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EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

- 1 This text has two goals. Firstly, it aims to define the parameters concerning the issue of discussing death and presents the articles making up this volume. Secondly, it attempts to provide an overview (a sort of progress report) of all of the articles comprising Volumes 19 and 20 of *Questions de communication* devoted to media representations and representations¹ of death.

Discussing death

- 2 'Discussing' the subject of death is a very different matter from that addressed in the previous volume, which looked at the methods used and the issues involved in 'announcing' death. In this new volume, it is once again a case of how death is announced and portrayed, but this is often not the primary framework attributed to the event. The main purpose here is to explain the occurrence of death by trying to identify the reasons behind it. If we see death as a biological process involving the natural and inevitable demise of a living organism, our concern with identifying the reasons explaining it may seem absurd. However, the matter of discussing death relates specifically to deaths that occur in an often disturbing or even shocking way, inasmuch as they give the impression they could have been avoided. Examples include deaths resulting from individual, family

or group conflicts, or where the actual process of dying has been altered following human intervention, as in the case of euthanasia, suicide, etc. In other words, to discuss death is to try to identify the part of human responsibility, individual or collective, in the course of a process that is by its very nature inevitable, but that human action can render more or less close, more or less painful, and more or less (un)acceptable.

- 3 If the link between these two volumes is characterised by the contrast between 'announcing' and 'discussing' death, it is also because the nature of the death represented differs. Certain deaths seem more likely to be 'announced', both by their very nature and because of the lives to which they put an end. The types of deaths that we will examine here, however, require a more analytical and critical way of dealing with their occurrence. While the 'announced' deaths analysed in the articles comprising Volume 19 were generally individual deaths, those 'discussed' here are more frequently collective deaths, particularly in the four articles making up the first part of this volume dealing with deaths that occur during conflicts. Furthermore, while 'announced' deaths mostly concern natural deaths, those that are 'discussed' tend to be unexpected deaths that disrupt the normal course of life and imply the presence of an executioner, either literally or figuratively. This can be the person holding the weapon, obviously, but also the direct or indirect cause of the death, such as a natural disaster, work-related stress, etc. Death thus becomes the link between the two figures of victim and executioner, engaged in a specular relationship and thus indissociable from one another. It is this relationship that is often at the heart of media representations of deaths of this nature.
- 4 Discussed deaths are most often found in two major media categories: the international pages and the society pages. It is this distinction that has governed the organisation of this volume. The first four articles analyse the representations of deaths occurring during national or international conflicts. Agnès Devictor takes a look at the way the deaths of combatants in the Iran-Iraq War were portrayed by the Iranian press, and notably by the daily newspaper *Johmuri-ye eslâmi*, with its strong ties to the Iranian government. In wartime, it is customary not to portray the death of one's own soldiers. But the Iran-Iraq War fell within a specific ideological context in which there was great honour in dying a martyr's death. The article lists the strategies implemented by the Iranian press with regard to the fine line that exists between news and propaganda. Next, François Robinet provides an analysis of photographic documents of the Great Lakes conflicts in the French media. By studying the very different forms of representation of death, as well as their relation to the various phases of the conflicts, the author highlights the successive issues underlying the media construction of the event, both as regards the evolution of the conflict on the battlefield and the ideological war to which the images contributed. Yeny Serrano then looks at representations of the deaths of civilians and combatants in Colombia in the local television news. She focuses in particular on identifying the strategic issues involved within this context of civil war, the interpretation of the conflict proposed by the mass media tending to justify the war and discredit the opponent, notably by means of the picture composition chosen and the denominative choices made. Finally, Valérie Gorin offers a more comprehensive view of these representations through the analysis of both the visual and the discursive staging by international magazines of the deaths of civilians throughout the second half of the twentieth century. A comparison of the media coverage of four humanitarian crises between 1967 and 1994 raises questions not only about possible evolutions in media representations of death, but also about our

relationship to the suffering of others, be this suffering close to home or more further afield.

