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The Dead Amongst the Living: Agency, Intention, and Power

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Abstract: The dead are viewed as having agency in this world when they make a difference to our lives. This article explores the various forms of agency that the dead are felt to have. Also, it looks at the power relations between the living and the dead. The research is based on archived narratives and internet discussions produced in Finland in the 21st century. The dead can be felt to have intentional agency that either derives from the past when they were alive, or emerges from a spiritual realm. But usually, their agency is viewed as non-intentional. As such, it is only represented by their memory or material objects in relation to the living in actor-networks. The representations can also serve the intentions of the bereaved. After all, it is the living who narrate the story of the dead, selecting what to include in it. Thus, there are even stories about deceased people and haunting that are next to fiction. But in everyday life, close relatives may have had such a formative role in one's identity that one cannot control their, or even one's own, story. The dead can have agency without intentions.

Keywords: actor-networks, agency, dead, haunting, intentionality, memory

The dead have an ambiguous role in the communities of the living. Even though they are absent, they may have an impact and their presence can be felt via their memory or legacy – or even in experiences of encounters with them. In this article, I am using the concept of agency to analyse the impact and position of the dead in contemporary Western societies. It has recently been suggested in death studies that in modernity, the dead were being detached from the society of the living, but since the late 20th century, their presence has become more visible in both private practices and public space (see, for example, Howarth

2007; Maddrell 2013; Walter 2019). My analysis is connected to this new integration of the dead in the lives of the living.

The status of the dead and the possibility of their having agency in the lives of the living varies culturally and historically, and the current changes are part of a longer chain of developments. The dead used to have an influential role earlier in history. Researchers have viewed medieval and other traditional communities as twin societies, which consist of both their dead and living members. In such societies, the dead have been depicted as being active members of society who take part in a reciprocal exchange with their living offspring and who might interfere if not satisfied (see, for example, Geary 1994: 78–79; Pentikäinen 1969: 95–96; Harva 1948: 502–511). In contrast, modernity has been characterised by a growing detachment between the living and the dead. The denial of the deceased ones' capacity and entitlement to active roles in the world of the living was initiated by the Reformation and supported by the Enlightenment and secularisation. Inspired by Sigmund Freud's grief model in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), 20th century psychologists standardised the need to break the emotional bond with the dead. The bereaved were thus recommended to let go, move on and invest in new attachments. Failure to do so was considered unhealthy (Howarth 2007: 20–30; Field 2006; Maddrell 2013: 506; Walter 2019: 392). It has been stated that in the 20th century, the sequestration of the dead has been all-encompassing: the bodies were handled professionally and kept out of sight, buried outside cities; communication between the living and the dead being deemed both psychologically unhealthy and theologically impossible. However, in the private sphere, and especially outside the Protestant world, there have been more connections and communications with the dead. By the end of the 20th century, researchers started to notice a change and have a more nuanced view of the position of the dead in Western societies (Walter 2019: 391–393).

It was first the study of vernacular practices that pointed to an increased presence of the dead. From the 1990s onwards, bereavement researchers started recognising that personal relationships often continue after death and that these can be healthy and adaptive (see, for example, Silverman & Klass 1996; Howarth 2000; Valentine 2008; Koski 2016a). The late 20th and early 21st centuries have also witnessed a growing informalisation and increasing freedom to express relations with the dead, something which is also occurring in the public sphere. One notices, for example, an increasing number of vernacular memorials for the deceased both in homes and in public spaces in Europe and the United States. While this phenomenon had existed in earlier times, and especially in Catholic and Orthodox parts of Europe, a wider scholarly interest towards such practices sparked around the 1990s. Instead of marking an absence, the memorials, as well as graveyards, came to be interpreted as a way of integrating the deceased into the society of the living. (Doss 2008: 5–11; Margry & Sánches-Carretero 2011: 1–4; Maddrell 2013: 507–511; Santino

2004). Another public domain in which the commemoration of and bonding with the dead can be seen as taking place is social media, including online games (Brubaker & Hayes & Dourish 2013; Haverinen 2014; Bassett 2015). The proximity between the living and the dead in recent years also manifests itself in the imagery concerning the whereabouts of the dead. Instead of thinking that the dead are in Heaven and stay there, it has now become more common to imagine them living on the outskirts of everyday reality, visiting the living, or to explain that the dead live in the hearts of the bereaved (Day 2012; Walter 2016; Koski 2020). This increased presence of the dead in our world has inspired scholars to suggest that unlike the past, when death was tabooed and sequestrated, we are now living in an era of the "pervasive dead" (Walter 2019).

In this article, I am exploring the agency of the dead in the everyday life of the living: how and in which circumstances the agency of the dead manifests itself, and how it can be approached and defined in theoretical terms. I will discuss the concept of agency and especially the question of intentionality within it. To handle the various forms of intentionality in relation to the agency of the dead, I will combine theories which have different approaches to the intentionality of agency. Furthermore, I will look at the interdependency and power relations between the living and the dead: Who is it that exerts power in the interaction? Do the deeds and intentions of influential deceased relatives still continue to shape our lives after their death? Or is it we, the living, who redefine their image and reputation once they are gone? I will first describe the cultural context and my research material, then discuss the theoretical frames for agency, and last, apply them to experiences of the bereaved.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH MATERIALS

My analysis concerns the situation in 21st century Finland. In recent international surveys, Finns were shown to be near the European average in their beliefs in life after death (Ketola et al. 2017: 46; Luijkx et al. 2017: 259). Similarly, in the World Values Survey maps, while being part of Protestant Europe, Finns' values are close to Catholic Europe and English-speaking countries, as well (WVS 2020; Inglehart & Welzel 2005). Compared to its Nordic neighbours, Finland is more conservative when it comes to death: the Lutheran church still holds a monopoly in death culture, and the cremation rate is much lower than, for example, in Sweden. Finland is culturally and geographically situated between East and West, and modernisation reached the country relatively late. Consequently, traditional rural death culture with the dead being prepared at home prevailed in Finland longer than in most other Protestant countries. Finland was strongly affected by the Second World War, resulting in a restrained form of grieving, which is typical of hard times. Nevertheless, Finnish death scholars estimate that the era of sequestration and death denial only really

prevailed in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s, after which the visibility of death started to increase again (Butters 2017; Haverinen & Pajari 2019: 313, 324–327).

