religions

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When Death Meets AI: Engaging in New Death Ways in Portugal

Clara Saraiva

Institute for the Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, 1649-004 Lisboa, Portugal; maria-saraiva@edu.ulisboa.pt

Abstract: This paper explores death practices and how societies have "placed the dead". It examines the implications of analyzing death in the digital age, using Portugal as a case study. In a country where death has long been tied to Catholic traditions, how do people respond to rising cremation rates, online memorials, and social media groups dedicated to the deceased? Are they open to "digital death ways", such as AI-driven chatbots, holograms, and platforms that preserve messages beyond one's lifetime? Following Recuber's call for empirical studies on how, when, and by whom technology is used to communicate with the dead, this research serves as a preliminary step toward a broader project on Portuguese digital death practices. It focuses on two key themes: changes in the treatment of physical remains due to evolving perceptions of the deceased and the relationships between the living and the dead (also in the new form of digitally resurrected personas).

Keywords: digital death; spirits; ghosts; metapersons; grief; online memorials; Portuguese death ways

1. Introduction

Towards the end of 2019, the walls of the Lisbon subway displayed advertisements for a new platform called *In Memorium*, inviting people to remember their loved ones online and share memories and tributes with others, even from afar. Unfortunately, the ads were not seen by a large number of subway users or, at least, not for long. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic left the subway halls empty, as most people were confined to their homes. Five years have passed, and the platform still exists, providing a starting point for examining the transition from traditional death ways to present-day digital death, with a focus on the Portuguese context.

In the foreword to a book published in 2018, João Pina Cabral reminded us how Sir James Frazer, at the outset of *The Golden Bough*, presents the case of a fictional tale about the death of a king in antiquity. Frazer is concerned with showing that death, by posing a threat to life as a social phenomenon, paradoxically promotes life. In this sense, death is a rhythm of sociality, and even as each person dies, life continues. Pina Cabral (2018, p. xv) argues that death is an anthropological theme par excellence because it confronts us with the ambiguity of what it is to be a person—an entity composed of body, mind, and social relations.

Following the same line of thought, and as part of the same volume, Maurice Bloch (2018) explains how humans are locked in a process of continual transformation—of their bodies, brains, and minds; their relationships with their environment; and their interactions with other members of their species. He highlights how funerary practices often relate the transformative nature of life to that which is immobile in the inorganic: "Not only is the fast-decaying corpse linked to materials such as stone (tombstones, for instance), but the stone is linked to the earth by means of a particular location in the specific geology

Academic Editor: Klaus Baumann

Received: 3 February 2025
Revised: 12 March 2025
Accepted: 19 March 2025
Published: 10 April 2025

Citation: Saraiva, Clara. 2025. When Death Meets AI: Engaging in New Death Ways in Portugal. *Religions* 16: 488. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040488

of the site" (2018, p. 15). Bloch revisits his theory on "placing the dead" (Bloch 1971), emphasizing the relationship between funerary rituals and identification with a place or land. Based on his work with the Merina of Madagascar, Bloch argues that funerary rituals imply two burials. The first burial, near the place of death, cleanses the body of impure substances. Two years later, the body is moved and buried again, this time in the ancestral grave. Burial in this land symbolizes the reunion of past, present, and future kin. It celebrates the union of family networks and the triumph over the division and separation imposed by daily life.

The issue of "placing the dead" has long been a relevant anthropological topic concerning death and funeral practices, connecting the person to their bodily remains, non-physical aspects, and survivors. What happens when death rituals change and the perception of what the dead person consists of also changes? How do we move from "placing the ancestors" (Bloch 1971), linking the dead to a place or ancestral land, to sending them into a non-physical, virtual world? How do the real and digital worlds connect? How does this shift affect the classical notion of a "good death" in a postmodern, digitally saturated world? Digital death—death within a digitally augmented environment—transforms conceptions of death in society and alters the relationships between the living and the dead. The pervasive presence of digital technology profoundly impacts death, affecting the dying, those who grieve, and individuals who continue to exist in digital form despite their physical passing.

I have argued elsewhere (Saraiva 2016a)—following Hertz's (1960) classical work—that, although varying in forms, all societies maintain some relationship between the two worlds, partly to maintain positive connections with ancestors. What happens when ancestors take the form of chatbots or virtual beings that send messages from cyberspace?

