

LIFE STANDING ON STILL LIFE, A JOURNEY THROUGH VIDEO AND ART IN HURT

MÁRIO JOSÉ AVELAR

Universidade Católica Portuguesa
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3559-8722>
mariojavelar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Johnny Cash's video cover of Trent Reznor's "Hurt" explores the themes of aging, regret, pain, and the passage of time. Within the context of ageism, the lyrics resonate deeply, reflecting the struggles faced by individuals as they grow older and confront societal perceptions that often devalue their experiences and contributions. The visual dimension of Cash's rendition, with its resonance of a pictorial genre, still life, imbued with a sense of vulnerability and introspection, highlights the emotional toll of aging, as well as the isolation that can accompany it, particularly in a culture that frequently prioritizes youth over wisdom. We also focus on the image of a man of Cash's stature and on his performance in relation to its strength but also its frailty, something that Bob Dylan stressed while addressing the presence of Cash "Johnny was and is North Star; you could guide your ship by him" (Diehl 2018). Ultimately, we will use his interpretation as our compass in which "Hurt" serves as a powerful commentary on the human experience, transcending the boundaries of age and challenging the stigma associated with growing older and as Nick Cave on his encounter with the man in black declared, "Johnny comes alive!" (Cave 2023).

KEYWORDS: Hurt; Video; Art; Ageism; Johnny Cash.

This essay analyzes how Johnny Cash uses the pictorial genre known as still life in his video cover of Trent Reznor's song "Hurt" in order to address the themes of passage of time, memory and loss. We show how the carefully curated arrangement of objects, such as decaying flowers, abandoned personal items, and desolated landscapes, evokes a sense of nostalgia and melancholy, mirroring Cash's own inner struggles and the passage of time, like the man staring at the old grey clock in Jacques Brel's 'Les vieux' that waits for the ticking sound of the ultimate catharsis, death. We will prove that his artistic strategy enhances the emotional weight of Trent Reznor's lyrics that were written ten years before, and invites the viewers to contemplate and meditate upon life's frailty and the inevitability of decay, eventually building a powerful synergy between the song's visual and auditive elements, thus challenging the stigma associated with getting old: when Nick Cave met the man in black, he declared, "Johnny comes alive!" (Cave 2023).

Thus, our analysis combines a diachronic and a synchronic approach through a reading of the textual/lyrical narrative as it unfolds in the video in a radical connection with the imagery, which requires a more detailed reading of certain frames. The pathos inherent to an emotional reminder of past acts is a pervasive issue of ageism that permeates modern society. As individuals progress through later stages of life, they are often confronted with a myriad of challenges stemming from societal perceptions that tend to diminish the value and significance of their accumulated wisdom, experiences, and ongoing contributions. Consequently, the song's lines and chorus encapsulate the deep sense of marginalization and invisibility that many senior citizens grapple with as they navigate a cultural landscape that often prioritizes youth, novelty, and productivity over the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings, regardless of their age. Thereby the emotional dimension brought forth by Cash's words and melodies in his version of Reznor's act as a reminder of the need for empathy, understanding, and inclusivity regarding individuals in their later years, acknowledging the invaluable perspectives and insights they still have to offer to their communities and the world at large.

Our essay comes within the concept of Vanitas Still Life, when we dive into the analyzing the world of "Hurt" particularly as exemplified by the term "homo bulla," which means "man is but a bubble" (Cheney 2018) that encapsulates the notion that human existence is inherently transient and delicate, akin to the fragility

of a soap bubble: “*homo bulla* is a new extension in the philosophy of Renaissance humanism from the medieval memento mori, which is rather stressed on the mortality of human being” (Mori 1996, 152). This metaphor was widely recognized during the period, and inspired philosophical reflections of Erasmus’s *Adages*. The imagery of the bubble functions as a bitter reminder of the fleeting nature of life, emphasizing the inevitability of mortality and the superficiality of worldly pursuits. Such artistic representations invite contemplation on the impermanence of human achievements and the ultimate futility of material desires, urging viewers to reflect on existence’s deeper significance amidst the inevitable passage of time, ingrained not only visually but through the words: “what I have become, everyone one I know goes away” (Cash 2019).

This notion emerges in the video’s initial frame, with a shot of a statue of a man carrying a vase of flowers on his back, evoking Atlas carrying the world on his back. This image leads the viewer right from the song’s beginning towards an exploration of existential themes, such as the nature of individual agency and moral obligations within a community. It also encourages a critical examination of how personal actions and decisions can contribute to, or mitigate, collective suffering, prompting individuals to reflect on their role within the larger tapestry of humanity.

