized, instrumentalized, technically mediated. Humanity is not only that which dies, but also that which produces death—systematically, with tools, with organization, with intent. Bruegel's composition demonstrates what happens when the extreme consequences of historical and civilizational conduct become a system. Once death

enters a regime, it no longer functions as judgment but as operation—without the distinction of status, age, or gender, without the evaluation of deeds or merits.

This is established operativity both through the visual regime of the image, which structures the gaze, and as an epistemological apparatus, which produces knowledge of death as a systemic, humanly produced process. If the painting's surface layer is a moral reminder of the universality of death, its hidden layer is the universality of violence generated by human rationality. The visual regime of the painting—its repetitions, mechanization, depiction of human weaponry, and absence of eschatological meaning—reveals that the viewer does not see death as an isolated event but as a systemic principle of the world's functioning. The radicality of Bruegel's image does not lie in the explicitness of violence, but in the revelation that this violence is ordered—cold, systematic, efficient. It is precisely this rationality, not blind cruelty, that transforms death into a visual-epistemological regime: it structures our gaze through the mechanization of violence and produces knowledge of death as a historical, humanly generated process.

The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers: An Autopsy of Collective Violence

Within the canon of the Dutch Golden Age, few images are as viscerally disturbing as *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* (fig. 2), attributed to Jan de Baen. This is a painting that refuses consolation. It does not mourn, commemorate, or redeem. It confronts. The mutilated bodies of Johan and Cornelis de Witt, hung upside down at the Groene Zoodje near the Gevangenpoort in The Hague, testify to one of the most brutal episodes of political violence in Dutch history. On 20 August 1672, the brothers were lynched, torn apart, and displayed like slaughtered livestock. The painting seizes upon this event with stark realism, and in doing so it exceeds the role of mere record: it transforms art into a witness, not only to history, but to historical violence itself.[3]

The historical context here is crucial. In 1667 Johan and Cornelis stood at the height of political power: Johan, as *raadpensionaris*, the de facto leader of the

3 Frans Grijzenhout, "Between Memory and Amnesia: Posthumous Portraits of Johan and Cornelis de Witt," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2015), https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2015.7.1.4.

Fig. 2: Jan de Baen, *The Corpses of the DeWitt Brothers*, c. 1672–1675, oil on canvas, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

republic; Cornelis, as mayor of Dordrecht and a military delegate, a key architect of naval strategy. Their alliance with Admiral Michiel de Ruyter led to the Raid on the Medway, a stunning victory that humiliated England and secured naval

supremacy for the Dutch. De Baen's earlier *Apotheosis of Cornelis de Witt* celebrated this triumph. But history turned. In 1672—the *Rampjaar*, the year of disaster—the republic was under siege. France invaded, England threatened, and internal panic transformed into political hysteria. Once symbols of republican strength, the De Witt brothers were turned into trophies of mob violence. In The Hague, an enraged crowd, backed by the local militia, stormed the Gevangenpoort prison, where Cornelis was confined. Johan came to rescue his brother, but both were seized, savagely assaulted, and abandoned to the fury of the mob.[4]

The obvious content of Jan de Baen's *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* is a shocking historical chronicle: the depiction of a brutal political execution and lynching during the *Rampjaar*, immediately communicating the consequence of political defeat. Yet this surface message—a spectacular display of violence—is merely the visible front. The painting's deeper power, its invisible counter-message or epistemological underside, emerges not from the subject matter alone but from its visual structure. This structure refuses to elevate the dead, instead rendering the brothers inverted, their bodies torn, skin flayed, limbs dismembered (their genitals were reportedly eaten). It is rare in Dutch art to find a history painting that refuses to glorify but instead exposes. Here, the corpses are not martyrs but mere flesh. The palette is cruel, dominated by livid purples, bluish reds, and pallid yellows. Flesh is rendered through *carnatio*, a technique Hegel described as the pinnacle of painting—the glow of blood beneath the skin, the animation of flesh from within. Yet here, *carnatio* is not merely aesthetic but epistemological: it reveals the body not as a symbol but as an irrevocable site of trauma, punishment, and rupture. The visual regime of the image—brutal flesh tones, a mutilated face, a torn abdomen—produces an epistemological effect: death is not allegory, but reality condensed into mutilated corpses.

Jean-Luc Nancy writes that the dead body has "nothing to say."[5] In a certain sense, this holds true for the De Witt brothers: death here is truly dead. Nothing remains that would allow the body to speak or signify. They are enclosed within brutal *carnation*, within the mutilated faces, and the torn abdomens emptied of organs. This silence is echoed in the eye sockets, which capture the final gaze of a once-living being, forged in unimaginable physical agony. The vacant mouth

4 Grijzenhout.

5 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Mrtvo telo," *Filozofski vestnik* 33, no. 3 (2012): 76.

holds no breath, no final scream. These mute bodies bleed death into the world quite literally and in silence.

