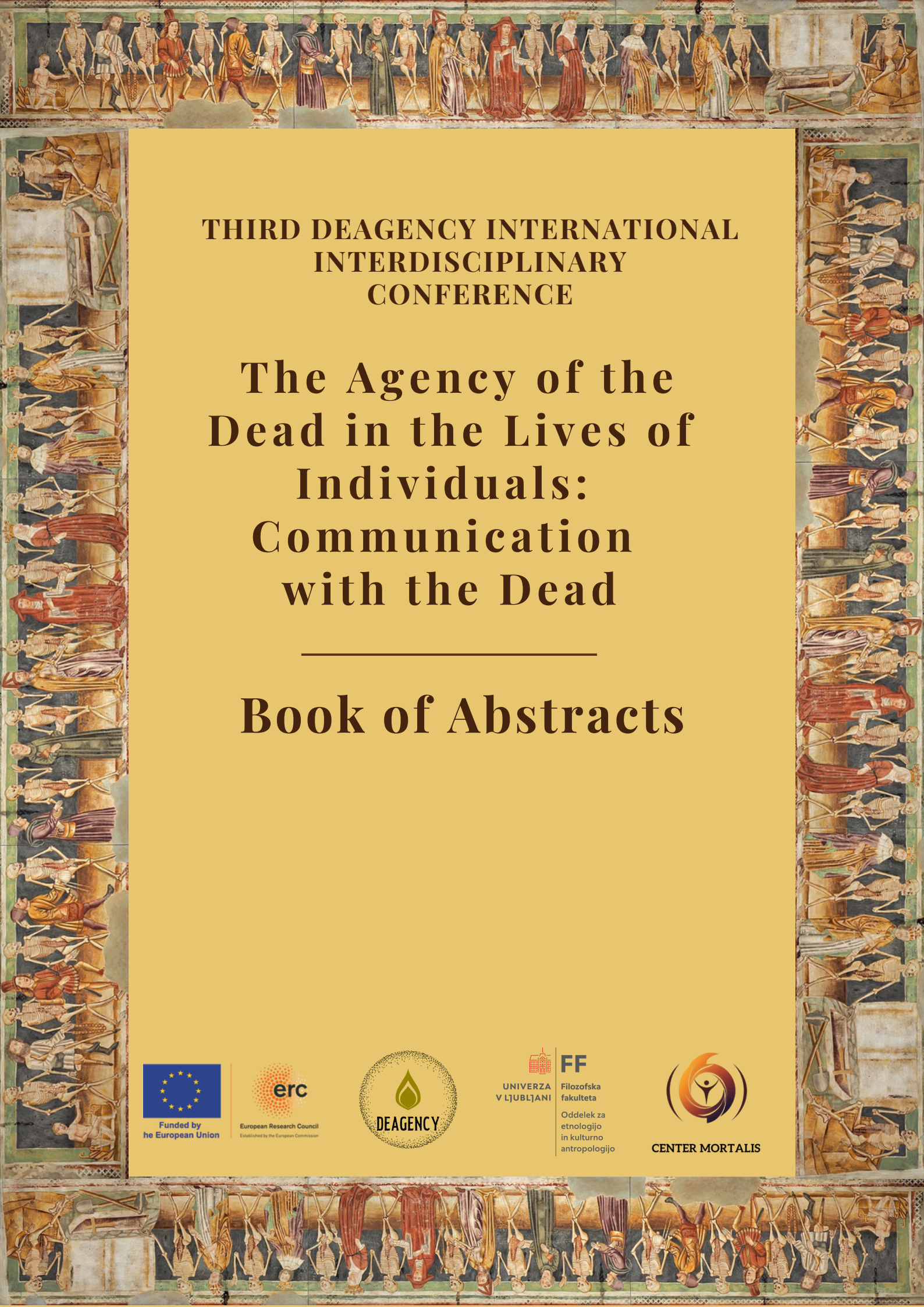


The background of the cover features a medieval manuscript illustration of a 'Dance of Death'. It depicts a long line of skeletons in various poses, some holding hands, some holding tools, and some in different states of decay. The figures are dressed in colorful, patterned robes. The illustration is framed by a decorative border.

**THIRD DEAGENCY INTERNATIONAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY
CONFERENCE**

**The Agency of the
Dead in the Lives of
Individuals:
Communication
with the Dead**

Book of Abstracts



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Image on the first page: Replica of Dance of Death fresco from the Church of the Holy Trinity in Hrastovlje (oil on canvas, created by John from Kastvo, 1490) in the National Gallery, Ljubljana (photographed by Vladimir Makuc, 1959).

DEAGENCY team would like to thank: European Research Council; Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana; Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology; and ŽALE d.o.o.

THE AGENCY OF THE DEAD IN THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS: COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD

Contrary to pre-modern European societies, and many contemporary non-Western societies, where the dead were (and are) considered members of the community and continue(d) to be significantly involved in people's everyday lives, the dominant Western ontology nowadays does not integrate communication and exchange between the living and the dead. However, as a bulk of quantitative as well as qualitative research testify, for some people in contemporary Western societies, social interactions do not necessarily cease after death but are merely transformed. The dead continue to be involved in our lives, affecting our thoughts, emotions, values, behaviour, and social relations. While scholars have often treated the accounts of the agency of the dead in people's lives as expressions of "folk belief", and ghosts as symbols and metaphors of larger cultural and social problems and changes, the aim of the conference is to take the agency of the dead in the lives of individuals seriously, as people themselves experience it.

This conference focuses on the different types of interaction between the living and the dead. These are broadly defined and may include both intentional and unintentional communication with the spirits of the dead, both familiar dead and impersonal ghosts, through both collective and private practices. It can include communication through dreams and other altered states of consciousness, visions, interactions through mediums or with the help of various other practitioners, "legend trips" and tourism to haunted places, practices of "summoning the dead", various after-death and memorialisation practices, online communication with spirits, and so on and so forth. Whereas in the past the way of communicating with the dead was largely prescribed by tradition, religion and/or the state, today individuals are free to engage in their practices without having to adhere to prescribed methods; in the fragmented and networked society of privatised death, they may not even have a community to share their practices with.

In this conference we aim to explore whether practices of communication between the living and the dead are aimed at maintaining personal relationships with the familiar dead, or whether they are intended as a test of courage or perhaps carried out of curiosity; do people perform them to honour and commemorate the dead, to ask them for advice, to keep a promise, to obtain or grant forgiveness, to enhance their social status, to improve their social relations, to strengthen their group's identity or a particular ideology, to demonstrate their political stance, or perhaps even as a means in intra-community power struggles and inter-group tensions? Are traditional forms of dealing with the dead (still) used or are they losing their significance for the individual? Have they changed and how, or have they been replaced by new practices? What role do material objects and places play in creating and maintaining interaction with the dead? What consequences does interaction with the dead have for the lives of the living? What role does communication with the dead play?

PROGRAMME

WEDNESDAY, JULY 1

Lecture Room 34

8:00 - 8:45 **REGISTRATION**
9:00 - 9:15 **WELCOME SPEECHES**

Prof. Dr. Mojca Schlamberger Brezar, Dean of the Faculty of Arts,
University of Ljubljana

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mateja Habinc, Head of the Department of
Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of
Ljubljana

Prof. Dr. Mirjam Mencej, Chair of the Programme Committee and
Principal Investigator of the DEAGENCY project, Department of
Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of
Ljubljana

9:15 -10:15 **PLENARY TALK**
**Elisabeth Anstett: Silent Stocks. When Human Remains' Agency
Is Suspended**

10:15 – 10:45 *COFFEE BREAK*

POLITICS OF THE DEAD
Chair: Petra Hamer

10:45 – 11:15 Salman Hussain: Living with the Dead: Hauntology, Ontology and the
"Politics of Death"

11:15 –11:45 Emily Fisher, Ellen Donovan: Unexcavated and Unidentified Dead:
Mass Graves and the Second Disappearance

11:45 –12:15 Jaka Repič: Art, Affect, and the Aestheticization of Mass Graves and
Human Remains in Slovenia

12:15 –12:45 Leena Käosaar, Ülo Valk: Liminal Presence of the Dead and Vernacular
Life Writing of the Gulag: The "As-If" Approach Revisited

12:45 -13:45 *ORGANISED LUNCH – CATERING*

	Lecture Room 34 THE DEAD AS HELPERS Chair: Ágnes Hesz	Lecture Room 119 DEATHSCAPES: CEMETERIES, TOMBSTONES Chair: Simona Kuntarič Zupanc
13:45 -14:15	Alexandra Bergholm, Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen: The Angelic Afterlives of the Dead: Tracing the Early History of an Idea	YeSeung Lee: Ami-dong Gravestone Village: Haunted Landscapes and the Material Agency of the Dead
14:15 -14:45	Kaarina Koski: The Roles of Angels in Communication Beyond Death	Abraham Maurer, Martin Lednický: When the Dead Speak in Stone: Tombstones, Agency, and Identity in Muslim and Jewish Cemeteries in Czechia
14:45 -15:15	Robin Tigran Keršmanc: Consulting the Dead: Practices of Cooperation Between the Living and the Deceased	Saša Babič: Inscriptions on Tombstones as a Final Letter to the Deceased
15:15 -15:45	<i>COFFEE BREAK</i>	
	Lecture Room 34 THE DEAD: FROM TRADITION TO ALTERNATIVE MODES OF KNOWLEDGE Chair: Robin Tigran Keršmanc	Lecture Room 119 DEATHSCAPES: HOME, MATERIALITY, PRACTICES AND NARRATIVES Chair: Saša Babič
15:45 -16:15	Ursula-Helen Kassaveti: Fallback Epistemologies: Mediumship, Urban Anxiety, and the Agency of the Dead in Popular Greek Cinema	Simona Kuntarič Zupanc: Presence of the Dead in Domestic Deathscapes in Rural Northeastern Slovenia
16:15 -16:45	Ritika Chhabra: When the Dead Speak: Bollywood Horror and the Reimagining of Folkloric Ghosts	Petra Hamer: Private Similarities, Public Differences? Rethinking Communication with the Dead among Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina
16:45 -17:15	Anastasia Victoria Servan-Schreiber: "Vaimolendid", Voices from the Past That Structure the Present	Vito Carrassi: Processions of the Dead and Their Interaction with the Living

