

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine a more universal topic than death. Since the beginning of life, death has been its companion; yet it is always the living who must determine the meaning of life's elusive and silent counterpart. Remembrance is not just a coping strategy for dealing with a loss of life – commemoration and other cultural expressions connected to death in art and literature reflect a society's norms, ideals, developments and changes. The meaning placed on death is dependent on and determined by surviving family, friends, communities, nations and civilizations, and the survivors' cultural backgrounds. Death is a defining factor in many aspects of our social interactions and perceptions of the world, and its representation. Its function and status change over time, reflecting societal, cultural and even technological and scientific advancements.

Death: The Cultural Meaning of the End of Life was the second LUCAS international graduate conference and aimed to explore the different ways in which conceptualizations of death — from classical antiquity to the modern age — have transformed our understanding of this universal topic. The conference, which took place in January 2013, was organized by Odile Bodde, Maarten Jansen, David Louwrier and Jenny Weston, all PhD researchers at LUCAS, and included nearly fifty speakers from various European, North American and Asian universities. Framed by keynote lectures by art historian Joanna Woodall (The Courtauld Institute of Art, London) and philosopher Rosi Braidotti (Utrecht University), the conference featured a diverse range of subjects and fields, including history, classics, film and photography, art history, literature, cultural anthropology and political science, and covered the period from the Roman Empire to the near future.

Like the conference, the articles in this second issue of the *Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference* demonstrate the diversity of possible viewpoints concerning the cultural meaning of the end of life. Ranging from the late Middle Ages to the early 1900s, the issue begins by focusing on the Western European tradition and closes with a discussion of the distinctly non-Western tradition of Tantra. The articles examine diverse mediums, from death masks and photographs to frescoes and phantasmagoria shows, and from novels and stories to funerary rites and cultic rituals. In assessing the cultural meaning of these phenomena, the authors employ a variety of methodologies, subjects and approaches, from the classical principles of mimesis and catharsis to affect theory and Deleuzian hermeneutics.

Despite the authors' different disciplinary backgrounds, a number of common themes emerge, which help us articulate some shared characteristics of our subject. What jumps out from the first articles in this issue is the contrast – sometimes clearly delineated, sometimes blurred and oscillating – between a rather distant mode of coping with death, and the more personal and intimate process that is especially prominent in the articles by Sarah Iepson and Emily Knight.

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When a human being dies, life ends but the body, the physical appearance, remains – the bereaved can still see and touch it as they come to terms with their loss. Changes in commemorative practices during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the result of a complex set of dynamics between societal changes, new shifts in religion, and technical developments. This enabled artists and families to create posthumous portraits – or have portraits created – that closely resembled the deceased, and thus transgressed the boundary between the living and the dead. The practice of creating plaster-cast death masks foreshadowed the rise of more accessible types of early photography such as the daguerreotype, which produced a portable image that enhanced the personal experience of mourning.

Sarah Iepson's article elucidates the specific interplay and interaction between the observer, particularly the surviving parent, and the posthumous photograph of a child in nineteenth-century antebellum American culture. The communication between the viewer and the image is described here through the concept of 'affect'. Akin to what science refers to as muscle memory, this article claims that parents perceived the image as allowing continued physical interaction with their deceased child. They were able to rekindle muscle memories of holding or touching their child as a sensorial product of holding or touching the photograph of the child. In viewing the work as a significant manifestation of the body with which one can continue to interact and engage, nineteenth-century posthumous photographs of children became more than simple *memento mori* objects. Instead, the photographs were powerful signifiers of physical presence and engagement beyond death.

Similarly, in her article on the death mask of the portrait painter Sir Thomas Lawrence, Emily Knight argues that the mask and its accompanying framework represented a performative collection of objects for early nineteenth-century audiences. The interrelationship between the various elements of the display created an immersive experience and challenged viewers to look beyond Lawrence's peaceful repose and contemplate the full continuum of his life. They could marvel at his creativity and reflect on their own mortality as they considered how death truncated the artist's long creative output. Knight maintains that the entire display represented a cultural shift from pure civic commemoration to the Victorian era's more intimate and personal

relationship with the deceased. Knight draws our attention to an artefact that at first appears self-evident in what it signifies, yet her analysis exposes its dynamic potential for meaning when audiences engaged with it.

Contrary to this tender, understated way of personally engaging with lost loved ones, the more abstract, distant mode is characterized by the way death is perceived – or, by way of coping strategy, deliberately framed – as a phenomenon of nature, something happening outside the proper circle of experience. This perspective prompts different patterns of behaviour, such as, paradoxically, an almost morbid fascination for gruesome but strangely exhilarating images. These cathartic images have been transmitted through different mediums over time, as the late medieval paintings discussed by Fabien Lacouture and Isabelle van den Broeke’s nineteenth-century phantasmagoria shows illustrate.

The miracle cycle of the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, painted by Simone Martini in Siena in 1324, is Fabien Lacouture’s starting point for an examination of representations of the death and resurrection of children in fourteenth-century Italy. According to Lacouture, images of dead children during this period were relatively rare, despite Italy’s exceedingly high child mortality rates. The peculiarity of the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece and its gruesome portrayal of children’s deaths therefore provides an opportunity to explore alternative interpretations for such imagery and its reception in Siena. Lacouture asserts that the naturalistic techniques employed by Martini for the miracle scenes enhanced their affective qualities and thus imbued the paintings with a didactic agency.

