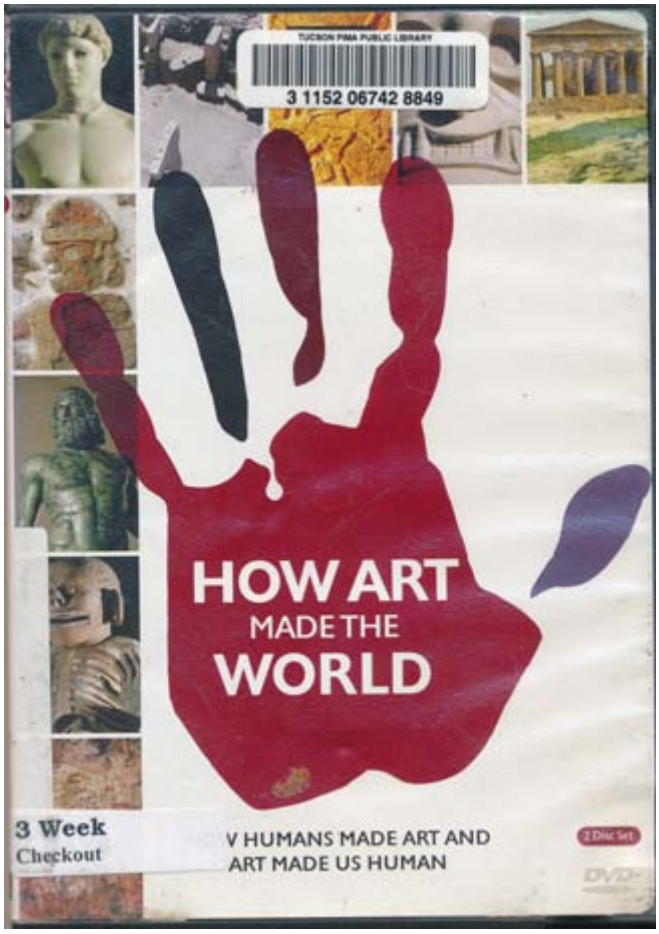
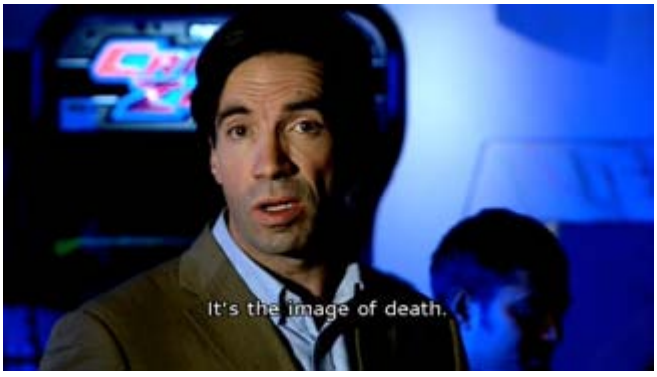
TO DEATH AND BACK (EPISODE FROM “HOW ART MADE THE WORLD”) – ILLUSTRATED SCREENPLAY

presented by Dr. Nigel Spivey
produced and directed by Francis Whately, Ben McPherson, Martin Wilson and Nick Murphy
also directed by Robin Dashwood, and also produced by Kim Thomas
A BBC TV Production in association with KCET

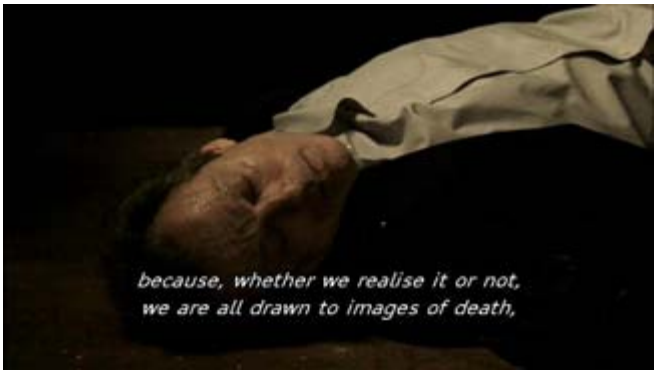


[Dr. Nigel Spivey] Every day of our lives, we are bombarded by thousands of different images, images which affect us in countless different ways. But if all these there's one particular kind of image whose power is uniquely mesmerizing …

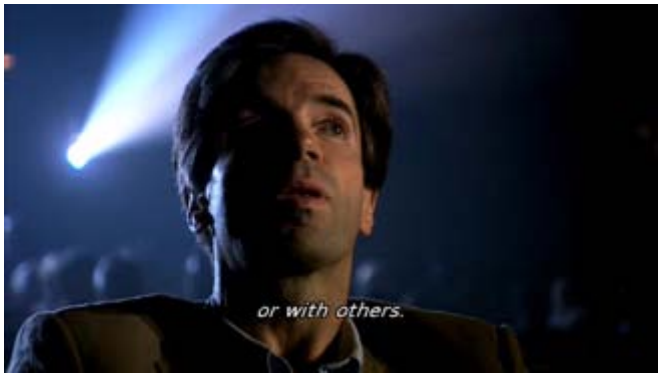
because while it terrifies us somehow it also comforts. But although it can manipulate us, it also reassures.



It's the image of death. Even though these young people have probably never seen a dead body in their lives, they are captivated by these pictures. And they're not alone …



because, whether we realize it or not, we are all drawn to images of death, whether we're on our own …

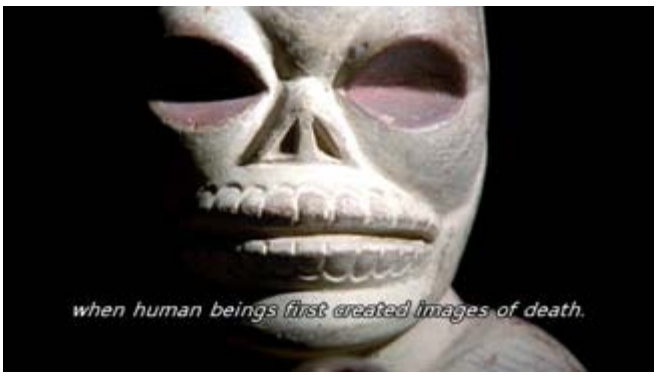


or with others.

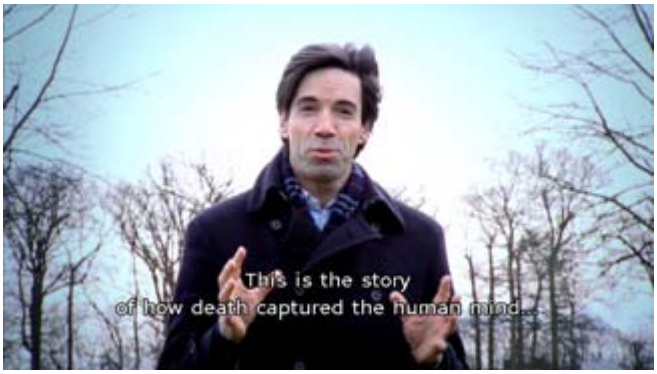
We build graveyards and monuments to the dead,

and their photographs fill our homes. But why? What makes us surround ourselves with constant reminders of death?

The answer lies not in the modern world but thousands of years ago …



when human beings first created images of death.

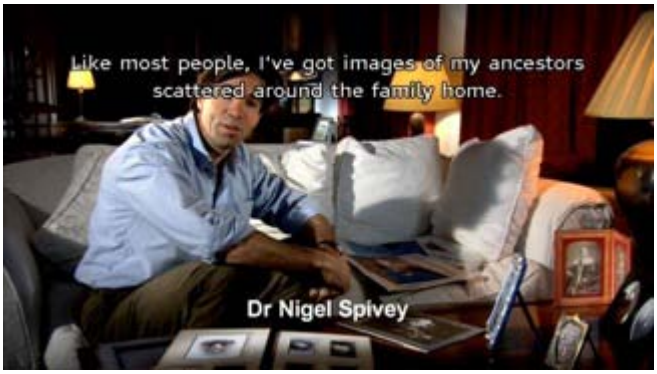


This is the story of how death captured the human mind,

and how that drove us to create some of the most powerful images in the world.

HOW ART MADE THE WORLD

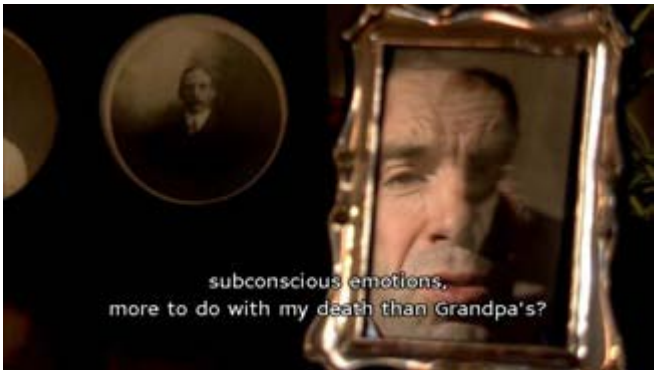
TO DEATH AND BACK



Like most people, I've got images of my ancestors scattered around the family home. I've always loved this one of my Grandpa Fred.

He was a self-made man from the East End of London, lived through two world wars and died about fifteen years ago.

Naturally, we want to surround ourselves with pictures of people who've died. Because we loved them, we want to preserve their memory. But I wonder if there's something else going on with these pictures. What if they triggered a range of emotions that I wasn't aware of …



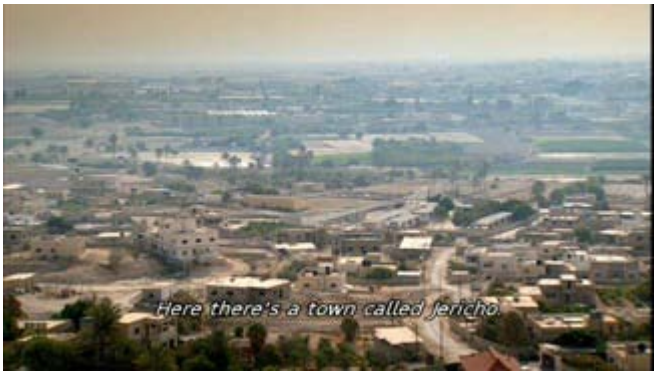
subconscious emotions, more to do with my death than Grandpa's? Could my desire to surround myself with images like these be somehow helping to overcome my fear of death?

Well, to try and find an answer, what if we went back in time?

