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Imaginations of Death and the Beyond in India and Europe



Editor(s): Günter Blamberger, Sudhir Kakar

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Review

The volume brings together essays about the imagination of death and the afterlife in different cultural and time settings, written by scholars from various disciplines located in both Europe (Germany and Switzerland) and India. The contributions were originally presented at a conference entitled “Figurations of afterlife – afterdeath” held in Delhi in 2014. The book opens with two introductory essays by the editors. The first one, by Sudhir Kakar, depicts a fictional dialogue between two Hindus: a skeptic and a believer. Mirroring Kakar’s own care to not reduce religious phenomena to psychopathological manifestations, it brings a few “classical” issues to the discussion: are (Indian) conceptions about the afterlife consolations against the unconceivable notion of death as complete annihilation? How can one deal with actual testimonies about an afterlife, such as near-death experiences (NDEs)? Is it possible to oppose a Western “culture of attachment” to an Eastern “culture of detachment”? In the second essay, Günter Blamberger argues that what makes images of death specifically modern is the contemplation of one’s own individual death. Exploring different cases from (post)modern literature (in particular, Kafka) and cinema, the author observes that figurations of death often show the way to better live one’s own life. This is an inspiring contribution, opening questions about the specificity of “modern” conceptions of death and the relation between “religious” and “artistic” representations. Without providing a systematic research agenda and despite not referring explicitly to the book’s contributions, these two essays delineate a vast set of questions that connect with most of the following chapters.

The book is subdivided into three parts: immortality, visuality, and transition—a division that feels slightly artificial, since several chapters deal with

more than one of these topics. The section on “immortality” opens with a contribution by the philosopher Jonardon Ganeri that offers a creative comparison between responses to the “illusion of immortality” in the works of Buddhaghosa (Buddhist philosopher, 5th century) and Fernando Pessoa (Portuguese poet, 20th century). The contribution observes a certain continuity in the questioning, thus implicitly warning against ready-made oppositions between both ancient and contemporary times and Asian and European cultures. Oliver Krüger’s contribution focuses on the quest to escape death in posthumanism. Relating it to Gnosticism in its wish to overcome the limitations of matter, Krüger suggests that posthumanism might be related to a Western tradition of thought going back to the Egyptian quest for immortality—a proposition certainly worth pursuing further as a research question. Analyzing Soviet discourses on bodily immortality, Anja Kirsch emphasizes the notion of death as a source of social inequality. The contribution invites the reader to think about the moral and social implications of death for the present life in an atheistic framework that refuses the notion of an afterlife.

The next section, on “visuality,” explores different cases in which death is an inspiration for artistic creation. Naman Ahuja’s chapter focuses on different examples of Indian artifacts related to death. One highlight of the chapter is the presentation of Jaina Karnī Bharnī manuscripts, illustrating aspects of the afterlife connected with how one leads his or her present life—very reminiscent of Dante’s circles of hell. Friedrich Vollhardt’s chapter deals with the *Visio Tnugdali* (12th century), a text reporting about the visions of a knight who almost died. The text inspired the painter Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* (16th century)—raising the question of the transition (or relation) between “religious” and cultural representations of the afterlife. In his essay, Georg Braungart looks at the role of communication with the dead in artistic creation. Focusing on Rainer Maria Rilke and his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, it becomes clear that this text, as other ones composed in the same period, was closely related to the poet’s interest in spiritism.

The last section, “transition,” has several essays dealing about the dialectic relation between life and death. Jens Schlieter’s text explores the phenomenon of “fast panoramic life reviews” in NDEs and proposes a specific hermeneutical framework inspired by work about wake-up dreams by Friedrich Nietzsche. The contribution, now developed in Schlieter’s forthcoming book, *What Is It Like to Be Dead?* (Oxford University Press, 2018), offers an anthropological and neuropsychological model to revisit not only accounts of NDEs but also “religious visions” developed in similar circumstances. Katharina Kakar provides an anthropological reflection on the connections between death and fertility in Varanasi. Focusing on the Aghoris’ extreme practices, she shows that death is not only considered as a new birth, but that manipulating death can be intimately related to fertility.

Taken as a whole, the volume provides rich and thought-provoking contributions from a fine group of scholars. The book is successful in showing that the universal experience of death has created an immensely diverse set of religious and cultural representations that cannot easily be classified as “Western,” “Eastern,” ancient, or modern. While promising, the purpose of focusing on India and Europe is not entirely clear. In addition, one might have expected at least a summary handling of the possible “cultural transfers” between India and Europe, perhaps taking into account mediators such as Persian Islam (see here Marc Tiefenauer’s recent work, *Les Enfers Indiens: Histoire Multiple d’un Lieu Commun* (Brill, 2017)). Finally—and this relates to the limits of the academic genre of conference proceedings—a chapter summing up the results and making explicit connections with the “initial questions” (or formulating questions for further research) would have been helpful, given the diversity of the contributions in terms of both approaches (from neuropsychological to socio-historical, anthropological, and literary-cultural perspectives) and historical-cultural contexts. This does not remove any merit from the high level of all individual contributions and to the project itself, whose interdisciplinary character, as well as the balanced participation of European and Indian scholars, is to be welcomed.

About the Reviewer(s):

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Günter Blamberger holds a Chair in German Philology at the University of Cologne and is Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Humanities (Internationales Kolleg Morphomata) in Cologne. Since 1996 he has been President of the International Kleist-Society, and editor of the Kleist-Yearbook. He was responsible for the Kleist-Bicentenary in 2011.

Sudhir Kakar has been Lecturer at Harvard University, Research Fellow at Harvard Business School, Professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad and Head of Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi.

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