Material creation of postmortem presence – and absence

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1. Relating to the dead

Materiality has always been a dimension of handling the dead. If for no other reason, then at least in relation to the dead body and its need to be taken away from the community of the living, with its obvious materiality as rapidly decaying organic matter. But throughout human history, getting rid of the dead body has typically involved additional kinds of materiality and material culture,[1] especially related to the grave and the gravesite. Well-known examples are placing precious objects in the grave together with the (noble) dead in ancient and Norse cultures, forming the grave as a sarcophagus, or decorating it with richly ornamented headstones. But even today it is far from uncommon to put objects into the coffin together with the deceased, like a teddy bear or box of chewing tobacco, or to decorate the grave or gravestones with personal images and objects.

But in contemporary society there are also several other forms of material creations of postmortem relations, forms which also say something about relating to the dead. Several studies have focused on the many ways in which materiality and objects are involved in dealing with and relating to the dead, such as the body as a material entity,[2] the role of material objects in mourning and remembrance,[3] the

1 For the distinction between materiality and material culture, cf. Bille, Mikkel: "Material Culture Studies: Objectification, Agency, and Intangibility", in: Maja Hojer Bruun et al. (Ed.), The Palgrave Handbook of the Anthropology of Technology, London: Palgrave MacMillan 2022, p. 85–103, here p. 89–91.

2 Engelke, Matthew: "The coffin question: death and materiality in humanist funerals", in: Material Religion. The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief 11 (2015), p. 26–48; Benkel, Thorsten/Meitzler, Matthias: "Materiality and the body: explorations at the end of life", in: Mortality 24 (2019), p. 231–246.

3 Graham, Barbara: Death, Materiality and Mediation. An Ethnography of Remembrance in Ireland, New York: Berghahn Books 2016.

function of objects in managing one's relationship with a deceased person,[4] and the significance of places and objects in both maintaining and creating memories of the deceased.[5]

Margaret Gibson's study "Objects of the Dead" focuses on the place and role of material objects in grief and mourning. Based on interviews with bereaved people in Australia, she notes how some objects, events or places can act as triggers for memories and emotions.[6] Associated with a value that derives from their embeddedness in history, self-understanding, personal biography or family relationships, they are crucial to how people imagine themselves, occupy spaces and claim identity; they are tools of the self.[7]

Annika Jonsson, drawing on Gibson, focuses on how objects, places, events or other external materialities can make the deceased present or, in Avril Maddrell's phrase, "present-absent" for the bereaved. She reveals in an interesting way the complex ways in which objects and places can represent the presence of a deceased person and trigger experiences of this in the bereaved.[8] The main pattern is how objects, places or events bring back the deceased and evoke memories and emotions in the bereaved because imbued with a meaning and animated by the now deceased person's use or enjoyment of them. But the circumstances of the retrieval of the objects are also significant and may affect whether the experience of the presence absence of the deceased is comforting or distressing, saddened by the memory of loss or rather a disturbing sense of the uncanny.

Barbara Graham makes a similar point in her study of how people in Ireland relate to their dead. Liminality, described by theories of rites of passage as the transitional phase between separation and reintegration, from death to the restoration of society, she suggests, should be seen as continuous rather than as a phase to be completed.[9] This ongoing liminal phase is intimately connected to and mediated by material objects. When a person dies, objects begin to circulate. They are passed on to the bereaved, discarded, sold, given to charity, or received for use, display or storage. This circulation can saturate the object with value and meaning, making it a

4 Mathijssen, Brenda: "Transforming bonds: ritualising post-mortem relationships in the Netherlands", in: Mortality 23 (2018), p. 215–230.

5 Maddrell, Avril: "Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence", in: Cultural Geographies 20 (2013), p. 501–522.

6 Gibson, Margaret: Objects of the Dead: Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life, Carlton: Melbourne University Press 2008, p. 8.

7 M. Gibson: Objects of the Dead, p. 19.

8 Jonsson, Annika: "Materializing Loss and Facing the Absence-Presence of the Dead", in: Tora Holmberg/Annika Jonsson/Fredrik Palm (Ed.), Death Matters: A Sociology of Mortal Life, Cham: Springer Verlag 2019, p. 25–44, here p. 40.