Isabelle van den Broeke’s article presents the phantasmagoria, a magic lantern show popular in the early nineteenth century, as an expression of post-Enlightenment beliefs about the ambiguity of death. Van den Broeke argues that the spectacle, which relied on hallucinatory images of the dead, reflected new popular fascinations with psychology and the macabre. Her research suggests that particular works by Francisco Goya and William Blake were influenced by the visual techniques of the phantasmagoria, and, like their model, reflected the contemporary cultural uncertainty surrounding death.

The pragmatic concern for the effect of death on an audience is also present in the articles by Michiel Verheij and Jostein Hølland, both of which examine how the death of a protagonist is put to use in literature. In addition to the more visual effects of death discussed by Lacouture and Van den Broeke, the texts of the Marquis de Sade and Edgar Allan Poe illustrate the possibilities of death as a literary tool.

Michiel Verheij's concise analysis of Poe's short story 'The Oval Portrait' (1842) focuses on the age-old philosophical debate about mimesis, and the idea that mimetic art by its nature implies death. Verheij compares Poe's withering heroine, 'painted to death' by her artist husband, to Pygmalion's sculpture of the ideal woman coming to life. Verheij reads the story against Plato's criticism of art as an imperfect copy of an already imperfect reality, as well as Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. He concludes that the oval portrait in Poe's story perfectly embodies Baudrillard's 'simulacrum' – an image that has broken free from any model, thus rendering obsolete Plato's hierarchy of representation – and its ultimate derivative 'simulation': the image replacing and murdering the model.

Jostein Hølland takes the Marquis de Sade's novels *Justine* (1791) and its sequel *Juliette* (1797) as starting points to argue that de Sade deliberately destabilizes the novels' libertine philosophical and pornographic messages through the death of a prominent character. Hølland argues that Maurice Blanchot, the critic who suggested that the story of Juliette echoes de Sade's philosophical project, in fact neglects the crucial role of Justine's character as a mode of resistance against libertine philosophy. John L. Austin's notion of the 'speech act' allows the article to explicate what type of resistance and agency can be ascribed to Justine. Exploring this notion further with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's hermeneutics, and Georges Bataille's philosophy of transgression, this article gives a daring and innovative reading of the character of Justine.

A further agenda death can serve is illustrated in the articles of Héléne Vu Thanh and Imma Ramos, which also take us beyond the Western-European context. As Vu Thanh demonstrates in her article on Buddhist funerary rituals and the Jesuit accommodation policy in Japan in the period between 1549 and 1614, bending commemorative customs was part of a strategic agenda to accomplish cultural and religious change. According to Vu Thanh, conversion

occurred gradually, as the Jesuits sought ways to implement effective strategies that did not alienate the Japanese. Critical to the initial success of the Jesuit campaign was their method of carefully studying the varied and divergent funeral practices espoused by the numerous Buddhist sects in Japan, which they classified according to religious and cultural function. Rituals that were deemed inherently religious were replaced entirely by Christian practices, while lay customs were adapted in order to ease the conversion process. As the conversion programme gained ground in Japan in the early seventeenth century, the Jesuits further differentiated Christian from Buddhist funerary traditions.

An equally powerful change of ritual is described by Imma Ramos, who examines the shifting ways in which emancipatory death was ritualized in late nineteenth-century Tantric practices of worshipping the Bengali goddess Tara. Ramos focuses especially on the famous Tantric practitioner Bamakhepa, and how his tender mother-son relationship with Tara ‘sweetened’ the perception of this traditionally terrifying goddess. Bamakhepa’s reimagining of Tara, from destructive deity to maternal protector, not only increased her popularity among a broader Hindu audience, but also appealed to Bengali nationalists who used the theme of maternal devotion to protect *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) against British colonial rule.

Together, the articles in this volume illustrate two important modes of dealing with death: the personal, and the pragmatic. Death serves a range of agendas that greatly vary in scope, from the personal to the institutional. At times these agendas overlap, when an individual’s engagement with death is coopted for aesthetic, religious, and national purposes. Moreover, the variety of forms used to figure death shape these agenda’s, sculpting versions of death to suit the mourner’s or the culture’s changing perspective on their relationship with the deceased.

However, the question as to the precise relationship between the personal and the pragmatic remains. Where does personal engagement end and where does pragmatism take over? Would the creator of the display surrounding Thomas Lawrence’s death mask have been able to anticipate the emotions evoked in the spectator, without first having lived through them? Did the inventor of phantasmagoria shows aim primarily for economical gain, or did he recognize the heartfelt longing many people evidently had to communicate once more with

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deceased loved ones? Were the seventeenth-century Jesuits and the nineteenth-century Tantric priest concerned with religious strategies, or were they negotiating practices that better suited their followers' needs? As this volume illustrates, the issue of death defies such clear demarcation lines and broad categorizations. Once more, it reminds us that they are merely a model to represent an infinitely complex reality.

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