In this text, I will briefly look at how death ways have changed, from 19th-century Victorian "black lace" customs to contemporary scenarios involving cryonics, turning ashes into diamonds or comic book drawings, nanotechnology, robotics, transhumanism, and "digital death". Relevant literature will provide an overview of the numerous subthemes inherent in analyzing death in the digital age. We will then move to the focus of this text: new death ways in Portugal. In a country where death has traditionally been closely tied to religion—particularly conservative Catholicism—how do the Portuguese respond to the increase in cremation, online memorials, and social media groups formed around the death of relatives or friends? Would they accept "new death practices", such as digital platforms and online technologies designed to craft messages that outlast physical bodies or the use of chatbots and holograms as avatars of the deceased, already popular in Korea, Japan, and elsewhere?

This reflection is based on decades of the author's research and fieldwork on death, conducted in Portugal and other cultural contexts, including the U.S. and Guinea-Bissau, and framed by recent state-of-the-art reviews on digital death. Following Recuber's (2023) recommendation to empirically study how, when, and by whom technological advancements are used to communicate with the dead, this text accounts for preliminary research on Portuguese digital death practices. The purpose is to frame these questions through informal interviews with individuals who directly handle death and/or have been engaging in new practices related to digital technologies in handling death. These include funeral directors, creators of a Portuguese online memorial, heads of cemetery divisions in Lisbon, laypersons who have used online memorials, and individuals in general who have been asked about their feelings toward the potential use of digital means to communicate with the deceased[1].

The text is therefore anchored in two subthemes: changes in how physical remains are treated, influenced by shifting conceptualizations of the dead person; and the relationships

between the living and the digitally resurrected. The following two subthemes align with the research strands identified by Christensen and Sumiala (2024) in their introduction to the Special Issue "*Digital Death: Transforming Rituals, History, and the Afterlife*": digital/online mourning and digital afterlife/immortality. Are the Portuguese willing to mourn online and engage with digital ghosts—or not?

2. From Black Lace to Cryogenics

As Melanie King (2008, p. 105) notes, Victorian mourning customs imposed rigid and austere expectations on women, as widows were socially excluded and required to dress entirely in black lace. In the twentieth century, attitudes toward mourning changed significantly, as did its social codes. Geoffrey Gorer (1955) captured this transformation in his seminal work *The Pornography of Death*, where he argued that, in the twentieth century, death had replaced pornography as society's most profound taboo.

The treatment of physical remains has also varied dramatically across different times and cultures (Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Cultural contexts and the social status of the deceased have shaped these practices. Various cultures and modern practices have unique ways of dealing with the deceased. For example, monumental mausoleums like the Taj Mahal serve as tourist attractions, while different burial rituals exist the world over: in Guinea-Bissau, the Pepel wrap the bodies in cloths before inhumation (Saraiva 1996; Saraiva and Mapril 2012); in Borneo, there are accounts of the use of decomposition liquids to cook communal meals (Metcalf 1985). In the 19th century, the British incorporated deceased loved ones' hair into jewelry, and today, people can transform cremation ashes into diamonds, paintings, or even use them to create artificial reefs or launch them into space (King 2008, pp. 110–15). Cryonics offers the possibility of freezing the body for future revival (Bayard 1993, pp. 196–98; Green 2008, pp. 25, 175; King 2008, pp. 182–86). The feelings are the same; the technical means differ. While these practices focus on the disposal and transformation of physical remains, humans are first and foremost concerned with preserving life and defeating death.

The World Transhumanist Association (WTA) further explores the possibilities of transcending human biological limitations through biotechnology. Its "Transhumanist Declaration", adopted in 2002, asserts that future technologies will radically transform humanity, overcoming limitations such as aging, cognitive constraints, suffering, and even our confinement to Earth (King 2008, p. 188). These transhumanist perspectives are driven by a deep belief in technology's capacity not only to defy death but also to enhance humanity by preserving its best qualities and eliminating its worst.

