

Death and Desire in Contemporary Japan

Representing, Practicing, Performing

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Introduction

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This volume was inspired by the Conference “Death and Desire in Modern and Contemporary Japan”, held at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice in 2011. As organisers of the Conference, we decided to start thinking about publishing some of the papers as a follow-up project. Unfortunately, the process took more time than we had expected. Nevertheless, this delay gave us the opportunity to take some time to consider and discuss some issues related to the topic, in an attempt to refine and redefine the project’s direction.

During this period, we witnessed an international increase in the interest in the topics of death, dying and ‘thanatology’, both among academics and within a more general audience. For instance, internet discussions groups – the widest of which is “H-Death”, providing announcements about International Conferences related to the topic – have become much more active in the last few years. Moreover, also the rise of forums, websites and Facebook pages on death-related topics such as war and war-tourism, museums of torture, or the so-called “dark-tourism”, has been highlighted by existing research (e.g. Sharpley 2009; Stone, Sharpley 2008; see also De Antoni in this volume), while the international market has witnessed an increase of horror films, both from the perspective of production and release (e.g. Popmatters 2017), and from the one of tickets sold at box offices (e.g. The Numbers 2017).

Similarly, in recent years, there has also been an increase in scholarly works on death-related topics. This trend has involved several disciplines that include social sciences – mainly anthropology (e.g. Kaufman, Morgan 2005; Franklin, Lock 2003; Lock 2002) and sociology (e.g. Exley 2004; Thompson et al. 2016) – but also film studies (e.g. Dixon 2010; Hantke 2004) and literature (e.g. Teodorescu 2015). There are even some ground-breaking attempts to deepen the understanding of death, dying and grief from an evolutionary perspective in primatology and biology, in the attempt to establish the new fields of “pan-thanatology” (Anderson, Gillies, Lock 2010): a study of death and grieving that comprises also non-human animals.

Studies on Japan have not been an exception to this trend. On the opposite, scholars of Japan seem to have been even more interested in the topic of death than academics focusing on other areas. Indeed, in the last few decades, publications and research into practices related to death have flourished. In Japan, Nakamaki Hirochika and Shimazono Susumu (both included as authors in this volume) were central in the organisation and management of whole research clusters on death-related practices. Nakamaki was one of the precursors of this interest, focusing on funeral customs in Japan (1986) for quite a long time and gradually specialising and producing research into company funerals and memorial services (Nakamaki 1995; 1999; 2002). Shimazono was a central figure in promoting and establishing *shiseigaku* (literally ‘death and life studies’, but also the translation of the English word ‘thanatology’) as an academic field, through research projects that included large groups of scholars and produced a series of five edited volumes published by Tokyo University press in 2008 (e.g. Shimazono, Takeuchi 2008).

Also scholarship in English has flourished in the last few years, starting with the remarkable *The Price of Death* by Hikaru Suzuki (2000), a study on the commodification of funeral practices and the funeral industry, based on both archival and ethnographic research. This work shed light not only on change and commodification of funerals, but also on the by-products of these processes, which include a dramatic decrease of perceptions of pollution (*kegare*) and fear related to the danger of the malevolent spirits of the dead.

The focus on change in mortuary rites, as well as on their fluidity – as opposed to a strong tendency in stressing their fixity and role in the reproduction of social and power relationships – has become more relevant also in other anthropological research on Japan. Rowe (2003), for instance, goes as far as to push forward the idea that a “grave revolution” (85) started in the eighties, led by changing family structures and a critical lack of sufficient burial space. Ancestor worship and the relative grave system seem to have gone through deep transformations and a decline has started to be observed as early as the seventies (Smith 1974). As a matter of fact, along with the commodification of ‘traditional’ funeral practices and ceremonies, which gave way to differentiation, individualisation and personalization (Inoue 2013; Suzuki 2000, 2013a), studies shed light also on the emergence and relative success of new practices such as the scattering of ashes at sea or on the mountains (Kawano 2004, 2010), as well as the compacting of cremated bones into Buddha statues, or their burying under a tree in “tree burials” (Boret 2013, 2014). Besides being one of the results of the changing family structure and ideology of the *ie* system (Boret 2014), as well as a response to the excessive economic demands of ‘traditional’ funerals (Boret 2014; Kawano 2010), these innovative practices are deeply intertwined with discourses on ‘nature’ and the environ-

ment, which have emerged among certain Japanese, as well as clearly the result of the commodification and liberalization of death.

Similar processes have been pointed out also in conceptualizations and notions of the afterlife. On the one hand, especially in the case of individualised death rituals, also the spirits of the deceased seem to have become less bound to the world of the living by those family bonds that would keep them tied to their relatives (e.g. Rowe 2011). On the other, along with change in ‘traditional’ views of the afterlife such as becoming an ancestor and live with the family, or conceptualizations of heaven and hell, also alternative conceptualizations have been reported and analysed in their relationships with social values such as meritocracy or hedonistic views of life after death, as well as secularism and “scientific” views of nothingness after life (Mathews 2011).

Therefore, scholarship on death and related practices in contemporary Japan, in accordance with the broader socio-anthropological tradition, has tended to firmly link them to kinship and family ties – though the more general term “relatedness” (Carsten 2000) might be more helpful in some cases, for also friends and colleagues play a role in those practices (e.g. Suzuki 2000) – as well as to socio-economic change. These are all processes that also influenced views of the afterlife. Needless to say, also dealing with an alarmingly ageing society and its concerns contributed to sharpening the focus on the centrality of social practices related to death (e.g. Traphagan 2004).

In spite of the great work that scholars have done on these topics, however, there has been a very strong trend to focus on the practices through which death and dying are settled and institutionalised, whereas untamed, unsettled death has generally been left aside. Even when it was taken into consideration, such as in cases of disasters, the main scholarly concern was shedding light on the ways through which it is successfully coped with through ritual practice (Hood 2011, 2013; Gill, Slater, Steger 2013). Yet, what about the cases in which this does not happen? What about if, for some reason, institutions and discourses are not enough to tame death? And what are those reasons? What about the cases in which unsettled death suddenly intrudes the social? What are the forms in which it does, and the consequences in the social? These are some of the questions that the contributions in this volume attempt to answer.

We Walk the Line

This project is, in our views, a ‘meshwork’, an entanglement of different “lines” (Ingold 2007) of fragmented movements, which come not only from different contributors and disciplines, but that also originate from several points of view on death, dying and the transformations and becomings that they imply.