The genre, and hopefully the topic of still life upon which this essay stands, involves a focus on inanimate objects, and has its origins in the Netherlandish painting tradition of the 16th and 17th centuries. According to the glossary on the National Gallery website the English expression “still life” is etymologically rooted in the Dutch word “*stilleven*,” reflecting the genre’s historical and cultural connections to the Netherlands. This artistic movement was marked by a meticulous attention to detail and a profound appreciation for the beauty of everyday items, which were often arranged in elaborate compositions. This goes hand in hand with the viewer’s aesthetic experience with “Hurt”.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Dutch painters began to explore and innovate this genre, creating works that not only showcased aesthetic qualities of objects but also imbued them with symbolic meanings. These paintings often featured a variety of items, such as fruits, flowers, and household objects, arranged in a manner that highlighted their textures, colors, and forms. The careful composition and use of light helped to raise the ordinary into the extraordinary, while inviting viewers to contemplate the transient nature of life and material

possessions. This can be seen in the opening video frame where several fruits are arranged in a way that evokes what Dutch painters did several centuries ago (Casey 2011).

The imagery evoked in the video functions as a vehicle for contemplation and reflection, inviting the viewers to engage with complex ideas and emotions dealing with the passage of time, and eventually death. Through its deliberate use of color, form, and imagery, the video stimulates a reflection on mortality, morality, and reality itself. Cash is fully aware that death is imminent and inescapable; it will consume him, just as the ring of fire engulfs the trees. Furthermore, viewers may project their own experiences and fears onto these images, turning the act of watching into a personal confrontation with the object rather than a passive observation. As a result, the video does not merely illustrate a meditation about aging; it directly engages viewers in a shared reckoning with human limits and the search for self-understanding.

Despite the absence of words and of human characters, still life conveys a narrative, since every thoughtfully chosen item acts as a silent storyteller that enthralls the viewer. Weathered books, a solitary piece of rotting fruit, or a tarnished pocket watch convey a silent story about abundance, time, decay or knowledge; while a skull is an obvious aesthetic reminder of death – *memento mori* (Alpers 1983), a fading flower may represent the fleeting quality of life. The painter's ability to suggest a narrative within the frame is just as impressive as the brushwork. Therefore, when Cash assimilates this pictorial genre in his video, it helps to emphasize the lyrics reflection on the passage of time.

The evolution of still life in the Netherlands laid the groundwork for its appreciation and development in other parts of Europe and beyond. As artists adopted and adapted the techniques and themes established by their Dutch predecessors, the genre continued to flourish, evolving through various artistic movements and styles. Today, still life remains a significant and versatile genre, allowing contemporary artists to explore new interpretations and meanings while drawing on the rich history that began in the 16th and 17th centuries (Alpers 1983).

Among the Dutch artists who contributed profoundly to the establishment of this genre, Pieter Claesz stands out (Biesboer et al, 2004). For this reason, we chose him to illustrate the relationship between the aesthetic specificity of pictorial genre and the possible metaphysical dimension inherent to it. His work *Still Life with a*

Skull and a Writing Quill is an excellent example of what we have just mentioned, with its meaningful inquiry into mortality and into life's transience through its meticulous framing of objects. The composition features a human skull, a symbol of death, juxtaposed with a writing quill, which evokes knowledge, creativity, and the fleeting nature of human endeavors. The interplay of light and shadow enhances the somber mood, inviting viewers to reflect on the inevitable passage of time and the impermanence of existence. The artist's choice of color palette, dominated by earthy tones, further emphasizes the gravity of the subject matter, while the detailed rendering of textures in the objects underscores Claesz's technical prowess and his ability to evoke deep philosophical contemplation through still life (Biesboer et al, 2004).

All these aesthetic dimensions function as a visual memory that echoes in Cash's video, emphasizing the pathos lent by the lyrics about the passage of time. We argue that Johnny Cash's rendition of "Hurt" echoes this aesthetic as it functions as a poignant fragment of time, encapsulating a powerful imagery that reflects the artist's introspective journey and the passage of time. Through a series of evocative visual signs, the video juxtaposes Cash's weathered visage with haunting memories, creating a narrative that explores themes of regret, loss, and the inevitability of mortality. The figure clad in black, known as Johnny Cash's, is an iconic representation of a complex persona that transcends mere musical artistry. Cash, a legendary country music singer-songwriter, often donned dark attire as a symbol of his empathy for the downtrodden and marginalized individuals in society. His choice of clothing was not merely a fashion statement; it served as a visual manifestation of his deep connection to themes of sorrow, struggle, and redemption that permeated his music.