The desire to defeat death, however, is not a new phenomenon. Traditionally, Abrahamic religions offered the promise of eternal life, envisioning the reassembly and resurrection of the body at the Last Judgment. In more recent times, extinction and oblivion have become threats to be countered through exponential technological advancements, including "the creation of software-based humans with fiber-optic spines, their bodies maintained by nanorobots, and their minds uploaded onto supercomputers" (King 2008, pp. 187–89).

Religious and spiritual perspectives remain intertwined with the quest for immortality. In 1994, Frank J. Tipler, a professor of mathematical physics, published *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead.* Tipler argued that theology is a branch of physics, applying "the solid results of modern physical science (. . .) to concepts of an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God who will one day resurrect humanity to live forever in what is essentially the Judeo-Christian heaven" (Tipler 1994, p. 1) in (King 2008, p. 188).

Although there is global interest in these technological advancements, Portugal lacks similar organizations or institutions dedicated to futuristic death practices. To understand how Portuguese society reacts to new death ways, such as cryonics, digital memorials, and transhumanist concepts, further research is needed. This text provides some insights into the topic and suggests areas for further exploration.

3. Unto Digital Death

Using the motto of an Italian podcast, *Digital Requiem*, we can ask, "What happens when something as new as the digital era meets something as old as death?" In a review of the 2023 book *The Digital Departed: How We Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality* by Timothy Recuber, Nilou Davoudi (2024) analyzes how scholarly studies on death and dying in the digital age primarily focus on how the living engage with the digital remnants left by the deceased—such as photos, videos, and messages (Lingel 2013).

However, the scope of this theme is much broader, with research exploring various aspects, including the impact of social media platforms on digital mourning practices (Walter 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Giaxoglou and Döveling 2018); the concept of "thanatechnology" (Sofka 1997); the practical uses of technology in death, dying, and grief (Altaratz and Morse 2023; Bassett 2015; Kasket 2012; Stokes 2021); responses to postmortem messaging services (Morse 2024); and the emergence of the digital afterlife industry (Öhman and Floridi 2017).

Davoudi notes that within this body of work, Recuber shifts the focus from how the living engage with the digital remains of the dead to the agency of the deceased and the evolving notions of selfhood in an era of technological reenchantment. He reminds us that while practices such as remembering the dead through letters, images, photographs, and epitaphs have long existed, the internet has opened a new Pandora's box—one where suicide notes are common and people can "interact" with the deceased long after their passing. Recuber portrays the deceased not just as digital memorials or artifacts but as extensions of the self—as digital souls "worthy of moral consideration". This notion reflects the reenchantment of digital spaces, where individuals can transcend death through their online presence (Recuber 2023, p. 28).

Death confronts us with the ambiguity of what it means to be a person: body, mind, and social relations (Pina Cabral 2018). What happens when that ambiguity is taken further by the creation of digital ghosts, where the memory of a deceased person is shared and debated by 3000 Facebook "friends"? How does one feel when receiving a Facebook invitation for a birthday celebration from someone who passed away long ago? Is a Facebook user an immortal? Furthermore, what happens when, with AI technology, people use chatbots and other digital means to communicate with their dead? This phenomenon is increasingly common in the United States, Korea, and Japan, where enterprises such as Replika and re-Memory create not only chatbots but also avatars of the deceased that can talk and interact with surviving relatives.

In the introduction to *Digital Death: Transforming Rituals, History, and the Afterlife*, Christensen and Sumiala (2024, p. 2) stress that anthropology has revealed alternative death practices beyond the classical works of historians such as Ariès and Vovelle, who focused on the Western world (Davies 2024). Contemporary studies on death and dying include the dynamics between online and offline mourning. Online mourning, in particular, implies continuing bonds with the deceased instead of what has been considered healthy in our postmodern world: cutting ties with the deceased after a reasonable (but not too long) grieving period.

Beyond the novel ways of disposing of material remains, analyzing death in a digital world includes several subthemes: the mediatization of death in traditional and social media (Morse 2018); the issue of digital remains (the billions of emails, posts, and messages

left behind after death) and their legal consequences; and the relationships created and maintained between the living and the digitally resurrected. In this text, we will reflect primarily on the old and new forms of relationships with the dead, in which, following Christensen and Sumiala's (2024, p. 2) suggestion, I envision two research strands: digital mourning and the digital afterlife.