9 B. Graham: Death, Materiality and Mediation, p. 11.

tool for the bereaved to maintain and manage ongoing relationships with the deceased. Keeping the mug one received from a beloved deceased aunt, even though it is rather ugly and has no monetary value, expresses its inalienability as the mug the auntie used for breakfast every morning and thus becomes a way of maintaining and honouring connections with her.[10]

These three accounts demonstrate different dimensions of relationships with the deceased and with material objects and reality. But they also raise further questions, particularly about the ways in which different materialities are intertwined with different forms of postmortem presence and absence. In what follows, this question is explored in greater depth using empirical material consisting of interviews and survey data from a Danish sample.

2. Theoretical frameworks of postmortem presence

Three theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant to the present question: theories of bereavement, theories of materiality, and theories of absence and presence.

A recent review article counted a total of 33 different grief theories in 51 academic papers on grief and bereavement, a clear indication of the complexity of the field.[11] By far the most common theory, used in a third of the articles, was the so-called dual-process model of coping with bereavement, which sees coping with bereavement as a dual and dynamic orientation that oscillates between loss and restoration.[12] It is a back and forth process between confronting and immersing oneself in the loss, relationships and bonds with the deceased, and distracting oneself from it by engaging in other things, such as everyday tasks. A distant second was the two-track model of bereavement, which described grief as a parallel process between an outcome in terms of functioning and the transformation and re-establishment of a new form of ongoing relationship with the deceased.[13] Importantly for what follows, both of these, along with the third most commonly used model of continuing bonds,[14] see relationships with the deceased as an important component of bereavement.

Next, theories of materiality help us to understand and articulate the role of material objects in relationships with the dead. An essential point across their many dif-

10 B. Graham: Death, Materiality and Mediation, p. 90.

11 Kustanti, Christina Yeni et al.: "A scoping review of theories and models applied for grief and bereavement theories", in: Death Studies (2024), p. 1–10, https://doi.org.ez.statsbiblioteket.dk/10.1080/07481187.2024.2370460.

12 Stroebe, Margaret/Schut, Henk: "The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description", in: Death Studies 23 (1999), p. 197–224.

13 Rubin, Simon Shimshon: "The Two-Track Model of Bereavement: Overview, Retrospect, and Prospect", in: Death Studies 23 (1999), p. 681–714.

14 Ch. Y. Kustanti: A scoping review, p. 5–6.

ferences is the recognition that material objects are a constitutive part of society and social reality.[15] Human subjects and material objects are interdependent, defined by their mutual relationality. Brent Plate offers a working definition of "material religion", which works slightly differently here, as a) interactions between human bodies and physical objects, both natural and man-made; with b) much of the interaction taking place through sense perception, in c) particular and specified spaces and times, d) to orient and sometimes disorient communities and individuals,[16] e) to structures of mourning and relationship with the deceased. Material objects are thus not simply tools in the hands of human, intentional subjects. They also affect human agents, their behaviour and identity.[17] A bereaved person may use objects such as graves, headstones, flowers, photographs, heirlooms and mementos in mourning and remembrance. But these material objects also shape the bereaved person and his or her staging of bereavement.

Some versions therefore also emphasise how material objects have agency or agentic qualities.[18] Clearly not in an intentional or causal sense of agency. The cup does not cause the drinking of tea or the thinking of a dead person. But agency has broader applications than intentional causation. In Latour's words, to be part of an action as an agent is to change a situation by making a difference in the course of another agent's action. And objects can do this because they can "authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, enable, prohibit, and so on".[19] An action, according to Latour, is the result of a collective of interwoven yet distinct forces, with no a priori asymmetry between human and non-human participants.[20] Agency is distributed, produced at specific points, as Bille claims, where objects cause events to happen in a sense that makes a sharp distinction between subject (with agency) and object (without agency) untenable.[21]

A third relevant theoretical framework in this context is theories of absence and its relation to presence. Post-mortem presence implies the seemingly paradoxical

15 M. Bille: Material Culture Studies, p. 86; Pels, Dick/Hetherington, Kevin/Vandenberghe, Frédéric: "The Status of the Object. Performances, Mediations, and Techniques", in: Theory, Culture & Society 19 (2002), p. 1–21.

16 Plate, S. Brent: "Material religion: An introduction", in: Idem (Ed.), Key Terms in Material Religion, London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2015, p. 1–9, here p. 4.

17 Miller, Daniel: "Materiality: An Introduction", in: Idem (Ed.), Materiality, Durham: Duke University Press 2005, p. 1–50, here p. 6.