THURSDAY, JULY 2

9:00 -10:00	Lecture Room 34 PLENARY TALK Johanna Sumiala: AI Dead: The Social Lives of the Dead in Synthetic Media	
	Lecture Room 34 COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD THROUGH DIGITAL PLATFORMS Chair: Johanna Sumiala	Lecture Room 18 COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD IN FOLKLORE Chair: Mirjam Mencej
10:00 -10:30	Jana Paulina Lobe: Summoning the Dead via Touchscreen? Rethinking Postmortal Agency in Digital Afterlife Practices	Danijela Popović Nikolić: We Bought You a New House. There You Sit: Speech and Non-Speech in Oral Vampire Narratives
10:30 -11:00	Tomaž Simetinger: Artificial Intelligence as Spirit Medium and as Autonomous Agent: Two Ontological Perspectives in Contemporary Folklore	Olha Petrovych: Tracing the Dead in Folk Song: A Comparative Study of Ukrainian and Estonian Oral Traditions
11:00 -11:30	<i>COFFEE BREAK</i>	
	Lecture Room 34 COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD THROUGH MEDIUMS Chair: Tatiana Bužeková	Lecture Room 18 THE BODY AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD: MORTALITY AND MEDICAL ISSUES Chair: Uršula Lipovec Čebtron
11:30 -12:00	Ágnes Hesz: "A Dark Legacy from the Past Standing in the Way of Progress": State Propaganda and a Seer of the Dead in Socialist Hungary	Kelly Curtis: Encounters with the Dead: How Exposure to Mortality Predicts Paranormal Experiences, Practice, and Belief
12:00 -12:30	Kari Sawden: Translating for the Dead: Mediumship and the Processes of Communicating with Spirits	Denielle Hill: "We Remember Us": Grief, Erasure, and the Trans Dead
12:30-13:00	Katarina Šrampf Vendramin: Between Healing and Mediation: Practitioners Communicating with the Dead in Contemporary Spiritual Practices	Mojca Ramšak: The Living Presence of Anonymous Donors: Psychological Connections and Communication with the Dead in Organ Transplantation

13:00-15:00 *LUNCH BREAK*

Lecture Room 34

MEMORIALS AND DARK TOURISM

Chair: Elisabeth Anstett

15:00 -15:30 Emily Selby Smith: Active Dead and the Afterlives of Landscapes:
Dark Tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

15:30 -16:00 Joscelyn Jurich: “Nije živ i nije mrtav” (“Not Alive and Not Dead”):
The Srebrenica Commemoration and Potočari Memorial Center
Archives as Temporal Mediation

16:00 -16:30 *COFFEE BREAK*

Lecture Room 34

**COMMUNICATION WITH THE
DEAD THROUGH DREAMS**

Chair: Kaarina Koski

Lecture Room 18

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DEAD

Chair: Smiljana Djordjević Belić

16:30 -17:00 Michal Uhrin: Communication
with the Dead Through Dreams

Joel Hanisek: The Dead Are with Us
Still: Addressing Questions of
Agency, Authority, and Public
Communication Through Art and the
Built Environment

17:00 -17:30 Florența Popescu-Simion:
Having a Chat with the Dead in
Dreams: Between Tradition and
Contemporary Ways of Coping
with Death

Benjamin Joseph Kapron:
“Remember These Were Once Living
Persons”: Natural History Museums
and Coercive Communication with
the Non-Human Dead

17:30-18:00 Felicity Wood: Spiritual
Messenger Animals, Dreams
and Visitations: Interactions
with the Dead in Xhosa-
speaking Communities, South
Africa

Narges Emami Shoushtari, Maryam
Rafatjah: The Most Recent Methods
of Martyrs' Veneration in Daily Life

FRIDAY, JULY 3

	Lecture Room 34 FORENSICS AS METHODOLOGY Chair: Jaka Repič	Lecture Room 18 COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD: NARRATIVES AND RITUALS Chair: Michal Uhrin
9:00 - 9:30	Nadya Jaziri Arjona: Between Two or More Worlds: The Spiritual Role of the Forensic Scientist	Smiljana Djordjević Belić: It is Agonizing for Him to Come Through: A Ritual Practice of Communication with the Dead in Central Serbia
9:30 -10:00	Uršula Lipovec Čebron, Gregor Haring: Forensic Anthropological Perspective on Migrants' Deaths in Slovenia	Tünde Komáromi: Fatal and Curable Possession by the Dead
10:00 -10:30	Martin Pehal, Helena Dyndová: Communicating with the Dead Through Space: Ritual Reclamation After the 2023 Prague Faculty of Arts Mass Shooting	Aggeliki Lyginou: Communicating with the Dead in the Digital Age: Cretan Moirologia, Mourning, and Social Media
10:30 -11:00	<i>COFFEE BREAK</i>	
	Lecture Room 34 THE DEAD AS MORAL AGENTS Chair: Ülo Valk	
11:00 -11:30	Tatiana Bužeková: Moral Emotions in Communication with the Dead in the Context of Alternative Spirituality	
11:30 -12:00	Mirjam Mencej: The Dead as Active Agents in Moral Relationships with the Living	
12:00-12:30	Anastasia Floraki: Voices from the Otherworld: Communication with the Dead in the Greek Folk Tales and Traditions	
12:30	CLOSING REMARKS	
14:00	ORGANISED LUNCH	

SATURDAY, JULY 4

10:00	Guided Tour of Žale Cemetery
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ABSTRACTS

Anstett, Elisabeth

Silent Stocks. When Human Remains' Agency Is Suspended

In various contemporary contexts marked by episodes of mass death, the unique situation in which certain human remains find themselves, immediately invites reflection. Indeed, although identified as belonging to victims of mass violence or genocide, and although having been the subject of expert assessments and in certain cases having been individually identified, these human remains persist to be silently stored over time - sometimes for several decades - quietly awaiting potential funeral or heritage treatment. These situations which place human remains in reserve, or aside, have so far received very little attention and have not yet given rise to any large-scale comparative study. However, these situations raise essential issues for the social anthropologists, as they signal the capacity of human remains' agency to be suspended or put on hold. These storages indeed invite us to question the liminal state in which human remains can be sustainably maintained, the stakes (political, religious, moral) of the creation of these storages and the reasons underlying their length. Thus, in what material conditions are the remains preserved, and do these conditions influence their subsequent treatment? What are the different reasons for the creation of these reserves? What status is given to these remains during this liminal phase? Drawing on several ethnographic surveys conducted in Europe, Latin America and beyond, as part of two research programs devoted to human remains in contexts of mass violence, this presentation aims at offering a reflection on the necropolitics of human remains management.

Babič, Saša

Inscriptions on Tombstones as a Final Letter to the Deceased

Tombstones in civil cemeteries constitute a means of communication that conveys to visitors who is interred, as well as the individual's dates of birth and death. At the same time, they may also function as a medium through which the living address messages to the dead. Such epitaphs or tombstone inscriptions have likely existed since the emergence of organised writing systems engraved on durable surfaces. These messages typically consist of selected verses that articulate sentiments associated with public mourning. A portion of these expressions is directed specifically to the deceased: carved permanently in stone, they may be understood as a kind of "final letter" to the departed.

Although epitaphs can be analysed through various categories - such as script, language, lifespan, or gender - this article focuses on inscriptions intended as communication with the dead, expressing reverence, grief, and longing. Using the example of Žale, the central cemetery of Ljubljana, we analyse epitaphs addressed to the deceased, examine their communicative functions, and compare the older and newer sections of the cemetery in terms of the frequency and stylistic features of such epitaphs.

Bergholm, Alexandra and Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen
The Angelic Afterlives of the Dead: Tracing the Early History of an Idea

The popular notion that the dead become angels, though absent from Christian doctrine, has exerted profound influence in contemporary vernacular religion on how the living conceptualise and interact with the deceased (e.g. Walter 2016). By framing the dead as active angelic intermediaries, this cultural construct grants them ongoing agency: they are imagined as protectors, messengers, and moral exemplars, shaping grief rituals and ethical behavior among the living.

Drawing primarily on historical and textual analysis, this paper traces the trajectory of this belief within Western Christian tradition, examining its muddled origins in early theological thought and its subsequent gradual reinforcement through visual culture and vernacular religion. It will be argued that while in contemporary religiosity the angelisation of the dead underscores the social and emotional need for interaction and relational continuity that enables the living to negotiate bonds across the boundary of death (cf. Klass et al. 1996), in earlier theological discourse the notion of the angelic postmortem transformation of the dead also had broader ontological and eschatological significance than has often been recognised. Accordingly, the paper illustrates some aspects of the dynamics of religious imagination, whereby theological deliberations become reconfigured to meet complex existential needs, often by fulfilling functions beyond the doctrinal and the intellectual.

Bužeková, Tatiana
Moral Emotions in Communication with the Dead in the Context of Alternative Spirituality*

Empirical research across various disciplines has demonstrated that people's experiences in communication with the dead are deeply connected to emotions. In this paper, I argue that in the context of alternative spirituality such emotional experiences maintain moral bonds with the deceased and at the same time support personal spiritual development. I will present results of ethnographic research in spiritual milieu which has been carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. Analysis of people's narratives about communication with the dead revealed several themes connected to moral emotions: spiritual growth as a result of this communication; moral learning and advice received from the dead; and reciprocal obligations between the living and the dead. In this, such emotions as reverence, gratitude, empathy, anger, shame, or guilt, which are tied to cultural values and social norms, play a crucial role. I interpret the results in accordance with a cognitive theory assuming that moral emotions motivate prosocial behaviour and facilitate compliance with moral rules. The main idea of my paper is that moral emotions in communication with the dead in the context of spiritual milieu not only illustrate the moral unity of the living and the dead but also transform grief into opportunity for spiritual development which is perceived as a moral imperative.