4. The Horror of Fire

In the 1980s, I researched the work and emotions of American funeral directors in a city in upstate New York. Ambiguously conceptualized as performing both "a dirty work or a treasured practice" (Saraiva 1993), American funeral directors of the late twentieth century emphasized their technical skills in creating an iconic symbol—the restored (through elaborate thanatopraxia) beloved one lying in the wake as if in peaceful sleep. They also stressed their "emotional work" with the bereaved, guiding them through their grief.

Upon my return to Portugal, I conducted years-long research on death practices across the country. I observed funerals and interviewed mourners, religious leaders, and undertakers (Saraiva 1993, 1996, 2001). Unlike the American experience, Portuguese attitudes in the 1990s refused thanatopraxia, were horrified at the idea of cremating the dead body, and disliked autopsies, stating that "the dead one should not suffer and have the body cut into pieces after already suffering death".

On the verge of the 21st century, death had already become a professional matter in cities, but there were still pockets in the country's interior where rituals continued as they had a hundred years earlier, with performances seemingly frozen in time. During my fieldwork, I sometimes felt as if I had stepped into one of Ariés's scenarios of "tamed death", where the deceased was tended to by an elderly "specialist" man or woman in the village (O'Neill 1989; Pina Cabral 1989a, 1989b), placed in an open coffin in the family room, while loved ones spent the entire night—until dawn—talking, eating, drinking, and keeping the corpse company. In the Northwest, where I conducted long-term fieldwork, using a funeral chapel was considered shameful, as the deceased was regarded as an integral part of the household ("casa"), itself considered a living entity. Even after death, the deceased should not be expelled from that familial space. The moment the funeral procession left the house marked a profound emotional catharsis, as the closest relatives would remain home to avoid the symbolically polluted space of the cemetery and the perceived danger of following the departed to the grave (Saraiva 1995, 1996).

Over the past thirty years, death practices in Portugal have changed significantly (Saraiva 2016a) as individuals now often die away from home and their loved ones (Cunha 1999). The management of death has become professionalized, even in small villages, as international enterprises have entered the market and acquired small family-run businesses. American-style thanatopraxia has been introduced, and cremation has become increasingly accepted. Immigration has also brought new death rituals previously unknown in Portugal, prompting municipalities to create Islamic sections and ecumenical cemeteries.

The intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and death has further accelerated these transformations. New digital technologies are reshaping social relationships with the deceased and dying loved ones. As the field of human–computer interaction has grown, people have sought more personalized ways to engage with death and dying, both in physical and digital spaces. We now contend with digital selves, bodily remains, memorialization, and the evolving spatial, temporal, and social configurations of these practices (Sas et al. 2019, p. 407). In Portugal (and elsewhere), the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to turn to online memorials, virtual wakes, and funeral live-streaming to compensate for the prohibition of in-person rituals and gatherings. In fact, the pandemic hastened this transition: empty temples and cemeteries, funerals conducted via Zoom, and an overwhelming

reliance on virtual interactions among family and friends to process grief and loss became the norm.

I argue that two key aspects characterize the changes that have emerged in Portugal: cremation and attitudes toward digital mourning practices.

4.1. Burning the Loved Ones

Resistance to cremation in Portugal is deeply rooted in Catholic religious and family traditions. Since the country's foundation in 1147, the monarchy was staunchly Catholic, and its close ties with the Church solidified Catholicism as the kingdom's defining religion. The 19th century saw the rise of liberal and constitutionalist politics, along with anticlerical movements influenced by Enlightenment ideals such as free will, freedom of conscience, secularism, and the separation of powers (Vilaça 2006). The establishment of the Republic in 1910 marked a turning point, reinforcing the separation between religion and politics in an effort to secularize society. However, the military coup of 1926 and the Estado Novo dictatorship under Salazar (1933–1974) restored the Catholic Church's political prominence. Estado Novo ideology promoted a "Christian Reconquest" (Dix 2010, p. 12), centered on the nationalist trinity of "God, Homeland, and Family". A 1940 concordat with the Vatican reaffirmed Catholicism's privileged status, often at the expense of religious minorities, who faced persecution.