18 D. Miller: Materiality, p. 11.

19 Latour, Bruno: Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, p. 71.

20 B. Latour: Reassembling the Social, p. 72–76.

21 M. Bille: Material Culture Studies, p. 92; Pels et al: The Status of the Object, p. 8.

idea of the presence of something or someone that is obviously absent.[22] Yet the experience of something being there, even though it is not physically there, is familiar enough. Through the absence of sound, I experience the absence of the upstairs neighbour. When I see the empty pedestal, I experience the absent statue that has been removed for renovation. This is sometimes referred to as secondary absence, the absence of something or someone that announces and draws attention to itself and its absence, and is at the same time present, present in its conspicuous absence.[23] Secondary absences are thus intertwined with presence. They do not constitute a binary figure of mutually exclusive opposites.

Primary absence, on the other hand, denotes absence in itself, absence as nothingness. Absence is a powerful cultural, physical and social phenomenon that affects people's lives and their understanding of themselves and their world. It has a social impact.[24] On the empty pedestal where the statue once stood, people begin to place small stones or other objects to acknowledge its absence and to await its return. In this sense, one could also speak of the agency of absence.[25]

A third point regarding theories of absence, in addition to its entanglement with presence and its social effect or agency, is how this present absence can be materially mediated. The interrelationship between absence and presence, the way in which absence becomes present and conscious, is material. The absent dead can become objectified and present in objects that link the past with the present, and the transcendent in objects that link the there with the here.[26] Present absence is wrapped up in material objects.

3. Relating to the dead: postmortem presence and absence

Inspired by these theoretical frameworks, the following analyses explore how relations between living and dead are enacted through material objects, and how presence and absence of the deceased are enfolded in material reality and objects.

The empirical basis is from the research project "Death, religion and memorialisation", carried out at Aarhus University in collaboration with the Centre for pastoral education and research in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.

22 Bille, Mikkel/Hastrup, Frida/Sørensen, Tim Flohr: "Introduction: An Anthropology of Absence", in: Idem (Ed.), An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss, New York/Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London: Springer 2010, p. 3–22, here p. 3–4.10.

23 M. Bille/F. Hastrup/T. F. Sørensen: Introduction, p. 5.

24 M. Bille/F. Hastrup/T. F. Sørensen: Introduction, p. 7.

25 M. Bille/F. Hastrup/T. F. Sørensen: Introduction, p. 11.

26 M. Bille/F. Hastrup/T. F. Sørensen: Introduction, p. 10. Maddrell, Avril: "Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence", in: Cultural Geographies 20 (2013), p. 501–522, here p. 507.

Among other data, it included a web-based panel-survey with a nation-wide, representative sample of 2000 responses (response rate 30) and personal follow-up interviews with 35 of the respondents, about practices, experiences and beliefs concerning death, remembrance and memorialisation. The interviewees were strategically sampled to represent variation in age and gender, included members of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD)[27] as well as unaffiliated, i.e. who are not members of any religious community. ELCD-members represented varying degrees of identification with the church. For pragmatic purposes they were also selected from three geographical areas, with different socio-geographic and religious profiles. They were *not* selected according to experiences of bereavement. Their names are pseudonyms.

A few facts about burials in Denmark are important as a background. First, cremation is by far the most common burial form, chosen in 87 percent of all deaths (2023). Second, according to legislation, remains from cremation must be interred on approved burial grounds or scattered over the sea. Ash scattering has increased during the past 10–15 years and were chosen by 10 percent in 2023. A few (currently < 1 percent, but increasing) are placed on woodland burial grounds, the rest, nearly nine out of ten, on cemeteries and churchyards. Third, most graveyards are owned and administered by the local parish councils in the ELCD and located adjacent to or near the church-building, except for some larger cities, which also have municipally owned and operated cemeteries.

Three domains of materiality stand out in enactments of the deceased's presence and absence: burial sites, photos and other visual representations, and other objects.