In 2025, 62% of Finns are members of the Lutheran church (evl.fi 2025). Lutheranism is present in societal values, but with regard to their belief in God or an afterlife, Finns often declare they do not follow the doctrine of the Church. Secularisation has rapidly increased in Finland during the last decades, and belief in an afterlife has also been constantly declining. In the year 2000, 57% of Finns believed in an afterlife (compared to 46% of Swedes, 38% of Danes and even 78% of Icelanders). According to the latest survey that handled thoroughly the question of afterlife (2015), 39% of Finns think that death represents the end of all life, while 49% find it possible that something follows death, even though they are not sure what that might be. 33% think that the living might sense a connection with the dead, but the general feeling about an afterlife is uncertainty: 71% declare that nobody can know what happens after death (Haraldsson 2006; Ketola et al 2017: 42–48). Belief in an afterlife, however, is not necessary in the interaction between the living and the dead. As the religion sociologist Abby Day suggests, relationality – the tendency to build one's life and identity together with and in relation to other people – makes the bereaved continue the bond with their deceased loved ones irrespective of their views about an afterlife (Day 2012).

A long-standing influence of the Lutheran doctrine in Finland relates to the fact that the Church denies the possibility that the dead could be in contact with the living. Consequently, experiences of mutual interaction with the dead are not encouraged in Christian circles. In Finland, contacts with the dead are thus often interpreted with the help of vernacular family traditions (Alasuutari 2017). This has been invigorated by esoteric spirituality, which left an imprint on local death culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Harmainen 2014; Kaartinen & Leskelä-Kärki 2020: 64–65). Public discourse, meanwhile, favours a more materialistic world view. In everyday life, relations with the family dead tend to be socially constructed around memory and legacy, and experiences of contacts that are initiated by the dead are exceptional and seldom discussed publicly. Anonymously written experience narratives nonetheless reveal much more about the phenomenon.

The dead are viewed as having agency in this world when they make a difference in our lives. The agency of the dead is manifested in various ways for different people and in different contexts, and narratives and descriptions about the issue are formed differently in different discourses. Therefore, I have used a variety of narrative texts as research material: archived texts, social media, and traditional media. The insights in this paper draw from a wider array of materials, but its present form is formulated by help of the following textual corpuses, citations of which will also be presented in the analysis.

First, I have used an archived collection of written reminiscence narratives entitled "Death, Loss, and Memory" dating from 2014 (see Koski 2016a).

Responding to a request by the archives of the Finnish Literature Society (*Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura*), 101 participants, most of them women, sent in their contributions, either in handwriting or via a digital form. The resulting collection covers 550 archived pages (reference K1–550).[1] Not every participant indicated their age, but several writers had been born in the 1920s, and the majority were from the 1930s or 1940s, while only 10 writers were born in the 1970s or later. The writers were free to choose how to approach the topic, but for inspiration, the call included questions, for example, about the care for the dying, the presence and memory of the deceased and the possibility of meeting the dead. The contents of the resulting reminiscence narratives range from descriptions of funerary customs to critical remarks about the health-care system, to emotional narratives about personal loss, and to dreams about an afterlife. Therefore, not all of the texts were about the agency of the dead. Many of the writers have built chronological life stories, which may describe the impact of the deceased in their lives, the ways in which a presence of their dead loved ones is actively produced, or negotiations about the memory of the deceased in their family. Others focused on some particular person and the relationship before and after death. Furthermore, some texts described special moments when the memory or even the deceased person themselves were felt to be present.

Second, I used online discussions. They represent interactional discourse, in which the expressed ideas get collectively evaluated, and they involve younger participants than the archived materials.[2] Online forums have been sites where participants can discuss various, even sensitive issues anonymously. I have used discussion from the oldest and most well-known discussion forum in Finland, Suomi24. For example, grief and extraordinary experiences related to bereavement have been discussed there anonymously in numerous threads which are openly available. In the 2020s, such browser-based forums with asynchronous discussions have been superseded by social media applications, in which people nowadays spend more time. Nevertheless, they are still used for discussion and for getting peer insight on intriguing questions. While anonymity increases the risk of getting a rude response, empathy is on offer as well, and users find their participation meaningful. (Harju 2018: 61–62; Lehti et al. 2020: 10–11; Ylisiurua 2024: 63–65, 68–71). Here, I have used a discussion in which a freshly bereaved person contemplates the question of an afterlife and the possibility of contact with the deceased. They are responded to by expressing condolences, giving advice and sharing more or less similar personal experiences. I have analysed the discussion elsewhere.[3] For the purpose of this paper, I use stories shared in the discussions to illustrate how the agency of the dead is described by the bereaved. The academic use of anonymous posts that appear on these forums is viewed as being ethically appropriate. Popular discussion forums have been approached in Finnish academic research as the collective voice of everyday people, and the majority of the Suomi24 content

has been archived in the Language Bank of Finland for research purposes (Lehti et al. 2020: 11–12; Ylisiurua 2024: 101–103).

As another form of internet discussion, I use an older thread (Ilta-Sanomat 2010) in the website of an afternoon newspaper, inviting people to tell ghost stories (see Koski 2016b). The stories range from strange sounds to personal encounters with deceased people, either one's own relatives or others. Ghost stories illustrate purposeful narrative representations of the actively returning dead.

The third form of research material is provided by the Finnish media. I will present the case of a late Finnish athlete, whose memory and legacy have been publicly discussed and negotiated in the media. The media materials show that the agency and memory of the deceased are not only private matters but widely discussed in public as well.

In the archived and online narratives, the agency of the dead in personal life is experienced for the most part as a positive phenomenon. People feel they receive support or help from the dead or simply see them as representing an important part of their social reality. However, for some, the dead or their impact after death is felt to be a burden. Ghost stories, in turn, show an unwanted and frightening contact. Also in personal life, the negative impact of the deceased is sometimes conceptualised in the shape of "hauntings" either in a concrete or metaphorical sense (Lincoln & Lincoln 2015).

I analyse the texts along the lines of narrative positioning. Narratives function as meaning-making with respect to special events, one's own life and the life of the deceased person. According to the Positioning Theory, people produce and define themselves and others as social beings. In narratives, they are positioned in relation to one another (Bamberg 1997: 336–337). Reminiscing over the dead, the living are the ones who narrate the story from their own point of view. The relationships can be portrayed as harmonious, aiming at keeping up the memory of the deceased. Sometimes, however, there are power struggles. The living builds a selective narrative which may reduce the life and personality of the dead relative. But sometimes the narrative can portray the dead in a controlling position, while the living submits to the conditions set by the dead.

AGENCY

In the humanities and social sciences, agency has been theorised along two lines, the first assuming that an agent necessarily has intentions, while the second considers non-intentional and nonhuman agents as well. The dead can be perceived from both viewpoints, depending on whether they are assumed to exist as sentient beings or not. I will thus make use of both conceptualisations of agency.

