

[Eros and Thanatos in the Arts of Asia \(extended\)](#)

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Eros and Thanatos in the Arts of Asia

Call for papers for the journal *Art Asie Sorbonne-Creops*, Sorbonne University (extended)

TABAIMO, *Obscuring Moon*, 2016, video still from animated picture. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery

From Plato to Saint Augustine to Freud, the pairing Eros / Thanatos occupies a place that is both central and multi-faceted in Western thought and art. It appears as a celebration of love as a vital energy that allows the (male) soul to escape its mortal body and reach the divine, but also as a threat when under the effect of carnal desire, or of feminine, maternal power, the soul is exhausted.

This is also the case in Asian thought and art, whether in popular beliefs and images, religious icons, classical, traditional or contemporary representations.

In India as well as in the Himalayan world and in some Southeast Asian countries, art inspired by Tantrism, whether Buddhist or Hindu, has made erotic union the metaphor par excellence for spiritual experience. Images of eros can be linked to terrifying or funereal figures, in a perspective that aims to overcome the opposition between pleasure and fright. The Sanskrit term *kāma* that qualifies eros extends more broadly to all forms of desire, but also specifically refers, in Hinduism, to the deity who presides over romantic relationships. In Buddhist legend, the god *Māra* ("Death") rules over the world of Desire (*Kāmadhātu*): it is him whom the Buddha must confront before attaining Enlightenment. The *Kāma* of Hindu mythology is not in the same way confused with death, but is connected with it: reduced to ashes by the god *Śiva* for daring to attack him, he is soon resurrected by the latter at the behest of the Goddess. The myth thus marks the intimate solidarity of eros with the

female deities, while illustrating the ambiguous relationship it has with asceticism, the masculine and the powers of destruction. These themes have continued to run through Indian artistic creation right up to the present day. The end of the 19th century saw the emergence of an ambivalent personification of the nation that finds its source in the pantheon of Hindu goddesses. The links between the divine, the feminine and death continue to inspire 20th century cinema and art.

Love and death are also linked in classical China and Japan, essentially as highlighting the dangers of female eroticism, presented as monstrous, disturbing, masked appearance of vixens or ghosts. Thus in Buddhism, there are specific hells reserved for women. In Japan, the image of the female ghost remains alive in folk art (Dumas, 2018).

These ambivalences are based in part on the Taoist representation of the Yang, masculine, vital energy that produces life through fertilization of the feminine, passive Yin, under certain conditions that must be preserved. Excessive feminine power breaks the balance of the cosmic order. An overly active female principle that overstretches the production of semen results in death. On the contrary, the preservation of the semen makes it possible to preserve the vital breath, and to fight against the corruption of the body.

But in China, the vital force of love can sometimes lead to the resuscitation of a dead person (cf. the 16th century play *The Peony Pavilion*), and love with a ghost can bring back a loved beauty, of a past but well-defined era. Finally, as Vandermeersch reminds us, this cosmology, which does not conceive an absolute yang without a yin, opened the way for literate women to manifest their femininity without endangering the Confucian order (Vandermeersch, 2004).

In the same way, in Japan, the erotic dance of the goddess Amenouzume, given as the ancestor of Kagura and Noh theatre, overcomes death by awakening the vital energies represented by the Sun - the goddess Amaterasu -, eclipsed for a time at the winter solstice, by provoking the laughter of the deities plunged into darkness who thus let the vital breath escape through their mouths.

For this thematic issue of the journal *Art Asie Sorbonne*, we are looking for contributions dealing with the theme of the couple Eros and Thanatos in Asian visual arts of all periods, including their vernacular and popular forms, of a length of about 30,000 signs, accompanied by illustrations free of rights (articles in English are also accepted).

Proposals with an abstract in French or English, accompanied by keywords, a brief bibliography, and a short bio-bibliography should be received by **July 30**. The answer will be given by **August 15** at the latest. Articles are due by **October 30**. Proposals should be sent to Christine Vial-Kayser (christine.vialkayser@gmail.com), Mary Picone (marypicone@hotmail.com) and Edith Parlier-Renault (Edith.Parlier-Renault@wanadoo.fr).

Bibliography:

Raechel Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture*, Springer, 2018.

Léon Vandermeersch, "Poèmes féminins du seuil de la mort dans la Chine des Qing", *Savoirs et clinique*, 2004/2 (no5), pp. 63-66. Online.

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