3.1 Burial sites and material enactment of postmortem presence and absence

The survey data confirms that visiting graves is a widespread and common practice of materially enacted and mediated relations with the dead. When asked about the last funeral they attended, 50 per cent of respondents said they had visited the deceased's grave after the funeral. 83 per cent of all respondents had visited a grave at all, most of them (85 per cent) within the last two years. 18 per cent, less than one in five, had never visited a grave. A brief historical background is important to understand these figures. From the second half of the 19th century, Danish cemeteries were gradually transformed into memorial gardens according to romantic aesthetic

27 The ELCD is organised as a state church, but parishes have a large degree of local autonomy. The membership rate 01.01.2025 is 71 percent. Centre for Pastoral Education and Research: "Folkekirken i tal" ["The ELCD in numbers"], https://www.fkuv.dk/folkekirken-i-tal/medlemstal.

images as well as rational and modern norms of order and structure.[28] The graves were laid out as small gardens, lined with low hedges, a gravestone with inscriptions about the deceased, decorated with planted flowers and well-tended gravel paths between the rows. In the early 20th century, strong social norms developed to maintain the graves of family members, to ensure that they looked tidy for Sunday worshippers and to decorate them for special commemorations or church holidays.[29] Today, professional staff have largely taken over the maintenance of graves, and the memorial garden is no longer dominant. The once widespread norm of frequent grave maintenance has correspondingly diminished, but visiting graves remains a common practice. The interviews can tell us more about how they function as material enactments of post-mortem presence – and absence – and suggest three main types.

Firstly, it should not be overlooked that for some people the grave and its materiality, including the preservation of the remains of the deceased, means little or nothing. They don't visit the graves of their family members, or they do so infrequently and only to accompany others. Their reasons vary. Some have a strong aversion to cemeteries, even finding them eerie. But mostly it's because the grave and the cemetery or churchyard mean nothing to them. Sören, who is in his fifties, once tried unsuccessfully to find his mother's grave in a cemetery but otherwise has never visited graves. Jens accompanies his wife to her parents' grave. Perhaps he thinks of them as he looks at their names on the gravestone, but no more than at any other moment. After her father died, Mette accompanied her mother on her visits to the grave, because her mother found it comforting. But after her mother died and was buried in the same plot, she no longer visits, preferring to stay at home and think about the good memories. Some may visit a grave or pass by it a few times shortly after the person's death. Jørgen visited his wife's grave once or twice after her death and laid flowers, but he has not been there since, and he has never visited his parents' grave.

Others visit graves, but not often and usually when it is convenient for other reasons. Placing flowers on the grave is usually an important part of these infrequent visits. For some, it is a short visit: they go in, place flowers on the grave and leave. Others stay a little longer to look after the grave and make sure it looks tidy. These visits reflect the earlier social norm of looking after the family's graves. Some think about the deceased during the visit, perhaps looking at the engraved name. Others see the grave as no different from other places when it comes to thinking about the deceased or even finding other places more important. Dorthe sometimes goes to her parents' grave to remember them and lay flowers or a garland, but she is not

28 Kragh, Birgitte: Til jord skal du blive… Dødens og jordens kulturhistorie i Danmark 1780–1990, Aabenraa: Museumsrådet for Sønderjyllands Amt 2003, p. 220–235.

29 B. Kragh: Til jord skal du blive…, p. 239–241.

very articulate about what it means to her. Ole visits the graves of his parents and his son around Christmas and on his son's birthday. The visits are relatively short, he lays flowers and maybe thinks about some memories. But he concludes that these graves do not mean much to him. There is no automatic connection between the loss – even an untimely loss – of a beloved and close family member and the experience of grave visits and their materiality as the presence of the deceased. Susanne's parents are buried in a cemetery near where she lives, and she visits their grave three times a year to lay flowers: At Christmas and on their birthdays. The memories in her heart and mind are more important – the grave only makes her sadder. But the opposite is also possible. Stine visits a family grave far from where she lives when she is in the area anyway. She lays flowers, brushes away leaves and dirt, stands there for a while and then leaves. All in all, it takes no more than a few minutes. Apart from these visits, she hardly thinks about the dead.

For a third group, visiting the grave is more important for their relationship with the deceased. They visit more often, stay a little longer, do things in addition to laying flowers, and are more mentally or emotionally involved. Emilie visits the graves of her paternal grandparents. At her grandfather's grave, a single coffin in a cemetery, she lays flowers, removes leaves and makes it look tidy. At her grandmother's grave, in a woodland cemetery, she sits on a nearby bench and enjoys the view of a small lake. Gitte visits her father's grave with her mother and brother on his birthday. They tell him what has happened during the year, sing a birthday song, light a candle and place it on the grave, which she insists on keeping after the mandatory ten-year lease expires. Jytte continues to visit her husband's grave, although less frequently than she did immediately after he died a few years ago. She sits on a bench near the grave or at the grave itself, perhaps stroking the gravestone. However, she does not feel any closer to him at the grave than she does in other situations where she has a relationship with him. Kasper sometimes visits the grave of a friend who died at a relatively young age. He talks to him, tells him what has happened recently, what his (the deceased's) boys have been up to, and sometimes scolds him for leaving so early. This is not something he does often, nor does he engage with the deceased friend in any other way.