The classic work on death ritual by Hertz ([1907] 1960) contributed to shape anthropological scholarship on the topic. Death is a transformative process not only for the deceased, but also – maybe mainly – for the living. Indeed, death rituals not only provide ways to cope with the material remains of the deceased through, for instance, (re-)burial or cremation. They often function to symbolically transform the dead and reincorporate them into the community or the society, with new identities and proper roles.

These rituals, similar to other rites of passage (Van Gennep [1909] 1960) in a person's life, are often tripartite and include a stage of separation, a transitional or liminal period, and a final reincorporation, all marked by their respective practices. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1966) deepened the investigation of the liminal period, pointing out that it is often characterised by the inversion of social norms, as well as social and hierarchical relationships, through symbolic practices. The social order is, then, reinforced through rituals, and the participants can obtain a new status, exactly as a consequence of having gone through this period "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967).

This model proved to be overly simplistic and, for instance, Bloch (1989) showed that, even within the liminal period, power, hierarchy and social norms tend to be enacted and negotiated, and that, along with their transformative powers, rituals also legitimise the continuity of social order and power relationships. Nevertheless, the general model is still considered valid. It is widely accepted that mortuary rituals often involve metaphors of regeneration of life, and that they open the chance for participants to access a vitality with great transformative powers (Bloch, Parry 1982).

More recent work showed that social actors strategically mobilise mortuary rituals in rapidly changing societies (e.g. De Boeck 2009; Kawano 2015) and that those practices are occasions for social groups to negotiate and reshape their respective positions in societies characterised by diversity and stratification (e.g. Kawano 2010). Therefore, it is clear that, as over-simplistic as the above-mentioned model can be, mortuary rites and, potentially, death, do have a transformative power that can be disruptive for social relationships and power among the living. Consequently, people try to cope with it and tame it by ritualized means.

Following the spread of medical scientific practices and technologies, this "well-managed death" (Kellehear 2007) started being handled by medical institutions, as well as by professional funeral companies. As a consequence of the changes that followed these developments especially in postindustrial societies – where there has been, for instance, a dramatic increase of life expectancy – death has come to be seen, on the one hand, as pertaining to the elderly. On the other, it has become separated from communities and neighbours.

Indeed, Mellor (1993) explained the gradual commoditization of death in terms of medicalization of the dying process and privatization of practices connected to death, together with “the sequestration of death from public space into the realm of the personal, the *absence* of considerations of death from social life” (19). Furthermore, as Kellehear (2007) pointed out, death “became wild, not because doctors, lawyers or hospitals appeared on the scene but because the old place of death (the afterlife) became questionable, even evaporated before the eyes of an increasingly sceptical urban elite” (177). Japan has not been an exception to these processes:

Community funerals reflected the participants’ fear of death, which they believed caused the release of malevolent spirits. [...] The ritual’s purpose was to usher the deceased’s spirit safely to the other world and to strengthen family ties as well as the relationship between the deceased’s family and community members. [...] Deprived of the common ground on which funeral rituals united communities, funeral ceremonies [...] solidify the ties between the bereaved and the members of groups to which they belong, including the colleagues of the deceased. [...] Various elements such as the migration of families into cities, the increase of nuclear families over household of extended kin, and the progress of work specialization have contributed to the transition. (Suzuki 2000, 4-5)

Following Suzuki (2013b), in addition to the dimension of social change and relatedness, it seems useful to add one more analytical perspective, in order to understand death and dying: the investigation of “how do the dying, who are expressing and acting on their own ideal for dying and death ways, influence afterlife values, the living, and the bereaved-to-be” (3).

As a matter of fact, thinking about death in postmodern societies only in terms of pacification and institutionalisation, implies the risk of overlooking the subjectivities and agencies of the dying and the bereaved. It also risks leaving aside those cases that exceed well-managed death, or in which the management of death through institutionalised practices is not enough. Moreover, particularly in complex and diversified societies such as the Japanese one, as a consequence of the above-mentioned changes in the modalities of relatedness that involve the management and taming of death, the problem of whose death that particular death is emerges. In other words, if a well-managed death implies the involvement of the family, friends and colleagues of the deceased, what happens when unrelated people come into play and, for instance, appropriate the narrative about one particular death, making it theirs? Or what happens when a badly managed death starts influencing people who are not related to it by ‘proper’ ritual practices?

This is the first line that we are trying to walk with this volume: the one between the efforts to ‘properly’ cope with the disruptive – at times

even monstrous – death, and the cases in which its transformative power produces new representations and practices. In traditional Japanese society – as well as in traditional scholarship on Japan – this was the realm of impurity or pollution (*kegare*), a liminal realm similar to the period between the double burial described by Hertz ([1907] 1960). Death was polluted and polluting. As such, special norms had to be observed by the bereaved in order to cope with it and its danger would not be tamed until the forty-ninth day. It was the realm that characterised liminal spirit entities, such as unrelated dead (*muenbotoke*) and spirits of people who died by sudden or violent deaths: *yūrei* or ‘hungry ghosts’ (e.g. Raveri [1984] 2006). It was the realm of social liminals such as outcastes, both *eta* and *hinin*, the ancestors of present-day *burakumin* (see Groemer 2001; Neary 1997, 2003). It was also one of the realms that the project of modernity tried to erase and pacify by making it a ‘tradition’ belonging to the past, through scientific rationalist thought and practices, as well as with the instauration of discourses of enlightenment, civilisation (Figal 1999; Foster 2009) and of, in some cases, ‘superstition’ as opposed to ‘religion’ (Josephson 2006, 2012).

Whilst, as stated above, studies on contemporary Japan have reported a decrease of the connection between death and pollution in funeral practices (e.g. Suzuki 2000), it has also been shown that it may be still operative in entanglements with national discourses of nostalgia, linked to a vanishing – though mainly imagined – past, framing and shaping practices perceived as related to ‘Japanese culture’ and ‘Japaneseness’ (e.g. Ivy 1995). Indeed, the politics of modernity were, for instance, not enough to debunk and erase ghosts or hungry spirits. Therefore, the possibilities for them to come back from the world of the dead and haunt places or people have been kept (De Antoni 2015), in spite of the strong and progressing secularization and the reportedly diminishing interest in religious and spiritual matters in contemporary Japanese society (e.g. Reader 2012).