The stark, desolated settings and the raw emotional weight of Cash's performance contribute to a powerful commentary on human experience, both an echo of his inner struggles and a universal meditation on the frailty of life and on the enduring impact of one's choices. We remind again Claetz' skull painting, but unlike the skull shown in the painting, we again agree with Nick Cave when he states that Johnny Cash "comes alive!" through the imagery, the persona, the voice and, above all, through the man.

Voice and song both converge as symbols of existence, condensing the essence of life even amidst their somber undertones. This duality highlights the

capacity of music and vocal expression to express the complexities of human experience, where moments of darkness can coexist with the vibrancy of life. Through the exploration of melancholic themes, the voice becomes a vessel for emotional depth, allowing individuals to connect with their innermost feelings and navigate the intricacies of their existence. As the lyrics remind the viewer, “Everyone I know goes away in the end” because we will all vanish and only through art - paintings, family pictures - memories, and other representations of our life will remain; thus, the tension between life and death prevails. As Magrit Rowell states: “In a certain sense, none of the objects in these paintings is still or inanimate: their deformations, palette, and brushwork transmit a sense of urgency, a precarious tension between life and death” (Rowell 1997, 124).

Therefore, even facing a darker tone, the act of singing and the resonance of the voice affirm the enduring nature of life and the myriad emotions that go along with it. Johnny Cash’s distinctive timbre functions as a poignant reminder of his enduring legacy and influence in the realm of music. His deep, resonant tones enclose a wide range of emotions, evoking a sense of nostalgia and connection to his artistic persona. This vocal quality not only reflects his personal experiences and struggles but also resonates with listeners, creating a lasting impression that transcends time. As such, Cash’s voice remains a significant artifact of his presence, allowing fans and new audiences alike to engage with the profound narratives woven in his songs.

Johnny Cash transcended the persona of the “man in black,” embodying the disenfranchised voice and the complexities and struggles inherent in human experience. His music and public image resonated deeply with those marginalized by society, yet he also captured the broader themes of existence, encompassing joy, sorrow, redemption, and resilience. Through his poignant lyrics and powerful performances, Cash articulated life’s multifaceted nature, making him a figure whose influence extended beyond mere musical boundaries to touch the very essence of humanity. Johnny Cash is, and we do not use the past because he remains not only the man in black, the man of the disenfranchised, but the man of life. Black is a nuclear color both in the video and in the artist’s persona, carrying along with it an aesthetic ambiguity. While analyzing André Derain’s art in *Still Life on a Black Ground*, John Thomson sharply reminded “how things became illuminated on how they reveal themselves by picking up accents of light from within a darkened space”

(Thomson 218, 2006). Just like the signs that reveal their identity and meaning in stark contrast with the darkness, Cash reveals himself before the audience through the darkness surrounding him and the one within.

The still life recurring visual theme in Johnny Cash's video thus invites a profound exploration of the intersection between art and the essence of his persona. This reading shows that Cash transcends the boundaries of mere representation, embodying the stillness and permanence often associated with still life compositions. His rugged features, somber attire, and the weight of his life experiences evoke a sense of timelessness, akin to the objects in a still life that capture a moment frozen in time. The juxtaposition of his raw emotional depth with the static nature of still life art creates a compelling narrative, inviting viewers to reflect on the complexities of his character and the enduring impact of his music. This portrayal not only highlights the aesthetic qualities of Cash's image but also serves as a metaphor for those themes of resilience and introspection that permeate his work, ultimately transforming him into a living embodiment of the still life genre.

At a musical level, Johnny Cash's guitar rendition of "Hurt" embodies a profound sense of frailty that resonates deeply with the audience. This effect does not confine itself to a technical virtuosity since it helps to build an emotional expression of vulnerability and regret that prevail in the lyrics. Cash's deliberate strumming and sparse arrangement create an atmosphere of introspection, allowing the pathos of the autobiographical experiences to permeate the performance. The rawness of his guitar work complements his deep grave voice, enhancing the poignant narrative of loss and sorrow. This combination of musical elements underscores the overarching message of the song, illustrating how Cash's artistry transcends mere entertainment to evoke a powerful emotional response.

Frailty therefore stands at the center of this video, both due to Cash's performance and to this weathered face and sometimes frail voice, and to the visual atmosphere created by still life frames which encapsulate the delicate balance between permanence and transience, as it often portrays inanimate objects that, while seemingly static, evoke a sense of vulnerability. The juxtaposition of beauty and impermanence in still life compositions not only highlights the aesthetic qualities of the objects depicted but also encourages a deeper reflection on the

human condition, emphasizing how even the most vibrant and seemingly robust elements of life are subject to deterioration and change.