What is distinctive about this type of visit is that it is a way of relating to and interacting with the deceased in the present, being with them, talking to them, even caressing them. Not them, of course, but the material objects through which their postmortem presence is staged. In these cases, the grave and its materiality are involved in the formation of the presence of the deceased, obviously not an ontological presence, but a practical presence through which they can interact. For the first two types, the deceased is present as a past, as an absence: a secondary absence that announces itself and becomes present, or an almost primary absence in which the grave and its materiality are almost a part of the present.

3.2 Photos: visual and material mediations of presence

After visiting the grave, looking at photos or videos of the deceased is the second most common way of relating to the deceased, cited by 26 per cent of respondents. Photographs are obviously visual representations, but it would be a mistake to see their significance as lying solely in their content. Rather, it is the simultaneous visual and material character of photographs that produces the dynamic of presence and absence of the deceased, a materiality that involves the production, distribution and consumption of photographs.[30] At the beginning of the 20th century, photography was exclusively a professional craft. Individual or family portraits were rare and typically depicted people dressed up in an artificial pose, often against a neutral and timeless background.[31] The pictures were placed in ornate frames, mounted on walls or placed on chests in the home for family members and other passers-by to view. Although technological and economic developments throughout the 20th century made photography far more common, the production and supply of photographs was still limited by the requirements of equipment and development facilities. Digital technologies have removed these constraints. Now, everyone always has a camera within reach on their smartphone. There is no extra cost for an additional photo, cloud storage solutions provide permanent access, and social media platforms are easily accessible channels of distribution and consumption. People are portrayed and portray themselves in all sorts of everyday situations, at home, at work, alone, with others, etc. It is no longer just a matter of preserving important and memorable events, but also of documenting the minor trivialities of everyday life. The materiality of photographs is not only about technological solutions, but also about their content, including photos of deceased people.

For some, especially those who do not like to visit graves, the photograph as a staging of the presence of the deceased replaces the presence staged by a grave. For example, Camilla reports: "I haven't visited my mother's grave for many years because I don't have a relationship with it […] I can remember her in my own home. I can look at pictures of her and think: My goodness, what a nice experience we had there together". A few years ago, Bernt visited a grave on the anniversary of the person's death and laid flowers on the grave. But he concludes that what counts is "what you have in your memory and in your thoughts, right, and you have some pictures of

30 Edwards, Elizabeth/Hart, Janice: "Introduction. Photographs as objects", in: Idem (Ed.), Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images, Oxford: Routledge 2004, p. 1–15.

31 Schorr, Sarah: "The Bereavement Project: Picturing Time and Loss through Photographs in the Landscape of New Media", in: Dorthe Refslund Christensen/Kjetil Sandvik (Ed.), Mediating and Remediating Death, Farnham: Ashgate 2014, p. 75–90, here p. 84; Widmaier, Lorenz: "Digital photographic legacies, mourning, and remembrance: looking through the eyes of the deceased", in: photographies 16 (2023), p. 19–48.

the person, and that – that is the best for me, anyway. I think it is". Janne also prefers photos to the grave:

> "I don't need to stand and talk to the dead, I really don't. I think of them when I see pictures, and with the children we talk about… the big one who remembers grandma who had that special chocolate with her when they were young. Or when I look at wedding photos with my grandparents, or pictures of my mum and dad, anniversaries and things like that. You know … I find it nice".

Photographs can bring back memories of life with the deceased, of the past when the deceased was alive, and of experiences with him or her. They make the deceased present as once alive – but now absent – rather than just as a dead body.

In some cases, the intertwining of the visual and the material is very clear in the way informants refer to photographs as stagings of the presence of the deceased. Ann has a photo album with pictures of her deceased close relatives and acquaintances, which she takes out and looks at when she is sad. Camilla, who doesn't like to visit cemeteries, receives notifications on her smartphone's google photo app that shows photos of her deceased mother or other family members. Jytte visited her late husband's grave often in the first years after his death but will not renew the contract for the grave plot when the lease expires: "I have him here [puts her hand on her heart], and I have him there [points to a picture on the wall next to the couch]". And she greets that picture of him every day: "Good morning, my love, did you sleep well – I mean, if you sleep where you are? (laughs)" and "Good night, darling". The material photograph is always at hand on the wall, to be lifted out of its background presence and embedded in a practice of direct relationship and interaction between the bereaved and the deceased.