This is the second line that this volume is trying to walk: the line between what is there and what is not, between what is alive and what is not; a line of diverse movements of multiple ways of differentiating, othering and distancing, as well as of coming-back. After all, “mortality and immortality (as well as their imagined opposition, itself constructed as a cultural reality through patterned thoughts and practices) become approved and practice life strategies” (Bauman 1992, 9). We walk the line between life and death as emerging ontologies (i.e. not given ‘objective’ categories, or epistemologies) of “being alive” (Ingold 2011), what it *is* and how it *becomes*, rather than what it *means*. The line of what happens in the social when distinctions are fractured and blurred by the exceeding transformative, or by the overwhelming suffering and mourning of the bereaved. In fact, suffering is a social practice (Kleinman, Das, Lock 1997) that goes well beyond the body. The body in pain can indeed disrupt selves

and subjectivities (Scarry 1987) but, nevertheless, suffering can also be a way to recreate a world (Das, Lock, Reynolds 2001).

In this sense, therefore, this project also walks the line of multiplicity. We look at discourses that identify the lines between life and death, at practices that (re)define them, at deadly desires that lie underneath them, and at institutionalised narratives and discourses disrupted by untamed death. Particularly in relation to this, we recognise the presence of a big absence in this volume: the 3/11 disaster in Tohoku (North Eastern Japan). There are several reasons for this. The first is that, to our knowledge, existing literature on 3/11 has mainly tended to focus on the efforts to tame all the deaths and horrors that occurred through more or less improvised institutionalised practices (e.g. Gill, Steger, Slater 2013) rather than pointing out the ways in which those horrors changed the social. This happened even in those cases in which the analytical focus was on adapting, for instance, religious practices to the immediate post-disaster (e.g. Peterson 2013). This trend is not unique to the case of studies of Tōhoku: it can also be found in the literature related to memorialization of other disasters in Japan (e.g. Hood 2011, 2013).

The second reason is linked to how it would be possible to highlight the ways in which death and horror changed the social in Tōhoku. One possibility, for instance, would be a scholarly investigation of the reports of experiences with ghosts in the area (e.g. Parry 2014; Ryall 2016). This was actually attempted by Kudō Yūka (2016), a student in Tōhoku Gakuin University, whose BA thesis was published as part of a seminal project by her Professor (Kanabishi 2016). Therefore, on the one hand, this topic has been already covered, at least partially. On the other hand, although a chapter on ghosts in Tōhoku would have been likely to have a certain appeal – Kudō san's work received a good amount of attention from the media (Andō 2016; *Mainichi Daily News* 2016) – we were not sure that it would have necessarily contributed to the volume from a methodological perspective.

The last – though definitely not the least – reason is that we wanted to leave those dead in peace, without the risk of appropriating them. Maybe it was not the right choice, maybe it is a matter of 'distance' (Latour 2005; see also De Antoni in this volume), but it was an important matter to us.

We put together contributions and approaches from different disciplines, trying to find a way to enmesh representations, practices and performing arts, seen as enactments of the above-mentioned transformations and becomings. Needless to say, we see each contribution as independent, as analysing one of the multiple, fragmented possibilities in which untamed death can tame the social.

The title comes from a different line than the *eros* and *thanatos* in the Greek philosophical tradition (otherwise it would have been *Desire and Death in Contemporary Japan*). Our intention was not to evoke Romeo and

Juliet, nor to invite to use those categories in the analysis of, for instance, the story of Izanami and Izanagi. Our intention was referring to the Buddhist concepts of suffering and impermanence, which link the ideas of death and desire, in an attempt to condense the above-mentioned lines in one single title, which also tries to point at two elements that transcend the specificities of Japanese society, each of them being common to all humankind. Yet, maybe, this was just another attempt to tame death and its becomings through ritualized (academic) practice.

The Lines in this Volume

The title of Matteo Cestari's paper – "Each Death is Unique" – is directly inspired by a sentence from a short essay written by Jacques Derrida, as an oratory for his departed friend Gilles Deleuze. How could there be philosophy, which speaks the universal tongue of reason – Cestari asks – about death, which allegedly is a matter of unique, unrepeatable singularity? Is thanatology still possible, or is it just an invalid application of some mental schemes and routines to an impossible object? How can we find an abstract truth about death, if the question is not the category of death, but every single death?

Cestari underlines how death "as such", in its facticity, is rarely taken from a purely phenomenological point of view. Many philosophers, scientists and religious men 'find' the meaning of death, its essence, its role within a rational scheme, bringing it back to the reassuring horizon of wisdom and thus re-determining the meaning of our being in the world. From the perspective adopted in his essay, the epistemic transfiguration of death is not limited to beliefs in afterlife, but includes the very assumption of possessing the hermeneutical keys to identify the essence of death. These hermeneutical keys are generally provided by a metaphysical approach that puts death's truth in a higher plane of existence, shifting the attention of the subject away from the awareness of death in its being 'here and now', closing the eyes to the fact that nothing can be either affirmed or negated about death. As Jankélévitch (1977) often says, death drives us to a condition of fundamental theoretical uncertainty, a constant oscillation that cannot be fixed on any determinate thesis.

Between the tragic subjectivity of death in the first person (my death) that is the tragedy of my entire being, exposed to nothingness, and the anonymity of death in the third person (their death), knowable only as an almost empty concept, Cestari points out that there is a somehow intermediate death, which can be experienced. This is your death. It could be possible to reckon that death in the second person is the most psychologically devastating dimension of death, which can affect my entire existence and shape my own death. Away from a subjectivist perspective, your death

reveals the social and relational character of the reality of dying and could count as a crucial element to allow a certain knowledge of death. It is neither the dominion of discourse, as with their death, nor the simple end of all possible words, as with my death. Far from being put into question in force of a rational counter-argument, it is jeopardised through some obscure, not entirely definable emotional and physical set of factors. Your death is the place of penumbra and ambiguity, where meaning vacillates and hesitates. Since your death cannot be reduced to a pure object of rational categorization, each death of people we knew well is to be considered apart on an existential and affective plane. Similarly, on the cognitive plane, such a knowledge is slippery and different each time.

It is Cestari's conviction that death may function as a kind of litmus test that enables us to verify the theoretical and ethical characteristics of our philosophical systems, and acquire awareness of their limits. He starts by discussing death in Plato's *Phaedo*, which he thinks is particularly useful in clarifying his metaphysical approach and the deep relationship with the idea of the transcendent character of truth. Plato's philosophy resolutely imposes death's meaning as the ideal condition to reach the transcendent and imperishable truth. His anthropology goes so far as to affirm that true life can be reached only rejecting the ambiguity of our transient body. Philosophy becomes an exercise of death, because human beings can achieve the realm of archetypal ideas solely once the soul is delivered from this mortal coil. Biological life is incompatible with truth. Platonic truth itself is deadly. It requires eternity and immobility. So, only imperishable, unchanging souls can enter the reign of the imperishable truth. The desire of truth becomes a desire of body's death, because the purity of the perfect truth requires that human being be purged of the entire bodily dimension. The impermanent body is a hindrance that must be swept away.