- 5 The three articles in the second part of this volume deal with the representations of death commonly found in 'Society' news. Denis Guthleben presents an analysis of death in the United States as portrayed by French television. Deaths of celebrities, news incidents involving fatalities, the death penalty, and terrorist attacks: death in the United States, such as it is (over-)represented on French television, is present on many different levels. This is especially revealing of the image that France has of its overseas neighbour, as well as of our attitude towards both the death of others and our own mortality. Pascal Hintermeyer then examines attitudes towards euthanasia in the press. Based on the analysis of a corpus of articles published in *Le Monde* between 1998 and 2010, he highlights a number of discursive processes and schemata of interpretation that characterise the discourse on euthanasia. He demonstrates that this subject is situated between the staging of some high-profile cases on the one hand, and a comprehensive reflection on euthanasia on the other, the latter notably concerning the issue of the end of life in general and, in particular, that of palliative care. Finally, Alain Rabatel explores the media representations of one of the most taboo forms of death, that of suicide in the workplace. The analysis of a corpus of newspaper articles on suicides by employees of France Telecom in late summer 2009 shows a turning point in the media coverage of this type of death. From that point on, media representations of suicides changed (each new suicide contributing to a 'spate', recourse to journalistic hyperstructures, use of explanatory rather than narrative discourse), going beyond a simple emotional approach to psychologise individual dramas and thereby challenge a certain corporate culture.

Media representations of death: between permanency and evolution

- 6 We are now going to review the different representations of death in the news media, in the light of the fourteen articles presented in these two volumes of *Questions de communication*. We will try to determine the types of deaths represented and how this is done, before looking at the semiotic and pragmatic variables that influence the ways in which death is represented by the media. We will then analyse the relationship between the representation of the death and the construction of the event. Finally, we will attempt to present an overview of the evolutions in the media coverage of death that these two volumes have highlighted, compared with previous work on the subject, an insight into which was given in the introduction to the last volume.

The types of deaths represented

- 7 In the previous volume, we presented the three modes of apprehension of death distinguished by Vladimir Jankélévitch (1994): 'death in the first person', 'death in the second person', and 'death in the third person'. Our aim was to determine which of these modes are most often portrayed in the media. It would appear from this double volume that the news media give greater coverage to death in the third person, i.e., the death of the Other. Indeed, otherness is at the heart of media representations of death, whether this otherness is cultural (Denis Guthleben), geographic (François Robinet, Valérie Gorin), or social (Benoît Lafon, Françoise Hammer, Adeline Wrona, Marie-Laure Florea). Deaths

portrayed in the media are thus primarily deaths that do not directly affect us ordinary mortals who read newspapers or watch television. Cited in an article in *Libération*² on the taboo surrounding death, Michel Schneider states the following (translation ours): 'Representations of violent deaths on our screens serve as screens between us and ordinary death. The viewer looks at these pictures and says "I will not die like that, therefore I will not die at all".' An anthropological dimension therefore runs through all representations of death: it is a case of facing and accepting our own mortality via the death of the Other, a death that cannot affect us.