The three informants present three different materialities of photographs. One is that of being placed between the covers of albums or books that must be taken off the shelf and opened to see the photos. It thus depends on an existing affective or emotional impulse that the photos can somehow help to manage or alleviate. Another is app-generated notifications on the smartphone that blend in with all sorts of everyday notifications about delivery services, hairdressing appointments, breaking news or exercise classes. And a third is openly displayed photos, mounted on walls or on chests in the home, readily available for direct interaction. Recalling the agential quality of material objects described above, these different materialities of photos have different agential qualities, which also produce different kinds of presence and absence of the deceased for the bereaved to interact with.

The photographs work in terms of the practices in which they are situated, and which give them meaning as material objects. They make Ann take out the album when she feels inclined to think about her deceased family, they remind Camilla of

the deceased on anniversaries, and they encourage Jytte to talk to the deceased as if he were here now.

3.3 Things of many kinds

While graves have a physical connection to the deceased by containing the remains and photographs have a visual connection, there are other kinds of objects which stage the presence and absence of the deceased through more diverse, biographical connections. The following four cases illustrate different ways in which these kinds of objects can create post-mortem presence and absence: the nature of the objects, the trajectories of biographical connections, and the dynamics of presence and absence created.

Jens, whose father was a pharmacist, has kept some of the paraphernalia, such as old medicine bottles with his father's handwritten labels. He finds them mainly funny and decorative and keeps them on display in his living room. They are important to him, he says, but much more so to his siblings. It's not that he doesn't think about his parents. He thinks of them often, but mostly when he is doing things he used to do with them, when something is said that reminds him of them, or just by chance. Material 'things' that used to belong to them are less important.

Hans' father was a dairy manager, and, like Jens, he has kept a few things from his father's shop, such as an old typewriter and a pair of scales. He keeps them not to remember his father, but because they are nice and fun things to have. Still, he says, they bring back memories of his father and his life with him. In this sense, they are different from his parents' grave, which for Hans is just a little piece of land with a stone on it. There may still be "bones and stuff" there, but it is not where his parents are. When he saw their bodies, all he saw were stiffened corpses, which to him were only indications of their "gone" and absence. Hans experiences his father's presence only through the memories these mementos evoke. But it is very much a presence of the past, a memory of something that once was, accidentally stirred by objects he keeps mainly as decoration.

Mette, who avoids her parents' graves and cemeteries in general, relates to and experiences the presence of her parents primarily through their mementos. She inherited a high-quality television set from her mother and crockery from her father that originally belonged to her paternal grandparents. She uses these things almost every day, and when she does, she not only remembers and thinks of her parents. She feels as if they are there with her when she uses the plates or watches television, which gives her comfort and confidence. "Sometimes I think… it is nice to have my mum's things because then I have her too. And maybe she is here too, I think". She feels the same about her father when she uses the crockery: "I can also feel that he's here in some way […] And it's really important to me, I'm really happy about it. I use it every day. And that, that is a bit of my father".

Pia, who lost her mother and brother within a relatively short space of time, also finds other ways of connecting with them more meaningful than visiting their graves: "I have them in my heart and … with me in my daily life, so to speak, right?" She has many of her mother's things, and she also got her brother's TV, a much bigger one than she would have bought herself, she says. Her brother died unexpectedly at a relatively young age, and she also inherited his gold necklace, a long, chunky piece that she felt was far too masculine for her. So she had it redesigned into something slimmer and more feminine, and added a heart-shaped pendant. Now she wears it all the time and fiddles with it during the interview. "It really means a lot to me, yeah. Ehh… so in that way I have him too".

In keeping with Danish tradition, the Christmas tree in Karin's family is decorated with white candle lights. Except for one, which is red. And that, Karin says, is her stillborn granddaughter. "We always have white candles, real candle lights, on the Christmas tree, and then there is a red light, and that is Johanne [the granddaughter]. Who is … she is there with us". The family members know immediately that the red light represents Johanne and that she is there with them, visibly and meaningfully. To others, it would just appear as a random object that stands out because of its different colour.