Conversely, in East Asian Buddhism, truth cannot be conceived without impermanence. As a matter of fact, in Buddhist tradition, there is a variety of positions regarding death. In ancient Buddhism, death is part of the process of the individual's decay, as the twelfth integrated cause of 'dependent origination'. Being subject to the 'wheel of becoming' is a source of suffering since the entirely impersonal causal flux, due to evil deeds and attitudes, gives rise to another existence, another individual combination, which produces other suffering. The question is also strictly interwoven with the problem of the self, since the self, considered as an aggregate of physical and mental elements, is disassembled with death, thus revealing the illusion of believing in an eternal individual soul. Moreover, according to many Buddhist texts, discussing about these themes conceals a selfish attachment to oneself. The correct path requires selfless practice and the attainment of wisdom, which has nothing to do with judgments and objective knowledge, but is much more a spiritual awareness of one's ontological dimension of emptiness. Salvation, therefore, is not

after death, because after death there are more and more lives. Salvation is not just another life, but another death, a ‘different’ kind of death, truly definitive – nirvana, the extinction– that finally wins the illusory forms of existence and ends the existential pain of living.

Cestari chooses to analyse the approach to death of the Buddhist Zen tradition, with particular attention to the writings of Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253), founder of the Zen Sōtō sect. His interpretation of death is radically defined by the question of Buddha-nature (*busshō*). Death is not contradictory to life, but is dialectically linked to it. As a matter of fact, Dōgen does not speak of simple death, devoid of life, nor of life detached from death, but always of ‘life-death’. This relationship between birth and death is coincident with Nāgārjuna’s affirmation of non-duality between nirvana and samsara, so much so that the very illusions of the world are just the same as Buddha-nature. Dōgen points out the error of interpreting the Buddha-nature as a sort of permanent substance, a kind of trans-temporal and trans-phenomenal essence that survives death. He straightforwardly defines Buddha-nature as impermanence. This statement indicates a totally different perspective: it assumes beings in their ‘being-so’, without any transfiguration. Death too ‘is-so’. The true character of things has neither substance nor a hidden part manifesting itself in the transient world from outside. There is no distinction between transcendence and immanence. All beings, just as they are, are the perfection of truth and emptiness.

Dōgen’s interest – Cestari comments – more than in knowing death or knowing life lies in ‘practicing’ death and life, as a way of forgetting the self. Only when the ego is not important anymore and is let go can life and death be fully lived, in every single moment, for what they are. As Kasulis (2009) and Ames (1993) pointed out, the difference between ‘what’ and ‘how’ to think of death lays respectively in the transcendent or immanent awareness of the epistemological relationship with the world. As Dōgen puts it, we can correctly face death only if we accept that life and death are truly enigmatic, and if we silently and lucidly accept both of them in their simply ‘being so’.

‘The view on death and life’, *shiseikan*, is a neologism devised at the beginning of the 20th century, to indicate the emerging of new theoretical perspectives on the old problem. Shimazono Susumu, in his paper, poses the question of how new discourses on death had been progressively constructed in modern Japan.

The tendency to aestheticize death, based on the concept of impermanence, which inspired the ideal of the failing hero in classical Japanese literature (Morris 1975), was exploited by Katō Totsudō (1870-1949), a propagator of Buddhist teachings, who was considered a moral leader, and had an important role in edifying the ‘new spirit’ of Japan as a ‘modern’ nation. He advocated that the Japanese warrior spirit had to develop into the national morality. After the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific war, it became

the dominant rhetoric and was used as an ideological device to persuade young people to sacrifice their own lives for the emperor.

But it was the novelist Shiga Naoya (1883-1971) - as Shimazono maintains - who expressed a much more sophisticated view on death-and-life. Shiga, as many of his friends, felt it strange that a person would go to martyrdom out of a sense of chivalry for the sake of the honour of a specific institution, be it the clan or the nation. Writers such as Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai were shocked by general Nogi's suicide after the death of Emperor Meiji, and respectively wrote *Kokoro* (Heart) and *Abe Ichizoku* (The Abe Family) with a sense of deep emotion. They saw in Nogi's 'self-immolation' an act of profound moral value, coherent with a way of thinking about the meaning of life and death that was the reverberation of the luminous tradition of the past. But for intellectuals like Shiga, this gesture did not have any sense. That kind of past for them had been obliterated by modernity. In the new epoch, as Shimazono points out, the centrality of the ego and the "disenchantment of the world", which were at the heart of modernity, did legitimise a different ethical strategy for individuals who wanted to devote themselves to the pursuit of universal truth, through reason and not through faith. Yet, the loss of transcendental values did not cause forms of pessimism and nihilism, so much to think that there would be no other way to glory than committing suicide. Through the perception of death, Shiga's generation saw the brilliance of life.

As Itō Sei - a critic quoted by Shimazono - underlines, understanding life through the consciousness of death is a frequent theme in Japanese literature (Itō 1986). Poets of the past, such as Saigyō, Kamo no Chōmei or Matsuo Bashō, were always conscious about living under the shadow of death and tried to express emotions of resignation and abandonment to the final, definitive emptiness. But in modern Japanese literature, the traditional expressions of lamenting the evanescence of life had little appealing power. Confronting themselves with the idea of death, writers like Shiga found in the discourses of modernity a new strength for a spiritual independence, in an almost selfish perspective, and a joy of living every instant of their present life. They lost 'God' or 'Buddha', but they found an alternative, such as 'nature' or 'science', on which they could lean.

The advancements in the fields of science have always imposed the necessity of reassessing old habits of thought. In contemporary late capitalist societies too, the discoveries and innovative technologies in medicine are redefining the boundaries between life and death. Louella Matsunaga's article examines and compares the Japanese system of reporting and investigating medical related deaths with the coronial system as practised in England, in order to shed light on the cultural dimension of the problems implied by this procedure.

Legislation on the investigation of medical-related deaths in both countries are struggling to keep pace with the changes given by the grow-

ing complexity of medical care and the number of different individuals, systems and procedures involved in testing, elaborating a diagnosis, and giving a medical treatment, which have led to an increased potential for (possibly fatal) errors. In Japan, in 2010 and then in 2015, a new legislation came into effect, establishing independent centres (Medical Accident Investigation and Support Centres) whose role was to investigate 'unforeseen' deaths. In fact, from the point of view of the two countries' respective legal systems, the key question in deciding whether or not a death should be denounced and investigated, is whether the death was 'unusual' (Japan) or 'unnatural' (England). But who decides that a particular case should be considered 'natural' or 'unnatural'? On what basis is this decision made?