In the social sciences, philosophy, and generally in its traditional meaning, agency is the human capability to enact one's will. Achieving one's goals requires both intentions and resources (see, for example, Hewson 2010). In social psychology, agency involves self-regulation: a capacity to plan, manage and evaluate one's actions (Bandura 2018: 130–131). Agency has been frequently connected with free will, resistance and conscious activity, thus also referring to the ability to exercise power (see, for example, Ahearn 2001: 112–117). Agency is not an intrinsic quality of an actor but is always located within a context. It thus emerges in relation with others who may enable or restrain it. It is based on the interdependency of human actors and involves power relations in which one may have a greater position of power over the other (Burkitt 2018: 526–531).

Intentional agency only applies to living people. The other approach is to acknowledge that agency can also be non-intentional. In both materialist and posthuman research, it was already being widely suggested by the end of the 20th century that nonhuman entities, such as natural phenomena and materials, can make a remarkable contribution to our lives without being intentional. The same can apply to nonhuman animals (Latour 2005; Sayes 2014; Müller 2015). The "Actor-Network Theory", coined within science and technology studies by figures like Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law, highlights that human action always involves interaction with other actors who/which affect each other in networked assemblages. For these scholars, our networks are seen as including, for example, natural phenomena, tools, bacteria, vehicles and machines (Sayes 2014: 136). The impact of an actor can nonetheless be small: indeed, sometimes sheer existence is enough to make an action possible, to permit, suggest, inspire, or to do the opposite: in other words, to hinder or block some action. Agency is thus defined by minimal criteria: an entity has agency if it makes a difference (Latour 2005: 72). Following this approach, we can recognize the agency of the dead in their new role, in which they do not possess intentions of their own. It can be observed that the dead, who are no longer physically present, and their belongings which we have preserved, can make a difference to our lives.

The philosopher Hans Ruin, who has focused on the contribution of the dead in our societies, finds the extension of agency to cover inanimate entities as unsatisfactory and confusing. In his book *Being with the Dead* (2019), he depicts the dead collectively as intentional actors who, nonetheless, belong to the past. Ruin elaborates on the transtemporal interactions that take place between the living and the dead members of the society, suggesting that we, as living people, interact with our history and carry the legacy of our predecessors into the present. The dead are thus seen as providing us with their legacy. We, in turn, do what they cannot do any more: we continue with their legacy, name and image. As Ruin writes, we feel the intentions of the dead in the legacy they pass on to us, for example, in the artefacts they produced. Gradually, however, the

feeling of their intentionality fades away and our own reactions and interpretations take over (Ruin 2019: 100–108). Ruin focuses on cultural continuities and the manifestation of ancestral and family lineages, emphasising the constitutive role of the dead (Ruin 2019: 78, 90). These are, however, not the only aspects of the agency that the dead have.

The Actor Network Theory involves the past as a temporal extension for nonhuman entities. While it does not acknowledge dead human beings as actors, they can be involved in networks via nonhuman entities which, as themselves, are spatially and temporally flexible gatherings. Therefore, actors that are no longer there can be present in associations, which have not broken down. (Sayes 2014: 140–141). In other words, the dead are represented by material entities – such as photographs or other keepsakes – which are associated with them. The dead as mental representations or spiritual entities were not within the scope of the Actor Network Theory, as it originally focused on the agency of material objects. Indeed, the theorists explicitly stated that entities that are supernatural or entirely symbolic in nature cannot be endowed with nonhuman agency (Sayes 2014: 136). An ethnographic view of human experience nonetheless defines reality from a broader viewpoint, suggesting that intangible entities can be seen as real in a social reality if they make a difference and people react to them. The anthropology of intangibles explores critically the ways in which humans in different contexts perceive the agency of various entities. Instead of aiming to produce a scientific definition of real entities, these scholars acknowledge that people feel the impact of various intangible entities in their everyday lives. This includes not only spiritual beings but also other intangibles, such as values, economy, or memory. Indeed, for them, even absence can be seen as making a difference and impacting people's lives and thereby having agency (Espírito Santo & Blanes 2014: 11–17).

The agency of the dead is formed in many ways depending on the viewpoint and context. In my analysis, I recognise three main ideas about the existence and impact of the dead in this reality:

1) The dead are physically non-existent and do not have thoughts or intentions. They are gone, and only represented in this world by their memory or material objects, the meanings of which depend on the context.
2) The dead are seen as intentional human beings who existed in the past and whose intentions are mediated by their legacy.
3) The dead exist as sentient and intentional beings in a spiritual realm and can contact the living and make new input.

These three are often combined with each other. It is not always explicated whether a felt presence of a deceased loved one is simply evoked by a memory or if it is interpreted as a real encounter with an intentional being. In particular, the boundary between the first and second viewpoint, culminating in the question of intentionality, is not only blurry in practice but also disputed by theorists.

THE AGENCY OF REPRESENTATIONS AND OBJECTS

We can define a memory of a dead person as a representation of the deceased, but there are diverse views about its intentionality. Can a memory be regarded as a non-intentional entity, or is it something that channels the intentions of the deceased? Theorists working in the field of agency disagree about the agency of representations.

The anthropologist Alfred Gell handled the question of the agency of representations in his study *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998). Here, Gell emphasised that an artwork is a non-intentional entity which does have agency, but is not self-sustaining. Gell's model thus conceptualises the interaction that takes place between the artist, the artwork, the recipient and the object or idea that is represented in the artwork. A central feature in this model is the division that exists between agents and "patients" or receivers: the actor who/which impacts on another is an agent, while the one that is affected is a patient.

If we apply this to the dead, then the dead person is the object that is represented, and the memory can be regarded as the representation, although it is unclear who can be seen as the artist that creates the representation. In the past, when they were still alive, the dead person themselves still served as the artist because they were the ones who created the image and style that lies behind the story of themselves. After death, however, the task is transferred to the bereaved. The bereaved have the roles of both artists and recipients: on one hand, they perform the presence of the dead in their lives, but on the other hand, they are naturally also affected by it.

Another relevant point in Gell's view is that he presents intentional and non-intentional agents in terms of a hierarchical relationship. Intentional agents, such as the artist, are seen as being primary, while non-intentional agents are secondary, because they merely mediate the intention of the primary agent. Gell thus finds intentionality a necessary characteristic of agency but thinks it can be mediated by a variety of entities (Gell 1998: 17, 36–37). When applied to the dead, this would mean that a memory has agency, but it either derives from the dead in the past or mediates the intentions of the bereaved. This is in opposition with the Actor-Network Theory discussed earlier, and despite their disharmony, I find it useful to combine them. While I agree with Gell that the agency of representations can mediate intentions of living or dead people, I think there is also purely non-intentional agency involved. The Actor-Network Theory emphasises the remarkable effects of non-intentional natural phenomena – in which I include death – and suggests that in new contexts, or in new networked assemblages, man-made entities may have new roles that are disconnected from the intentions of their designers (Pickering 1995: 6, 11–12, 22). When death is involved, the memory as a representation of

the deceased also has meanings and effects that were not necessarily intended by anyone.