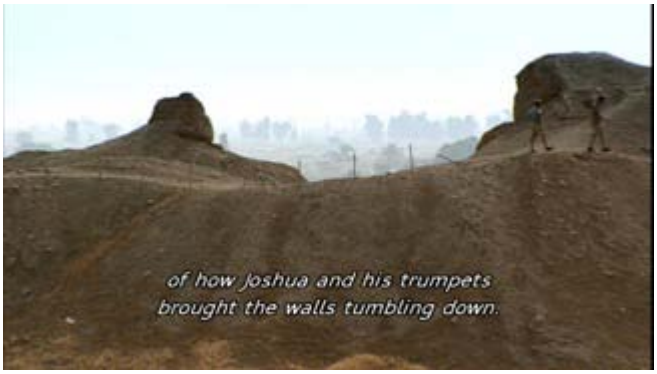
What if we tried to discover what compelled people to surround themselves with images of death for the very first time?

Our journey starts at a place where people have been living continuously for longer than anywhere else on earth.

This is the Jordan Valley in the Middle East.



Here there’s a town called Jericho. Jericho is famous for the biblical story …



of how Joshua and his trumpets brought the walls tumbling down.

The collapse of these walls is believed to have happened about 3,000 years ago.

But Jericho the city is much older than that. It’s something like 9,000 years old. And it was in order to investigate what was happening behind these walls, that a team of archaeologists arrived here from Cambridge in the mid 1950s.

[LIVELY MUSIC]

The archaeologists wanted to reach right back into Jericho’s past.

They dug deep trenches into where the ancient town had stood to try to find evidence of how these earliest inhabitants had lived.

As a young woman, Cecil Western was one of the Cambridge archaeologists.

[Cecil Western, Archaeologist] It was a jolly good dig. There was an enormous lot to do, so we were working all the hours there were, because they were finding so much stuff.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] By the end of the expedition, the team had uncovered pots and tools.

They'd even found the remains of some of Jericho's ancient walls. But what they were about to uncover would make everything, including the legendary walls, pale into insignificance.

It happened on the very last day of the dig.

[Cecil Western, Archaeologist] Everything had been packed up. We were all preparing to go the next day.

That's when it often happens, at the most inconvenient moment, that you find something that you've got to pay attention to.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] The team had noticed something sticking out from the side of the trench.

This was in one of the oldest parts of the site, an area that was 9,000 years old.

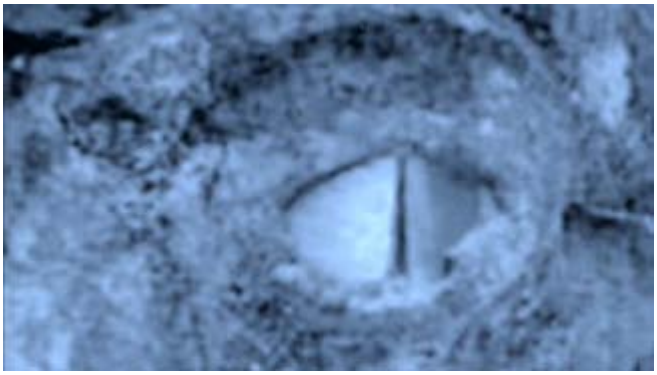
[Cecil Western, Archaeologist] We didn’t want to leave it there, because we thought the children would get it out.

And they would make a nasty hole in the section anyhow, so we might as well make it ourselves and see what we’d got.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] With great care, one of the team began to dig the object out.

But they were completely unprepared for what they would find.

[Cecil Western, Archaeologist] Everybody got very excited. When it's something unusual that you think nobody's ever seen the like before, it's very exciting.



[Dr. Nigel Spivey] And the cause of all this excitement was this, a human skull …

but a skull quite unlike any other they’d so far found on the excavation, in fact a skull quite unlike any other known to archaeology, because its nose had been reconstructed in plaster …

and where two vacant sockets should have met our gaze, a pair of eyes made out of shells.

This wasn’t an ordinary skull taken from a skeleton.

An ancient artist had separated it from its body and then decorated it. Using plaster, the artist had rebuilt the front of the skull to create a delicate face.

Where the eyes had once been, he’d placed two highly precious objects, shells from the Red Sea, many days’ walk away. So, 9,000 years ago, the people living in Jericho had made artistic representations of the dead because, whether we realize it or not, we are all drawn to images of death, the earliest ever created.

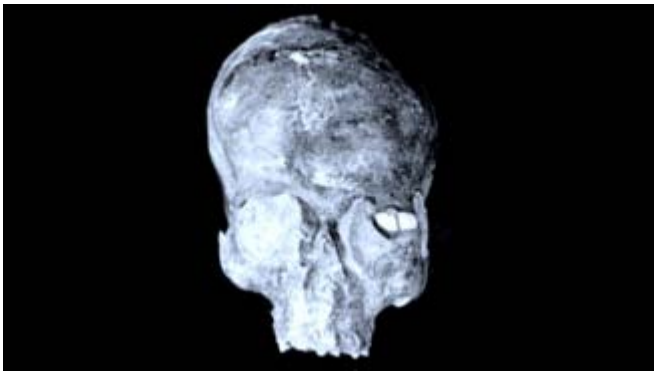
But there wasn’t just one.

As they dug further, the archaeologists at Jericho found another and then another.

In all, the team discovered nine decorated skulls at the site.

And they immediately began to ask the question, “What were they for?”

[Cecil Western, Archaeologist] They were obviously portraits.



We speculated as to whether they were enemies,

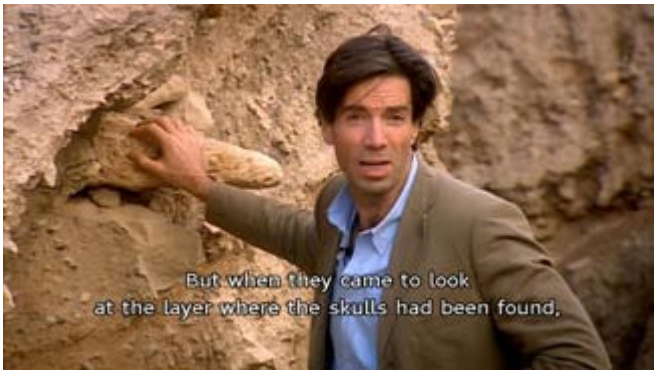
or whether they were ancestors, or what they were, or family portraits.

But they were strange because, so far as we knew at that point, nobody had ever discovered this sort of portraiture on the actual skull.

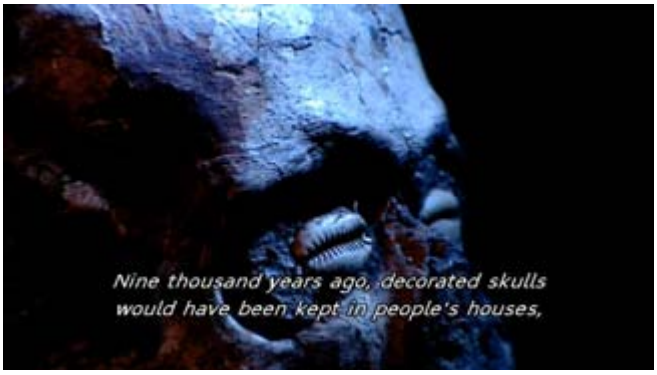
So they were quite unusual. None of us had ever seen such a thing before.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] But there was far more to it than that. By looking at the layers of earth ancient objects are buried in, archaeologists can tell what they were used for.

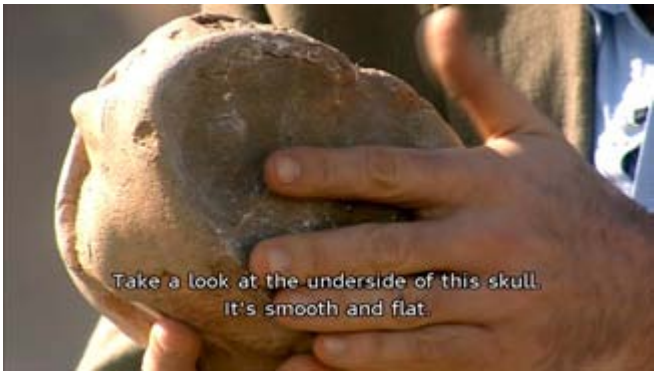
In the past, when archaeologists had found buried bodies, the layers had always shown that they were in special burial grounds.



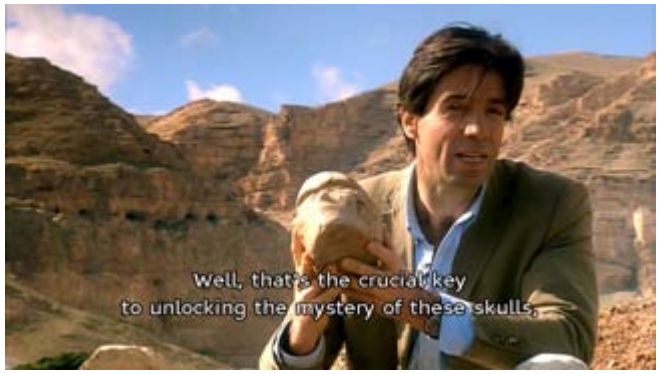
But when they came to look at the layer where the skulls had been found, they discovered something that astounded them. The layers clearly showed that the skulls hadn't been tucked away in some sort of cemetery, but lodged above the floor of someone's home, someone's living space.



Nine thousand years ago, decorated skulls would have been kept in people's houses. And just as the experts began to wonder what this meant, they noticed something else.



Take a look at the underside of this skull. It's smooth and flat. "So what?" you might think.



Well, that’s the crucial key to unlocking the mystery of these skulls, because they weren’t intended just to lie flat. They were specially designed to stand upright, perhaps on the floor of someone’s house or, more likely, in some special alcove or niche. It was an astonishing revelation, because it meant that these skulls, the earliest images ever of dead people, had been made to be seen by the living.

But archaeologists were to discover that Jericho wasn’t the only place where there were skulls like these.

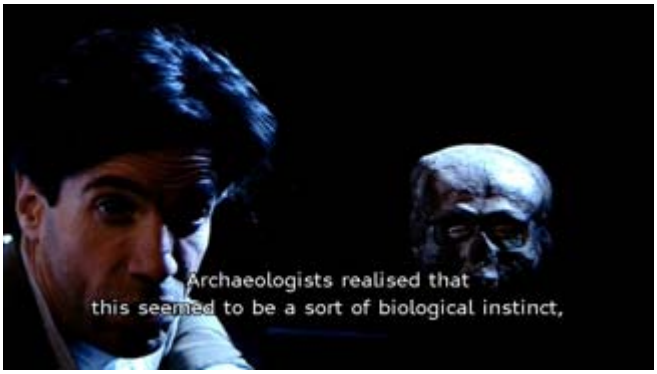
Over the decades that followed, as archaeologists excavated elsewhere in the Middle East, they discovered more decorated skulls at other sites.