Exploring the contrasts and similarities of the Japanese and English systems of death-reporting and investigation, Matsunaga detects the many ambiguities and the points of tension, particularly on three main headings: the autopsy and attitudes to the body; the different roles of the patient and of his family in the processes of decision making; and the role of legal and institutional frameworks.

In Japan, the autopsy – which is, from the scientific points of view, the fundamental action to determine whether or not death was "unusual" on "unnatural" – poses a difficult problem because it touches some basic conceptions about the integrity of the body. As Namihira (1997) and Suzuki (2000) clarify in their studies, the idea of death as a process is quite diffused in Japan, and the newly dead body continues to be treated as a person during the succession of death rituals preceding cremation. Matsunaga agrees with Lock (2002, 2005) in pointing out the social importance of complying with Buddhist funeral practices, which continues to be marked, although expressed belief in ancestral spirits may be waning in contemporary Japan. It is this position that in turn reinforces reluctance to agree to medical intrusions into a newly dead body. But, as Matsunaga points out, an aversion to autopsy is by no means unique to Japan: field-work research clearly showed how many people in England pose strong objections to autopsies for religious convictions regarding the body and the person.

Another problematic issue, analysed by Matsunaga in both countries, regards the processes of deciding if a death could be considered officially reportable to the investigative authority. The reporting of 'unusual' deaths in Japan remains low, in comparison with England. In fact, in Japan, doctors are strongly influenced in their decisions on the reporting of deaths of patients by the question of whether or not they had obtained 'informed consent' for the procedure, tending to believe that having obtained informed consent would exempt them from reporting a death, even when this resulted from a medical error (Ikegaya et al. 2006). Matsunaga's article stresses that 'informed consent' is not necessarily understood in the same way in Japan as it is in the USA or the UK. Fetters and Danis

(2000), in their study, contrast the importance accorded to ascertaining the patient's family's views in Japan with the tendency among physicians in the United States to emphasise the patient as an independent agent and decision maker, on the basis of the idea of the primacy of the individual, and to correspondingly de-emphasise the role of the patient's family in medical-decision making. But this principle of autonomy, usually referred to as one of the most important bio-ethical principles in the Western social context, might not apply effectively within the Japanese cultural tradition. This is because Japanese culture, nurtured in Buddhist teaching, has developed the idea that the egoistic self should be completely suppressed. Being autonomous and independent as an individual has been regarded as an egocentric idea.

Increasingly, the fundamental ideas of bioethics, which give legitimation to the ways in which the body is dealt before and after death, are refracted and negotiated in different cultural and religious settings, and are the objects of global debates and exchanges, which interact with, modify, and are modified by local interpretations and practices.

Matsunaga's research on the medical and legal notions of the body, personhood, and the process of death casts light on a broader theoretical issue: what do 'natural' or 'unusual' mean, where death is concerned. Our understanding of the 'naturalness' of death may appear innocent and 'objective', taking for granted that death is an objective state, clearly distinguishable from another clearly objective state called life. Yet, in reality it varies, because also the concept of 'nature' is not static at all: it is the result of shifting classificatory processes that depend on both historical and socio-cultural contexts.

Matsunaga, following Lock (2002) and Franklin, Lury and Stacey (2000), points out how the idea of a 'natural death' is far from self-evident, now that the boundaries between death and life become fluid in the light of technological transformations. The rapid advances in biomedicine and the successes in the domain of technology have, as a matter of fact, spread the belief that any limit is only provisional and can be moved further. The new reproductive techniques, the therapies practiced with an exasperated desire of winning death, the notion of brain death and organ transplantation have led to a situation where traditional categories of 'life' and 'death' become increasingly problematic and ambiguous. The implications have not only ethical, but also ontological overtones: can we hope to infinitely delay death? Transfiguring death through the dream of science tells how powerful the force of the myth of immortality is.

Yet, also a growing fascination with death in contemporary societies has been documented and analysed. As Stone and Sharpley (2008) pointed out, post-industrial societies increasingly consume, willingly or unwillingly, both real and commodified death through audio-visual representations and mediated expressions of popular culture.

In his article, Andrea De Antoni points out that, since the seventies, Japan has witnessed an increasing public interest in narratives about ghosts (*yūrei*) and monsters (*yōkai*): a real ‘boom of the occult’, *okaruto būmu*, as it is called. Media, television programs and the Internet often refer to specific sites, associated with death and the macabre, describing them as ‘haunted places’ (*shinrei supotto*), where people may have some supernatural experience. De Antoni presents his field-research on one of the most famous haunted place in Kyoto – the Kazan tunnel – which has become a destination of what is generally called ‘dark tourism’ or ‘thanatourism’ (Seaton 1996), providing a less generalised way to understand the alleged ‘lust for death’ in contemporary society. As a matter of fact, he points out how the definition of what constitutes ‘dark tourism’ is still theoretically fragile and problematic. It might have even become a ‘fashionable and emotive’ term, which perhaps oversimplifies a complex, multi-faceted cultural phenomenon.

De Antoni agrees with the most recent anthropological interpretations that the notion of darkness is socially constructed and, although haunted places are often liminal ones, legitimised by some historical link to death, there is no ‘essence’ of darkness that imbues those sites. As Stone (2006) argued, there might be multiple levels and shades of darkness in this kind of tourism. There are different design features and management strategies symbolically charging the place and, from the perspective of fruition, people have different motivations and ways to try to engage with ghosts, namely with spirits of people who (allegedly) died in those places. In this perspective, the author analyses the processes of construction, commodification and consumption of haunted places, to show how between death and place a relationship is constructed and negotiated among supply and demand, presentation and consumption, the visitors and the locals, focusing on the processes that create what Seaton (2009) defines the “Otherness” of death.

De Antoni argues that Otherness emerges according to associations or networks that include both humans (e.g. suppliers, tourists and residents) and non-humans (such as material features of the place). He shows that features of the landscape itself and things that are enrolled in the network during the tour and in haunted places have to be taken into account as actors, along with reified past events selectively presented by mediators to construct and preserve the auratic impact of the place, for they have an agency on tourists’ perceptions. He sees how the experience of Otherness of death was constructed in various ways well before tourists were taken to the haunted places: famous mediums, who acknowledged the place as haunted, stories about ghosts or supernatural phenomena that were narrated as an entertainment during the travel. Tourists, in turn, contributed to improving the strategies of construction of Otherness. During the tour people tried to interact with ghosts and ghosts interacted with people:

sometimes one person or small group of participants claimed that they heard lamenting voices that no one else had heard.