Indeed, death has no intentions, but it has agency and makes a difference. Death initiates new contexts and assemblages, in which the agency of the representations of the deceased is reassessed. Objects that represent the deceased also have effects that are neither intended by the deceased nor orchestrated by the bereaved. For example, one narrator describes that she started crying when she read the wartime diary of her late brother who died in the Second World War and whom she had not even known properly (K275–282). While writing the diary, the young man hardly intended to make his little sister cry. The diary represents her brother, only not as the person he was while alive, but as a deceased person, who is lost and gone and whose intentions belonged to a life that was cut short. A variety of objects may represent the deceased, and while the objects may mediate the agency of the dead, they do not necessarily involve their intentions. Unless the person, while alive, planned the objects to function as memorial keepsakes after their death, the meaning of the objects changes when they are inherited by the bereaved.

Depending on the context, representations of the dead can have self-sustaining agency or mediate another actor's intentions. Both views about the agency of representations need to be taken into account when we explore the agency of the dead in theoretical terms. Memory can be viewed as a process; a representation constantly emerging with the help of a network of intentional and non-intentional agents. It is nonetheless also an entity that has an agency of its own and makes a difference in the lives of the bereaved.

MEMORY AS AN ASSEMBLAGE

Long-standing memory, in both its individual and collective form, is often made up of smaller bits of information, such as short-term recollections of fleeting moments. It can thus be characterised as a stable but flexible structure, into which new elements can be inserted. While the narrated representation of the deceased can be an individually selected compilation, the continuity of which is corroborated in social communication, it can also contain new information. A memory can be collective in nature and shaped by retellings concerning the same topic that take place in social settings. Despite its relative stability, it is constantly changing and reinterpreted (see Anastasio et al. 2012: 2–3, 46; Apfelbaum 2010: 85–91; Assmann 2008: 100–110.)

Figure 1 (see below) shows how intentional and non-intentional actors serve to create and shape the memory of the deceased, and how the memory itself also acts upon the bereaved. While the basis of the memory has a background in the contribution and the intentions of the deceased while alive, their intentional agency is something that only belongs to the past and becomes detached from the present when they die. In short, death has interrupted and distorted

the intentions and contribution of the dead person and made them something else than they used to be. Death thus underlines that in place of the person, there is now absence, and death and absence prompt the process of building a posthumous memory.

In the present, memory can be said to represent a shadowy presence of the deceased, the contribution and even the intentions of the deceased being carried on in the shape of the material legacy and documentation. This material legacy often includes not only properties or money, but also personal belongings or items that the deceased had owned, used or made while alive. Today, there is usually plenty of documentation about the deceased in the shape of photographs and videos, as well as social media posts, and letters and postcards, which the deceased intentionally produced. Both the legacy and personal reminiscences are involved in the meaning-making process in which the memories of the deceased unfold. The bereaved attempt to make sense of the fragments they are left with and produce a new representation. This could be called the narrated dead.

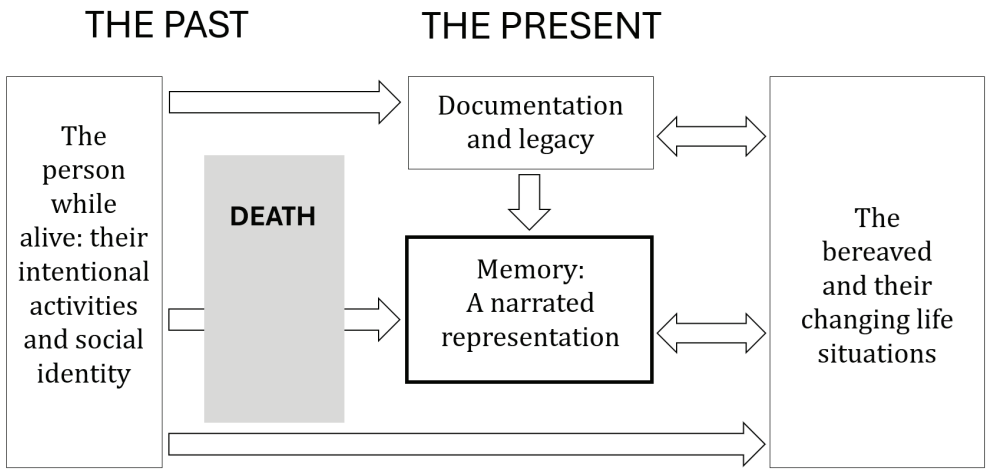

Figure 1. An assemblage in which narrated representations of the dead unfold. The actors in this network consist of both intentional and non-intentional entities, and the memory itself naturally also affects the bereaved. The long arrow signifies the formative impact that e.g. parents may have had on their offspring.

Narratives about the deceased, like any experience narratives, build partly on facts and partly on the contextual needs and aims of the narrators (see, for example, Siikala 1990). Memory can serve as a building block in both a personal life story or in collective identity-building. A tension between which intentions dominate the posthumous depictions and reputation of the deceased can thus be observed. And gradually, the bereaved move on and view the memory from

a growing distance, which is likely to increase their authorship of the story (Anastasio et al. 2012; Ruin 2019: 103). In other words, the intentional agency of the dead is bound to decrease over time. The memories themselves, shaped by the bereaved and the community to their liking, nonetheless continue to have agency. They can be evoked in new contexts, and may affect the living in ways that neither the deceased nor the bereaved ever intended. Now, I will look at how the agency of the dead emerges in the Finnish materials.

THE DEAD AND THE LIFE STORY

Especially in the archived reminiscence narratives, the bereaved process the memory of the dead by narrating their story. Bereavement narratives (see, for example, Valentine 2008), which handle and summarise the life and death of an individual, attempt to make sense of the death of the person in question and keep the memory of them alive. Such a postmortem biography can also be seen as a ritualisation of death. It is a means of creating a new identity for the deceased in their new role as a dead person or ancestor. Such narratives often review the life of the deceased, sum up their significance, and weave their life and death into a new meaningful whole. This can be done in public in the form of eulogies and obituaries; it can also unfold as part of discussions among friends, or privately, in a means which never involves presenting the postmortem life story to anyone (Walter 1996). In such private re-narrations of their lives, the bereaved can be seen as forming a new kind of relationship with the dead in which the interaction may occur in the form of an inner dialogue (Silverman & Klass 1996: 16; Valentine 2008: 4). Because there is no active input from the deceased in bereavement narratives, in principle, it is the living that control the interaction.