Yet for the painter, the mute presence of death alone does not suffice. A single corpse risks becoming an aesthetic object, symbolically reanimated by representation. To forestall this danger, the painter inscribes a sequence of deaths into the corpses themselves: traces of torture before death, the mark of killing, and the desecration of the body after death. Each layer insists that death is not symbolic but real, irreducible, and final. Even this cascade of deaths appears insufficient; the painter intensifies the scene with yet another body, a dead cat placed before the inverted brothers. Its presence is grotesque, but it functions as a guarantee: a reminder that what we see is not allegory, not symbol, but the raw theatre of mortality. In this way, the painting strives to prevent the brutality of the event from being idealized, forcing the viewer to confront death as an undeniable historical reality.

The multiplication of death finds its confirmation in fragmentation, where the body is rendered as anatomized matter that cannot be reanimated. The corpses are not whole but torn into pieces, their dismemberment evoking the procedures of anatomy and dissection. Fingers severed, flesh bitten, organs absent—the body is presented as something taken apart, analysed, exposed. In this sense, the painting performs more than historical documentation: it stages a visual anatomy, a pictorial dissection that transforms the brothers' bodies into a medium through which history suspends humanity and reveals its obscene underside.

The hidden layer of the painting is therefore the political autopsy not only of the brothers themselves but of the community that killed them. The image dissects history, revealing the mechanisms through which violence is normalized, ritualized, and aestheticized. In doing so, it forces the viewer to acknowledge that death is not simply an individual fate but a collective operation—a macabre feast that exposes the social body as a mechanism capable of its own cannibalism.

Vanitas Still Life: Contemplation and Concealment in the Economy of Death

Among the quietest genres of Western painting, still life long occupied a modest place in the hierarchy of pictorial forms. Yet it is precisely this quietness—its

compositional restraint, focus on everyday objects, and absence of narrative—that enables the vanitas still life to articulate death with a unique visual force. Unlike Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, where mortality is spectacular, allegorical, and animated, vanitas still life weaves death quietly into the texture of the visible world. It does not dramatize; it insinuates. In these paintings, death is fully integrated into ordinary objects, appearing not as an external event but as a fundamental condition of reality for each individual. In contrast to Jan de Baen's *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*, where death erupts into the mutilated corpses and shocks us through its visual violence, vanitas still life remains disciplined: it does not force death into violent forms but embeds it in the humble surfaces of everyday things.

Drawing on the biblical refrain from *Ecclesiastes—Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vaxnitas*—seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas painting transforms Scripture into a visual philosophy. *Memento mori* functions here as a universal reminder of one's own mortality. The core objects within the composition—the skull, the extinguished candle, the withered flower, the fragile glass sphere—serve as visual affirmations of absence and impermanence. The arrangement of worldly goods—books, instruments, fruit, flowers—is never neutral. Each element carries symbolic weight, gently reminding the viewer that life is fragile, time merciless, and death inevitable.

This visual philosophy finds its most eloquent articulation in the still life of the period, where individual compositions stage mortality through objects that quietly correct the vanity of worldly pursuits. Harmen Steenwijck's *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* (fig. 3) presents trophies of human achievement, such as a globe, a Japanese sword, shells, fruit, and flowers. Yet, centrally placed is a skull, a silent correction that places human accomplishments within the context of their inevitable end. The painting thus quietly communicates the transient nature of worldly power, beauty, and luxury. In Jan Davidsz. de Heem's *Still Life with Books* (1628–1629, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), worn parchment lies alongside decaying fruit, while the word *finis* visually marks the concept of finitude. Pieter Claesz's *Vanitas Still Life* (1630, Mauritshuis, The Hague) offers a space where the faint flame of a candle barely pierces the darkness. The extinguished candle, the resting watch, the overturned glass—all speak in the language of silence. The jawless skull recalls a hollow without echo. Time spares no one. This message deepens in Claesz's *Still Life with Violin*