- 8 In the introduction to Volume 19, we also resumed the distinction made by Jankélévitch (1977) between the three temporal perspectives of death: 'from this shore', 'the mortal instant' and 'from the other shore'. Our aim was then to determine the extent to which the news media attribute a place to these three temporal perspectives in their representations of death.³ Ultimately, we see that what is represented within this context is rarely death in the mortal instant, that most violent and most direct of the three temporal perspectives. A few marginal cases prove the exception to this rule, notably where the crime is in the process of being carried out, in various bloody news incidents in the United States, where death is filmed by surveillance cameras (Denis Guthleben), or the case of murders carried out live on Internet (Sophie Pène). Whatever the case, these representations of death in the mortal instant seem to go hand in hand with technological developments that allow for capturing images more easily today than a few years ago, and then broadcasting or distributing them to an increasingly wide public. What we tend to see more often in the media is death from the other shore, notably mass death, anonymous death (we will come back to the reasons that lead to this representation of the body later). This is the case of the representation (linguistic or iconic) of mass graves, or of the death of Nedā Āghā-Soltān, for example, shot during the 2009 Iranian election protests, which was widely broadcast over the Internet (Pène, 2011). Death from this shore (notably the *moribundus*, the period immediately preceding death, that of the death throes, which can be of a shorter or longer duration) also figures prominently in the media. Indeed, representations of death often involve persons considered to be on the verge of death, such as a Rwandan child with cholera, for whom death is just a matter of time according to the photo caption (François Robinet), or images of Iranian soldiers photographed before going into battle and regarded as martyrs, their fate already sealed (Agnès Devictor). More broadly, the media also represent the dying whose deaths have been placed 'on standby', as it were, such as in the case of persons wanting to die by euthanasia (Pascal Hintermeyer) or prisoners on death row (Denis Guthleben). And therein lies the paradox: certain people portrayed by the media as dead are actually often still alive.
- 9 Beyond these temporal perspectives of death portrayed in the media, one thing is clear: it is not only death that is represented; life, too, is portrayed in the background, and sometimes even in the foreground. This staging of life may be that of the deceased who is often shown during his or her lifetime, either in the prime of life (Sophie Pène, Adeline Wrona, Françoise Hammer, Marie-Laure Florea), or during times of suffering (Pascal Hintermeyer, Alain Rabatel). As Denis Guthleben puts it, television is not a mausoleum: it does not expect us to bow before a lifeless body but before a body that is full of life. Life can also take centre stage when portraying people who have narrowly escaped death. This includes survivors of attacks or massacres (François Robinet), or prisoners on death row who were granted a stay of execution or a pardon at the eleventh hour, as in the case

of the American Kirk Bloodsworth (Denis Guthleben). Finally, representations of life can sometimes come to replace representations of death. The representation then becomes a re-presentation, as shown by Sophie Pène in her analysis of how Facebook works, sometimes continuing to portray as 'living' people who have died, and perhaps giving rise to a new dimension in the temporal perspectives of death, a sort of 'life' after death. This point is also highlighted by Adeline Wrona, for whom talking about death is actually a matter of talking about life: the life a celebrity, for example, could have lived in this span of time that separates us from him or her.

Ways of representing death

- 10 Death is represented in various ways by the media. A continuum exists between denial and affirmation, where it is possible to silence, euphemise, exhibit and exaggerate death. There is a constant movement back and forth between these two extremes: death is put on show for all to see and it is covered up, it is mitigated and it is exacerbated. Euphemisation is the form of mitigation that we would most expect but finally found very little of, except in obituaries (Françoise Hammer). The main means of mitigation is by metonymy, an extremely widespread practice. Different things can come to represent death through metonymy: the person directly responsible for it, for example the armed soldier (Valérie Gorin), or the object that caused it, such as the electric chair (Denis Guthleben) even though this is no longer used for executing prisoners on death row. In this case, we can say that the object of the metonymy has become stereotyped. Death can also be represented by the place where it occurred or will occur: the wall of the prison, the blood-stained ground, the chalk outline drawn by the police at the crime scene and that remains once the body has been removed, etc. More generally, death in the media maintains a strong link with symbolism, for example, the image of a coffin (Benoît Lafon), or the bloody tulip representing the Iranian martyrs (Agnès Devictor). Sometimes the meaning relationship is reversed, with the body itself coming to symbolise something. Here, it is as though the fact of showing a dead body is only possible when the body is not considered in and of itself, but rather represents a higher reality. Examples include the bodies of enemy soldiers displayed as trophies of war (Yeny Serrano), the dismembered bodies of Iranian combatants symbolising the martyrdom they endured (Agnès Devictor), bodies representing sacrificed innocence (Valérie Gorin), or the severely disfigured face of Chantal Sébire, who fought for the right to die by euthanasia (Pascal Hintermeyer). Representations of death are thus laden with strong symbolic value, the deceased coming to symbolise as much the situation responsible for their demise as the inevitability of death itself.
- 11 Alongside these euphemising representations, hyperbolic representations of death also exist. This exaggeration of death may be due to the frequency of representation that, on the one hand, increases when the same event is told and/or shown repeatedly. As Denis Guthleben so elegantly puts it when summing up the continual replaying of the footage of the September 11 attacks, 'For every physical death, several cathode deaths'. On the other hand, the frequency of representation can be increased when several deaths follow one another and are staged consecutively. This is the case where deaths continue to occur over a number of days, for example in the event of war (Yeny Serrano) or a spate of suicides (Alain Rabatel), or in a succession of death notices and obituaries, which can come to resemble a sort of media graveyard (Françoise Hammer, Marie-Laure Florea,