As a useful analytical tool, De Antoni uses also the concept of "distance" (Latour 2005). As a matter of fact, within and among networks of interactions, distance - he writes - plays a fundamental role in constructing the reality of a place as haunted. On the one hand, the residents saw the tunnel as 'a simple tunnel', namely an environment in which they carried out certain practices related to their everyday life, thus creating a network that would not result in the haunting. On the other hand, associations between Kazan tunnel and ghosts were constructed by and negotiated among mediators - the media, the 'expert' of ghosts, the tour organisers - who, just because of the distance, had more chances to create networks of Otherness, not being connected to the tunnel through everyday practice. These two different Kazan tunnels were equally real and they could emerge because of two completely different (i.e. distant) modalities of interactions with the tunnel.

In contemporary Japan, De Antoni concludes, death and spirits of the dead are managed by the bereaved and the groups to which they belong. But the dead in haunted places do not belong exclusively to the private space of the bereaved, thus presenting some possibilities to be appropriated in the almost infinite play of identity with images and possibilities of difference that generates strong compulsions of negative and positive desire.

Also the ritual apparatus of the funeral organised and supported, both under the economic and social point of view, by a company to commemorate the founder on a grand scale, is an example of how death could be transferred from the private to the public sphere and renegotiated through an interactive semantic process that imply a tension between proximity and distance. This ceremony chronologically follows the 'private funeral' (*missō*) and the 'temporary burial' (*kasō*) organised by the family and is considered the 'formal funeral' (*honsō*). It is not an exaggeration to say that this is the most important social event in the history of the company. Nakamaki Hirochika, in his article, investigates the peculiar features and the symbolic implications of the procedure, analysing three significant examples, namely the funeral ceremonies for Matsushita Konosuke (founder of Matsushita Denki), Ibuka Masaru and Morita Akio (founders of Sony).

The company undertakes the arrangement of the ceremony in every formal aspect according to its own 'public' perspective, following a precise logic of roles and power that very clearly shows inequality and hierarchy. The company-sponsored funeral is not exclusively centred on the prayers for the deceased: a great importance is given to the choice of the guests who will be invited to attend the ceremony, i.e. Japanese and foreign businessmen, politicians, and other outstanding figures. Some decisions have to be taken very carefully, in particular about the person who will give the funeral oration to publicly honour the deceased, or the one who will

read the messages of condolence, or about the list of the guests allowed to burn the incense.

It is clear that the company's reputation is intimately connected to the 'official' funeral and any fault is felt as undermining its prestige in some way. The company pays attention to every single detail of the organisation in order to exclude unexpected events or at least to be able to cope with them. But the ceremony is also created by the guests, through little gestures that break the etiquette, spontaneous gestures which express intimacy and recall the 'private' perspective of the sorrow of detachment, referring to ties of affection and not of power. Nakamaki remembers, for example, when the U.S. Ambassador at a certain point of his memorial address, used Morita's first name. It was unexpected but was not considered impolite. Overcoming the formalities of diplomatic language was perceived as a demonstration of spontaneity that revealed the sincerity and friendliness of their relationship.

The funeral ceremony is constructed with the awareness that the event will be amplified and made spectacular by media coverage. That explains the peculiarity of the company's ornamental arrangement of the altar. In company-sponsored ceremonies, the altar adorned with flowers is usually displayed with a great picture of the defunct in formal suit at its centre; in some cases, posthumous ranks, decoration or medals may also appear on the altar. The image that depicts the founder in the perfection of his social role of authority becomes the fulcrum of the rite. The extreme formality with which it is addressed makes his figure even more abstract and pure.

The passing of the founder is invested with a particular significance for the company. Although it is a funerary ceremony, it represents an occasion for the company to express the will to maintain its internal and external relationships. In this occasion, the company displays its eternity: indeed, the ceremony often officially symbolises the continuity of the authority. Albeit a company is defined as an organisation with its own regulations, in many cases the ideas and personality of its founder constitutes the keystone around which the company develops. Nakamaki compares the internal organisation of the company to that of a family, where the founder constitutes the first ancestor. As long as the ancestor's DNA is transmitted to his heirs, the attitude of the founder, in some way, is handed down to his successor. The founder's figure (the 'great' ancestor) is renegotiated in an almost mythical discourse and becomes the personification of the company and of its characteristics.

Nakamaki, however, points out that the function of the company funeral is not just the memory and the magnification of the past. At the same time, this ceremony is considered an opportunity to show and legitimise some important changes. The subtleties of the ritual apparatus can, as a matter of fact, also represent the transferring of the real power inside the company, along with the development of the company's future attitude

and image. In a broader sense, the company's relations centred on the founder's action in the past are exalted in order to be repositioned on his successor in a new perspective for the future.

The 'good' death, thus, pertains to the male gender, in this case. The ancestor who, in life, was the head of the family and in death is, and will always be, its protector, is a male, not a woman. Through myths, legends and ritual norms, Japanese culture continued to sanction a marginalization of the woman with the idea of her fundamental impurity. She used to be considered the emblem of sexuality, felt as a wild and negative power. She was thought to incarnate the energy of nature, the confusion of the uncontrolled; her erotic attraction was considered to be a dangerous wealth, a fascinating and terrifying potentiality: when free, it was overwhelmingly destructive. The triggering of female sexuality was not intended as a regeneration of fertility, but rather as its antithesis: something that, stirring up the disorder of passions, threatened life itself. Buddhist tradition too shared this idea. The doctrine condemns the senses and feelings, as the primary vehicle of the thirst for existence and the illusion of the ego. It condemns woman's tempting erotic power, capable only of hindering and distracting man from his spiritual quest towards liberation. Already in the texts of ancient Buddhism, female sexuality is the samsara, i.e. the world of existential evanescence, the world of that same desire that imprisons human beings in the infinite cycle of deaths and rebirths.

In this context, the idea of a beautiful woman who turns up to be a cruel monster, is a subject dear to Japanese artistic and literary imagination. Her charm was felt as some sort of a threat: the more intelligent, fascinating and sensual is the woman, the more dangerous, smart and lethal is the monster that lies in her and that will lead her ingenuous lover to death.