And it wasn’t just the Middle East.

Thousands of years ago, ancient artists had also created decorated skulls in what’s now the Ukraine.

And it wasn’t all in the past, either,

because indigenous people in modern-day Southeast Asia were also decorating the skulls of their dead.



Archaeologists realized that this seemed to be a sort of biological instinct,

a human predisposition to decorate the skulls of those who’d already died.

Almost all other animals' behaviors are driven by instinct. Instinct here is defined as an innate behavior in response to stimuli that is essentially "pre-programmed" in the organism. So, a bird flies south for the winter, sea turtles move towards the beach to lay eggs, etc. etc. I will also lump certain forms of learned behavior into instinct as well. Yes, it is not innate, but it seems to be epigenetic in a way for some learned behavior in other animals, as they are "primed" to learn and cannot help but learn based on their programming. An example of this is a daughter chimp learns how to be a "good" mother from watching its mom. However, the daughter chimp does not have a choice to do anything but learn from her mother. It cannot say one day, "eh, I don't feel like being a mother". In a way, this is an instinct to learn specialized behaviors for survival. The animal cannot help but learn.

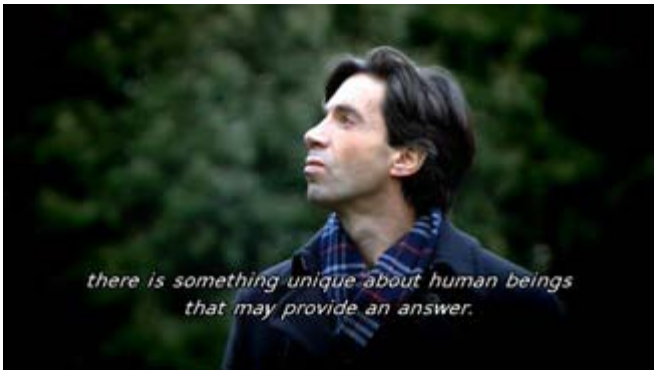
Humans, somewhere along the way from Australopithicus to Homo sapiens have developed a linguistic/conceptual based mind (with developments of the Broca's region, Wernicke's region, neocortex, amongst other brain regions and networks. This linguistic mind has changed the way human behavior functions from other animals. It gives humans the ability to create complex hierarchical thinking. We still have very basic instincts (e.g. eating to get rid of hunger, warmth, a drive towards pleasure, etc.) but most other behavior any more complex than these basic drives, is based on linguistic-cultural origin and not instinct.

My claim is that most of human behavior originates through linguistic-conceptual thought and not instinct. Even something as fundamental as child-rearing is not instinctual. If people want to have a child, it is a desire just like any other desire. That is to say, it originates with concepts (I, raise, baby, development, nurture, care for, etc.) and concepts are purely in the realm of linguistic-cultural. This contrasts with much of pop-psychology and "just so" stories that are used to explain behaviors. Beliefs like "we have an instinct to nurture and raise children" would be spurious in this view. Anyone can have a preference to not want to produce offspring, for example.

-- Instinct vs. Cultural Learning in Humans, by Schopenhauer1, The Philosophy Forum

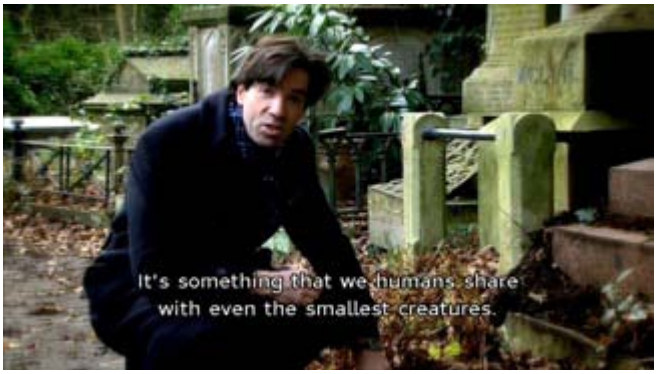
What had driven people so far apart in time and place to do this? What had compelled them, just like us, to decorate their homes with images of their dead ancestors?

Compared to all other creatures on earth …



there is something unique about human beings that may provide an answer. It’s to do with the way that our mind works.

All animals take action to avoid their own deaths.



It’s something that we humans share with even the smallest creatures.

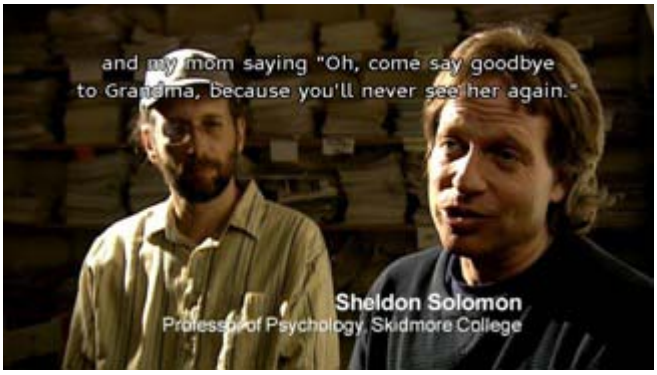
But this is just the basic evolutionary instinct to survive, to try to avoid being killed. Human beings have got something else.

We humans are the only creatures who understand the inevitability of our own death, the fact that we just can’t escape it. And unlike other animals, we’ve got a brain that’s powerful enough to imagine a world in which we’re no longer alive.

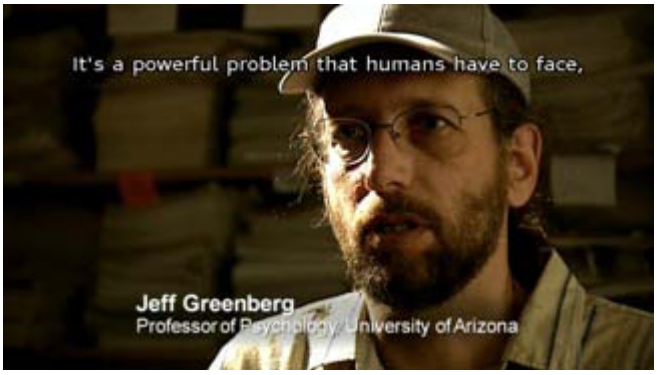
And there is a group of experts who believe that this helps explain why humans surround themselves with images of death.

They aren’t archaeologists but psychologists, based in Arizona.

[Sheldon Solomon, Professor of Psychology, Skidmore College] I remember being eight or nine years old, and my grandmother dying …



and my mom saying, “Oh, come say goodbye to Grandma, because you’ll never see her again.” When I thought about why that was so difficult to bear, it was because I realized by inference that that would be me at some point. Only human beings are explicitly aware of the fact that they some day die.



[Jeff Greenberg, Professor of Psychology, University of Arizona] It’s a powerful problem that humans have to face, their knowledge of their own inevitable death, and how that violates so much of what we’re doing day to day. We’re trying to stay live, we’re trying to thrive and yet we know, inevitably, it’ll be thwarted.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] It’s a terrifying thought, that the one certainty in life is that we’re all going to die …

and there’s nothing we can do about it. But these psychologists believe there is a way of easing this fear …

a way of trying to come to terms with our own death.

[Sheldon Solomon, Professor of Psychology, Skidmore College] The first uniquely human way of accomplishing this is art. What art does is to take the natural world and to give us some control over it.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] So, by creating images of our ancestors …

we’re reassuring ourselves that death isn’t so bad after all.

[Sheldon Solomon, Professor of Psychology, Skidmore College] That is the psychological impetus for its creation …

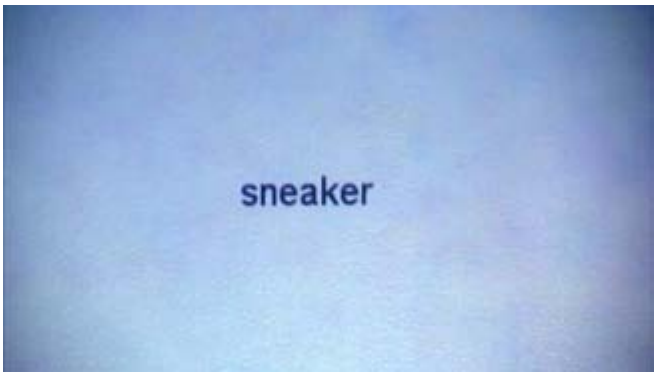
your father and your grandfather and your mom and your grandmother are still very much with you, even though they aren't moving around as much as they did in the past.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] It's an interesting theory, but could it be true?

Professors Solomon and Greenberg decided to run an experiment to try to discover what's happening in our minds when we see images of death.

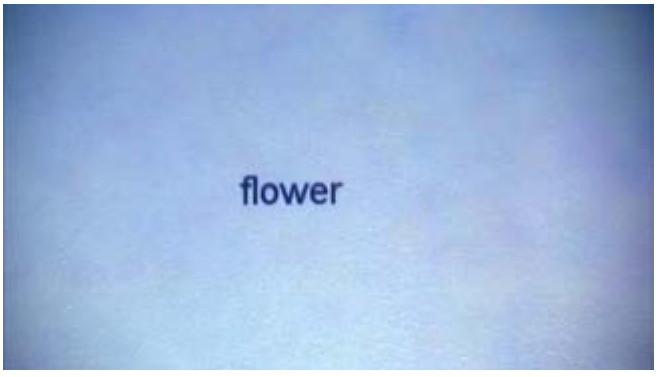
They began by taking two groups of American students. The psychologists made one of these groups think about death, but without them knowing it. And they did it by showing them these words:

rose,



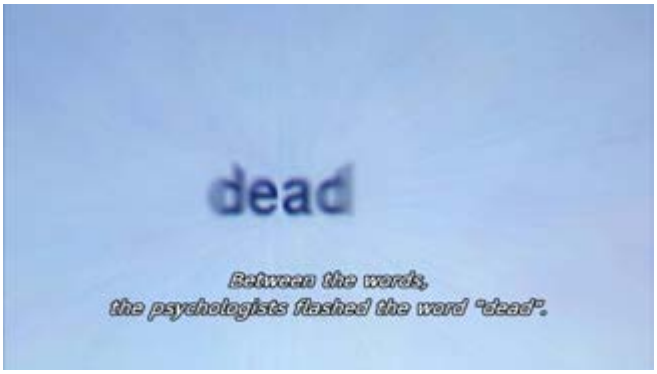
sneaker,

fajita,



flower.

See anything else? Well, you wouldn’t, because it was too quick for television to pick up. Let’s slow it down.