4. Material creations of dynamics of postmortem absence and presence

These four cases can be used to examine and clarify dimensions and differences to material creations of postmortem presence and absence, regarding a) which kinds of materiality and material objects produce postmortem presence, b) how they produce postmortem presence, i.e. the trajectories of their significance c) the dynamics of postmortem presence and absence they produce.

a) Characteristic of the cases above, but also for the rest of the material, is how the objects involved in creating the dynamics of presence and absence of the deceased are quite ordinary objects of everyday life. They can be objects from the deceased's professional life, as with Hans and Jens. But it does not have to be from a remarkable or spectacular career. Utensils from a quite average and ordinary work life will do just fine. The objects can also be quite average, although their age might add a bit to their particularity. Typewriters or handwritten bottle-labels are no longer the average ingredient of a work life.

Other objects belong to domestic life and the private sphere of the home. They have been ordinary parts of daily, regular life in the family. They are not particularly precious or valuable, nor associated with extraordinary family occasions. Neither are they necessarily old objects, rooted in a long family history. It can be the deceased's relatively new TV set.

A third kind of everyday, ordinary object, can be from the deceased's personal, embodied life, worn or used in his or her bodily life, like clothes, jewelry, sports equipment etc. Given these four cases it can only be a speculation whether there is also a gender dimension regarding which objects enact postmortem presence to whom. That aside, the general point is that material objects of postmortem presence and absence are ordinary, usual objects of everyday life, work life as well as domestic life. They are "humble" things, not extraordinary or unique items.[32] Other than that, it appears that it can be almost any kind of object. They are singular things, not things belonging to a particular category or from a particular domain.[33] What they have in common is the link to the deceased.

b) It is thus not by virtue of any inherent value that these objects have the function they have, regarding the deceased's presence and absence. Instead, their significance is rooted in their history or biography. The deceased have used the objects in his or her daily lives at work or at home. Here as well, it is not by being reserved for extraordinary occasions or exclusive, rare events in the deceased's life, like weddings or anniversaries or the like, that the objects have attained their function. It is the daily handling and use, more than extraordinarily significant, singular events, through which the objects represent the deceased. Not life-altering events, but ordinary daily life, make them into mediations of the deceased's presence.

And they do so by concretely and materially bridging the past and the present. But they are not only material links between past and present, then and now. They are material links, a concrete bridge, between the deceased and the bereaved.

An important distinction in theories of materiality can help further understand and explicate various dimensions of this bridging function. A key point in theories of material culture is the essential role material objects and material reality play in the shaping of social realities and identities. Research, family dinners, holidays and funerals all have obvious material components, like computers, dinner tables, hiking shoes and coffins. These components are not just passive tools in the hands of human intentional agency but interrelate with and affect human agents. The coffin in the funeral is not simply an effective tool for containing human remains – although it is of course that as well. It also shapes a social reality of "taking care of the dead," as it is placed on a platform, decorated with flowers, respectfully greeted, and car-

32 Hahn, Hans Peter: "Materialität zwischen Alltag und Religion. Lebensweltliche Verwandlungen der geringen Dinge", in: Ursula Roth/Anne Gilly (Ed.), Die religiöse Positionierung der Dinge, Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer 2021, p. 13–26.

33 Beckmayer, Sonja: "Materielle Kulturforschung und Praktische Theologie", in: U. Roth/S. Gilly (Ed.), Positionierung, p. 40–41.

ried out in solemn procession.[34] But clearly it is not just a body-sized box of white wood which compels these responses. It does so by being recognized as a "coffin", described in Danish legislation on funerals, and well-known from other funerals, in other words as already embedded in social realities. This duality of material objects as simultaneously shaping and shaped by social reality, is aptly put by Daniel Miller in his material theory of objectification, quoted by Mikkel Bille. "Objects make us, as part of the very process by which we make them".[35] This point translates to the issue at hand, about how these objects function as links between past and present. Considering this objectification theory of materiality, the bottles or the typewriter can objectify the fathers' work life or the family dinners. And at the same time, they thereby also elicit and shape social realities in the present, such as a social reality or practice of "display" and "decoration," and reiterated meals or TV-watching. The point is that it is multilayered social realities which these objects are embedded in, which make them into bridges between past and present.