*Funded by the European Union (ERC project DEAGENCY, № 101095729) and by the project APVV22-0063 "Reproductions of Religious and Worldview Structures in Slovakia: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Changes"

Carrassi, Vito

Processions of the Dead and Their Interaction with the Living

While the returning dead commonly appear as individuals to the living, they can also reveal themselves as a collective entity, as will be explained in the present paper. According to a widespread folk belief in southern Italy, in certain days or periods of the year (notably in the night between 1 and 2 November) the dead come back to the earth in order to rejoin their own places and/or to carry out some tasks. Generally they form a procession travelling along the town which is forbidden to the living, just like the Masses celebrated by the dead themselves. As a result, the living can reconnect with their own dead not directly but through mediation of food and drink, which are prepared to be consumed by the dead during the night, while the living are supposed to sleep. In case the dead can also return such a generosity with gifts for the children. On the contrary, the living who dare or happen to run into the dead in procession are expected to suffer bad consequences.

Drawing from a variety of ethnographic and literary sources, traditional beliefs and narratives coming from the southern Italy will be presented and examined, in order to provide an overview of a peculiar type of interaction between life and death, essentially based on a respectful form of distance and kindness toward the afterlife.

Chhabra, Ritika

When the Dead Speak: Bollywood Horror and the Reimagining of Folkloric Ghosts

Across cultures, folklore has provided a vocabulary for imagining the dead and their presence amongst the living. In South Asian folklore, a vast repertoire of ghostly figures embodies the unresolved ties between the living and the departed. They demand ritual offerings, voice their grievances, or even return to enforce moral obligations. In traditional oral narratives, they are often portrayed as dangerous traditions of spectral communication. However, in contemporary Hindi cinema, such figures are increasingly represented in ways that unsettle the assumption of ghosts as purely malevolent. Instead, they are reimagined as protectors, avengers or interlocutors, mediating conversation and demanding recognition.

This paper explores how contemporary Hindi horror cinema often dramatises and rearticulates traditional folkloric ghosts in sympathetic ways. Ritual practices such as ancestral offerings, exorcisms, or invocations of deities continue to be central to their representations, however the spirits themselves are no longer mere threats to be banished. Instead, they communicate forgotten histories, expose social injustices and even forge unlikely intimacies with the living. While Euro-American horror cinema has often been analysed as a reflection of social anxieties, Hindi horror cinema, whilst presenting such anxieties, also draws explicitly on ritual, religious and oral traditions. The spirits in these films also resonate with anthropological theories of ritual and liminality, as cinema transforms traditional practices of contact into a mediated spectacle of dialogue and recognition.

By focusing on recent Bollywood horror, then, this paper argues that in folklore studies, cinema acts as a cultural intermediary as it preserves folkloric motifs while reimagining ghosts as agents who challenge patriarchal, social, and ritual norms. These figures haunt, but they also speak, demand, and sometimes protect. In this reframing, Hindi horror demonstrates a reimagination of the dead as interlocutors in contemporary society, contributing to debates on death, haunting, and the spectral.

Curtis, Kelly

Encounters with the Dead: How Exposure to Mortality Predicts Paranormal Experiences, Practice, and Belief

Contemporary Western societies often position death as a boundary that ends social interaction, yet many individuals continue to report meaningful contact with the dead through anomalous experiences. This paper examines how different forms of exposure to mortality shape these experiences and the belief systems that interpret them. Drawing on a three-phase mixed-methods study, the research compares patterns across three populations: individuals who have accompanied loved ones through dying or death, professionals who work in death-exposure settings, and people who have confronted their own mortality.

Quantitative analyses using the Exposure to Death and Dying Scale (ED&DS) reveal that specific exposure types predict distinct forms of anomalous experience, communication practices, and belief systems. Exposure to a loved one's mortality was most strongly associated with perceived communication with familiar dead and meaning-making processes that sustain continuing bonds. Exposure to one's own impending death or near-death events predicted heightened spiritual awareness and greater confidence in afterlife continuity.

A notable pattern emerged among professionals: despite frequently reporting anomalous perceptions on the job, many did not endorse corresponding paranormal beliefs. This divergence suggests that professional experiences may be integrated pragmatically, symbolically, or through occupational culture rather than through explicit metaphysical frameworks, as repeated exposure tends to make the paranormal "normal." Qualitative interviews enriched this finding, showing how death-workers navigate ambiguity and create interpretive spaces where the dead exert subtle but acknowledged agency.

Together, these results show that communication with the dead in contemporary Western contexts is neither rare nor peripheral but follows clear patterns in which the type of relationship to the dead predicts the form and function of anomalous experiences. These relationally patterned responses demonstrate that after-death communication, its interpretation, and its impact emerge directly from the specific ways people encounter death, reaffirming the active role of the dead across these different worlds.

Djordjević Belić, Smiljana

It is Agonizing for Him to Come Through: A Ritual Practice of Communication with the Dead in Central Serbia

The presentation will describe, based on ethnographic material and data collected through field research, a specific form of communication with the dead in central Serbia. It involves a ritual in which a vessel filled with wine acts as the main object, serving as a mediator between the world of the living and the dead. Within the wine, one can see the realm of the deceased, particularly the person being called upon for contact. The elements of the ritual vary on a micro-local level, especially concerning temporal codes, yet stable components can be identified through the ritual actions and the associated system of taboos.

In the second part of the presentation, attention will focus on a detailed analysis of the discourse from field informants regarding this practice. In their descriptions of personal experiences (memorates and pseudofabulates), particular emphasis will be placed on representations of emotional states and their impact on the living. From the reverse

perspective, the analysis will explore the perceived emotional states attributed to the deceased – those inhabiting the other world – and the potential consequences of communication initiated by the living for the dead.

Emami Shoushtari, Narges and Maryam Rafatjah
The Most Recent Methods of Martyrs' Veneration in Daily Life

Martyrdom, rooted in Islamic law, refers to individuals who consciously sacrifice their lives for a higher cause. After the Islamic Revolution, religious values gained new prominence in shaping public discourse, and terms such as *shahid* (martyr) acquired evolving manifestations. As part of this ideological shift, war casualties received heightened reverence, expressed through both spiritual status and visible political and symbolic representations. Memorials and mausoleums constructed in the past two decades – some resembling *imamzadeh* shrines – strengthened the behavioral overlaps in devotional practices, including Arabic-language supplications *tawassul*.

This study investigates how residents of Tehran's Iran Street understand the souls of martyrs, intercession, and supplication, and how these beliefs shape everyday life. Drawing on Peter Berger's phenomenology of the supernatural in ordinary experience and Danièle Hervieu-Léger's concept of religious memory, the analysis explores continuity and change in contemporary Shia practice. Using a qualitative phenomenological method, the research includes 24 participants from religious families with and without martyrs; all of them maintain ongoing relationships with the dead. In Iran, grief is not about letting go– it is about staying connected.

Findings fall into four themes: (1) definitions of martyrdom ranged from sincerity and devotion to religious duty or social virtue; (2) the status of martyrs was strongly tied to the circumstances of their death; (3) preserving their sanctity depended on media portrayal; and (4) intercession practices were widely accepted, with martyrs addressed for everyday needs while spiritual requests were reserved for the Twelve Divine Guides(Imams). The study also identifies the emerging “heavenly boyfriend” phenomenon– women forming intimate emotional bonds with the spirits of martyrs – which reflects a broader cultural pattern in which the dead remain active, comforting presences. Overall, the findings show how martyr veneration intertwines with religion, reshaping the relationship between grief, devotion, and daily life in Iran.

Fisher, Emily and Ellen Donovan
Unexcavated and Unidentified Dead: Mass Graves and the Second Disappearance

Across the world, thousands of known mass graves remain unexcavated, leaving the dead in a prolonged state of social uncertainty. Drawing on cases from Syria and Sri Lanka, this paper examines how obstructed exhumation and delayed identification shape the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead in the context of enforced disappearance. While scholarship thus far has extensively analysed secondary graves; the deliberate relocation of bodies to conceal crimes, less attention has been paid to what happens when mass graves are discovered but remain mishandled or unresolved. We argue that this produces a form of second disappearance, experienced not as a juridical category, but as an interruption/suspension of the normative trajectory of the living-dead relationship: a forced, perpetual pause in which the dead cannot be mourned, named, communicated with, or cared for.

Through mass grave mapping, and horizon-scanning conducted within MaGPiE, we explore how unexcavated mass graves generate landscapes of terror and unresolved connection. In Syria, ambiguity and uncertainty are deliberately cultivated around the status of the dead. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, potential identification is endlessly deferred, leaving families in a state of anticipation. These examples reveal the mechanisms through which the social role of the dead is transformed as they remain socially active, sometimes visibly present, yet inaccessible to the living. As the designations placed upon the dead shift throughout these cycles of waiting, neglect, and ambiguous loss, Syria and Sri Lanka demonstrate how the agency of the dead becomes weaponised against the living in ways that, we conclude, operate as a distinct experience of harm. Consequently, by highlighting the multitude of enmeshed relations and expectations that surround relationships between the living and the dead, this paper seeks to emphasise the role of the second disappearance in the perpetuation, and ultimately reproduction, of both overt and structural violence.

Floraki, Anastasia

Voices from the Otherworld: Communication with the Dead in the Greek Folk Tales and Traditions

In Greek folk narrative tradition, the dead are not silent. Across a wide range of folk tales and oral traditions, deceased relatives, friends, and supernatural beings from the Otherworld continue to intervene in the lives of the living, offering guidance, warnings, and assistance. This paper investigates the narrative motifs and cultural meanings of communication with the dead in Greek folk tales, drawing on both archival material and published collections. These encounters may occur through direct apparitions, dreams, omens, or symbolic intermediaries, and often serve as pivotal moments in the plot.

The analysis focuses on stories in which the dead act as moral agents, rewarding the virtuous, punishing the unjust, or helping the hero overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. Special attention is given to international tale types such as ATU 505 The Grateful Dead and ATU 470 The Journey to the Otherworld, as they appear in Greek tradition, alongside indigenous narrative patterns with no direct international equivalents. By situating these narratives within a comparative framework (including parallels from Balkan and Mediterranean traditions) the study explores how such stories articulate local cosmologies, moral codes, and conceptions of the afterlife.