Between the words, the psychologists flashed the word “dead”. Each subliminal image lasted just a fraction of a second, but long enough to put the idea of death into the subconscious minds of the subjects. The psychologists then showed both groups of people a series of pictures. They were images of famous dead Americans …

icons who would have emotional value for the subjects.

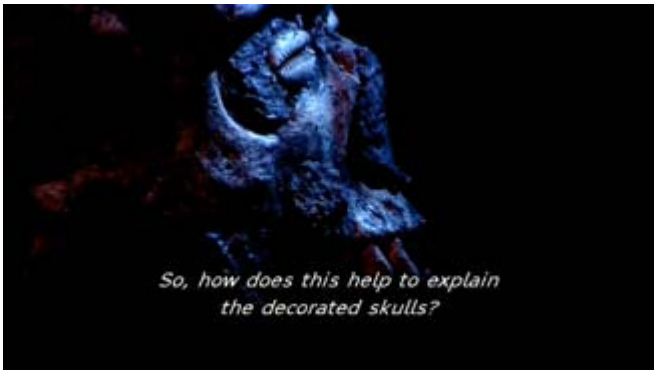
Like past presidents, George Washington and JFK.

Or screen stars, [like Marilyn Monroe]. The subjects then chose how long they wanted to look at the pictures, time which was measured.

What the psychologists found was remarkable. The group who'd been made to think about death wanted to look at the pictures for significantly longer than the group who hadn't.

It seems to show that if we're thinking about our own death, we gain reassurance

by looking at images of those who've already died.



So how does this help to explain the decorated skulls? Well, 9,000 years ago, Jericho was a death-ridden place.

Average life expectancy was just 24. Thoughts of death would have dominated the minds of the inhabitants, and would have terrified them. So, to try to reassure themselves, the Jerichoans created artistic representations of their dead.

[Jeff Greenberg, Professor of Psychology, University of Arizona] The skulls from Jericho are a striking example of the people at that time trying to keep their dead alive and to keep them present. And if they're still present, then they still exist, and thus they exist after death.

That's what we're all looking for. That would be the most, you know, comforting thing that would really assuage this potential terror.

Terror management theory (TMT) is both a social and evolutionary psychology theory originally proposed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski and codified in their book The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life (2015). It proposes that a basic psychological conflict results from having a self-preservation instinct while realizing that death is inevitable and to some extent unpredictable. This conflict produces terror, and the **terror is then managed by embracing cultural beliefs, or symbolic systems that act to counter biological reality with more durable forms of meaning and value.**

The most obvious examples of cultural values that assuage death anxiety are those that purport to offer literal immortality (e.g. belief in afterlife, religion). However, TMT also argues that other cultural values – including those that are seemingly unrelated to death – offer symbolic immortality. For example, values of national identity, posterity, cultural perspectives on sex, and human

superiority over animals have been linked to death concerns. In many cases these values are thought to offer symbolic immortality either a) by providing the sense that one is part of something greater that will ultimately outlive the individual (e.g. country, lineage, species), or b) by making one's symbolic identity superior to biological nature (i.e. you are a personality, which makes you more than a glob of cells).

Because cultural values determine that which is meaningful, they are also the foundation for self-esteem. **TMT describes self-esteem as being the personal, subjective measure of how well an individual is living up to their cultural values.**

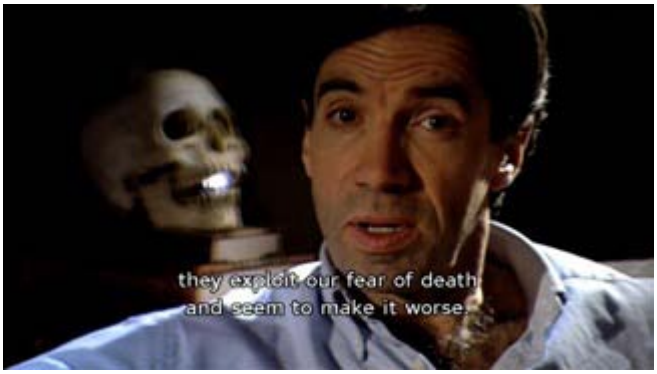
TMT is derived from anthropologist Ernest Becker's 1973 Pulitzer Prize-winning work of nonfiction The Denial of Death, in which Becker argues most human action is taken to ignore or avoid the inevitability of death. The terror of absolute annihilation creates such a profound – albeit subconscious – anxiety in people that they spend their lives attempting to make sense of it. On large scales, **societies build symbols: laws, religious meaning systems, cultures, and belief systems to explain the significance of life, define what makes certain characteristics, skills, and talents extraordinary, reward others whom they find exemplify certain attributes, and punish or kill others who do not adhere to their cultural worldview. On an individual level, self-esteem provides a buffer against death-related anxiety.**

-- Terror management theory, by Wikipedia

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] What motivated the Jerichoans was a universal human instinct. The fear of our own death is so great, we surround ourselves with pictures of people who've already died in order to reassure ourselves.

But reassurance is only part of the story, because there are other images of death that are very different. These seem to have the very opposite effect.

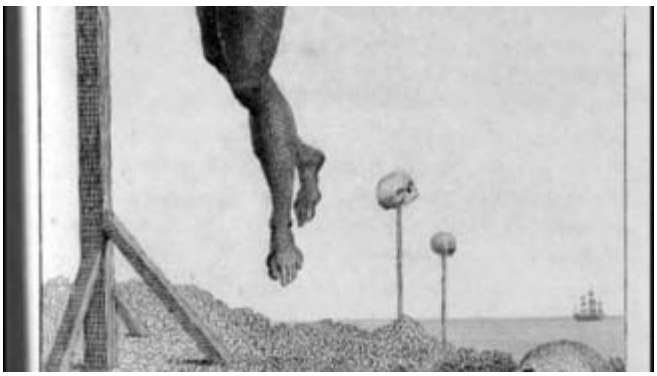
Far from reassuring us …



they exploit our fear of death and seem to make it worse. Take a look at this.

This unsettling painting from the 18th century depicts a leader of the French Revolution who's been murdered …

while this 19th century picture shows a massacre of Spanish civilians.



This etching shows a hanging …

And in the 20th century …

Himmler's SS chose to use as its regimental symbol a skull and crossbones.

Images of death like these aren't reassuring. They're upsetting. Terrifying, even.

Why do human beings create images that are so deeply disturbing? What we need to find is a civilization that's taken images like these and pushed them to the limit. If we can understand what motivated them, then we might understand what motivates us.

This is the coast of northern Peru in South America.

Between 100 and 700 AD, a powerful civilization dominated this area.

It was called the Moche. Ten years ago, an archaeologist came here to study the Moche.

His name is Steve Bourget.

Bourget began his excavations at the foot of this building …

the Temple of the Moon, or Huaca de la Luna. It was built almost 2,000 years ago.

Today, the images on its mud walls have faded and seem to have little significance.

But this is what they would once have looked like.

On these walls are some of the most grotesque images of death one can imagine.

These, for instance, are spiders. But they are no ordinary spiders.

Each one is carrying a knife. And on their backs, they have a human face with fangs.

Here’s a row of lizard beasts …

all carrying a decapitated human head.

And scattered around the site was Moche pottery showing other disturbing acts.

[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] These images look terrifying, for example people being literally eaten alive by birds.

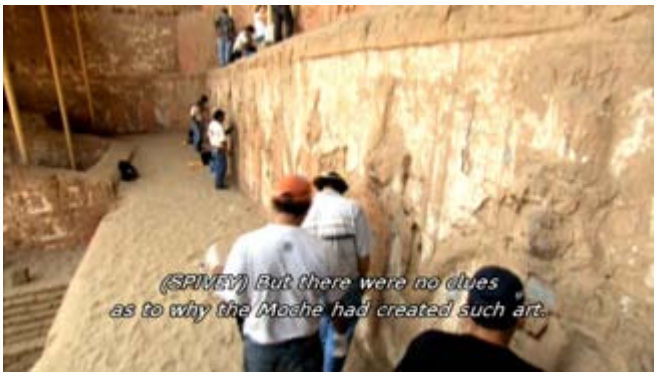
Having their face taken off. This crude facelift.

Things like that.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] But what kind of dark mythology produced these images? Were they simply the product of a lurid violent fantasy?

[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] We see what appears to be supernatural beings, people with fangs …

so it looks unreal.



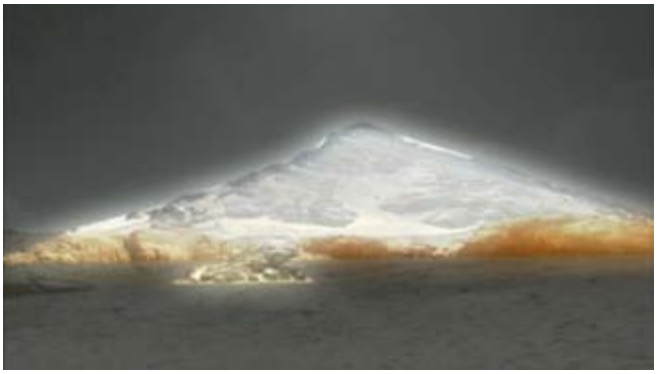
[Dr. Nigel Spivey] But there were no clues as to why the Moche had created such art.

What had compelled them, Bourget wondered, to create such disturbing images of death?

Then, one day, walking near the temple, he noticed something strange.

It was a large rock formation.

But what was so unusual was that it had an almost identical shape to the mountain behind it. Bourget began to wonder if that had given it a special significance.



[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] I believe that there was a connection …

between this rock and the mountain behind it, but that this rock was in fact a sacred rock, a sacred outcrop, in fact a copy, a small copy of the mountain behind it.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] Bourget and his team began to excavate the area, and what they found astonished them.

[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] At the beginning, all we had there was sand, clay, rubbles, bricks, nothing else.

So we start digging there.

And a metre, a metre and a half ...

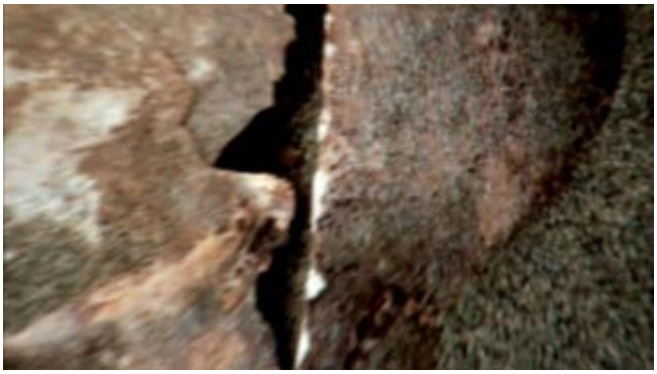
inside this rubble we located human remains.