Therefore, the images that punctuate the video create a dialogue with the viewer, with the audience, inviting us to be part of what is happening, to be a guest in Cash's house, at his dinner table with his family, to be a witness, not an outsider, a voyeur watching the unfolding of the visual narrative, and thus somehow be an actor within it. This involvement also owes to the genre as such. In *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* Norman Bryson reminds:

The fiction is maintained that the place of eating and the place of viewing are one and the same, and through that fiction comes the idea that at this level of simplicity persons are interchangeable, and equal. As the viewer joins this space, solitude becomes intimacy; and Claesz is close. (Bryson 2012, 113)

Within this artistic context a specific sign, the wine glass, stands out since it functions as a symbol of life's fleeting nature, encapsulating the idea that moments of pleasure often are temporary. Similarly, musical instruments like the lute have historically conveyed analogous themes, with their melodies acting as metaphors for the vanity inherent in human life and the ephemeral quality of existence itself. Through these artistic expressions, both the visual and auditory realms reflect a deep commentary on the transient aspects of human experience, inviting contemplation on the impermanence that characterizes our lives. Cash pours the wine over the table, while facing the camera, thus looking straight into the viewer's eyes, not with an aura of defiance, but of warning.

The act of pouring the wine also carries with it significant symbolic connotations that extend beyond mere consumption. Traditionally, this gesture is often associated with rituals of celebration, communion, and the sharing of experiences among individuals. In various cultures, the act of pouring wine may mean hospitality, generosity, and the establishment of social bonds, as it invites others to partake in a communal experience. Furthermore, the ritualistic nature of pouring wine can evoke themes of abundance and the cyclical nature of life, as the liquid flows freely, representing both the passage of time and the interconnectedness of human relationship. Here nonetheless it evokes regret and as mentioned warning of how life can be unstable instead of secure. Regarding the function of wine and glass Margit Rowell states in *Objects of Desire*: "glasses for the consumption of wines and spirits... represent objects of choice and desire in a

most literal sense, and their reality is neither secure nor eternal but as fugitive and unstable as desire itself” (Rowell 1997, 46).

Still life’s Dutch master, Jan van Eyck, brought into the genre depictions of religious themes that showcased his exceptional ability to create hyper-realistic portrayals of various objects, including sculptures, by skillfully manipulating light and shadow (Brusati 1990). This technique allowed the items to appear as though they were emerging from the canvas, enhancing the three-dimensionality and tangible quality of the artwork. Actually, religious motifs are a constant presence in Johnny Cash’s oeuvre, reflecting his personal struggles and spiritual journey. His music often explores themes of redemption, sin, and the quest for divine forgiveness, which resonate deeply with listeners who share similar experiences of faith and doubt. Songs such as “The Man Comes Around” and “God’s Gonna Cut You Down” illustrate his engagement with the Scriptures, inviting audiences to contemplate the implications of faith in the context of human frailty and societal issues.

Therefore, in Cash’s rendition of “Hurt,” the stark visual aesthetics evoke the classical artistic genre of still life, where inanimate objects are imbued with profound symbolic meaning. The music video’s bleak, monochromatic palette and the focus on Cash’s weathered, expressive face and hands convey a sense of deep introspection and vulnerability. This visual language poignantly underscores the emotional weight of the song’s themes - the pain of regret, the ravages of time, and the specter of mortality that looms larger as we age. The isolated, almost ascetic setting suggests the profound loneliness that can accompany the twilight years, as one confronts the accumulated sorrows and mistakes of a lifetime. Notably in modern Western culture, which often glorifies the vibrancy and potential of youth, the wisdom and life experience of the elderly are easily overlooked or discounted. Thus, as we mentioned above, Cash’s performance functions as a reminder of the fundamental human frailty and impermanence that connect us all, regardless of age and status. The raw emotionality and unflinching honesty of the piece challenge us to reflect on our own mortality and to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the trials and triumphs of those in their final chapters of life.

It is therefore legitimate to conclude that “Hurt” acts as a profound and thought-provoking reflection on the universal human journey, delving deep into the essence of what it means to age and confronting head-on the pervasive societal

stigma surrounding the process of growing older. Through its nuanced exploration of Cash's life, the narrative transcends the superficial boundaries of chronological age, instead illuminating the rich tapestry of experiences, emotions, and wisdom that accumulate over the course of a lifetime. By shedding light on the oft-neglected perspectives of older individuals, it challenges the reductive and dismissive attitudes that too often characterize societal discourse around aging. In doing so, it invites viewers to reexamine their own preconceptions and biases, encouraging a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of the diverse realities of growing older. Ultimately, it can be seen as a testament to the enduring resilience, adaptability, and vitality of the human spirit, reminding us that the passage of time is not a burden to be feared or resented, but rather an opportunity for growth, self-discovery, and the forging of deeper connections with others.