When reminiscing about the dead, the bereaved commonly highlight memories that they find relevant or which make them feel happy. Recountings of warm memories can refer to a harmonious relationship or a selective image, which only includes memories that they are comfortable with and which are in line with their own life story and identity. My narrators sometimes say that they have decided to forget or suppress certain negative memories. This naturally means that that they remember them anyway, but they nonetheless decide which memories they wish to actively reminisce about or include in their own stories about the deceased. To give an example: a woman, born in the 1970s, writes the following about her grandfather, who was an influential character in her home region. ([...] marks a cut from the narrative.)

> *Grandpa was part of my childhood in everyday life, so there are numerous things connected to him in my childhood home and the memories are always there. I think about good and happy memories and funny anecdotes about my grandpa.* [...] *He still affects many*

> *people's lives; a strong character has surely left an imprint on his children (my mother and her brothers), but I have not started to delve into those. Instead, I maintain my own grandchild experiences and memories.* (K411–412)

The picture remains ambiguous. The narrator's selection of memories consists of her own childhood experiences and a set of positive stories that the family has circulated. But she is also aware of the tensions and distress her mother's generation experienced with their dominant father. She describes her mother and uncles as bound up with their earlier experiences and hints elsewhere that her mother still struggles with her negative memories. She herself, being in control of the situation, can keep alive her own selection of positive memories, while her mother, due to her own life history, fails to appreciate them. This illustrates the fact that each family member will form a different image of the deceased. Their own personal experiences naturally steer the memory, whether they like it or not. Indeed, the fact that we cannot control the past has been emphasized in memory studies which have focused particularly on traumatic memories and past injustices which tend to resurface and haunt the living in one way or another (see, for example, Etkind 2009; Erll 2011; Vanderstraten 2014). Family members, especially parents, may have had a formative impact which cannot be dismissed. A woman born in the 1930s describes the impact that others have had on her:

> *I am a puzzle, a jigsaw. I consist of all the people who have been close to me and who have affected my life. They will live in me for my whole life, every moment. They have pressed their mark onto me. There are beautiful marks and sorrowful marks. Together they form the whole pattern.* [...] *I cannot escape the impact of my parents. I have to accept it. The way in which they treated me is imprinted on me. Myself, I can only choose how to relate to it, and I have chosen to be grateful.* [...] *I do not think ill of my mother who never loved me. She simply couldn't do that because I wasn't a boy.* [...] *I can still hear her voice saying to me even when I was a little child: "You cannot imagine how disappointed I was when you were born. I had so wished for a son."* (K168–170)

Here we can see a discord between the woman's generally serene attitude and the fact that she remembers her mother's cruel words and feels she was never loved. She portrays especially her late mother in a formative role, and herself having to submit to being defined by her. In her story, the lifetime actions of the older generation still continue to make a difference in her life. As these examples show, the long dead relatives can live on as selected narrative constructions, but the living do not always have the power to edit the story to

their liking. There is a limit to how much you can really choose what to include in the stories you narrate about the deceased and yourself.

THE DEAD BEING KEPT ALONG IN LIFE

In everyday life, the agency of the dead emerges in the world of the bereaved in their thoughts, in discussions and in material objects. Having demised, the dead only have agency in relation to the bereaved who are apt to remember them. Often this takes place in assemblages, in which the bereaved are accompanied with other people or, for example, certain objects or words that evoke the memory. The next example shows the bereaved actively reminiscing over their dead loved ones. Their memory is associated with a variety of entities:

> *In my memories, they are all still by my side. There is sure not a single day without some memory coming to my mind. It comes from places, objects, some words or sentences or what I have read, from scents, anniversaries, anything.* [...] *In my memories and thoughts, in grief and happiness, in everyday life and festivities they come along. I have their image in the bookshelf, in a photo book and photo albums, in the crannies of my mind. Again and again, I fish them out. Again and again in lonely darkening evenings, I light a candle to them, in front of their photo.* (K391–405)

Writers of the reminiscence narratives describe how the legacy of the deceased carries the memory in their everyday life. A male writer highlights intangible forms of such legacy as follows:

> *Even now some memory comes into my mind every day, a proverb, a song, a feeling or something else the deceased is somehow connected with. I thus feel that our dead relatives are still living in our lives even though we cannot see them or talk with them. Perhaps the dead live on in the mental legacy that they have left behind in our innermost beings while they were living. This is what I believe.* (K54–58)

The agency of the deceased emerges in language use and other forms of expressive culture. This continuity is felt not only in relation to individuals but also the family and kin. The older generation in particular feel the agency or presence of the dead in handicrafts made by them or in manual skills they learned from the deceased. Some kitchen tools have been inherited from generation to generation and link the successor into a long chain of mothers and grandmothers (Koski 2016a: 8). Material objects can also be used to mediate communication with the dead, as in the next example about a late mother:

> *She is present in my life every day in the form of photographs, jewellery, clothes and dishes which I use, and letters and diaries. Reading them is quite hard. They are so vivid, and all grief has been poured into them. I made a kind of memory book myself, too; I glue in it cards, pictures, greetings, and one night I wrote her a "letter" in it since I was missing her and I had many things to tell her.* (K171–173)

The material objects intensify the agency of the deceased. By collecting and producing these materials the writer has increased the presence of her late mother. Intimate texts with a strong emotional content evoke empathy and feelings of connection. Even though the letter will never get an answer, she has the feeling of sharing her thoughts with her mother.

A good example that combines aforementioned forms of agency is the public legacy of the late Finnish ski jumper, the world champion Matti Nykänen (1963–2019). Following his famous sports career, Nykänen had had a colourful life that was eagerly followed by the press, and his cultural legacy consists in particular of original aphorisms and quotes that he was famous for in popular media (see, for example, Wikiquote 2023; Koskinen 2019). As a person, Nykänen left an ambiguous memory: he was known to have problems with alcohol and violence, something which his family members experienced their personal share of, but sports enthusiasts have preferred to cherish a more heroic view. Nykänen's family members have continuously appeared in the afternoon press even after his demise, and in media interviews; Nykänen's daughter has publicly revealed that she had difficult memories concerning her drunk and violent father (Pakkanen 2024). Nykänen's life story has inspired film makers. A movie concerning his sports career came out in 2006, a documentary series about his life in 2023, and a full-length documentary film in 2024, focusing on his personal problems. The representations of Nykänen in the films and media range from funny stories and heroic narratives to dramatic and sad memories.