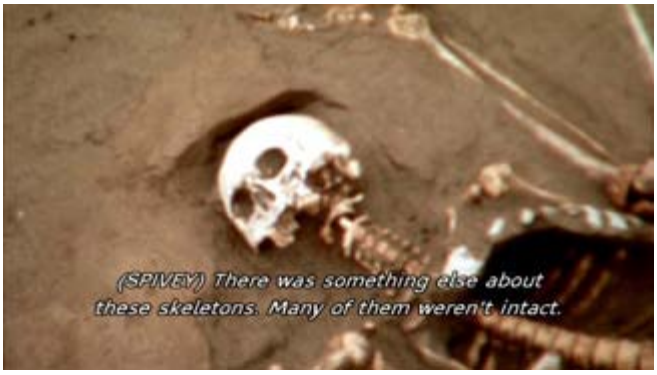
[Dr. Nigel Spivey] Not just one skeleton, but seventy. And these bodies hadn’t died naturally.

[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] As soon as we encounter the human remains …

we found for example a cranium with a large opening in the back of the head. We found another man resting on his back with a gash …

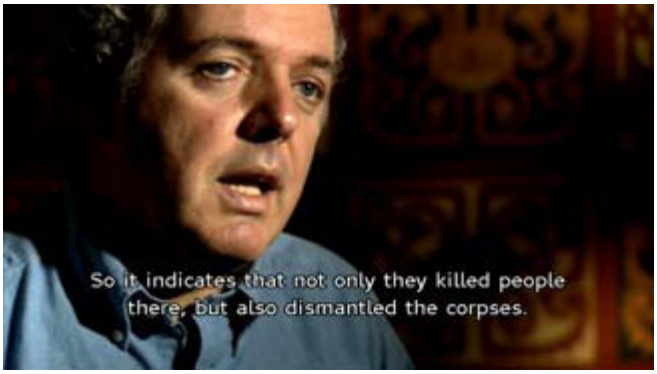
a wound just alongside the head, just right there, probably made with a copper knife.



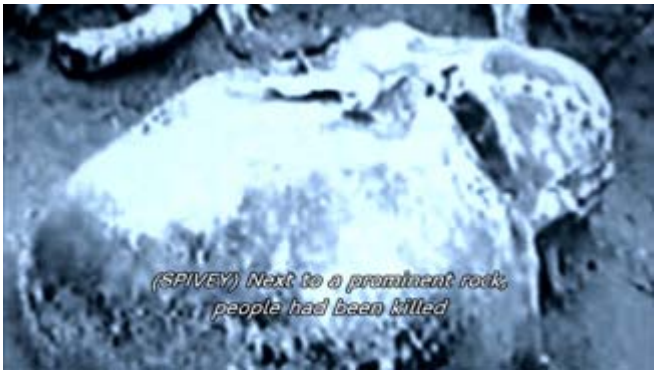


[Dr. Nigel Spivey] There was something else about these skeletons. Many of them weren’t intact.

[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] What we have there is a human cranium. And you can see that this head is literally standing alone. The body [head] has been removed from the corpse itself.



So it indicates that not only they killed people there, but also dismantled the corpses. Took them apart, so to speak.



[Dr. Nigel Spivey] Next to a prominent rock, people had been killed, and their bodies had been dismembered. For Bourget, it could mean only one thing.

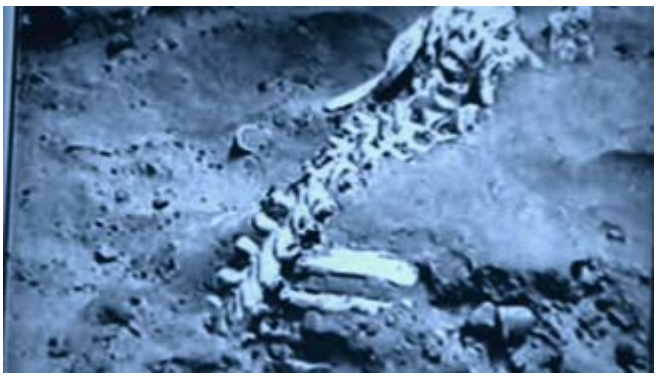
[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] This rocky outcrop was a sacred altar. In fact, a sacred mountain, a small microcosm of the big mountain behind it.

And in front of this altar, this would have been the best place for performing human sacrifice.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] Bourget had discovered that this was a site of ritual sacrifice.

But that was just the start, because then he noticed something else.

Dismembering, skeletons, severed heads,



these sacrificial remains …

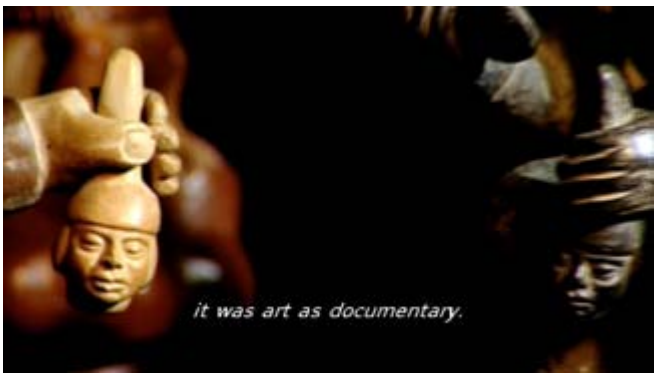
bore a remarkable resemblance to many of the artistic images created by the Moche.

[Dr. Steve Bourget, Archaeologist, University of Texas] What we are looking at …

these are illustrations of sacrifice at the same time that they are the real thing. They are the real McCoy, so to speak.

Time and again, the Moche had performed horrific acts of sacrifice and then created images of it.

This wasn’t art as fantasy …



it was art as documentary.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] And the Moche weren't alone.

For thousands of years, Latin America had been dominated by a series of ancient civilizations …

including the Inca, the Olmecs, and the Maya …

and they had all created terrifying images of death:

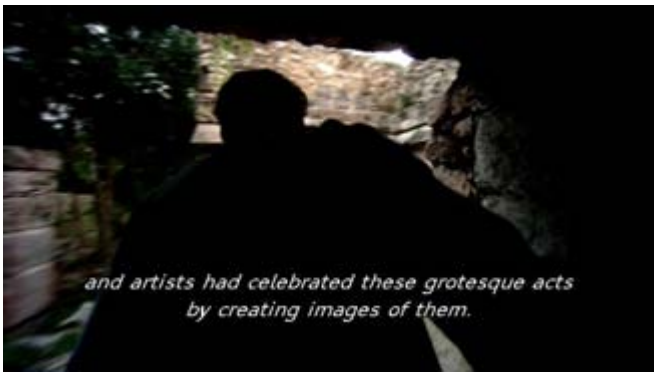
skulls …

flayed bodies …

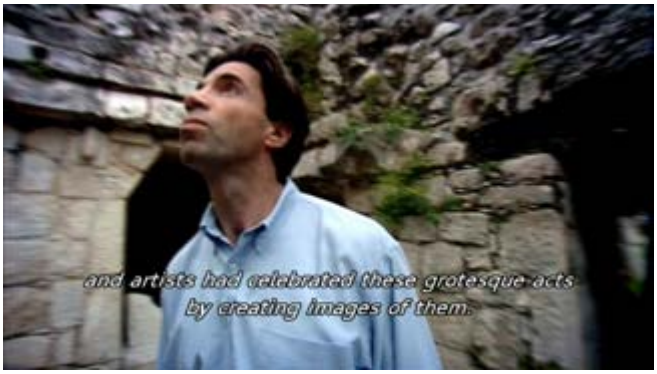
and bound captives.

Archaeologists had long wondered why this was.

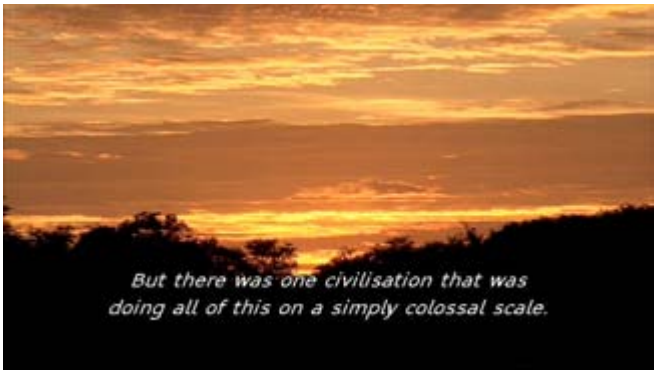
The Moche discovery finally confirmed their suspicions. In all these civilizations, sacrifice had been a way of life.



And artists had celebrated these grotesque acts by …



creating images of them.



But there was one civilization that was doing all of this on a simply colossal scale.

They were the people who ruled here in Mexico City 500 years ago.

The Aztecs.

And these are their descendants.

Today they’re here to see a modern-day blood ritual …

a bullfight.


Here in the stadium, the deaths of some half
a dozen bulls will be watched by a huge crowd.

Here in the stadium, the deaths of some half a dozen bulls will be watched by a huge crowd.

Over the next few hours, 40,000 people will witness and enjoy this killing.

[CHEERING AND APPLAUSE]

[Bull falls down dead]

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] But what if the situation were reversed? What if all of us here were lined up to be sacrificial victims over four days, one by one? Well, that's what happened here about 500 years ago.

[CHEERING]

It's almost impossible for us to comprehend the scale of such bloodletting, but Aztec historians record that in 1487, at the great pyramid of Tenochtitlan, executioners sacrificed four lines of prisoners …

each two miles long.

Victims were forced to climb to their deaths …

up the pyramid’s 114 steep steps.

And at the top, two killing rooms.

[EERIE WHISPERING]

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] Here they were met by priests wearing masks made of human skulls …

and wielding sacrificial knives.

While still alive, the victims had their hearts hacked from their chests.

Their heads were then removed …

and placed on this stone rack.

It was killing on a truly industrial scale, at least forty thousand deaths over four days.

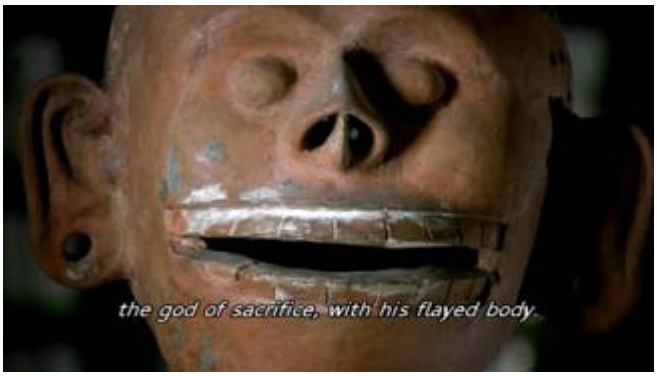
But that's not all, because the Aztecs then meticulously documented this slaughter …

with their art.