Beyond their folkloric significance, these narratives reveal the persistence of a worldview in which the boundary between the living and the dead is permeable. The dead continue to participate in the moral and social life of the community, shaping memory, identity, and interpersonal relations. This paper argues that the agency of the dead in Greek folk narratives is not a vestige of pre-modern belief, but a dynamic cultural resource that endures in oral tradition, bridging past and present in ways that remain meaningful to contemporary audiences.

Hamer, Petra

Private Similarities, Public Differences? Rethinking Communication with the Dead among Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina*

This paper examines practices of communication with the dead among Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on ethnographic fieldwork. Although both Islam and Orthodox Christianity formally discourage direct

interaction with the dead, relationships with them continue to be actively maintained through a variety of practices. I argue that communication with the dead is structured by a distinction between private and public contexts, yet the differences between Muslim and Orthodox Christian practices are less pronounced than is often assumed.

In private settings, communication takes place through intimate and largely non-institutionalised practices. Interlocutors keep photographs and personal belongings of the deceased, address them silently or aloud in moments of solitude, pray for them, and encounter them in dreams. These practices are remarkably similar across religious communities, revealing shared emotional and moral frameworks through which relationships with the dead are sustained.

In public contexts, communication with the dead is enacted most visibly through commemorative practices at cemeteries and memorial sites. People visit graves, clean tombstones, pray, light candles, bring flowers, speak to the deceased, and participate in collective commemorations. Such acts constitute embodied forms of communication that reaffirm continuing bonds with the dead while simultaneously reproducing collective memories and social belonging. While these practices are articulated through different religious vocabularies and symbols, their underlying logic and performative structure are strikingly similar. At the same time, public commemorations are shaped by religious institutions and political actors who frame the dead through distinct narratives of victimhood, suffering, historical responsibility, and the remembrance or denial of past violence. These top-down narratives often accentuate communal differences, even where everyday practices of remembrance reveal significant similarities.

By examining communication with the dead across both private and public settings, the paper questions assumptions about clear-cut religious differences and highlights the shared social processes through which the dead continue to shape the lives of the living.

*Funded by the European Union (ERC project DEAGENCY, № 101095729)

Hanisek, Joel

The Dead Are with Us Still: Addressing Questions of Agency, Authority, and Public Communication Through Art and the Built Environment

This paper addresses a particular concern with the dead in contemporary society – namely the agentic power of dead people in historical context to animate contemporary thought and action. James Joyce’s short story, “The Dead,” concludes with a poetic meditation on an elemental bridge between life and death; he writes of, “snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling ... upon all the living and the dead.” Yet that same elemental bridge does not have a ready equivalent in terms of social and communicative interaction. However, this paper posits figurative public art as one way in which commemoration of historical figures, particularly through socially oriented statuary projects, provides model of continuing agentic power for purposes of public education, civic formation, and personal devotion.

This paper considers Edward’s Delaney’s 1967 sculpture of Wolfe Tone in Dublin’s Stephen’s Green in comparison with John Coll’s 1991 statue of Patrick Kavanaugh on Dublin’s Grand Canal. It will also analyse the current campaign of the Maude Gonne Society to honour Maude Gonne with a public statue in Dublin.

By examining the history, placement, and politics of these pieces of art, this paper will contribute to discussions of how collective practices of commemoration relate to practices of communication with the dead. The paper will also consider the politics of post-mortem representation in relation to legacies of continuing agency and influence. In particular, this

paper will consider how the context of Ireland helps to shape understanding of continuing communication with the dead in terms of politics, poetry, and social movements.

Hesz, Ágnes

“A Dark Legacy from the Past Standing in the Way of Progress”: State Propaganda and a Seer of the Dead in Socialist Hungary*

Ideas about the afterlife and the relationship between the living and the dead have always been subject to authoritative knowledge production and control. This was no different in state socialist Hungary, where, in its fight against religion, the regime deployed various means to reshape people’s ideas about the afterlife and their connections to the dead. A documentary film released in 1977, “The Seer of the Dead”, by an ethnographic filmmaker also trained as a folklorist, was part of this endeavour. Aimed to undermine the credibility of the seer, the film implicated her as a fraud. It sparked public debates and was followed by an intense and carefully curated media campaign with countless newspaper articles, opinion pieces and film reviews. Published mostly in regional newspapers but also in art journals and church magazines, these articles spoke harshly against superstition and gullibility and contrasted beliefs in the afterlife with modernity and the achievements of socialism.

Through the analysis of the film and its contemporary media coverage, as well as consulting party decrees and archival material about the seer, this paper focuses on the various tools the regime deployed to repress ideas and practices incompatible with socialist ideology and life. It also reveals that despite the widely disseminated centralised message, the unfolding discourse around the seer and about communication with the dead was surprisingly multivocal, and that in the long run, the campaign failed to tarnish the seer’s reputation and hasn’t substantially changed the ways people connected with their dead.

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Hill, Denielle

“We Remember Us”: Grief, Erasure, and the Trans Dead

This paper argues that trans memorial practices make visible the agency of the dead, who are not just symbols of social movements but active presences that shape ethnographic encounters, political claims, and public memory under conditions of social erasure. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, archival research, and digital investigation, I examine how narratives of suicide, overdose, misrepresentation, and media silence circulate through trans memorial sites as refusals of dominant frameworks that render trans death unintelligible.

Centering the story of Nilo, a trans, non-binary person, I trace how their presence actively shaped the direction and ethical stakes of my ethnographic work. Nilo’s story emerged not as a bounded case, but as a recurring interlocutor across interviews, archival materials, and institutional records. This reconstruction draws on interviews I conducted, materials I received from dissertation research, and my engagement with the British Columbia Coroners Service. Rather than seeking narrative coherence or closure, I attend to gaps, contradictions, and silences as moments through which the dead act upon the living, redirecting attention and demanding particular forms of care and accountability.

The paper also draws from two weeks of archival fieldwork at the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, examining zines, newsletters, and ephemera documenting

trans organizing and remembrance. These materials reveal continuities between historical and contemporary commemorative practices, and local reporting on trans deaths in Vancouver's Downtown East-side further illustrates how public memory is unevenly distributed and institutionally constrained.

Bringing together queer theory, memory work, and critical death studies, I argue that trans memorial practices mobilize the dead as ethical and political interlocutors, presences that structure ethnographic knowledge production, link past and present violence, and generate infrastructure that sustains the living.

Hussain, Salman

Living with the Dead: Hauntology, Ontology and the "Politics of Death"

In Social-Cultural Anthropology, claims about the presence of other-worldly beings are often interpreted as representing something beyond their denotative meanings. It is not what these beings are, but rather what they represent; that is typically privileged. In other words, statements about the dead are considered to signify more than just the dead: for example, the melancholia (Freud 1917) of mourners that disrupts notions of state sovereignty (Khoja-Molji 2021), sacrifice (Rashid 2020), or the unequal valuation of lives and deaths (Hussain 2024); or the dead bodies that represent aspects of the past and reorient the present, particularly in a post-socialist context (Verdery 1999).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork (2019 – ongoing) with parents of children killed in a terrorist attack in Pakistan (December 2014), this paper interrogates dominant interpretations of death, grief, and the afterlife. Engaging with the literature on Hauntology (Gordon, 2008) and Ontology (Viveiros de Castro, 2014) – two key paradigms addressing the afterlives of the dead– the paper explores the lived politics of death and grief. By reflecting on the experiences of these parents, particularly their encounters with their deceased children, the paper proposes a re-examination of the politics of death from an ontological perspective. It redefines the concept of agency, positioning it within a shared ontological space where both the living and the dead coexist. In this space, it is the living– the parents– who claim to be guided toward certain legal and ethical actions by the agency of their deceased children.

This paper ethnographically examines the lived experiences of death and grief in Pakistan and proposes a rethinking of the relationship between the dead and the living–conceiving both as existing within a shared ontological space or reality. In this space, it is the dead who influence the living through their agency.

Jaziri Arjona, Nadya

Between Two or More Worlds: The Spiritual Role of the Forensic Scientist

Although the role of the forensic scientist may seem practical and secular, not guided by religion or spirituality, the solemn respect for the deceased that is expected by families and communities places them in a kind of intermediary role. They inevitably link the world of the dead with that of the living. They can interpret the deceased and convey their findings to the families and authorities and therefore influence important decisions such as legal procedures or burials, not only through their analysis of the dead body, but also through their own embodied knowledge.

Arguably, forensic science is usually not associated with metaphysics (spirits and ghosts). However, the need for collaboration between indigenous spiritual practitioners and forensics has become pronounced and a reality faced by humanitarian forensics when

searching for human remains of missing persons or even before performing an exhumation. The term “spectral forensics” (Robins & Kent, 2024) describes the need for greater recognition of the possible constellations between families and/or spirit mediums who experience spirit possessions, dream apparitions and other embodied experiences, and the authorities and forensic experts involved in searching for missing persons.

Furthermore, in regard to migrant transnational deaths and more specifically migrant deaths at borders, the forensics scientist has to communicate what they interpret from the body of the deceased and, if the family is found, they may have to communicate in another language, with other cultural codes and other religious attitudes about how to touch a corpse or even how to perform an autopsy. This means that forensic work may seem universal, but its application is in constant dialogue with contextual beliefs and values. This paper delves into the exchange between the coroner, the deceased, and the families. And how migrant deaths impact and transform forensic work, as well as burial rituals.