Adeline Wrona). But beyond the frequency, this exaggeration of death can reflect the intensity of the representation, which often involves the use of strong words (Yeny Serrano presents a perspicacious analysis of the use of the word 'massacre'), or a toll updated daily with a steady increase in the number of dead (tsunami, the Twin Towers, influenza A virus).

Semiotic and pragmatic variables

- 12 Various factors can influence the ways in which death is portrayed in the media, including the contrast between text and image, the profile of the deceased, and the nature of the medium. The semiotic variable plays a key role in observing the contrast between relatively blunt discursive representations and euphemising iconic representations. This can be seen in all of the articles whose corpora are based on traditional media (newspapers and television) and comprise material that is both discursive and iconic. While death can be told in a rather direct way, sometimes including all of the sordid, gruesome details, it is generally not shown as it really is in the images, although there are a few, very significant exceptions to this rule.
- 13 The second variation relates to the deceased themselves. Indeed, the dead are not all equal where the media coverage of their deaths is concerned. This is not just a case of the macabre law of "kilometric death" according to which the nearer to home the death takes place, the greater media coverage it receives and the more we are affected by it. It is also a case of the deaths of certain people being associated with certain original types of media: the deaths of outstanding individuals, for example, are dealt with in a very specific way (Lafon, Freyssinet-Dominjon, 2001; Delporte, 2000). Moreover, even within the same 'category', not all of the deceased receive the same media coverage. Alain Rabatel studies suicides within companies, but what of suicides within the civil service or in prisons, which seem to be treated as a taboo within a taboo? Clearly, the profile of the deceased plays a key role in the subsequent representation of his or her death.
- 14 Finally, the nature of the medium is also an important variable. First of all, there is the very specific nature of new types of media, such as blogs and social networks, compared to traditional media, and we will discuss this specificity in more detail below. As for the traditional media, according to the articles presented here, it seems that there is little difference between the representations of death on television and in newspapers, apart, obviously, from the inherent differences in these two types of media. However, it is the place of representation with regard to the location of the event that changes the representations, by affecting the point of view brought to bear on the event. Indeed, death during conflicts is portrayed in very different ways depending on whether the portrayal is done by local media (Yeny Serrano, Agnès Devictor) or by external media (François Robinet). Moreover, even when these external media are directly concerned by the conflict, the forms of representation differ greatly, as illustrated by François Robinet who discusses the particular point of view of France with regard to the Rwandan conflict, given its military and humanitarian involvement in the country.

Re-presentation and re-construction of the event

- 15 It is a well-known fact (for example, Veron, 1981) that reality is not reflected by the media, but rather it is the media that actually shape reality. This is what we wanted to