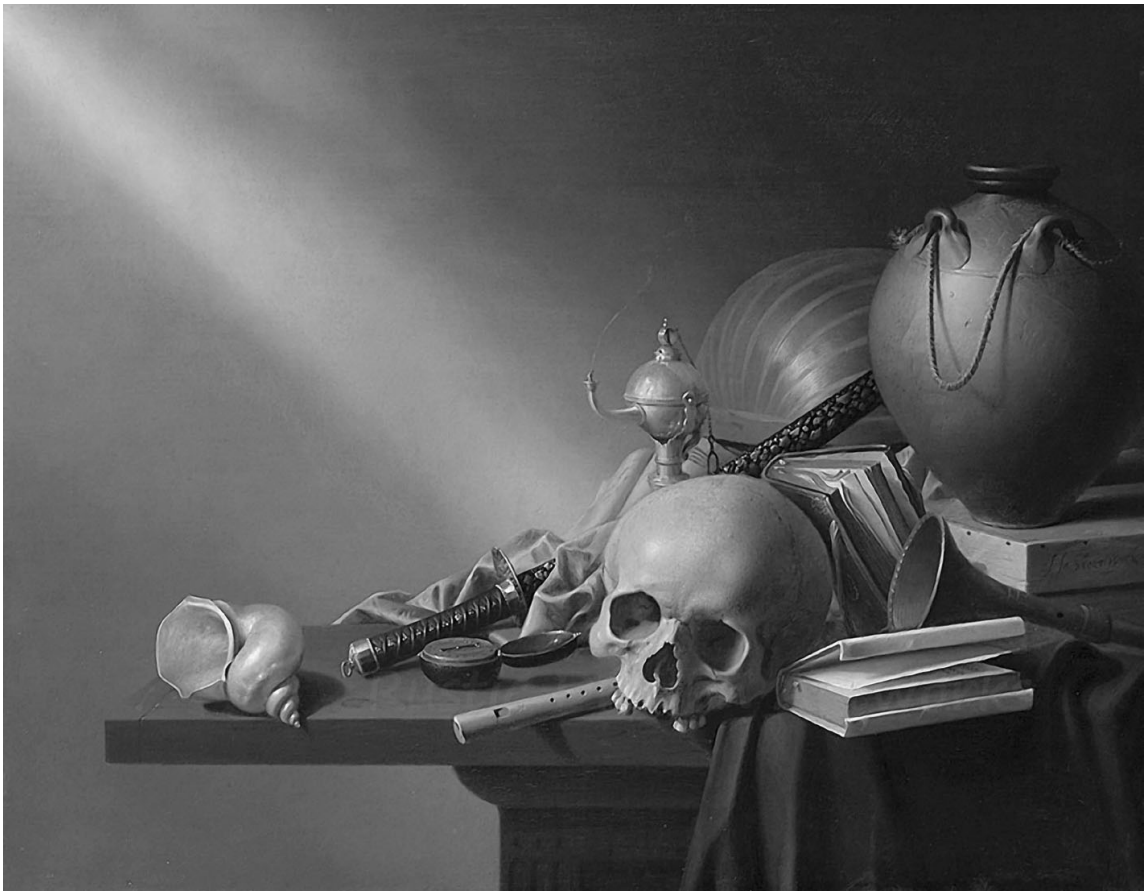

Fig. 3: Harmen Steenwijck, *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*, c. 1640, oil on oak panel, London, National Gallery.

and Glass Ball (1628, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg), where the violin dominates the composition. Behind it, a skull; beside it, a glass orb that captures the artist's own reflection. The orb recalls the image of a soap bubble—a conventional symbol of life's fatal fragility. The reflection is not merely a self-portrait but a visual meditation on transience, a silent gesture toward disappearance. In the visual regime of the still life, death appears as a reminder—subtle, insistent, and soft.

Yet this contemplative surface conceals a deeper problem. In *Caterpillage*, Harry Berger Jr. offers a critical perspective on the interpretation of Dutch vanitas still life.[6] He understands vanitas as a rhetorical distraction, a "McGuffin"—a

6 Harry Berger Jr., *Caterpillage: Reflections on Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life Painting* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

term popularized by Hitchcock for an element that appears crucial but in fact merely propels the narrative forward.[7] Within the still life genre, vanitas assumes precisely this role: symbols of transience (shards, clocks, withered flowers) are supposed to encourage moral reflection, but Berger warns that such interpretation is simplistic and misleading, since it obscures the relationship between luxury and its moral and political justification.

Berger first rejects the notion that painters merely reproduced existing scenes. The painter is not a passive observer but an active director who shapes the scene with intention. He places the objects, arranges them into a composition, and illuminates them in such a way that they generate a specific visual and symbolic message. In this sense, the act of painting is not mere reproduction but a deliberate construction of meaning, where light, placement, and order collaborate to guide the viewer's perception and reflection. What appears to be a faithful mirror of reality is in fact a carefully staged artifice. Floral compositions, for instance, are "horticultural fantasies": tulips, roses, irises, and carnations are often depicted blooming together, even though they belong to different seasons and sometimes even different regions.[8] Painters such as Jan Davidsz. de Heem or Jan Brueghel the Elder assembled bouquets that could never exist in nature, combining exotic imports with local blossoms to create impossible spectacles of abundance. These arrangements remind us that realism in Dutch still life is not a neutral record of the world but a deliberate construction, one that both dazzles the eye and quietly reveals its own artificiality. The painting plays with reality through inconsistent perspective, objects sliding off tables, and details that defy the natural order.