Images like the giant statue of Chalchiuhtlicue …

with her necklace of hands, hearts and skulls.

And Michtlantecuhtle …



the god of sacrifice, with his flayed body.

And the walls of skulls itself.

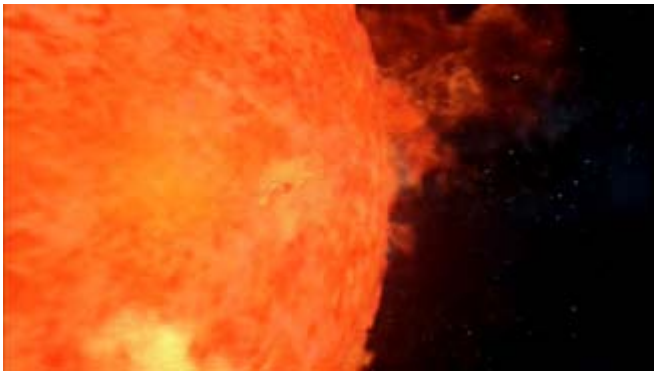
Here's an entire society that wanted to record the horrific slaughter it was perpetrating.

The question you keep coming back to with the Aztecs is "Why?"

Why the killing on such a horrific scale? And more importantly for our story, why would you want to fill your world with images of this wholesale human butchery, as if you were proud of what you were doing?

A clue to the answer lies on one of the Aztecs' most sacred objects.

Three and a half metres across, it’s the Stone of the Sun.



To the Aztecs, the sun god was the giver of life, but this was a gift that didn’t come cheap. And the Sun Stone reveals why. At its centre is the sun god.

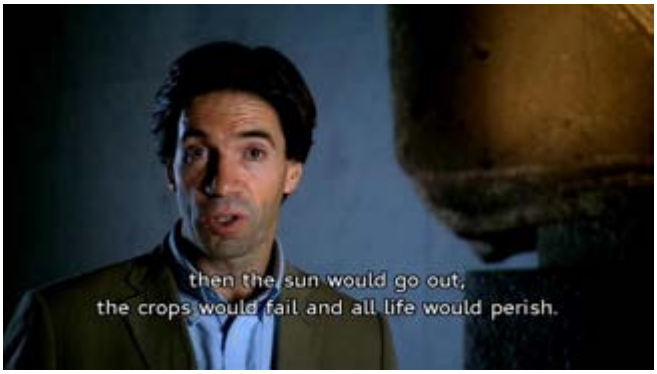
And in his outstretched hands, he’s got two objects.

They’re human hearts.

And in his mouth he has a knife.

This is one vast sacrificial altar.

The sun god created the earth by sacrificing his own blood. This meant the people were forever in his debt, and now they must repay him with the most precious commodity that they had, their own lives. If the debt wasn’t repaid …



then the sun would go out, the crops would fail and all life would perish.

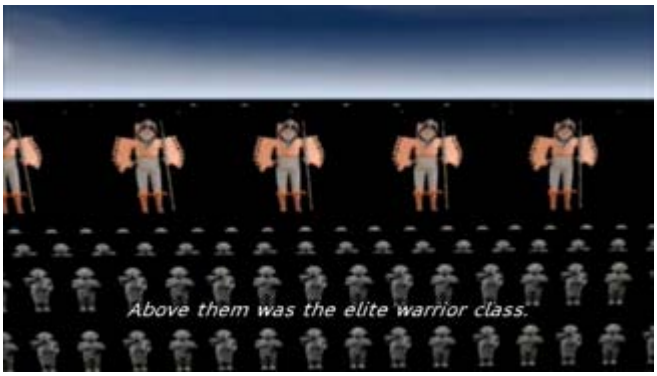
By constantly reminding people of the debt they owed …

images like these instilled loyalty and obedience to the state.

The Aztec leaders were using art to bolster the whole structure of their civilization.

Aztec society was based on a rigid hierarchical structure, and sacrifice was carefully integrated into each tier.

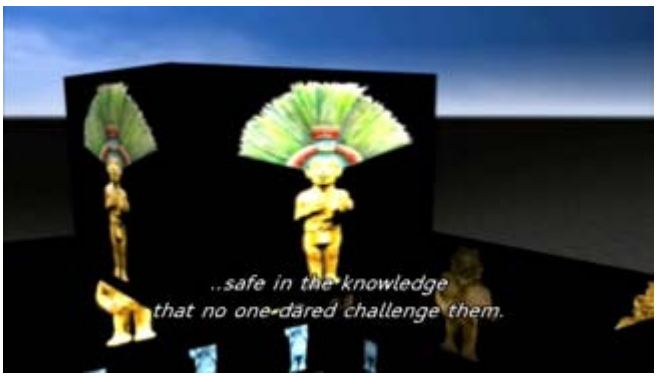
At the bottom were half a million law-abiding citizens. This was the audience for the ritual.



Above them was the elite warrior class. These were the people who fought neighbouring states to capture victims for ritual sacrifice.

Then came the priesthood, who turned killing into a form of gruesome theatre.

And at the very top, the Aztec court and its king reigned supreme …



safe in the knowledge that no one dared challenge them.

So the winners in this orgy of death imagery were the powerful elite who stood at the top of Aztec society …

perhaps the most successful regime of terror the world had ever seen. Through this art, they gained a powerful grip over the hearts and minds of their people.

And that wasn't just because these images made people fearful of being killed. The psychologists believe they were having another even more powerful effect on the minds of the Aztec population, driving them towards the values of the state.

[Jeff Greenberg, Professor of Psychology, University of Arizona] If you were an Aztec, you could say, "This is brutal. What the hell's going on?" Maybe some did that. But most would be better psychologically served by identifying with the powers that are dispensing death …

and feeling that, “Hey, we’re on the side that has control over death.”

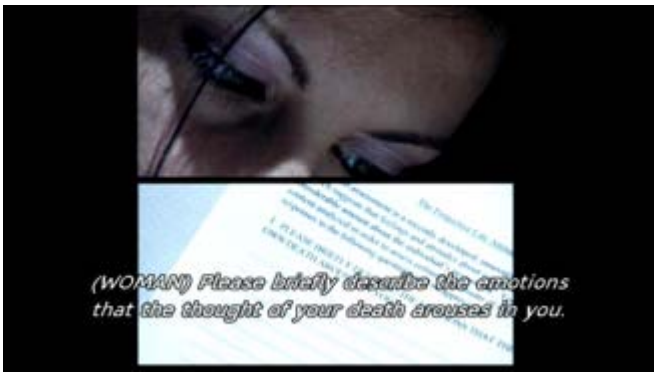
[Dr. Nigel Spivey] Professors Solomon and Greenberg wondered if thinking about death would manipulate the minds of people in a similar way today.

So they conducted an unusual experiment to find out.

They started by dividing a group of American students according to their political allegiance. Half were strong Democrat Party supporters. The other half supported the Republicans.

The students were asked to dole out a portion of foul-tasting hot spicy sauce for someone to eat. First they were told to do it for a supporter of their favoured political party, and then for a supporter of the party they opposed. The students served on average the same amount of spicy sauce …

regardless of whether it was for political friends or adversaries. The psychologists then took another group of students, but they asked them to read a series of questions designed to make them think about their own death.



[Woman] Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your death arouses in you.

Jot down as specifically as you can what you think will happen to you as you physically die.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] When these students measured out the sauce for their political allies, nothing changed. Once again, the portion averaged 12 grams. But when they doled out the sauce for their political opponents, something happened.

This time they measured out an average of 27 grams of sauce …

more than twice the previous amount. So reminding people of their own deaths seems to drive them towards supporting those who share their values and opposing those who don't. And the experiment suggested this was a universal human instinct, as relevant to modern-day students as to 15ht-century Aztecs.

[Jeff Greenberg, Professor of Psychology, University of Arizona] These results suggest …

when people are reminded of their own mortality …

they are going to lash out at those who have a different belief system than their own, the idea being that when we think about our own death, we become more invested in our own belief system, and someone with a different belief system becomes psychologically threatening. So we're gonna lash out at them, oft-times with violence.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] This psychological explanation would also account for unsettling images like these.

This was painted to inspire loyalty to French revolutionary values.

Here a painting celebrates the sacrifices that were made for Spanish independence.

This etching was created to provoke revulsion towards slavery.

And in Nazi Germany, the skull and crossbones was used by the SS to instill obedience.

In each case, disturbing images of death were being used to bind people to a cause.

So we seem to surround ourselves with two very different types of images of death.

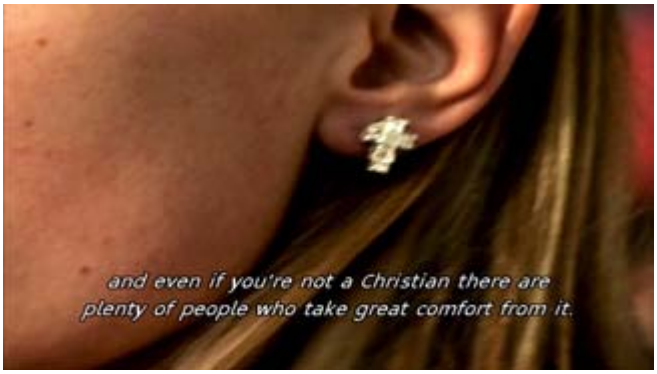
Some reassure us …

whereas others terrify. Each has a powerful hold over the human mind. But just imagine the power of an image that could do both. Because there seems to be another kind of image of death …

strangely one that terrifies and reassures us both at the same time.

In the Western world, this is one of the most familiar images that we ever see.

It’s used to reassure people …



and even if you’re not a Christian, there are plenty of people who take great comfort from it.

The other of the two pillars of Hegelianism is his so-called philosophy of identity. It is, in its turn, an application of dialectics. I do not intend to waste the reader's time by attempting to make sense of it, especially since I have tried to do so elsewhere; for in the main, the philosophy of identity is nothing but shameless equivocation, and, to use Hegel's own words, it consists of nothing but 'fancies, even imbecile fancies'. It is a maze in which are caught the shadows and echoes of past philosophies, of Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as of Rousseau and Kant, and in which they now celebrate a kind of witches' sabbath, madly trying to confuse and beguile the naive onlooker. The leading idea, and at the same time the link between Hegel's dialectics and his philosophy of identity, is Heraclitus' doctrine of the unity of opposites. 'The path that leads up and the path that leads down are identical', Heraclitus had said, and Hegel repeats this when he says: 'The way west and the way east are the same.' This Heraclitean doctrine of the identity of opposites is applied to a host of reminiscences from the old philosophies which are thereby 'reduced to components' of Hegel's own system. Essence and Idea, the one and the many, substance and accident, form and content, subject and object, being and becoming, everything and nothing, change and rest, actuality and potentiality, reality and appearance, matter and spirit, all these ghosts from the past seem to haunt the brain of the Great Dictator while he performs his dance with his balloon, with his puffed-up and fictitious problems of God and the World. But there is method in this madness, and even Prussian method. For behind the apparent confusion there lurk the interests of the absolute monarchy of Frederick William. The philosophy of identity serves to justify the existing order. Its main upshot is an ethical and juridical positivism, the doctrine that what is, is good, since there can be no standards but existing standards; it is the doctrine that might is right.