Jurich, Joscelyn

“Nije živ i nije mrtav” (“Not Alive and Not Dead”): The Srebrenica Commemoration and Potočari Memorial Center Archives as Temporal Mediation

“Nije živ i nije mrtav” (“Not Alive and Not Dead”) is how one interlocutor and Srebrenica resident described his town to me, as a place that is neither alive nor dead. Site of the 1995 genocide of approximately 8,000 Bosniak boys and men, Europe’s worst massacre since the Second World War, the town’s population is at present approximately 2,600 with many of the residents living there only part-time. The 1990s war transformed these “ordinary” spaces – such as the Kravica warehouse, the “Dom Kulture” (Cultural Center) in Pilića, the Hotel Vilina Vlas in Višegrad, the battery factory in Potočari, part of which is now the Potočari Memorial Center near Srebrenica – into abject, tainted, contaminated and possibly even toxic sites of crime that witnessed rape, torture, massacres and genocide (Volčič and Simić 2016). These spaces exist in the context of what Mariella Pandolfi argues is an emergency state of “permanent transition” in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Pandolfi 2013: 153) and what Jasminka Husanović has incisively analysed as the nefarious managing of affect in Bosnia-Herzegovina through biopolitical strategies often masked as “therapeutic” in the paradigms of “transitional justice” (Husanović 2015: 20). The commemoration and re-burial ceremony that has taken place in and around the Potočari battery factory and Memorial Center every July 11 since 2002 brings international media attention to Bosnia-Herzegovina each year and for a few days during that period the town becomes more “alive” than “dead” as Bosnians and people from around the world come to attend the commemoration. Based on my past field research in Srebrenica, and drawing upon new research in the visual and oral history archives of the Memorial Center, this paper will draw upon ethnographic and visual ethnographic material to examine the Potočari Memorial Center and the annual commemoration to analyze how the commemoration and Memorial forge a liminal mediation between life and death and between “transitional justice” and violence. It will argue that the Memorial Center and commemoration are especially important and generative for thinking through the limitations of the trace’s linguistic and visual representation (Derrida 1967), especially in this context of a broader local geography of what anthropologist Roma Sendyka (Sendyka 2013) calls “non-sites of memory,” sometimes unmarked and uncommemorated sites of violence, silence filled sites that may be in the process of ruination yet sites that are temporally, affectively and potentially ethically persistent (Didi-Huberman 1998: 230; Sendyka 2015: 16).

Käosaar, Leena and Ülo Valk

Liminal Presence of the Dead and Vernacular Life Writing of the Gulag: The “As-If” Approach Revisited

Narratives of supernatural encounters have often been treated as entertaining fictions or as expressions of symbolic and metaphorical thinking. As these events do not match the modernist mindset, some scholars purposefully exclude the possibility of the ontological reality of the otherworld in order to safeguard academic credibility. This “as-if” approach – critically examined by others – risks reducing lived experiences to cultural allegories, overlooking both the possibility that the otherworldly is real and that communities genuinely maintain connection with their dead members. However, looking for evidence in personal experience narratives about the other world tends to flatten stories and memories into simplistic claims about the factual existence of the afterlife, neglecting the poetic and symbolic dimensions of narratives.

Drawing on vernacular forms of life writing – diaries, personal correspondences and oral and written testimony that mediate the lived experiences and memories of victims of Communist terror in the Gulag, this paper proposes a counter-argument grounded in epistemic uncertainty. Definite statements about the reality of afterlife in vernacular discourses are rare. Instead, the dead hover in a liminal zone between existence and non-existence, where the boundary between commemoration and communication remains open. This vernacular “as-if” discourse does not dismiss the dead but evokes them, sustaining their agency through ambiguity.

In secular, rational, and oppressive contexts, commemoration becomes a negotiation of presence and absence, where modes of belief, doubt, and lived experience remain unsettled. The paper explores how remembrance enacted through ritual, memory, and storytelling can take on dimensions that kindle the presence of the dead and allow them to remain active agents in the lives of the living.

Kapron, Benjamin Joseph

“Remember These Were Once Living Persons”: Natural History Museums and Coercive Communication with the Non-Human Dead

Many museums presume some level of communication with the dead is possible – the remains of dead humans are preserved and displayed so that the living might learn something from them. The human remains now housed in museums were often taken from Indigenous and other marginalized communities through colonialism and imperialism. Thus, in recent years, members of these communities have been increasingly vocal about the need to repatriate such remains. Underlying repatriation efforts are ontological questions regarding the nature of the dead and how they ought to be treated – museums see no harm in preserving and displaying human remains, even seeing this as a positive contribution to society, while Indigenous and other marginalized communities often assert that injustices are perpetrated against the dead when they have been denied cultural funerary and/or burial rites. In this way, the communication with the dead happening at museums might be viewed as coercive, where the dead have been unjustly taken from their communities and are now forced to “speak.”

Beyond human remains, natural history museums – in particular – collect and display vast amounts of non-human animal remains. At a time when human activities are causing the mass death of other animals, it is important to attend to dead and dying non-human animals. However, the preservation and display of non-human animal remains is still

assumed to be harmless and a good thing, largely without question – the repatriation of non-human animal remains is not a serious consideration – even when many Indigenous and other non-Western communities, and post-humanist scholars inspired by such communities, understand non-human animals to be persons, kin, and nations with their own agency, animacy, and spirit. Examining the remains of a rhinoceros, a Komodo dragon, a blue whale, and a coyote – all housed at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada – in this paper, I interrogate injustices that occur when non-human animal remains are removed from their communities to be displayed in museums and what justice might look like for these dead non-human animals coercively forced to “speak.”

Kassaveti, Ursula-Helen

Fallback Epistemologies: Mediumship, Urban Anxiety, and the Agency of the Dead in Popular Greek Cinema

Unlike many Western cinematic traditions in which communication with the dead functions as a normalized narrative trope, representations of mediumship in Greek cinema are comparatively rare, ambivalent, and historically specific. This presentation argues that such figures are best understood as fallback epistemologies, i.e., alternative modes of knowledge to which individuals turn when dominant modern frameworks fail to provide meaning, prediction, or emotional resolution. The analysis situates Greek cinematic mediumship within the intellectual dominance of Greek folklore studies throughout the twentieth century, which framed beliefs related to divination and spirit communication as remnants of a pre-modern past, even as such practices continued to operate within everyday life, remaining culturally present but epistemologically marginalized. From the interwar period, marked by the activities of the Greek Society for Psychical Research founded by Angelos Tanagras, to the rapid urbanization of the 1960s and the proliferation of popular magazines featuring mediums and psychic phenomena, such practices re-emerged in mass culture as responses to the anxieties of accelerated urban life.

Popular Greek cinema of the 1960s to 1970s from reflects this tension by portraying mediums as liminal figures who offer access to hidden knowledge, future insight, or emotional closure. Although communication with the dead is not always explicit, mediums function as infrastructures of mediation through which the dead may acquire agency, understood as the capacity to produce effects in the lives of the living. Decisions, emotions, and moral orientations are shaped through indirect, displaced forms of posthumous influence. By situating mediumship as a fallback epistemology rather than a survival or superstition, the presentation contributes to contemporary debates on posthumous agency, demonstrating how cinema articulates culturally negotiated modes of agency beyond the living subject.

Keršmanc, Robin Tigran

Consulting the Dead: Practices of Cooperation Between the Living and the Deceased*

The article examines practices of cooperation between the living and the dead based on ethnographic fieldwork among adherents of alternative spiritualities in Slovenia. It illustrates how the dead cooperate with the living across domains, from domestic tasks and everyday decision-making to professional practices, knowledge transfer, and the realization of life visions. Interlocutors consult deceased family members or unknown dead pragmatically, selectively, and situationally, relying on the knowledge and broader

perspective provided by the deceased. Task-specific cooperation involves discussion, negotiation, adaptation, and affective engagement, with trust, care, and mutual satisfaction forming its relational and reciprocal dimension. Drawing on the concept of distributed agency, the article frames these interactions as a form of cooperation, highlighting the active role of the dead in shaping everyday practices and, through decision-making, impacting individuals' lives.

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Komáromi, Tünde

Fatal and Curable Possession by the Dead

In a mixed village in central Transylvania, Calvinist Hungarians tell stories about the dead returning as a beam of light to torment a former lover or spouse. The tormented partner is eventually taken by the deceased. In the same village, Orthodox Romanians recount how they (or their children) were frequently disturbed at night by recently deceased family members. In both cases, people become possessed by the dead, but the outcomes are very different. My presentation aims to reveal how these outcomes depend on the differences in religious culture and beliefs surrounding death.

Koski, Kaarina

The Roles of Angels in Communication Beyond Death

Experiences about the deceased loved ones visiting the living as angels are sometimes reported as a form of communication with the dead. Such narratives are also frequently criticised. In Finnish vernacular religiosity, angels do hover around death and the dead in diverse roles. For example, the dying may be escorted by angels to heaven and be accompanied by angels there. But it is much disputed whether the dead can appear as angels themselves. Lutheran Christianity does not approve of humans becoming angels in death. However, communication with or about the dead could be mediated by angels. Experiences about angels bringing news about the well-being of the deceased would be better accepted, and they do occur. The Finnish argumentation about the angelic dead clearly differs from the interpretations of Tony Walter (2016) about the British cases, in which people would portray the dead as angels in order to theologically justify their interaction with the living. Historically, the idea about the dead becoming angels has been assumed to reflect a vernacularisation of Emanuel Swedenborg's writings about heaven. While this may be true, contemporary experiences already lack the connection to Swedenborg and rather base on popular imagery and vernacular discourses. In my paper, I will look at personal experience narratives about the communication with the angelic dead in various Finnish sources in the 21st century. In addition, I will trace the continuity of these ideas in experience narratives and public discourses in the 20th century.

Kuntarič Zupanc, Simona

Presence of the Dead in Domestic Deathscapes in Rural Northeastern Slovenia*

In contemporary Western societies, the home is typically regarded as a domain of the living – a space of intimacy, family relations, and daily routine. Based on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in 24 villages in rural Northeastern Slovenia, including participant observation and over 150 interviews, this article challenges that assumption by demonstrating how the dead continue to inhabit domestic environments. It shows how

the dead are incorporated into home life through everyday objects, photographs, plants, rooms, sensory perceptions, and daily routines. Drawing on the concept of deathscapes (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010) and Maddrell's (2016) spatialities of bereavement, I approach grief not as an individual psychological stage but as a spatial and relational process. I argue that the home functions as a domestic deathscape – a space where the dead are encountered through everyday routine gestures, material arrangements, and sensory experiences that embed them in the ongoing life of the household.