Recently, a new layer was added to Nykänen's posthumous agency. In 2024, Nykänen's daughter got married. Before the wedding, the press announced that: "The late Nykänen can participate [in] the wedding in a special way." In the text, the bride-to-be stated that she wanted to remember her father and have him along with her on one of the greatest days of her life.[4] The element of participation in question took the form of a golden chain, a piece of male jewellery that the late athlete had given to his daughter. The young couple had had their rings made out of it. As the daughter explained: "The bride's father is expected to take care of the costs of the wedding, but since my father died and can't participate, this is a way in which he can contribute" (Jobe 2024). This case is a good example of how a material object can have agency. The golden chain, the value of which was unknown to the daughter until they had it evaluated at a goldsmith, represented the deceased in a way he may not have originally

intended. The chain itself had agency in that it made it possible for the deceased to participate in some way in the wedding. While the agency of the couple that took the jewellery to the goldsmith's may have been more decisive, the chain itself was a necessary actor in the network that brought about the presence of the deceased. The example also illustrates in a way the absence-presence of the deceased, something which is a typical experience of the bereaved (see, for example, Maddrell 2013). The young bride stated that her father could not participate, but the headline declared he could – albeit in a "special way". These seemingly contradictory statements point to the ambiguity of creating or perceiving a presence of an absent person.

As in Nykänen's case with the wedding, mediated participation of the deceased can update their memory to include events that took place after their death. This not only happens in frames of significant life events and by help of material objects, but the bereaved can also simply imagine their dead family members participating in topical discussions. For example:

> *When I meet my sisters, we always remember our brother and parents. Often we "update" the memories and ask: "What would mother/father say about issues of European Union or daily politics, for example."* (K76–90)

In short, some families have a habit of producing opinions for the dead about later events that the dead never witnessed. The families maintain and renew the memory of the bereaved in their social communication, ensuring they do not only belong to the past.

As shown above, the nonintentional agency of the dead emerges in memories and social practices: in actor networks that, in addition to the bereaved, may include particular places, special events and social contexts, sensory perceptions, verbal expressions and material objects. The dead, having agency in the network, can contribute to the well-being and identity of the bereaved, but their impact can also be felt as negative or ambiguous.

THE DEAD VISITING AS INTENTIONAL AGENTS

Some narrators have perceived the presence of their dead loved ones as something that is real and relate their personal experiences of encountering them as intentional agents, reaching out from the other side. Such experiences are usually kept private, but they are discussed anonymously in online forums and often told to those who are nearest. Almost everyone in Finland knows somebody who has experienced an encounter with a dead person. In a broad survey in 2019, 23% of Finns reported having felt the presence of a deceased person (Ketola & Sohlberg 2022: 103–104).[5] Another survey in 2015 showed that 18% of Finns thought that the dead would be able to see the world of the living (Ketola

et al. 2017: 47). While the majority of Finns does not believe it possible to have contact with the deceased, such beliefs are not uncommon. Both the materialist and Lutheran worldviews deny the possibility, and therefore it tends to be assumed that if anyone thinks they have seen a dead relative, it must have been a mistake or a hallucination. The third, theologically correct possibility, that it was a demonic spirit, is nowadays rarely mentioned by the Church, but members of charismatic movements still bring this idea up, for example, in internet discussions (Koski 2016b: 28–29).

In spite of the above, ideas about post-mortem communication circulate in vernacular tradition. They tend to be inspired by close emotional relationships and longing, and are shaped by personal experiences and narratives about the dead. Other discourses that feed into this tradition include ghost stories and esoteric teaching. Traditional esoteric movements like spiritualism and theosophy are somewhat marginal today, but they had a noticeable impact in vernacular discourse in the early 20th century. They thus challenged the existing Lutheran views and offered new insights into relationships between the living and the dead, suggesting that positive contacts beyond the grave could take place. The idea that the dead exist in an invisible dimension around us was something that was supported by the esoteric tradition, as well as the idea that the dead may stay around for a while and then continue to some further stage of afterlife (Koski 2020: 105).

One woman who shared her thoughts in the archived collection felt that her late mother had remained around her to help and support her. She would, for example, ask her mother to help her find a parking lot when she was driving in the city and felt it really worked.[6] The woman nonetheless expected that one day her mother would stop participating in her life and move on to find her own peace and quiet, reflecting the idea of a gradual withdrawal (K200–209). In this case, it is clear that the interaction was initiated by the living, and took place via thoughts and actions. Sometimes, however, the contact is sensory: the deceased is seen, heard or felt. Usually, the perception is fragmentary involving only one or two senses, and lasting for just a short time. Compared to the agency of the living, it seems evident that the intentional agency of the dead in this world is highly restricted. Such an idea is expressed in the following description by a woman who had lost her sister:

> *My sister died after a long and tough illness, and when it happened, we were in our summer cottage. My sister came to me in the early hours of the morning: in the light summer night I saw her translucent figure standing near me in the room, and she said only three words to me, as if she only had permission to utter those three words: "I am dead". It was not a dream. I was entirely awake and wondered how it was possible to see this translucent being in a room illuminated by the summer night?* (K24–31)

While it is common for respondents to reassure themselves that the experience was not a dream, dreams have actually become the most common modality for encountering the dead in Finland. The dreamers in question discern dream visits by the deceased as being more vivid and memorable than ordinary dreams (Alasuutari 2017: 180–181; Siltala 2019: 119–120). In such dreams, the deceased often act more freely, since they have not actually crossed the boundary into the realm of the living; it is seen as being easier to enter a dream than waking reality. In the next narrative, ideas relating to the difficulty of crossing the boundary are acknowledged, the husband who visits his fresh widow using multiple channels to communicate:

> *My husband died on a journey around midnight, and early in the morning, while I was between sleep and being awake, he came to report to me. It felt as if he touched me, but I told myself that this must have been a cat beside me on the bed. The experience continued as a dream, in which I got up from my mother's bed in my parent's bedroom, got up from her 'position'. She had been widowed a couple of years ago.* [...] *The heavy atmosphere of the dream gradually dissolved during the morning, but it returned to my mind instantly when the police arrived in the afternoon to tell me about my husband's death. I believe that my husband came to prepare me for the news.* [...] *Since then I have had some very vivid dreams, in which my husband has come to visit me. I always know that he is actually dead and that the visit is a special occasion, something it is a bit difficult for him to arrange.* [...] *I believe that these are real visits because these dreams differ from ordinary dreams in terms of intensity, and because he had unusual abilities even when he was living.* (K222–224)

As can be seen here, the narrator justifies the exceptional visits by her husband by referring to the special abilities he had while living: he used to sense and know things in advance. The next example involves another sensory experience:

> *I lost my father unexpectedly. He was only 67 when he died – not very old at all. It was Fathers' Day. A couple of days after his death, I experienced something extraordinary. I was sitting at my computer and felt someone touch my shoulders and stroke my hair. I thought my husband had come home but when I turned around there was no one behind me. I went downstairs and called out asking if anyone was there, but no. I am sure that my father visited me.* [...] *I believe he visited me and wanted to bid farewell. We were truly close and dear to*

> *each other.* [...] *I miss him every day, but I believe we will meet again eventually.* (Suomi24, 2012)

A typical feature of such experience narratives is the way the narrator builds credibility for the narrative by declaring that they first ruled out the ordinary possibilities and only then came to the conclusion that it was the deceased. The assumption that such contact should not have been possible is manifest in the texts in the "as if" structure that narrators use. As here, the narrator also offers a justification for why such a thing should happen between her and her late father: it is because they were very close. Such narratives about continuing bonds reflect the idea that close relationships survive even when the deceased is gone. Indeed, the idea that the dead live on in the hearts of those who loved them is sometimes understood as a powerful factor that helps make it possible for one to meet the deceased.