-- The Open Society and Its Enemies, by Karl R. Popper

But, just for a moment, look at the cross simply as an image.

It’s the figure of a man oozing blood, dying an agonizing death.

It should terrify us.

Is this really so far from the images of sacrifice created by the Aztecs?

So why create an image that both terrifies and reassures us at the same time?

What's going on psychologically that makes this image such a comfort to countless millions of people?

In the field of psychology, **cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort (psychological stress) experienced by a person who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values**. This discomfort is triggered by a situation in which a person's belief clashes with new evidence perceived by the person. When confronted with facts that contradict beliefs, ideals, and values, people will try to find a way to resolve the contradiction to reduce their discomfort.

In A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957), Leon Festinger proposed that **human beings strive for internal psychological consistency to function mentally in the real world. A person who experiences internal inconsistency tends to become psychologically uncomfortable and is motivated to reduce the cognitive dissonance, by making changes to justify the stressful behavior, either by adding new parts to the cognition causing the psychological dissonance or by avoiding circumstances and contradictory information likely to increase the magnitude of the cognitive dissonance.**

-- Cognitive dissonance, by Wikipedia

Well, now we may be able to find the answer …

because we now know the moment …

at which human beings first brought together images of death …

which both reassure and terrify.

It happened here in Italy. Two and a half thousand years ago, a great civilization ruled this land. It had cities, wealth and beautiful art.

No, not the Romans.

These people were the Etruscans.

Who laid the foundations of Rome?

Not the Romans. The Etruscans.

You thought gladiators were Roman? You’re wrong, because they were Etruscan, too.

Think straight roads were a Roman idea? No, they were Etruscan.

Bridge building, irrigation systems, the Etruscans were superb engineers. They gave Rome the tools to build an empire. Despite this, for a long time it was believed that little remained of this once-great civilization. Then, in the 19th century, archaeologists began to prove otherwise with a series of discoveries that would give us the final chapter of our story.

They lay buried underground. Because down here are thousands upon thousands of Etruscan tombs.

This is where the Etruscans buried their dead.

And they’re some of the most reassuring visions of the afterlife ever created.

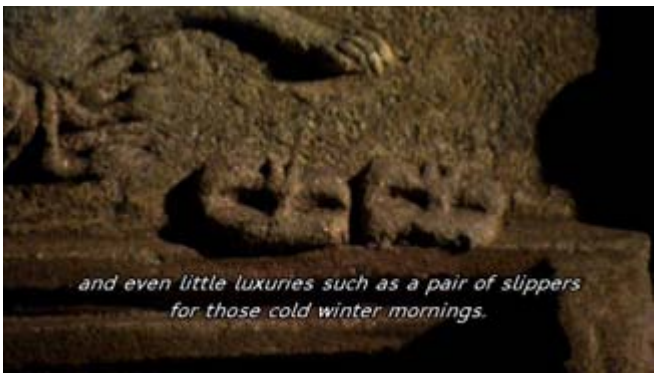
I’m in the tomb of the Matuna family, who lived in Cerveteri about two and a half thousand years ago.

And although this was designed for them in their death, it’s got a very cosy feel about it.

The Matunas were given tools for farming …

livestock …

cooking utensils, a flagon of wine, beds …



and even little luxuries such as a pair of slippers for those cold winter mornings.

With all this food, the only problem the Matunas may have faced in the afterlife is mice …

but thoughtfully the artist has created a cat.

Etruscan tombs were designed as houses for the dead …

so they’ve got all the features that you’d expect from a house.

We’ve got doorways leading into bedrooms, en suite of course …

windows …

really sturdy roof beams.

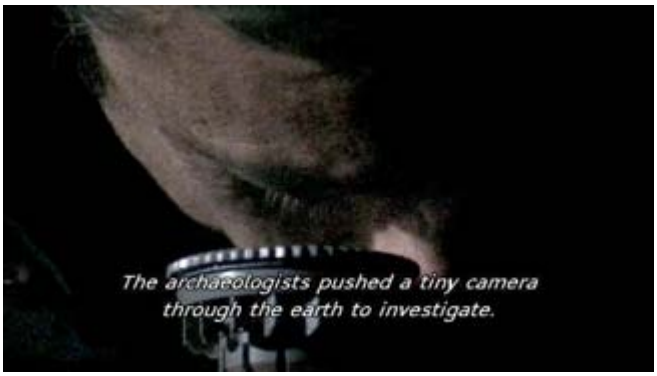
They made them to last. Thousands of years after the wooden houses of the living have disappeared, the stone cities of the dead still stand. For the Etruscans, death seemed to be simply a joyful continuation of life. If I were an Etruscan, I'd be looking forward to my death.

But it wasn't the whole story. There was a dark side to the Etruscan view of the afterlife.

And it was dramatically revealed to the world 20 years ago.

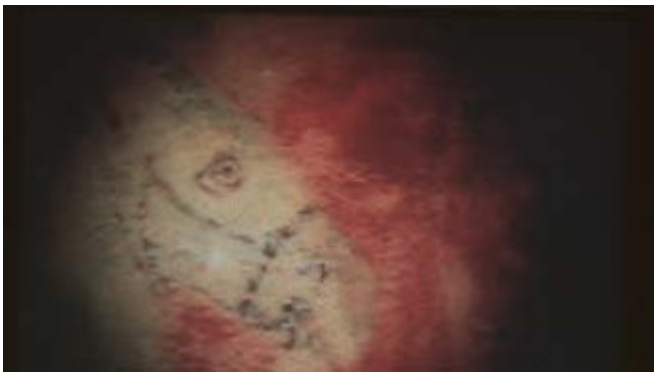
In 1985, Italian workers were digging a trench for a new pipeline to supply the town of Tarquinia with water.

They came across yet another buried Etruscan tomb and called in the archaeologists.



The archaeologists pushed a tiny camera through the earth to investigate.

What they first saw was what they expected to see.



Covering one wall of the tomb were the kind of enchanting images for which the Etruscans were famous. Anyone buried here would be surrounded by paintings of a reassuring afterlife. Then the archaeologists turned their camera around, and what they saw on the opposite wall shocked them.

Here were paintings of disturbing and unsettling creatures …

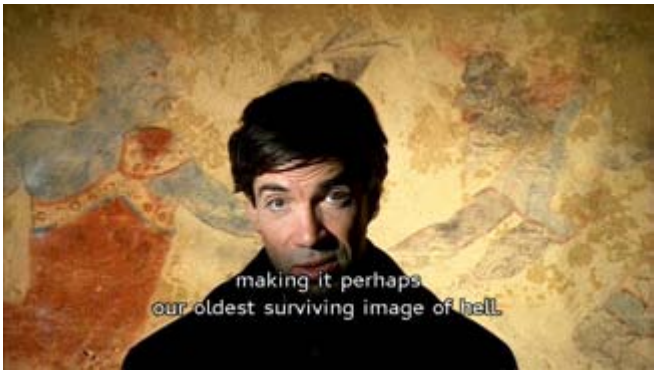
images intended not to reassure but to terrify.

This is the blue demon, the hook-nosed creature from the Etruscan underworld.

The demon’s skin is the colour of rotting human flesh.

He has a snake coiled around his arms.

Beside him is a winged devil, ready to drag the dead off to an underworld of pain and suffering. An Etruscan artist devised this vision of a terrifying afterlife around 420 BC …



making it perhaps our oldest surviving image of hell. It’s not intended to reassure. Quite the opposite.

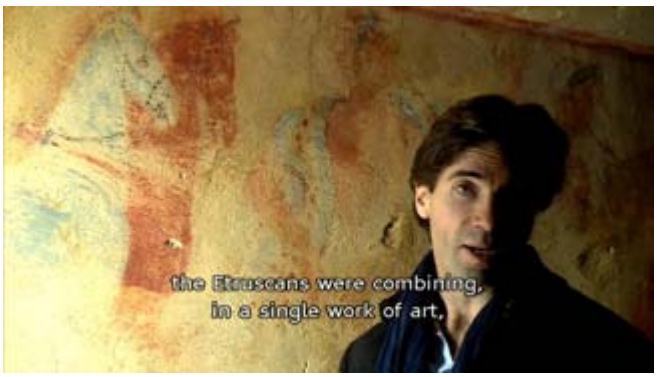
When they dated this tomb, archaeologists realized it marked a watershed.

For the previous 200 years …

Etruscans had created tombs full of images promising only a happy afterlife.

But then something had changed.

By 400 BC …



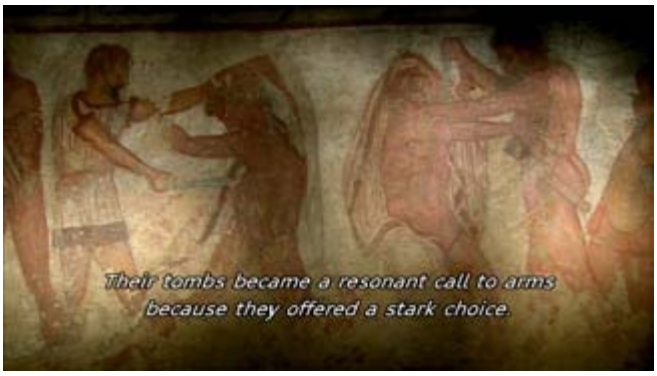
the Etruscans were combining in a single work of art, images of death that were both reassuring and terrifying, rather as we do today. So what had happened?

At this time, the Etruscans were being threatened by the rise of another Italian civilization, a greedy and aggressive people who would steal their land and destroy their culture.

Who else but the Romans?

The Etruscans knew the Romans were coming …

and they knew they needed to resist them at all costs.



Their tombs became a resonant call to arms because they offered a stark choice.

Would you be damned or saved?

These images of hell reminded the Etruscans of the gruesome fate

that awaited them if they failed in their duty and surrendered.