Daniela Moro's in her article analyses a short story - *Ano ie* by Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986) - centred on a female protagonist, the actress Kayo, and her love story with Nishikawa, a great and famous Noh master. The heart of the narrative is a meditation on the many facets and nuances of female sexuality and desire.

The depth of the protagonists' feelings is expressed through a very sophisticated technique of intertextuality between classical theatre - in particular 'dream Noh' (*mugen nō*) - and prose. The references to two plays, *Dōjōji* and *Izutsu*, construct Enchi's singular interpretation of the power of female desire, which is destructive in *Dōjōji* and nostalgic in *Izutsu*. They are the two faces of the same coin and, indeed, the two female figures can be interpreted as the forms of Kayo's desire for Nishikawa. Moreover, both these forms of desire are related to death. On the one hand, the female protagonist of the Noh *Dōjōji*, corresponds to the image of the 'dangerous woman' archetype. Transformed into a monstrous snake by the terrible strength of her anger because she was refused by her beloved, the woman fights against the monk who wants to pacify her spirit. Yet, his prayers

fail to pacify her, because also in death she is consumed by her passionate attachment to life and love. After a furious battle, the poisonous snake burns herself with her own flames, but a suspicion is left that the angry ghost could return in the world over and over again.

On the other hand, there is the female protagonist of *Izutsu*, a “woman who waits for the distant past”, a phantom that is still intensely longing for her dead husband, but does not show it emphatically. Her desire is so strong that she continues to linger in this world, but the only way to meet him again is to encounter him in the past, by making him live again in a cross-gendered transformation of the monk’s dream, where she is herself and her dead husband at the same time.

Like in the majority of Noh plays, in Enchi’s novel too there is a deep sense of the caducity of life, which reveals the other side of desire. The concept is a cliché of classical Japanese literature and drama. At the end of the story, Kayo, after the war, goes to the ruins of the teahouse. In front of what was once the place of her passion, of her “beautiful dream”, which has become a place of death and destruction, she deeply feels the evanescence of life and experiences a sort of catharsis, finding purification from her obsessive memories.

In Moro’s interpretation, the only way to overcome the vanity of life and death, the frailty of all the illusions of love and hate, is, paradoxically, to dream. As her analysis shows, the dream is at the centre of this story. At the end, when the framework narration returns in order to conclude the story and the protagonist meets the girl of the teahouse introduced at the beginning, Kayo becomes a spectator to her own past, together with the reader, but a few hints at the end of the narrative make the reader suspect that the entire story recalled by Kayo of her love for the master was not real, but the product of her phantasy. Yet, just this dream represents the final stage of Kayo’s self-awareness of the depth of her illusion, and her liberation.

Death and desire are essential characteristics of Hijikata Tatsumi’s *butō*. Katja Centonze, in her article, analyses several aspects displayed in *butō*’s death aesthetics and performing processes, showing how the artist, in tune with the sixties avant-garde in Japan, places the paradox of life and death, of stillness and movement, at the roots of dance itself.

The entangled intimacy between death and eroticism, which is nothing but the texture of life, is highlighted since the beginning of Hijikata’s *butō*’s adventure. The artist often quotes Georges Bataille. Yet, for Centonze, it is important to consider that the French philosopher develops the concept of eroticism as an “inner experience” linked to mysticism, which transcends “flesh” (Bataille 1969). For him, human eroticism differs from animal sexuality and calls inner life into play. Conversely, for Hijikata, who drastically obliterates the dialectic between dancer/human being, animal and the object, everything runs through our body, including knowledge.

As a consequence, dance, if pushed to its extremes, is the art that is able to concretely reproduce the deep interplay of desire and death.

Centonze's article focuses on Hijikata's radical investigation of corporeality, which puts under critique not only the carnal body (*nikutai*), but even the corpse (*shitai*). The *nikutai* is the living and raw corporality that inexorably 'disappears', transforming itself into the *shitai*, the corpse. Mutability is absorbed by *butō*'s morphologic texture and becomes the fundamental condition of its semantic process: facing the forms of life necessarily implies facing death and mortality. Hijikata's *butō - ankoku butō* (dance of utter darkness) – emerges as an aesthetic and corporeal revolt, expressed on the theatrical scene through outrageous acts, in which also the physical states of biological death are icily and almost brutally enacted. Obliterating and suspending the dimension of transcendence, this form of art speaks of the omnipervasive presence of death. The audience is guided through the tunnel of the abyss of *ankoku*.

The stiffened and paralysed bodies in *butō* performances recall the state of *rigor mortis*. This practice becomes a distinctive component in Hijikata's experimental strategy. His renovation consists in conceiving dance by suffocating dance, which means, by preventing and sabotaging its commonly perceived dynamic essence, i. e. movement. Centonze shows how in technical and practical terms, the artist tries to destroy the common concept of choreography. Linear and geometric movements are further menaced and denied by *keiren*, convulsive seizures or nervous contractions. Not only *rigor mortis* is pursued, but also the other stages of death can be visibly and sensibly detected. *Pallor mortis* is reflected in *shironuri*, the practice of painting the dancers' body white. But the dancers are naked, in order to project, at the same time, an aura of sexual desire. Skeletonisation is manifested as well. The bones of the dancer are emphasized in performative dynamics. Hijikata brings on the scene dancers with a skull mask and a big scythe performing their skeleton dance as if they were dead laughing at the prosperous, sanitised, aggressively optimistic world of the living. In his challenge to the theatrical language, Hijikata exaggerates the movements of these hybrid bodies so desperately grotesque, and creates processes through which the dancer starts to animate the inanimate and renders inanimate the animated. For Hijikata, those who once died may die over and over again inside the dancer's bodies. The dead may become more present or alive on the scene than the dancers themselves. Enacting the contradictory unison of life and death, the deceased dictate the movements, while the body of the dancer, who has become stranger to himself, obeys almost automatically.

The fear of death and the desire to transcend mortality are themes that have often recurred also in film history. As a test case for her analysis, Cinzia Cimalando has chosen the film *Rokugatsu no hebi* (A Snake of June, 2002) directed by Tsukamoto Shin'ya. The film tells a sensual and violent story of salvation through the reawakening of desire and the repossession

of the body – an erotic body – in a modern city of steel, glass and concrete.