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Lee, YeSeung

Ami-dong Gravestone Village: Haunted Landscapes and the Material Agency of the Dead

Ami-dong Gravestone Village in Busan, South Korea, embodies a unique entanglement of the living and the dead, where displaced refugees during the Korean War repurposed abandoned Japanese settler graves into the foundations of their makeshift homes. Through Peripatetic exploration, archival research, and multimedia documentation, this paper explores how the dead continue to shape thoughts, emotions, values of the living through the material surfaces of the village. In the village, gravestones and other funerary monuments are embedded into stairs, walls, and other architectural surfaces. These haunted surfaces, often pasted over with cement, concrete, and paint, are palimpsests of trauma, transmitting memories of colonialism, war, and survival across generations. Rather than erasing the past, the patched and covered surfaces intensify its visibility, creating what Roland Barthes calls a “perverse palimpsest”, where erasure becomes revelation. Interactions between the living and the dead in Ami-dong extend beyond material appropriation, with ghost stories, dreams, and animistic practices revealing how villagers negotiated fear, guilt, and reconciliation with the dead. Ghostly apparitions, spectral lights, shamanistic rituals, and funerary urns integrated into children play illustrate how death became constitutive of place, embedding complex emotionalities into the landscape. By situating the case of the village within broader debates on memorialisation, heritage, and postcolonial identity, the paper argues that the village exemplifies how places and objects mediate ongoing interactions between the living and the dead, actively shaping collective memory and national consciousness. The perverse palimpsest of Ami-dong reveals how haunting can be both wound and healing, with material traces sustaining dialogue with the dead while imagining futures beyond erasure.

Lipovec Čebon, Uršula and Gregor Haring

Forensic Anthropological Perspective on Migrants' Deaths in Slovenia

Border deaths have become an intrinsic part of the European migratory landscape, particularly in the Mediterranean and along the so-called Balkan route. Many of the deceased migrants are buried as anonymous individuals, since their identification has become a significant challenge within forensic anthropology (Palamenghi and Cattaneo 2024). Consequently, forensic anthropological practitioners and researchers across Europe are increasingly tasked with the recovery and analysis of unidentified human remains associated with migrant deaths.

In this paper, we analyse aspects of migrants' deaths that have occurred in Slovenia over the past decade. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted since 2020 (Lipovec Čebon and Škerl Kramberger 2025; Hameršak and Lipovec Čebon 2025) and forensic

anthropological studies carried out over the past decade, we demonstrate the multifaceted factors that impede identification of these individuals. A primary obstacle is the high incidence of drowning in Slovenian rivers, which leads to rapid decomposition and skeletonization. This poses a significant forensic anthropological challenge in establishing a biological profile, particularly when dealing with inadequately represented populations in studies and when deceased migrants most likely originate from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent.

Furthermore, we compare postmortem procedures in Slovenia with those in other European countries, highlighting systemic barriers such as the lack of comprehensive, integrated databases for antemortem and postmortem data at regional, national, and international levels. Finally, we present a multilateral identification model that we are currently establishing in Slovenia through the interdisciplinary Working Group *Prehod* (Passage), which has already facilitated the identification of deceased migrants.

Lobe, Jana Paulina

Summoning the Dead via Touchscreen? Rethinking Postmortal Agency in Digital Afterlife Practices

What does it mean when the dead can be summoned by opening an app? As digital technologies increasingly mediate encounters with the deceased, boundaries between presence and absence begin to shift. AI-based afterlife services – voice- and text-simulating avatars or algorithmic repositories – allow the dead to reappear as data-driven figures that respond or even initiate contact. These “generative ghosts,” also referred to as *ghostbots*, emerge not from the beyond but from databases and predictive models, yet are often experienced as more than technological output. Users frequently describe a paradox: they cognitively recognize the artificial nature of these systems yet emotionally perceive the generated responses as meaningful or authentically connected to the deceased. This ambivalence is treated as a cultural mode through which postmortal agency becomes experientially real. In this tension between knowing and feeling, AI systems take on communicative roles previously associated with spiritual media or ritual specialists, positioning algorithms as active participants in ongoing relationships with the dead. Drawing on digital ethnography and discourse analysis of popular media and user narratives on platforms such as Here After AI and Replika, this paper examines how postmortem presence is interpreted and traces moments when technology becomes uncanny. An avatar replying in a familiar cadence or a resurfaced photograph on a significant date may be experienced as intentional acts within what I term *computational haunting*: algorithmic processes read as signs from the dead. While such encounters echo supernatural haunting, they constitute a distinct, technologically mediated mode of presence aligned with longstanding cultural logics of ghostliness.

Digital afterlife technologies function as relational infrastructures that sustain continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996), blending familiar expectations of communication with new computational conditions. They invite us to reconsider what it means for the dead to act – and what it means for the living to call them forth.

Lyginou, Aggeliki

Communicating with the Dead in the Digital Age: Cretan Moirologia, Mourning, and Social Media

Cretan *moirologia* have long provided a way of speaking to the dead, not simply about them. Drawing on ethnographic research in Crete, including interviews, life stories, and collected lament material, this paper examines lament as a ritual practice through which women remember, address, praise, mourn for, and maintain bonds with the deceased. In this context, mourning is understood not only as emotional expression but also as a socially recognised form of public speech.

The paper then turns to contemporary forms of mourning on social media. It asks how posts addressed to deceased relatives, anniversary messages, memorial photographs, comments, and shared memories reshape older forms of communication with the dead. Rather than suggesting that digital media replace lament, the paper argues that they rework some of its central functions within a new public and mediated environment.

By bringing Cretan *moirologia* into dialogue with digital mourning, the paper explores what changes when communication with the dead moves into social media. The medium changes, but so do the audience, the visibility of grief, and the temporal rhythm of mourning. What remains central is the need to address the dead and to sustain their presence within social life and memory.

Maurer, Abraham and Martin Lednický

When the Dead Speak in Stone: Tombstones, Agency, and Identity in Muslim and Jewish Cemeteries in Czechia

This presentation examines the agency of the dead through a comparative analysis of Muslim and Jewish tombstones in Czechia, drawing on a comprehensive database of all existing Muslim and Jewish graves in the country created by the presenters and their systematic visual analysis. Situated in a post-communist European context marked by historical rupture, religious marginalization, and discontinuity, the presentation approaches tombstones as material actors through which the deceased continue to shape the social lives of the living.

Building on Actor-Network Theory and scholarship in material religion, the presentation conceptualizes communication with the dead not as belief in metaphysical presence but as a relational process mediated by material forms. Tombstones impersonate the deceased by stabilizing specific versions of personhood through names, genealogical references, languages of inscription, religious symbols, dates, and spatial positioning within cemeteries. The deceased are treated as actors within family and religious networks, acting through tombstones that delimit what families can and cannot say about themselves: which religious affiliations are foregrounded or muted, which histories are rendered continuous, and which ruptures are concealed or emphasized.

Through these materialized presences, the dead actively participate in the production of family identity by defining lines of descent, articulating moral expectations, negotiating minority visibility, homemaking, and anchoring claims to belonging over time. Families engage with these demands by maintaining, modifying, or contesting tombstones, but always in relation to the agency already inscribed in them.

The comparative focus on Muslim and Jewish cemeteries highlights both shared and divergent modes of posthumous agency shaped by distinct religious traditions and minority histories within the same post-socialist environment. Grounded in religious

studies while oriented toward anthropological debates on agency and materiality, the presentation contributes to discussions on how the dead continue to act through material culture and how identities are formed in ongoing interaction with them in contemporary post-communist Europe.

Mencej, Mirjam

The Dead as Active Agents in Moral Relationships with the Living*

Drawing on fieldwork among Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) in rural Central Bosnia from 2016 to 2025, this presentation examines forgiveness between the living and the dead as a central moral and religious value. The analysis addresses forgiveness for both material and immaterial “debts”, ranging from unpaid loans to unresolved interpersonal offences. It argues that, in the Bosnian Muslim context, forgiveness structures not only relationships among the living but also those with the dead. The dead, as will be shown, are active agents who seek forgiveness – when they did not receive it – through various forms of posthumous intervention.

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Pehal, Martin and Helena Dyndová

Communicating with the Dead Through Space: Ritual Reclamation After the 2023 Prague Faculty of Arts Mass Shooting

On 21 December 2023 a mass shooting at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague claimed fourteen lives and left twenty-five injured, confronting one of Europe’s most secular societies with a sudden concentration of violent death at the heart of its capital. Such violence radically undermines the agency of individuals and institutions. This paper examines how that lost agency has been gradually reclaimed through ritualised negotiations over the affected space, and how these negotiations have produced a shared, if fragile, territory of the living and the dead.

Through Actor–Network Theory, the recovery is conceptualised as a relational process linking the dead, the living, and key spatial nodes that co-produce the conditions for a return to academic life without erasing the presence of the tragedy. These nodes include the neighbouring area used for the mourning march, the faculty courtyard with its continuously tended votive fire, the façade and entrance of the building where spontaneous memorials accumulated, “Quiet Place” and “Memory Hall”, where the attack took place, and the memorial stone(s) installed on campus. Attention is paid to the ways in which these sites were first marked by respect, then gradually re-claimed and re-inhabited, allowing everyday academic life to resume.

Within this framework, the paper traces a sequence of public and semi-public rituals – the “Hugging of the Faculty”, the reuse of candle stubs in the collective artwork Shared Landscape, and everyday practices of passing, pausing and touching at memorial sites – as moments of ritual creativity and improvisation in a society that largely rejects shared religious symbols. It argues that these emergent practices make it possible to inhabit a post-traumatic university space where the dead continue to act through places, shaping movement, memory and institutional identity.

Petrovych, Olha

Tracing the Dead in Folk Song: A Comparative Study of Ukrainian and Estonian Oral Traditions

This paper investigates how the dead are represented in folk song narratives and whether, and under what conditions, they are portrayed as communicative agents. As a first step, the study examines death-related vocabulary in Ukrainian and Estonian folk songs and analyses how references to the dead are framed: as direct mentions of deceased persons, metaphorical expressions of death, or situations in which the dead actively interact with the living.