emphasize by hyphenating the term 'representation'. As we explained in the introduction to the previous volume, re-presentation helps modify, shape, and (re)construct the event, with complex interactions developing between the two. Concerning death, discourse helps construct the event in as much as it tries to make sense of it, often by inserting it into a narrative framework. Media representations of death are often conveyed by this storytelling, which can take two main forms. First, when the aim of the particular media genre is to announce the death (in the articles of Volume 19), it is usually a case of a single, individual death, where the deceased's life constitutes the story. This is the case with obituaries, which mostly consist in a biography of the deceased (Marie-Laure Florea). This is also true of new types of media. Sophie Pène quotes the example of a family who, following the death of their loved one, sorted the photographs posted on the deceased's Facebook page, deleting some and reorganising others in a clear effort to constitute an embryo of that person's life story. On the other hand, in media genres that discuss death, it is usually the death itself that constitutes the story. The deaths discussed are often put into perspective in relation to the timeline into which they fall, and which is often built over the long-term by the media, the event being treated almost in the form of a serial drama (see, for example, the serialisation discussed by Alain Rabatel). Pascal Hintermeyer designates this discursive process, which consists in presenting the facts as being interrelated by a causal relationship, as the 'meaningful conjunction', a standard practice in articles dealing with euthanasia. This desire to bring new meaning through the setting of the story can also be found in iconic representations of death. François Robinet shows the dramatisation at work in photographic documents depicting the Rwanda conflict, representing not only given moments in time, but also constituting part of a narrative. The setting of the story is therefore central to the understanding of the event and its representation. The reconstruction at work here aims to transform reality, to give the deceased a 'good' or 'noble' death, or at the very least one that makes sense. The event can thus sometimes be situated elsewhere, no longer in the death that gave rise to the article, but in attempts to explain, interpret, and find solutions that accompany the representations of this death. This is especially the case where human intervention can be seen as impacting the future of mankind, with certain types of death (due to social or military conflicts), or certain forms of dying (suffering, or degrading deaths, such as euthanasia or suicide), giving the impression they could be avoided. In these circumstances, the setting of the story no longer operates alone. The inclusion of informative or argumentative sequences, such as graphics or interviews, extends the subject of the analysis by placing the individual fact of the death within a broader, more abstract setting, right up to examining ways to prevent such tragedies.

- 16 This reconstruction by the media sometimes results in a dual representation of death: the event is planned as a representation, staged thinking that can then be portrayed in the media, and which, when the phenomenon is pushed to the extreme, can result in the instrumentalisation of death. Thus, during televised funerals, for example, the ceremony is organised for the benefit of the cameras and staged for broadcasting (Benoît Lafon). This is the same phenomenon that affects certain deaths by euthanasia, in which the patient makes his or her act a militant gesture, a spectacle for the assumed media coverage, to try to convince the public of the legitimacy of the cause of those who advocate the legalisation of this practice (Pascal Hintermeyer). This is also the case in the staging of suicide, when it is planned as a spectacle, like a young woman employee of France Telecom who threw herself out of a window (Alain Rabatel), or of certain

executions, such as that of the American John Albert Taylor, who chose to be executed by firing squad so that his death would embarrass the state of Utah. Here, the event seems to become a representation in itself, the details of which are worked out in advance for the subsequent media coverage. The development of new online media accentuates this phenomenon: the broadcasting of images being increasingly easy and fast, the sequence of events is frequently modified by the presence of the cameras. Events are sometimes even created from scratch for the benefit of the media, such as executions of hostages, staged specifically for the media coverage they generate. There is thus no longer a simple instrumentalisation of death when its occurrence and/or nature have been 'scheduled' for the subsequent media representations. In this extreme case, death exists only because it will be portrayed in the media.