But what might escape attention with this approach of objectification is matter itself, the substance, thingness and tangibility of objects. The coffin is also an object of solid wood, which becomes especially clear when something threatens to go wrong: when it bumps into the pews in the small church, or when it nearly starts to roll downhill in front of the church as the funeral director briefly looses control of the heavy catafalque. In this perspective, the link between past and present is created a bit differently, namely in terms of the continuity or permanence of the physical matter itself of the objects. The bottles are not only items with the social reality of a work life written on them. They are also tangible things the father has held in his hands and has written on with a pen, in ink that is still visible. So has the crockery and the Television set. In their concrete materiality, and the deceased's physical handling of and bodily proximity to the objects, the deceased become present. As the bereaved handle their concrete materiality, he or she can also materially and physically bond with the deceased, touch what the deceased has touched, as if touching the deceased by proxy. The objects provide a material, tangible link between deceased and bereaved. The difference between the two kinds of bridges between past and present is especially clear when it comes to Pia's necklace. On one hand, in Pia's eyes demanding modification to retain its meaning across cultural patterns of masculinity and femininity regarding jewelry, on the other, still the very same matter carried by her brother and now carried by her.

c) The third dimension concerns the dynamics of presence and absence of the deceased. First, the cases affirm the above-mentioned theoretical key point that ab-

34 Stetter, Manuel: Die Konstitution der Toten. Eine Religionsethnographie der Bestattungspraxis, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2024, p. 184–195.

35 M. Bille: Material culture studies, p. 89.

sence and presence should not be understood as binary categories of either – or, but rather as dynamically interrelated. Second, they also affirm how secondary absence, absence which announces itself and therefore also has a form of presence, can be interacted with and related to. At the same time as an absent something – or someone – makes itself known and therefore attains a form of presence, it becomes a social reality. The empty pedestal tells me that something is absent and might prompt me to place a decorative stone in its place, to underscore the absence and the awaited return of the statue itself. Third, and what interests us the most at this point, is how this secondary absence, what Maddrell calls presence absence, can be materially created, for example by material objects. This is clearly affirmed in the cases as well as in the materiality of the gravesites and the photos, but in addition, they also suggest a more complex and multifaceted dynamic of post-mortem presence and absence. There are important differences between the present absence exemplified by, on one hand, Hans' and Jens' fathers, and on the other, by Mette's parents and Pia's brother. In the cases of Hans and Jens, as well as in some gravesite- and photo-materialities, a quite strong degree of absence becomes present. The materiality of the bottles, the typewriter, or the google notifications announces and makes deceased people present and relatable. But it is the presence of someone who is emphatically not here anymore, who is related to as someone locked in the past, by thinking back on life, experiences and events that they took part in. And especially Hans' and Jens' cases also show that one should be careful not to exaggerate the role of material objects in creating this kind of present absence. Even though one might think of the pharmacy bottles with the deceased' handwriting as paradigmatic cases for creating postmortem presence, they are not at all that important for Jens in terms of relating to his father. He'd rather think of him in other, even quite random situations.

The presence absence in the cases of Mette and Pia, and the photo of Jytte's husband is quite different, I will argue. All three describe how, as they relate to the objects, they also relate to the deceased person as being there with them. Mette's father and mother are there together with her when she watches the television set that used to belong to the mother, or the crockery from her father and the grandparents. Wearing the modified necklace from her brother not only makes Pias think of him. It makes him present there with her, even carried by her. And Jytte greets her late husband every morning and night in present tense. It is not only that they are reminded of the deceased and think of experiences they shared with them in the past or of their life together. The deceased are experienced as being right there with them, not ontologically, of course, but practically, as an enacted reality, but one which can nonetheless be related to and interacted with.

5. A multifaceted material creation of a complex postmortem presence

Deceased people are present in social realities. This is not meant in the sense of coping mechanisms of grief, or psychological sensory experiences, but as materially enacted forms of presence. This is hardly a new or surprising insight. What is more striking is what can be learned about the multifaceted and complex nature of this presence, how it is enacted, and what that says about relationships with deceased people. The materiality which creates a post-mortem presence and thereby bridges past and present, is of a quite diverse nature. In addition to obvious forms, like gravesites and visual forms, it can also include a multitude of different objects, which primarily have in common their origin in ordinary, everyday life, not in remarkable, extraordinary events or accomplishments. And the presence they create is hardly a uniform, one-dimensional kind of presence, but rather a complex dynamic of presence and absence together. Some deceased become present as absent, as belonging in the past, participants in present social reality as remembered, thought back on. Others become present as participating actors in the present, who can be interacted and talked to. Above all, their presence is a presence in this reality, and the reality of ordinary life.