Between 1960 and 1980, Japanese writers, filmmakers, and playwrights turned again and again to the February 26 Incident. Always controversial, the abortive coup d'état by young army officers in Tokyo in 1936, the only serious attempt at revolution in Japan in the twentieth century, became a favourite topic. The works produced include Mishima Yukio’s novella ‘Patriotism’ (Yūkoku, 1960), Suzuki Seijun’s film Elegy to Violence (Kenka erejii, 1966), Sekine Hiroshi’s long narrative poem ‘Abe Sada’ (1971), Ōshima Nagisa’s film In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no koriida, 1976), and Satoh Makoto’s plays ‘Abe Sada’s Dogs’ (Abe Sada no inu, 1976) and ‘The Killing of Blanqui, Spring in Shanghai’ (Buranki-goroshi Shanghai no haru, 1979).

During these two decades, ideas about what constituted a ‘revolution’ were being contested globally in both politics and art. In numerous countries, the Old Left historicist model of revolution was being challenged by the anarchic liberationist model of the New Left; and the classical avant-garde was being questioned by the neo-avant-garde and postmodernism. This chapter argues that in Japan, works about the February 26 Incident were a site for this contestation. Reviewing them, it is possible to observe a growing incredulity towards the received meta-narrative of ‘revolution’, the testing of alternatives, and the evolution of artistic works from realistic, life-or-death tales of conviction to outlandish kaleidoscopes of doubt.

The notion of the ‘avant-garde’ originated as a military term and from the time of the French Revolution was closely associated with the idea
of political insurrection (Calinescu 1987: 101). Baudelaire was critical of the avant-garde because of its subservience to politics, and it was not until the 1870s in France that a small group of experimental writers and artists applied the spirit of radical social critique to the domain of artistic forms (Calinescu 1987: 112). A tension developed between the political and aesthetic impulses of the avant-garde, but after the Russian Revolution, the avant-garde became increasingly associated with the monolithic Communist movement. Even after the war, Sartre and Camus, among many others, argued bitterly about the proper relationship between politics and art.

After 1956, a crisis developed in this relationship. That year, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s crimes to the Twentieth Communist Party Congress (25 February), and Soviet troops brutally suppressed the Hungarian Uprising (23 October to 10 November). The credibility and prestige of the Communist revolution were severely damaged and never recovered. The same year, critics began writing of the ‘death of the avant-garde’. Beginning with Roland Barthes, commentators such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler argued that the idea of the avant-garde had lost its antithetic power and was obsolete. The avant-garde’s ‘offensive, insulting rhetoric came to be regarded as merely amusing, and its apocalyptic outcries were changed into comfortable, innocuous clichês’ (Calinescu 1987: 120–1).

The same history was repeated in Japan. During the 1920s, the avant-garde had become closely affiliated with the Communist movement, and, after suppression during the war years, this affiliation continued in the late 1940s and 1950s. By the mid-1950s, however, the Japanese Communist Party was losing its grip on the left. In 1958, a non-Communist left-wing group called the Bund took control of Zengakuren, the national Japanese student movement. After 1960, the rift between the Old and New Left became irremediable, when the mass demonstrations against renewal of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty coordinated by the Communist Party ended in failure. By 1969 there were almost forty anti-Communist left-wing sects in Japan arrayed against only one affiliated with the Communist Party (Tsurumi 1970: 104, 108).

Around the world in the 1960s, ‘revolution’ was one of the most frequently invoked notions. From student rioters in Paris in May 1968 and demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August to protests against the Mexico City Olympics in October, the world was convulsed in 1968 by New Left activists demanding ‘revolution’. In Japan, student strikes that began at Japanese universities in January escalated throughout the year, culminating in the violent siege of Yasuda Hall at Tokyo University in January 1969, when eight thousand riot police were mobilized to oust student militants who had occupied the building.

It was no longer clear, however, what ‘revolution’ meant. The 1968 Beatles song ‘Revolution 1‘ reflected this lack of consensus: ‘You say you want a revolution / Well you know / We all want to change the