In first-hand narratives, a common feature is that the deceased appears soon after death to inform others about their death, to bid farewell, or to comfort the bereaved by saying that they are safe and comfortable on the other side. Even in the mid-twentieth century, we find the bereaved worrying about whether the deceased have gone to a good or bad place, referring to heaven and hell. Such a division is less explicit today, but the bereaved seem to worry about the well-being of the deceased. In such situations, visits give them a lot of comfort (Siltala 2019: 171–175).

Even though traditional Lutheran views about an afterlife are nowadays relatively rare in Finnish experience narratives, they still exist. The next example echoes the Lutheran idea of the sleep-like state that follows death and the traditional prohibition against bothering the dead by longing for them too much: it used to be said that it disturbs the dead if the living grieve too much and go on thinking about them. As can be seen, the narrator terribly missed her mother-in-law who had died some years ago. When visiting her grave, she apologized to her in her thoughts, as the following account shows:

> *I am sorry I have disturbed your rest selfishly, thinking how different our life would have been if you had lived. I am so sorry. I have hoped so much that you could be alive with us. After this thought, I immediately felt I had a connection with the person in the grave. It was as if understanding and deep peace streamed from the grave straight to my heart. And I felt good and relieved, as if the person in the grave had heard my thoughts and forgiven me for my longing. All this happened as if my own will had not been needed to make the contact happen. The unexpected contact from the bosom of the earth felt self-evident, completely natural. But even though it soothed my mind, it also puzzled me in its peculiarity.* (K24–31)

As in the last three examples, it is usually the case that the dead affect the thoughts and emotions of the bereaved. The living are worried or anxious about something, and they feel better after the contact and the message. Applying Gell's division of roles (see above), in this case, the dead was the agent, and the bereaved the patient. Indeed, the narrators make it clear that they themselves did not initiate the contact. It was the deceased that did it and it was for real. Sometimes it also seems that the bereaved have badly needed the contact and reassurance, and in both academic and vernacular discourse, there have been claims that people subconsciously produce these experiences themselves (see, for example, Koski 2016b). In this context, I am particularly interested in the narrators' own interpretations, which are diverse. The experiences are either felt to have been initiated by the dead as intentional agents, or inspired in one's subconscious mind by memory. Some people are not sure or do not even care about such distinctions, because for them, it is the experiences that make a difference. In an internet discussion about encounters in dreams, one participant commented on their own experience as follows:

> *Was it real or a dream, you can't know. But the feeling that remains is good and real.* [...] *True or not, the point is that it gave me strength.* (Suomi 24, 2012)

While the majority of these experiences concern emotions and the personal relationships, other accounts show the dead offering practical advice or expressing their opinions. One woman described getting help from both her late brother and father about where to buy certain supplies or to find a certain tool. Once she was driving alone to the summer cottage that she used to visit with her father. It was winter and the road was covered with snow. Quite near the cottage, a tree had fallen across the road and was preventing the car from being turned or backed. Then she received a message in her brain: "The yellow little saw is in the drawer at the sauna." She knew it was her father speaking, so she went there, found the saw and used it, and thus got through the tricky situation (K91–92).

In most cases, the contacts with the family dead continue or improve the lifetime relationship. And even if there have been problems, the experience may function as a form of reconciliation, as in the next example:

> *My father was an alcoholic, which was the main reason why my parents got a divorce when I was little. I only remember my father vaguely, and I hardly had any contact with him in later years. When I was a student, I was once reading an exam book in my room. Suddenly I got the feeling that I was not alone, and I saw my father standing by my desk. I talked with him strangely "in my thoughts", without uttering any words. He apologised to me for never having*

> *been a real father to me. I had a good and serene feeling in this situation. The next time I visited home my mother told that she had received a letter that my father had died.* (Ilta-Sanomat 2010)

Sometimes, however, new problems may arise after death if the survivors do not live up to the expectations of the deceased. Such narratives used to be more common in older belief traditions, but they can occasionally still be found in narrations in our times. The next example was shared in an internet discussion about ghost stories by a woman whose husband experienced it:

> *My father-in-law died, and before that, he had not wanted the family to change the water container* [for the heating system] *in their cellar.* [After his death,] *my husband took his mother home from the hospital. His brother had asked him to check what kind of container they should acquire. When my husband went to the cellar, the lights went out, someone walked outside and knocked on the cellar door. He came up from the cellar and asked his brother, "Why did you switch off the lights?" but the brother said he hadn't. (In earlier years they had used to play pranks on each other: whenever one went down to the cellar to fetch potatoes, the other would disconnect the fuse so that the light went off.) When my husband then left home, in the dim light of the outdoor lamp, he saw something on the stairs and running out into the yard. He thought it was the dog and called to it: "Come here!" But the dog came* [from an entirely different direction] *from the cowshed attic, stretching himself as if having been sleeping there. It had not been the dog. He started the car and felt as if someone was sitting on the back seat. After a kilometer he stopped the car and checked but there was no one. When he arrived home, he was pale and terrified* [and said that] *it must have been his father's ghost. And he quit his plan to get a new water container.* (Ilta-Sanomat 2010)

He had not only been startled by what he assumed to be his late father showing his disapproval, but apparently was also positive that his father would continue harassing them if they proceeded with the renewal of the heating system. The reaction of the man refers that he probably perceived the encounter as haunting.

THE AGENCY OF THE HAUNTING DEAD

As noted above, unwanted and disturbing activity by the dead is often defined as "haunting". In most cases, people think they do not need to be afraid of their own dead loved ones; in such cases, the figures in question are identified as being themselves, rather than ghosts or haunting (fi *kummitus*). "Hauntings"

are more typically associated with dead people who are not next-to-kin, but are rather attached to places, such as haunted houses or sites of violence and death. In the following, I will only briefly discuss such hauntings in relation to agency, in order to enable a comparison to the accounts of contacts with people's loved ones. In most cases, haunting is seen as being a result of suffering or violence. In the first-hand experience narratives of such experiences that I have examined, a person sees or feels something uncanny or disturbing and is later told that something fatal has happened there, usually that someone has committed suicide. The following is a good example:

> *I stayed overnight at my friend's house when we were in high school. The house was quite old. The first time I was there I slept restlessly, and every time I woke up, instead of the lamp I saw a man hanging from the ceiling, and he was trying to pull the rope off of his neck, but then started to wheeze, and fell silent. I woke up my friend and said, "I must have had a repeating terrible nightmare half asleep," and I told her about what I had seen. My friend got really frightened and told me that she had heard a story telling of how the adult son of the previous inhabitants had committed suicide in the house. Her parents said in the morning that it was all nonsense. But when the same thing happened the next time, my friend asked them to give us the guest room. There I slept quite well. My friend's parents got curious and inquired about the history of the house. The suicide had involved hanging in that very room, and since then, they had only used it as a walk-in closet.* (Ilta-Sanomat 2010)

Such stories suggest that some people are able to see the fatal event being repeated in the spiritual realm. Traditional belief narratives often tell how after death, sinners had to keep repeating their sin, an over-eager dancer having to dance as a corpse until her socks wore out (Jauhiainen 1998: 94), or a greedy mistress having to return every night after her death to eat the pigs' food (Jauhiainen 1998: 102). Another typical pattern was that sinners had to return to make things right. For example, a man who got more land by moving the boundary marker to his own benefit would have to remain in the original border after death to indicate the right place for future generations (Jauhiainen 1998: 118). In such narratives, the person is shown to lose their free will or even their personality in death, as they are turned into a puppet of a greater moral order. They have become representatives of the sin or moral problem in question.

In a similar way, victims of oppression and violence may appear in the landscape as echoes of a traumatic event (see, for example, Mencej 2021). In a way, they have become ghostly memorials of suffering. In such a role, the dead are regularly seen as symbolic figures rather than real entities. In short, the haunting is viewed as a call for justice, the dead representing the uncanny feelings

that have been evoked by a problematic event. In real life, or in real storytelling, one finds literal and metaphorical interpretations intertwining (Good & Chiovenda & Rahimi 2022).

All in all, the agency of haunting figures is somewhat ambiguous. The haunting clearly has an agency in a social discourse, reminding people of relevant problems and warning them about inappropriate actions. All the same, the haunting dead are represented as being in a helpless situation, as victims of their fate. They are deprived of the intentional agency they used to have as living human beings. These haunting dead are, of course, essentially narrated figures. Even in case such stories are based on genuine experiences, the characters have commonly been shaped by narrative patterns and traditional ways of discussing moral problems, suffering and injustice.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have been exploring the agency of the dead in the everyday life of the living, with a focus on Finnish narrative materials. The agency of the dead can be approached as intentional or non-intentional. In a material outlook, the dead do not have thoughts and intentions, and their agency only emerges in relation to the living, often represented by memory or material objects. This non-intentional agency can be theorised in terms of nonhuman agency as defined in the Actor-Network Theory. This theory is useful in conceptualising the impact of (the memory of) a deceased person in their new, passive role. In new contexts and assemblages, representations of the deceased may affect the living in ways that were not intended by the deceased.

In many cases, however, it is justified to argue – following Alfred Gell's views – that representations do mediate the agency of their maker. Either the intentions of the deceased have been incorporated into the representation, or the narrative representation of a dead person mediates the intentions of the bereaved who has compiled it. Memories are often selective, and the living may want to choose what they include in their version of the deceased. In addition, narratives can be designed to serve other purposes than to create an accurate image of the dead. If there is, for example, a moral point to make, the characterisation of the person can be fabulated. In ghost stories, the deceased can become narrated figures that are next to fiction.

In the case of close familial relationship, it is not simple for the bereaved to change the narrative of the deceased even though the memory was not entirely happy. If the past events are an integral part of one's own identity, they are not optional in one's story. Especially parents may have such a formative impact on their offspring that it is actually the dead who define the living. If the relationship has been asymmetrical or oppressive, the living may have unwillingly submitted to the role designed by their parents. On a societal level, it can be portrayed as a desirable state of affairs that people get their cultural legacy and

identity from the past generations. According to Hans Ruin, the legacy that represents the dead simultaneously carries their intentions from the past. While the dead do not have intentions in the present, they used to be intentional in the past, and this intentional agency lingers on.

In addition, I explored the intentional agency of the dead who are perceived as conscious beings who contact the living from the hereafter. Such experiences mostly take place in the framework of continuing bonds. According to the first-hand narratives of this kind of encounter, the dead seem to have retained their personality and sometimes have a strong impact on the living, their well-being, their plans and their decisions. Usually, the dead come to greet or bid farewell, but sometimes they can come to reconcile lifetime controversies. Compared to the dead who are simply represented as memory and may not be changed, encounters with the dead as real entities offer the possibility to improve the relationship. Nevertheless, their agency is highly restricted. It is believed that the dead cannot fully reach this world, and they are not allowed to do much. This especially applies to the other type of intentionally returning dead: the haunting dead seem to lack almost all intentional agency, instead, serving a moral argument or as part of an interesting plot. Stories of haunting commonly handle problems that exist in a community or at a societal level, while continuing bonds are essentially something that exist only between family members or friends, underlining that the dead are still part of the community.

Analysing the positions of the living and the dead in the narratives, I looked at the power relations between the living and the dead in their interaction. Intentionality and power do not seem to be directly related. Instead, it is the closest late relatives who exert power, while the agency of the more distant acquaintances is likely to be shaped and manipulated by the living.

NOTES

1 The collection's archival code is "KUOLEMA". I use the abbreviation K accompanied by the page numbers of each contribution.

2 In the archived material, none of the writers born in the 1920s and only few born in 1930s had used the digital form to send their story, while every writer born between 1970-1991 had done so. Even without explicit knowledge about age, it is safe to assume that people who discuss death and loss in internet forums are, on average, younger than the participants in the archived collection. Also, descriptions of life situations by some narrators indicate an earlier stage of life.

3 Koski forthcoming: Uncertainty of afterlife, reassuring experiences: Online discussions about the dead in dreams. In: Ülo Valk & Kristel Kivari (eds.) *Making Sense of the Uncanny: Interpretive Framings of Epistemological Uncertainty*. Berghahn Books.

4 The statement about taking one's deceased father along to an event clearly points to the discourse of continuing bonds, and shows the ordinariness of keeping the deceased around. Such a statement would perhaps not have been expected a couple of decades earlier.

5 This particular question has not been regularly included in the surveys. In an earlier round in the 1980s the percentage in Finland was significantly lower, only 14; it was lower than the mean for the whole of Europe, which was 25%, but higher than the Nordic average, which was under 12%. However, Iceland had been excluded because of its exceptionally high percentage, 41 (Haraldsson

2006: 178–179). Iceland's figure of those who have felt the presence of a deceased person has kept over 30% for the last 50 years and was 36% in 2023 (Gunnell 2023: 12).

6 This motif is more commonly linked to angels (see, for example, Utriainen 2017: 86–87), and angel beliefs presented by a friend is where this narrator received it.

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