The painter knows how to stage a scene that diverts our attention, for instance, from the fact that luxury, violence, and death are presented together within the same frame. But which death? What violence?

The answer lies in colonial plunder, slavery, and global trade. Luxury objects—begonias, spices, porcelain—are not innocent ornaments but products of Dutch colonial extraction. In this context, vanitas is no longer simply a device for easing the conscience; it becomes an active instrument of deception, a McGuffin

7 Berger, 2.

8 Berger, 71.

that conceals the true cost of luxury. The visual regime of still life—the arrangement of objects, the fantastical composition, the illusionistic hyperreality—produces an epistemological effect of concealment. Vanitas, therefore, cannot be understood merely as painting that embellishes wealth with reminders of transience. The caterpillar gnawing at a leaf becomes, for Berger, a metaphor for the Dutch merchant gnawing at colonial resources. The violence required to produce sugar or acquire spices is encoded in the painting as natural decay. The very title *Caterpillage* fuses caterpillar and pillage. Berger emphasizes that insects in still life are not innocent symbols of time but agents of destruction—embodiments of a natural "small but violent" passion (*rapacitas*).[9] Damaged leaves are not signs of transience but evidence of attack. This is caterpillage in action.

In this respect, Berger distances himself from the analysis offered in Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*.[10] Schama argues that the Dutch society of the Golden Age was marked by a profound ambivalence toward its own wealth. Economic power and material abundance stood in apparent contradiction to the Calvinist values of modesty, thrift, and religious humility. The wealthier one became, the more one had to develop strategies to manage the embarrassment of riches. The Dutch navigated this discomfort in various ways: wealth could be morally justified as a divine blessing, interpreted as a sign of God's favour, or aesthetically adorned with moral lessons—precisely through vanitas symbolism in painting. According to Schama, still life acknowledges this moral tension while simultaneously resolving it. It allows the enjoyment of wealth with a cleansed conscience, transforming the painting into a space where luxury may unfold, yet veiled in a mantle of humility.

Berger, however, finds Schama's influential theory insufficient. He proposes a deeper and darker motive: *pleonexia*, from the Greek *pleon* (more) and *echein* (to have).[11] Pleonexia is not merely greed but an infinite, obsessive desire for more—more power, more wealth, more status, more domination. It entails aggressive competitiveness and the compulsion to possess more than others. At the same time, it carries the drive toward self-sufficiency, toward complete and

9 Berger, 62, 90.

10 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

11 Berger, *Caterpillage*, 22.

immortal independence, achievable only by depriving others. In a competitive society, pleonexia also entails the necessity of seizing something before someone else does. Whereas Schama speaks of "embarrassment" as a response to already acquired wealth, Berger points instead to the disgust and violence hidden behind that embarrassment: an active, unquenchable force that produces wealth at the expense of others. Schama's theory focuses on an internal moral dialectic, while Berger's concept of pleonexia shifts attention to the external, material, and violent conditions that make such wealth possible in the first place. Wealth is not merely a moral dilemma; it is a product of global exploitation. In this light, Berger's notion of pleonexia illuminates the deeper function of vanitas still life: what appears as a moral meditation on transience is in fact the aesthetic mask of an insatiable desire for more.

Vanitas still life thus performs a double gesture. On the surface, it invites contemplation, humility, and moral reflection. Beneath, it conceals violence, exploitation, and the colonial cost of luxury. It is not merely a meditation on death but an epistemological choreography of concealment. The skull does not only remind us of our own mortality; it diverts us from the mortality of others—those whose lives were consumed in the production of the objects we admire. In this sense, vanitas is not only a genre of silence but of displacement. The arrangement of objects produces an epistemological effect of redirection: violence becomes ornament, exploitation becomes elegance. And this occurs not through falsehood but through composition. The painter arranges objects, meanings, and absences. The viewer contemplates what is shown while forgetting what is hidden. What emerges, then, is that still life is pleonexia in image. This is the epistemological power of vanitas: it redirects the gaze from colonial exploitation to introspective contemplation of one's own mortality.

Conclusion

In this discussion of death in visual art, we have moved away from metaphysical questions and turned toward visual structures that not only depict death but, through their visual regime, produce it as an epistemological category. In the selected examples, death does not appear as a singular event but as a process—a logic that structures the image and the viewer's gaze. In all three cases, the image does not merely represent but actively participates in the formation of knowledge about death, violence, and history. A comparative perspective

discloses three distinct regimes of death: Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* presents death as the universal fate and as a system operating within history; *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* reveals death as political trauma and collective responsibility; vanitas still life transforms death into an introspective reminder while simultaneously masking economic colonial exploitation. Each of these images functions as a visual regime that structures vision and, at the same time, as an epistemological apparatus producing knowledge of death as a historical, political, and economic process.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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