The structure of *Rokugatsu no hebi* is essential and rigorous: a limited number of actors, enclosed places, condensed duration. The use of the colour blue itself, ably combined with the sound effects of the unceasing pounding of the rain, are precise stylistic choices. Each element is an indispensable piece of a stylised mosaic, a thriller starring portraits of desire, inhabited by the fear and the fascination of death. For Cimalando, the film provides the occasion for an analysis of desire and its relationship with the crux of death through the interpretative key offered by Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories. Director Tsukamoto, throughout all his films, has shown his skills in giving shape to precise mental landscapes and staging the most hidden inner impulses of the unconscious. *Rokugatsu no hebi* too deals with the psychological uncertainty posed by the sense of frailty of life and the anguish for death, always looming on human beings. Cimalando's analysis shows how Tsukamoto's aim is to stir strong emotions in the spectator, but not as an end in itself: by systematically overturning the taboos of voyeurism, violence and disease, his declared intention is to penetrate and open a breach into the prison of the mind and the unconscious, like the rain that in the film seeps unfailingly into every crack in the cement; staging an act of deadly perversion that sweeps away any moral judgment, he offers an intense meditation on the mysterious and disquieting nature of desire.

This book begins with a reflection on the sense of the uniqueness of death, the impossibility of telling death in a subjective dimension – 'my death' – and ends with the article of Francesco Comotti, with a reflection on the difficulty, almost the impossibility, of telling another death: a death in the plural – a mass death – and the horror of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Together with works of historical reconstruction and analysis, there have been various atomic narratives, films, art and music coming from several European and American countries. Authors in Japan too write on the issues of the atomic bombs and the dangers of nuclear energy. In the media, the imaginary of radioactive monsters and post-apocalyptic worlds, where human society starts anew in a primitive struggle for survival, is widespread. The atomic bomb is treated as a dreadful Big Bang, a cosmic event that annihilates the 'old' world, the 'old' mankind, and opens the way to new knowledge and action. Hardly discernible from the explicit elements of these representations, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are silently still behind it.

Comotti focuses his article on some characteristic traits of Hiroshima and Nagasaki's witness literature and compares the different perspectives, the different approaches and motivations with the writings of authors who are not survivors of the bombing. Almost all their attempts at expressing the epoch-making appearance of the atomic bomb into the world share

a common ambiguous and controversial rhetoric: the ultimate weapon of mass destruction provokes a sense of fear for the terrifying option of future annihilation of humanity and a kind of intoxication for the power gained through scientific knowledge.

The concern with the truth of what really happened is a never-ending controversy in itself, from which any writing generally comes out defeated either on the grounds of its reliability or its literariness. In stories, novels, photographs, drawings, films and performances concerning the bomb, the line between testimonial accounts as historical documents and literature is blurred. In front of the unprecedented nature and terrifying magnitude of the two bombings, the paradigm of literary communication is radically questioned. Comotti clearly shows the problematic aspects in the creation and fruition of certain famous literary works about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But ultimately, the real question that emerges is if it is possible – and morally acceptable – to employ literature for writing something that, in its horror and inhumanity, resists being put into words. Or is the atomic bomb the ultimate literary theme, one that only by being mentioned is capable of branding any writing as literature? Answering such a question is not easy.

A considerable number of thinkers and writers have been taking interest in the nuclear issue since the two bombs were dropped in 1945. Figurative artists have usually recurred to representations dominated by the aerial silhouette of the gigantic mushroom cloud as was seen by the crew members of the B-29 planes who, in awe but undisturbed, had filmed and photographed it. But the living and the places that were forced to endure the destruction are missing from the narrative. The instantaneous and apocalyptic event reduces everything that one might imagine to exist underneath to one single nothingness.

As Comotti points out, authors who engage in the representation of the atomic bomb with indirect knowledge tend to put the focus on its totality: whether they evoke the scale of destruction in the event of a future nuclear conflict or recount the actual bombings through testimonies, they struggle for reliability and accuracy in pursuing the total scope of the bomb. The disparate singularities of the people who died or who survived are generally put together and multiplied in order to gain a full view of the scene. It is the bomb, then, that attracts one's desire of knowledge and experience: the bomb becomes the source of creative processes and imagination, obliterating the singular, local experiences of the survivors and the dead by including them metonymically.

Another tendency is to elaborate a superlative characterisation of the events, as the 'most' destructive, deadly, and terrifying. As Todorov suggests, ranking any violent event at the top of a chart is a frequent symptom of "sacralisation" (Todorov 2000). The 'end-of-the-world' symbology surrounding the bomb ends up distancing it, alienating the reader by hindering the only

thing that a stranger to the facts could possibly do: trying to empathise.

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki citizens who survived the blast and had the psychological strength to share their testimonies made it possible to look at the bomb from the ground up, as well as to have a better knowledge of the extent of the destruction and the suffering it caused. From that moment on, the atomic bomb could no more be justified avoiding the victims' reality of pain and loss. But these narratives place the reader or the spectator in an extremely vulnerable position: Comotti rightly stresses that, while there is little room to question what words and images are given about the facts, one is also repeatedly told that ultimately a comprehension will not be possible, that what is being shown and shared is not at all what it was to be there. There is a fracture that separates language from experience: in most narratives, the reader is being told through intelligible words about facts that the writer declares unspeakable. But the difficulty in communicating is not only due to the audience's lack of experience of that kind of suffering and dying, but also to the witness's inability to bring coherence to what he has experienced. In order to re-establish a tie between the victim and humanity, perhaps the writer and the reader have to meet in this very lack of understanding of what happened.

The paradigm to any attempt at comprehending the experience of the atomic bombings is, in Comotti's analysis, the survivor's body: while scientific data constitute abstract descriptions of the event, often outside the scale of what a human being could possibly register with perception alone, it is the survivor's body the only measure that the reader could refer to, as he/she tries to imagine what the bombings felt like. Yet, that same body sets apart those who experienced from those who did not: far from being a sign of truthfulness, the physical manifestations of the radiations isolate the victim as if deeply impure. Here lies a key component to the communicative status of survival: the body that suffered might be expected to incarnate a tale of survival by itself, as clear and self-explanatory as its resilience might suggest. But that is not the case: the traumatised body seems to become a magnified presence over which the survivor obsesses, while also rendering every word more opaque and insufficient in the face of the full extent of the experience. Since the atomic bombs were dropped not only on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but "on all Japanese's heads, on every human being around the world" – as Inoue Mitsuharu (1983, 292) wrote – it is only by fully accepting the victims' bodies and psyches in pain that humankind will be able to heal them as well as to overthrow the very possibility that an atomic bomb will be used again.

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We hope the reader will join us in walking the above mentioned lines, thus becoming an integral part of the entanglement of this book. Indeed, in line with the book topics, this might be our 'last wish', so that the end of this introduction will become the beginning of the readers' desire to continue investigating these issues, without letting the desire for further discussions die.

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