How to manage the death? Reflections on dirty work.

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In my PhD research I study the notion of ‘complexity’ in the Dutch railway system. Through a multi-sited ethnographic methodology I try to understand what railway managers and employees mean when they talk about the complexity of the network. One of the ways the organizations try to cope with this complexity is by means of making it simpler: managing, measuring and rationalizing a railway world that is inherently irrational and complex. Stories are abundant about strange, peculiar, emotional or unintelligible situations: a mourning swan that disrupted the train service between two large cities for some hours; train managers who are being attacked by aggressive passengers; technological artefacts that simply do not want to do what they are essentially made for; traffic controllers collaborating with train operators in a field of different, almost paradoxical values and interests; or incident fighters who remember all the gory details of how they had to put their sturdy safety boots on slippery and blood-covered tracks in order to find some bodily remains of another ‘jumper’.

For the paper I will present at the Ethnography Symposium I want to zoom in on the case of train suicides and how these are to be ‘managed’. On the one hand it is certainly an extreme case, as it involves many different actors and organizations, but also because of the emotionality it evokes. On the other hand, it could be argued that this is a very normal case. On average, every other day someone in the Netherlands commits suicide by means of jumping in front of a train. For the railway organizations it thus is important to manage these sad incidents efficiently. In the paper I will show how the position of ProRail, the railway infrastructure manager, is indeed Janus-faced: a tension between the need to manage the irrational in order to legitimize organizational performances and the almost inhumane consequences this might entail. The tendency to rationalize the irrational becomes most visible in the practices of incident fighters who, while being busy finding a missing arm or leg, are confronted with procedures to do so in an efficient way.

I will specifically address the role of the reflective ethnographer in studying dirty and emotional work. In the paper I will show how reflection and reflexivity plays a pivotal part in understanding the meaning of these practices.