This reframing of aging finds a powerful visual and emotional expression in Johnny Cash's "Hurt," where old age is not softened or romanticized but presented as a space of reckoning. The imagery present in the video confronts the viewer with a body worn by time, a voice weakened yet unwavering, and a life measured through memory, regret, and survival. Aging here is inseparable from loss of physical strength, of loved ones, of certainty but it is also the source of authority and truth. Cash's presence transforms age into testimony: his scars, failures, and endurance grant the song its weight. Rather than depicting aging as decline alone, "Hurt" frames it as a moment of brutal honesty, where accumulated experience strips away illusion and forces a final confrontation with identity, legacy, and mortality.

He might want people to stay the hell away from him, but the magnetism of the man in black is undeniable, and the audience cannot turn the eyes away from him. Like a shaman evoking the spiritual world, his performance and his image not only summon us viewers but also enchant and leave an impression upon us, as can be seen in the dozens of videos reacting to this work. His distinctive baritone voice, replete with gravitas and tinged with a hint of melancholy, resonates with a profound authenticity that strikes a chord deep within the human psyche. The raw, unapologetic honesty of his interpretation of the lyrics, changing the words of the original to become "crown of thorns" giving an extra dimension to the song, coupled with the simple, yet powerful, instrumentation of his music, forges an intimate connection with his audience, fostering a sense of shared experience and

understanding. Cash's ability to articulate the struggles, joys, and sorrows of the human condition with such poignancy and sincerity renders him relatable and accessible, even as he maintains an aura of mystery and intrigue. Above all, the attraction resonates deep in those who regard human existence both as an attraction to the joy of life, while keeping an attraction and fascination towards death.

References

- Alpers, Svetlana. 1983. *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Biesboer, Pieter, Martina Brunner-Bulst, Henry D. Gregory, and Christian Klemm. *Pieter Claesz: Master of Haarlem Still Life*. Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2004.
- Brusati, Celeste. 1990. "Stilled Lives: Self-Portraiture and Self-Reflection in Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Still-Life Painting." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 20 (2/3): 168. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3780741>.
- Bryson, Norman. 2012. *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Casey, Todd M. *The Art of Still Life: A Contemporary Guide to Classical Techniques, Composition, and Painting in Oil*. New York: Monacelli Press, 2011.
- Cash, Johnny. 2019. "Johnny Cash - Hurt." YouTube Video. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AHCfZTRGiI>.
- Cash, Johnny. 2002. "Hurt." Track 13 on *American IV: The Man Comes Around*. American Recordings.
- Cave, Nick. 2023. "Nick Cave - the Red Hand Files - Issue #224 - I've Recently Been Listening to Your Duet of 'I'm so Lonesome I Could Cry' with Johnny Cash, on Repeat. Whilst It's Melancholy, the Harmonising That's Happening Just Makes Me Feel so Comforted, Warm, Fuzzy and Happy. Do You Have Any Stories That You Could Share with Us about Recording This Song with Mr. Cash." *The Red Hand Files*. February 27, 2023. <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/ive-recently-been-listening-to-your-duet-of-im-so-lonesome-i-could-cry-with-johnny-cash-on-repeat-whilest-its->

melancholy-the-harmonising-thats-happening-just-makes-me-feel-so-comforted/.

- Cheney, Liana De Girolami. 2018. "Cultural and Religious Studies." *Cultural and Religious Studies* 6 (5): 267–84. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2177/2018.05.001>.
- Heezen-Stoll, B.A. 1979. "A Vanitas Still Life of 1621 by Jacques de Gheyn II: A Reflection of Neo-Stoic Ideas." *Oud Holland - Quarterly for Dutch Art History* 93 (4): 246–50. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187501779x00032>.
- Mori, Yoko. 1996. "The Iconography of Homo Bulla in Northern Art from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries." Yoko Mori Bruegel. 1996. <https://www.yoko-mori-bruegel.jp/resources/pdf/homobulla.pdf>.
- Rowell, Margit, Author Rowell, and H Abrams. 1997. "Objects of Desire : The Modern Still Life the Museum of Modern Art: Distributed." https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_249_300063172.pdf.
- "Still Life." n.d. www.nationalgalleries.org. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/still-life>.
- "Still Life - Origin & Meaning of the Phrase." etymonline. Accessed January 2, 2025. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/still%20life>.

Article received on 09/10/2025 and approved on 15/01/2026.

Creative Commons Attribution License | This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.