The paper distinguishes between symbolic references to death and explicit post-mortem encounters, asking whether the deceased are addressed, whether they respond, and how their presence affects the actions and emotions of the living. Particular attention is paid to the spatial contexts in which such encounters occur – graves, roads, rivers, specific types of trees, battlefields, and dreams. These locations are understood as liminal spaces (van Gennep 1960) where communication with the dead becomes possible and socially legitimate. Drawing on folkloristic and anthropological research on dialogic song traditions and communication with the otherworld (Valk 2000; Lintrop 2001), the paper examines how the dead are portrayed in folk songs and how such portrayals influence emotions, moral choices, and social obligations. From this perspective, immortality is understood not as abstract eternity but as sustained relational presence through acts of address and response, resonating with thanatological interpretations of death as transformation rather than termination (Feifel 1959; Ariès 1981; Koval-Fuchylo 2006).

Methodologically, the study combines close folkloristic analysis with computational exploration of large text corpora of Ukrainian and Estonian folk songs. Computational methods are used to identify recurring lexical patterns, narrative structures, and contextual clusters related to death, the dead, and communication. This approach supports a systematic comparative analysis while remaining grounded in qualitative, ethnological interpretation (Abello, Broadwell & Tangherlini 2012; Sarv & Oras 2020).

Popescu-Simion, Florența

Having a Chat with the Dead in Dreams: Between Tradition and Contemporary Ways of Coping with Death

Romanian vernacular burial and bereavement rituals are very complex and well documented. Even nowadays, when the pressure of official rules regarding the burial has led to great transformations in its structure, the rites and ceremonies regarding this moment are still rich and spectacular. Nevertheless, in the cities, they are losing ground in favour of – apparently – more simplified ceremonies.

But the more simplified the ritual is, the more salient could be the way people chose to integrate the dead in their lives. If in the past the deceased were somehow confined to cemeteries or other (un)holy places, now they seem to be nowhere and everywhere.

Apart from visiting the cemeteries, many people experience dreams in which their relatives are appearing. The dreamers declare that sometimes the dead appear in order to guide them, other times just to talk to them. The oneiric presence of the dead is generally felt as soothing, but not totally deprived of a darker edge. The proposed paper analyses the relation between dreams and dreamers, and the agency attributed to the dead appearing in dreams, as a way to individually reconstruct the connections between this

world and the otherworld which were lost in the contemporary process of de-ritualising death.

Popović Nikolić, Danijela

We Bought You a New House. There You Sit: Speech and Non-Speech in Oral Vampire Narratives

Forms of communication with the dead also include utterances with a protective function, intended for the deceased who is on the unstable border of the path to the afterlife. They dominantly mark the spaces intended for him, highlight his belonging to them or refer to them. The paper focuses on the speech addressed to the deceased who is potentially dangerous (prevention of return) and to the one who has been confirmed as a demonic being, returning to the living (expulsion to the world of the dead). The types of address (command, request, threat, curse etc.), their function and meaning are determined. Special attention is paid to referring to the absence of speech in the ritual context, as well as other markers of non-verbal expression.

The research is based on selected field records from the folklore archive of the Department of Serbian Language and Literature, Faculty of Philosophy from the University of Niš. The material includes testimonies of ritual manifestations as part of vital practice or memories of it, as well as narratives about vampires within the genre of demonological legends.

The research is traced with methodological approaches concerning the focus on the oral folklore text, with the inclusion of the notion of the context in which such narratives are produced. From the position of affective narratology, the presence and absence of an emotional component in relations to the deceased is considered, whether they are determined by self-comments or comments that function as a description of the state of the actors in the given narratives.

Ramšak, Mojca

The Living Presence of Anonymous Donors: Psychological Connections and Communication with the Dead in Organ Transplantation

Although organ transplantation is governed by strict anonymity protocols that prevent recipients from learning the identity of their donors, many recipients report profound experiences of connection and communication with their unknown, deceased donors. This phenomenon represents a unique form of interaction with the dead in today's society, where the impact of anonymous donors continues to influence the lives, feelings and behaviour of recipients long after the transplant. In contrast to traditional forms of communication with familiar deceased persons, organ recipients come into contact with completely unknown deceased persons by embodying them in their own bodies.

The author examines how organ recipients experience and interpret their relationships with anonymous donors as a form of ongoing communication with the dead. It explores the ways in which these interactions manifest and influence recipients' daily lives, their identity formation and their understanding of life and death.

A systematic literature search of several databases was conducted, focusing on qualitative studies, case reports and ethnographic accounts of organ recipients' experiences of the donor connection.

The analysis reveals distinct patterns of communication and interaction with anonymous donors that differ markedly from traditional relationships with the known dead. Key findings include: 1) Personality changes – organ recipients report personality changes

following transplantation, with recipients attributing these changes to the characteristics of the donor; 2) Embodied communication – physical sensations interpreted as messages or presence of the donor in their body, particularly among heart transplant recipients; 3) Psychological bonds – recipients develop bonding relationships with unknown donors, varying in intensity depending on organ type and transplant success; 4) Depression and anxiety in recipients correlate with the strength of the perceived connection to the donor. In contrast to traditional ancestor veneration or encounters with familiar spirits, these relationships are characterised by gratitude-based commitment, embodied presence and identity restoration rather than fear, grief or supernatural phenomena.

Repič, Jaka

Art, Affect, and the Aestheticization of Mass Graves and Human Remains in Slovenia*

Since the 1990s, hundreds of mass graves dating back to the Second World War have been registered in Slovenia; more than 200 have been investigated, and more than 100 fully or partially exhumed. The gradual uncovering and public acknowledgment of these sites—concealed from public awareness in Slovenia until the 1990s—has profoundly affected not only the lives of individuals connected to the graves or the deceased, but also the politics of memory and Slovenian society more broadly. This presentation examines personal encounters with mass graves alongside artistic practices that engage with and aestheticize mass graves, human remains, and excavated objects. Focusing on selected artworks, it explores how artists move beyond the representation of violence or memory to interpret the sensory and affective dimensions of encounters with mass graves as sites of death, violence, and memory. Drawing on personal narratives and artistic practices, the presentation argues that excavations of hidden mass graves does much more than expose material evidence of violence: it enables resurfacing of silenced memories, prompt revisiting of the past, and compels a reconfiguration of the relationships between the living and the dead.

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Sawden, Kari

Translating for the Dead: Mediumship and the Processes of Communicating with Spirits

In researching divination practices and practitioners in contemporary Canadian societies, a repeated theme that I have encountered has been the variety of methods and tools utilised to obtain and interpret messages. For one individual, tarot is an effective language, for another, astrology, and for many more, a complex blending of multiple forms is brought together into a personalised dialect that facilitates communication. This pattern is found whether the messages are coming from spirit guides, deities, or ghosts.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted with mediums in Canada, this presentation will explore the processes of communication that these individuals undertake with the dead. In particular, I will focus on three key areas: first, how these spirits fit into the worldviews of those who communicate with them. Second, I will examine the means by which the living and the dead communicate, paying particular attention to the strategies mediums employ to determine the identity of the spirit and the accuracy of the information being provided. Finally, I will consider what values and worldviews of the dead are communicated through these messages and what they can tell us about their ongoing relationship with the world of the living.

Servan-Schreiber, Anastasia Victoria

“Vaimolendid”, Voices from the Past That Structure the Present

In contemporary Estonian paganism, the dead are omnipresent but never named as such. They are souls, spirits, forces, that inhabit the world and make it sacred, but their status as “passed away”, deceased” or “dead” is never emphasized, and “un-alive” would be the very last adjective one would think of, to name these beings. They have a very active, central and structuring role in the organisation of social hierarchy, spiritual life and the transmission of societal values. Categorised under the very large category of *vaimolendid*, or “spiritual beings”, they are the guardians of traditions, invoked and addressed in every ceremony. They belong to a pantheon of sacred figures that gives the religious ritual its sanctity and its purpose. I suggest that these rituals are, also, what maintain the presence of these beings in the present.

Through an intricate web of relationships, the *maausulised* revendicate a symbolic or mythical kinship with these entities. Building on my previous research on symbolic kinship and the role of ancestors in Maausk communities, this presentation examines how communication with the dead unfolds through everyday engagements with sacred natural sites (*hiied*), natural places and through practices that blur the boundaries between memory, place, and personhood. The aim of this presentation is to provide examples and materials on the conceptualisation of death by taking the Estonian paganism as a case study, and how this relates to spirituality, religion, but also social order and legitimacy claims. I propose to understand Nature as a medium that enables and sustains communication with the dead, and I also argue that ancestral presence is not a mere reference to the past but an active mode of relating, central to moral personhood, ecological ethics, and the formation of a collective ethnic identity.

Simetinger, Tomaž

Artificial Intelligence as Spirit Medium and as Autonomous Agent: Two Ontological Perspectives in Contemporary Folklore*

This contribution is based on a corpus of contemporary folkloric material concerning spirits and the dead who are believed to use artificial intelligence as a tool for communicating with the living. Drawing on narratives collected in digital environments and amongst interlocutors, the contribution examines how AI-based tools have become a distinctive digital liminal space in which boundaries between life and death, human and non-human, material, digital and immaterial are negotiated.

In these narratives, artificial intelligence functions as a digital “deathscape”: a space associated with death, memory, and post-mortem presence, but also one that remains accessible to the living. AI is not only imagined as a channel through which spirits and the dead address the living, but also as a means by which living individuals may symbolically travel into the realm of the dead, a role reminiscent of earlier ritual specialists such as shamans. From this perspective, spirits and the dead using AI represent a clear historical continuity of beliefs shaped by technological innovation. Similar interpretations accompanied earlier media such as radio, television, and other communication technologies.