But these images of a reassuring afterlife promised the Etruscans their reward …

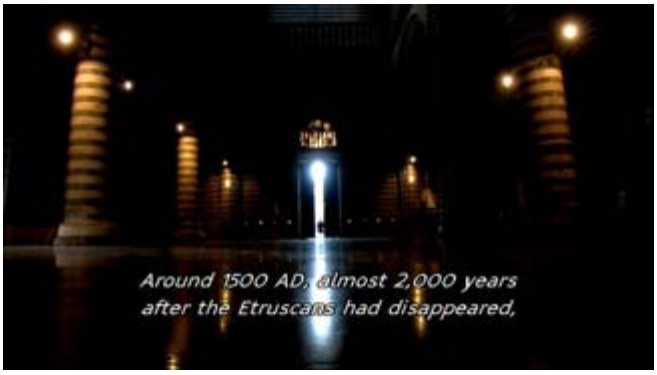
if they stood up to the imminent threat.

For the first time in history, these conflicting images had been brought together.

The Etruscans gave us the earliest images of hell, and in doing so they created the first ever images of what we today would call redemption.

This is the place where the Etruscans built their capital.

Today it’s the Italian city of Orvieto.



Around 1500 AD, almost 2,000 years after the Etruscans had disappeared, Christians built a cathedral here.

On its walls are two huge frescos …

one showing the damned suffering in hell, and here those who have been saved rising up to heaven.

[CHORAL SINGING]

Notice anything?

Well, again, we've got a vision of the happy afterlife …

contrasted with an intense depiction of suffering and pain in the other world …

meted out by blue-green demons.

These frescos offer the same mix of terror and reassurance as the Etruscans’ tombs 2,000 years earlier.

This, if you like, was their legacy.

The artist who painted these images knew only too well …

the powerful effect that combining them …

had over the human mind.

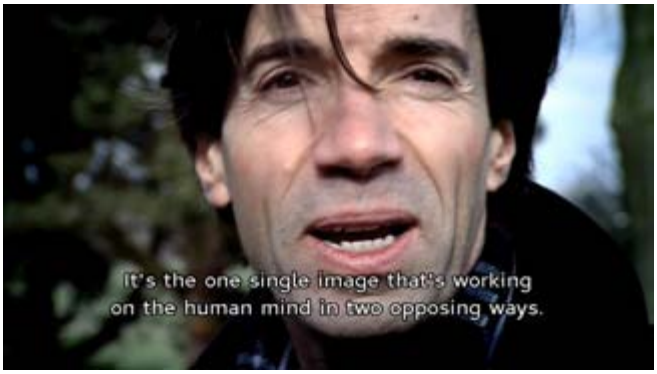
[Jeff Greenberg, Professor of Psychology, University of Arizona] The cleverness of the idea of redemption is that it can lead people to actually look forward to death, rather than dreading it.

The idea of sacrifice for the greater good is widespread. The idea of falling on a grenade for one’s buddies.

Then what we do is we memorialize such people. They’re remembered more than the rest of us.

So the idea of giving up one’s life for the greater good, and then getting something from that, getting redemption, and being in a better place, by dying in a heroic manner.

[Dr. Nigel Spivey] And that’s why the cross is unique.



It’s the one single image that’s working on the human mind in two opposing ways.

It’s a terrifying image, representing pain, loss and suffering, and yet at the same time it’s an image that reassures, one that holds out hope.

This combination has made the cross one of the most powerful symbols ever. And it explains why so often it's been used to try to give meaning …

in the face of the incomprehensible loss of life.

[CHORAL SINGING]

Presented by Dr. Nigel Spivey

Librarian Charles Carreon's Comment:

We all want to think the best about a bloke as jovial and engaging as Neil Spivey, but something's off about this episode. We start with skulls pulled from ancient Middle Eastern ruins that turn out to be the equivalent of comfy snapshots of mum and dad, grandpa and grandmum, and proceed to the thesis, derived from Terror Management Theory (TMT), that all culture is an attempt to deal with the fear of death. The scientific evidence is then marshalled, but not too convincingly, that people gaze upon the images of dead stars and politicians for much longer after they've been "primed" by thoughts of death than they otherwise would, absent the priming. While I believe the behavioral observations are accurate, the fact is, images of JFK, Marilyn, and other famous people are more than just dead people. They're famous dead people, who provoke nostalgia, and one of the discoveries of TMT is that nostalgia diminishes the fear of death.

So to simply conclude that looking at "dead people" makes us feel better isn't the clear inference to be drawn from the experiment.

Moving on, we dig into the phenomenon of human sacrifice, and quickly head for Mesoamerica, where we are presented with grim images of dead from the Aztec temples at Tenochtitlan. They were some bad hombres, no doubt, but it's hard to swallow the argument Spivey makes, that the Aztec populace were "comforted" by seeing their priests dispatch victims from neighboring tribes, because that put them "on the side of the killers," i.e., the people who were dominating the people with murder, and bribing the Sun God with heaps of human hearts. This is an unwarranted leap of fantasy that warms Spivey up for the main event, a humongous self-propelled vault over the high-bar of -- you guessed it -- the dread symbolism of the Crucifixion.

We know who practiced Crucifixion, right, class? "The Romans!" Yes, that is correct. And why did they do it? "To terrify people." Right again. But Spivey quickly switches meanings on us, in a tortured gambit to turn the Christian symbolism of crucifixion into a symbol that is "both terrifying and comforting." Somehow, he argues, through an unexplained magical pass accomplished by unknown means, Christianity turned the "The Cross" into a symbol that crushes the grapes of terror and yields the wine of Divine Comfort. Yes, according to Spivey, who sails over the obstacle of experience with a leap of pure assertion, smiling genially all the way, the Cross is indeed a magical achievement of symbolism, an icon of death that relieves the very terror it inspires.

Now I am surprised that no one that I've yet seen on the Internet seems to find this notion absurd. Jews, for example, are not comforted by the sight of crosses or crucifixes. (By the way, the difference between a cross and a crucifix is that Protestants venerate the first, and Catholics the second. For a Catholic, a cross without a dead Jesus hanging on it is just a watered-down symbol that takes them nowhere.)

Back to the Jews. Historically, they've been blamed three ways, using the Cross/Crucifix as a prop. First, they are Infidels. They fail to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Second, they are doubly at fault, for Jesus appeared to them specially, as their Messiah, and they rejected him. Third, they couldn't just ignore him, they had to hire the Romans to crucify him. Ever since, they've suffered for rejecting Jesus -- thousands werekilled in pogroms by Crusaders who decided to practice on them while journeying to kill Moslems in the Holy Land, thousands more were burned at the stake by the Inquisition, deprived of their property and land in Spain and Italy, and millions were herded into death camps by the Nazis. All their killers were Christians, all were justified, and all bore the Cross/Crucifix as their emblem of Holiness. Hence, as Chaim Potok explained it in his novel, The Chosen, it really freaked out his parents when he, a Jewish artist, painted a crucifixion scene. A lot of folks have painted crucifixions, but aside from Potok's fictional narrator, none of them were Jews.

As for the Moslems, we can hardly expect them to respond well to Crosses/Crucifixes. They banished all depictions of humans from their religion altogether. The idea of depicting God as a man, much worse one murdered by his fellow-men, is anathema to them. Then of course, they have also been persecuted by Christians, and when the Crusaders came to kill them, they bore the Cross as their emblem of murder and vengeance. The only satisfaction a Moslem could get from a cross back in those days would be by wresting it away from a Crusader and

shoving it up his ass, which probably happened once or twice. And today, when the United States went off to murder Islamic people by the gross, what kind of cannon did they use -- the Crusader Self-Propelled 155 mm cannon. That's a shell 6 inches wide -- about the size of a 3 pound coffee can, and this mofo flings that kind of munition at the rate of 10 rounds per minute. Level a building very quickly. Crush people to hamburger most efficiently. The meaning of the word "Crusader?" One who carries a Cross.

Finally, we come to the believers, the Catholics and Protestants who post these torture instruments atop their churches.

According to Spivey, these images are really comforting to Christians, who can efface from their minds the awareness that crosses were things built especially to kill people with. Kind of like saying, post an AK 47 on the top of your building to make folks feel safe walking inside. Well, now that you mention it, when you google "Church and AR 15" you do get some of these freakos to gawk at.

These folks, I guess, really have got the "old-time religion." They know what that cross is for, and if you give them any LGBTQ bullshit, they'll hang you up on it!

But what about normal Christians. People who believe in the Beatitudes, and want their Jesus to greet them and their relatives at the Pearly Gates with a big smile and a glass of lemonade? What about them? Do they find it comforting to see him hanging up there on the Cross, bleeding his life away? Does it comfort them to know that "God gave his only begotten Son that men should be freed from sin?" Do they think it's great that Jehovah, having become wroth with mankind, didn't resort to a world-destroying flood to cleanse the earth of sinful men, and instead took his Son up on an offer that must have gone like this, "Aw Dad, I know humans are a big disappointment. From Adam and Eve going for the Apple instead of the Garden, and Cain going vegetarian and killin' his brother the shepherd. I know that really bummed you out because you love meat and hate vegetables. And they always be fornicatin' and drinkin' and gettin' all confused about what's good and bad. But

they're weak, you know, and I'm strong! Kill me, Dad! Kill me! I can take it! Just take all that anger out on me -- whip me -- aw let's say 40 lashes -- have some strong Roman badass do it. Then have a Roman Procurator wash his hands of my fate, and let my own people, my own flesh and blood, the Chosen People, cry out for me to die, yeah, let them favor a murderer, let's call him Barrabas -- that's a scary name -- let them release him from death. Then for a final ignominy, hang me up on a cross on a boilin' hot day, between two thieves. Let the soldiers throw dice below me, betting to see who can win my bloody clothes. When I ask for water, let 'em offer me piss. I can take it, Dad! Then I'll show em all how great you are by Rising from the Dead! Tell me that won't impress 'em, Dad. C'mon, it'll be fun!"

Yeah, that's a groovy myth, huh. Just totally comforting to think that God would accept that bargain. What red- blooded American dad wouldn't be proud of a son like that?

Spivey didn't think this through very well, you know? I don't know who wrote this script, but I think it was a bunch of preachers operating through the BBC. They wanted a nice fella like Spivey to wash the blood off their religion, make it clean as the driven snow, like sheets hanging out on the line on laundry day. You'd just have to be a fool to buy it, though.

Hate to tell you, Spivey, but among Catholics, prayer is penance. Prayer is punishment. Redemption happens in Purgatory. Jesus suffered because we sinned. We wielded the whip. We nailed him up. We threw dice for his clothes. We caused it all, and we are to feel guilt for that, not relief. Comfort in the Christian tradition comes at the end of a long train of repentance. It comes after acknowledging that Christ was crucified "Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." And no BBC special can change that.