Evolutions in media representations of death

- 17 Finally, we would like to examine recent developments in media representations of death. To do this, we will first revisit one of the assumed evolutions in attitudes to death. Several authors (for example, Walter, 1994; Legros, 2006) argue that contemporary discourse on death has changed dramatically, to the extent that it even breaks the taboo surrounding it. Social and media practices with regard to death have certainly evolved, images of death being increasingly present in our everyday lives. The 2011 Death Exhibition in Paris, for example, contributed to bring the subject of death back into the public sphere, and the broadcasting of images of death live on the Internet shows that the boundaries governing what can and cannot be said or shown have been pushed back. It seems inaccurate, however, given the articles making up these volumes, to say that the subject of death has become commonplace; while there are undoubtedly changes, death nevertheless remains a taboo subject, although to a somewhat lesser extent than before. Indeed, there are still certain types of deaths that are not portrayed in the media, and certain things that are not said: we do not speak ill of the dead, for example (Marie-Laure Florea, Adeline Wrona, Benoît Lafon). And while dead bodies are now shown in the media, the same is not true of the actual act of killing, with the exception of some very specific cases (François Robinet, Yeny Serrano, Valérie Gorin). Nor do the media broadcast images of just any dead body, since identifiable or dismembered bodies are not shown (Agnès Devictor, Yeny Serrano, Valérie Gorin). There would thus seem to be a shift in, rather than a disappearance of, the taboo surrounding death and its media representations, as confirmed by Folker Hanusch in his book (2010), a comprehensive overview of the different representations of death in the news media reaching the same conclusions.
- 18 Apart from these changes in the limits of what can and cannot be said or shown in discourse on death, the major evolution to have taken place over the last decade concerns the emergence of new types of media, coupled with a change in the ways death is portrayed. As we expected, technological developments over recent years have led to significant changes in media practices where representations of death are concerned. This primarily involves the form of death that is portrayed: the death of loved ones, and even one's own death, today have their place in certain types of media (Françoise Hammer, Sophie Pène, Adeline Wrona). Similar changes affect the forms of this representation, particularly with regard to iconic representations, given the ease with which moving images can be recorded and broadcast, a phenomenon made possible by the advent of the video digitising process. But new media practices also apply to the more

traditional media; as we have seen, the 'unrepresentable' nature of death changes the ways in which the media treat this subject. The development of journalistic hyperstructures (Marie-Laure Florea, Alain Rabatel) or the split screen (Benoît Lafon) thus allow for seeing what cannot be represented by a single shot. Beyond a mere sign of evolving media formats, these changes are significant of a desire to multiply viewpoints concerning death and/or the deceased.

- 19 Furthermore, this evolution in media representations of death corresponds to a change in the associated rituals, which are less present in the private sphere and more and more visible in the media. Our own mortality is no longer faced and accepted through the death of our loved ones (their death being relegated outside the family circle), but by the death of the Other, which is usually the type of death portrayed in the traditional media. This otherness may reflect either the deceased's life, which is not that of the average man in the street (obituaries, televised funerals), or his or her death, which is not ordinary (incidents, wars, disasters, etc.). Thus it is often this death in the third person portrayed in the news media that is, in our Western societies, one of the first ways for us to come to terms with death, both that of others and our own future death.
- 20 Here too, the practices of the new media are disrupting this process. Where the traditional media play on sensationalism (the representations of death necessarily showing something out of the ordinary – see Moeller, 1999), the new media, on the other hand, play the card of proximity. It is this requirement for deaths that are much closer to home that changes the forms of representation: while the traditional media portray the death of the Other, the new media portray a type of death that we can all envisage as happening to us some day. Moreover, there is reason to question traditional categories, which place the boundary between the fictional and non-fictional representations of death in the media, a typology generally used in research on the subject, including in these two volumes. And yet non-fictional representations of death in the traditional media perhaps present more similarities with fictional representations of death than with the representations given in the new media. Indeed, where the first provide 'derealitising' representations, to quote Louis-Vincent Thomas (1991), the latter have a greater tendency to stage the death of an alter ego. This parallel between fictional and non-fictional representations of death would certainly be worth exploring further.

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NOTES

1. The issues inherent in this notion of re-presentation were discussed in the introduction to the previous volume (Rabatel, Florea, 2011: 8-10). We will come back to this point later.
 2. 'La mort, un mot tabou qui a la vie dure' (M. Hajdenberg, *Libération*, 02/11/04: p. 32).
 3. While retaining Jankélévitch's original tripartition, we take some liberties with the content of his categories that we limit here to a temporal distinction of 'before', 'during' and 'after' death.
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