Alongside this perspective, contemporary folklore also articulates a fundamentally different ontological understanding of artificial intelligence. Here, AI is interpreted exclusively through the logic of numbers, algorithms, and statistical computation. Rather than serving as a medium for spiritual agency, AI itself emerges as an autonomous agent

endowed with intentionality, awareness, or own agency. While these two ontological perspectives are mutually exclusive, they are nevertheless complementary, together revealing how artificial intelligence is culturally negotiated either as an instrument of human and spiritual actors or as a new form of non-human agency.

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Smith, Emily Selby

Active Dead and the Afterlives of Landscapes: Dark Tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

During the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995, over 100,000 people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) lost their lives, however, those lost remain powerfully present in the postwar social worlds. As a result, the landscape of BiH is marked not only by memorials and cemeteries but also by unmarked sites of mass violence and mass death which, through oral histories and war narratives, keep the dead active in the present. These landscapes have gained new significance alongside a growing tourism industry in the country. Due to its history of violence, dark tourism - or the visiting of sites of death and disaster - has become a large source of touristic interest in the country. Tourists participate in dark tours in BiH not just to visit the sites but also to, explicitly or implicitly, encounter and connect with the dead. These encounters are the focus of this paper; building on the anthropology of dark tourism, I examine visits to marked and unmarked sites, focusing on how tour guides mediate visitors' experiences with the dead alongside their own. Often drawing on personal and familial stories of loss, tour guides find themselves continually engaging in conversations both of and with the dead, even if they do not wish to be. Drawing on ethnographic research with English-language tour guides in BiH, I explore how dark tourism fosters international connections with the dead from the Bosnian war as well as consider what such encounters may mean for personal, familial, and collective memories moving forward.

Sumiala, Johanna

AI Dead: The Social Lives of the Dead in Synthetic Media

In this paper I wish to reflect the trajectories, challenges and opportunities of media anthropology in the study of dead in the present context of synthetic media (Meikle 2023). First, I outline the study of the social lives of AI dead as an object of ethnographic inquiry and media anthropology (cf. Farman 2020; Kneese 2023). By AI dead I refer to those biologically deceased human beings who have gained new digital lives by digital afterlife industry (DAI) generated technologies. In literature such "entities" are described as biologically dead, virtually alive, and socially active (Bassett 2022) as they continue to exist in digital platforms and interact with the living. Second, I reflect my study of AI dead as an ethnographic exercise (see also Farman 2020) and discuss my work on different digital platforms as well as the significance of interviews with the (living) users who interact with the AI dead, with their service providers and, if successful in experimentation with the AI dead themselves. Taking inspiration from the work of philosopher Patrick Stokes (2021) I place special emphasis on the critical problem of social agency (Sumiala 2021) associated with their study in the emerging context of media anthropology of synthetic media.

Šrampf Vendramin, Katarina

Between Healing and Mediation: Practitioners Communicating with the Dead in Contemporary Spiritual Practices

In contemporary Western societies, there has been a growing number of people who communicate with the dead outside institutional religious frameworks, instead engaging with individual spiritual healers and mediums. These practices are commonly associated with healing, emotional support, and meaning-making, and form part of contemporary spiritual practices. This paper explores the ways in which selected practitioners communicate with the dead, how they present themselves and their work, how they understand their relationships with the dead, and how they perceive communication with their clients in their role as mediators between the deceased and the living.

The paper is based on in-depth interviews with contemporary spiritual practitioners who describe their work as involving communication with the dead. The analysis focuses on how practitioners narrate their experiences, how they frame their activities, how they speak about their interactions with the dead, and how communication with the dead is positioned along a continuum between healing and mediation. Attention is also given to the diversity of practitioners' narratives, including differences in practices and views on what constitutes communication with the dead, how connections with the dead are established, and how practitioners work with their clients.

The paper considers how the dead appear in practitioners' accounts and how communication with the dead is understood as part of contemporary spiritual practice, contributing to broader discussions on contemporary ways of relating to the dead.

Uhrin, Michal

Communication with the Dead Through Dreams*

Dreams of the deceased are a widespread phenomenon found across cultures and religious traditions worldwide. Dreams involving the deceased may be viewed as a distinct form of communication between the living and the dead, linking two interconnected worlds that depend on one another. This paper examines the impact of dreams involving the dead and their influence on the thoughts, emotions, and actions of living. I distinguish between first-hand dream narratives, in which individuals directly experience encounters with the deceased, and second-hand dream narratives, which circulate through communities and between individuals through retelling. Drawing on works from the study of memory, I argue that not all dream narratives function in the same way. Firsthand dream encounters typically exhibit narrative characteristics associated with episodic memory, including event specificity and strong personal anchoring. Second-hand narratives, by contrast, tend to be more schematic and culturally patterned, resembling semantic memory rather than lived recollection. Both forms of dream narratives can exercise agency by shaping beliefs, moral decisions, ritual practices, and ongoing relationships with the dead. However, first-hand dream encounters possess a stronger agentive potential, as their episodic structure enhances experiential authority, credibility, and motivational force. The analysis is based on data collected during long-term ethnographic field research conducted between 2023 and 2025 in a village in the Horehronie region of central Slovakia. By combining ethnographic research with cognitive approaches to memory and agency, this paper seeks to contribute to broader discussions of the social effects of dream accounts and of how the dead remain active participants in the lives of the living.

Wood, Felicity

Spiritual Messenger Animals, Dreams and Visitations: Interactions with the Dead in Xhosa-speaking Communities, South Africa

This paper explores various interactions with the dead in Xhosa-speaking communities in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa, focusing on certain forms of communication with the ancestors, who act as spiritual guardians and guides. For instance, a traditional healer and prophetess's description of how her deceased grandmother visited her in dreams, offering her guidance and instruction is discussed. Then, the role that emissaries from the ancestors in the form of spiritual messenger animals, such as snakes, play in the training of *amagqira*, traditional healers and diviners that receive a special calling and undergo an initiation process, is described. Moreover, such creatures can appear in other contexts, as visitations from the ancestors, and some instances of this are discussed. Finally, however, this paper touches on certain ways in which forms of communication with the ancestors can be severed or impaired in contemporary times, as can their protection and guidance. These include certain sinister occult practices that have arisen relatively recently, such as *ukuthwala*, a dangerous procedure for long-term wealth. Also, the construction of dams and, consequently, the submersion of graves, hinders the ability to commune with the dead by means of graveside rituals.

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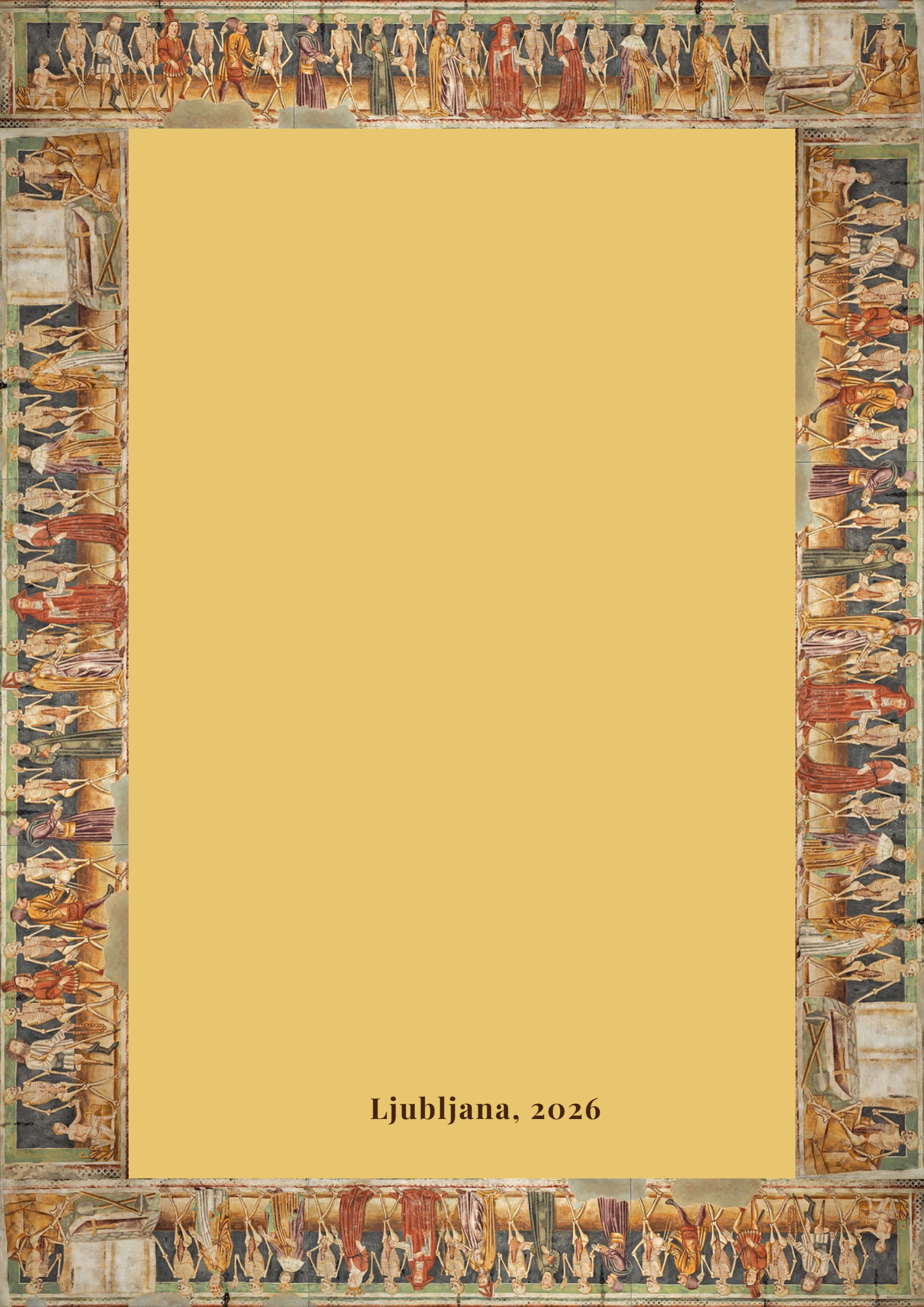
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