The Catholic Church historically opposed cremation, viewing it as a denial of bodily resurrection and a violation of traditional burial rites. Although this stance was officially lifted in 1963 following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, traditional cemetery burials remained the norm. Cremation was legalized in Portugal in 1911, after the Republic was established, and construction of the first crematorium in Lisbon began in 1912, although it was not completed until 1925. With the rise of the Salazar dictatorship and its alliance with the Church, the crematorium was shut down in 1936 and only reopened in 1985, ten years after the dictatorship's end. The political freedoms gained after the 1974 democratic revolution and the 1976 constitution, which reaffirmed freedom of conscience and religion, enabled, amongst other things, the Hindu community to conduct cremations legally, though they had previously been forced to do so in open-air settings. Until 1995, Lisbon's Alto de S. João cemetery housed the only crematorium in the country; since then, cremation facilities have expanded, and by 2024, there were 21 crematoriums nationwide (Catroga 1988; Cunha 1999; Xisto 2012).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, public interest was minimal, and, apart from an intellectual, atheist, or agnostic elite, most of those cremated were foreign citizens. This trend only started reversing in the 1990s, accompanying the growth of technological facilities and changes in mentalities, which came by rather slowly. In the late 1990s, when I conducted my long-term fieldwork (Saraiva 1993), cremation was definitely still not accepted, and many believed that to "burn their loved ones" was a sin beyond repair. In most of my interviews, people were in fact not even aware that the canon law no longer prohibited cremation.

Over time, attitudes gradually shifted, especially in urban centers where cremation is now more common—approaching 68% in Lisbon compared to just 6% in the country as a whole (Xisto 2012). The changes in the religious scenario, made possible by the 1974 revolution, also play a role in the augmentation of cremation. Since the late 1980s, Portugal has become a country of immigration, evolving into a multicultural and multi-ethnic society. The democratic transition, European integration, and the implementation of the Schengen agreements significantly altered Portugal's position in global migration flows. These changes brought an influx of populations with historical and colonial ties to Portugal—such as Brazilians, Cape Verdeans, Guineans, Mozambicans, and Angolans—as

well as migrants from other regions, including Chinese, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Senegalese, and Central and Eastern Europeans, such as Romanians and Ukrainians. This demographic shift has reshaped the country's religious landscape, which now reflects a remarkable diversity. Brazilian charismatic Catholicism coexists alongside Punjabi Sikh and Hindu temples, Jewish congregations (Pignatelli 2020), Islamic groups (Mapril et al. 2019), Evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal movements (Mafra 2002), and African churches (Sarró and Blanes 2009). Additionally, Afro-Brazilian religions (Pordeus Jr. 2009; Saraiva 2008, 2016b), Orthodox Christian communities (Vilaça 2016, pp. 89–107), Buddhists (Vilaça and Oliveira 2019), as well as neo-pagan, neo-shamanic, and neo-druidic groups (Fedele 2013; Roussou 2017; Saraiva 2023) are also integral parts of this diverse religious landscape.

Beyond the practice of cremation by specific religious groups, cremation continues to rise in popularity, despite some cultural resistance tied to the symbolic importance of the body and traditional mourning customs. Apart from economic or ecological factors, cremation is also more common among younger generations, who tend to have a more pragmatic outlook and are less bound by religious Catholic traditions.

4.2. Shifting Attitudes

One factor that emerges from literature (Xisto 2012; Cunha 1999) and from my fieldwork is the desire to free younger generations from the responsibility of maintaining gravesites. Many elderly individuals express a preference for cremation, explaining that they do not wish to burden their descendants with the upkeep of a family tomb. In Portugal, families can purchase grave plots, passing them down through generations, or they can rent space from the municipality, in which case remains must be exhumed after five to seven years for secondary burial.

The concern over future abandonment also plays a role. The justification of "not burdening the young ones" ("putting that weight on their shoulders") often disguises a deeper fear, that of being forgotten. If descendants fail to visit their graves on significant occasions such as All Saints' Day (November 1), Christmas, or birthdays, they may feel abandoned. By opting for cremation and scattering their ashes in the sea or a garden, they eliminate this anxiety altogether.

Beyond practical concerns, many Portuguese are becoming increasingly detached from the material remains of the dead and traditional mourning symbols. Rather than focusing on physical relics, people now emphasize memory through shared experiences, personal objects, or meaningful locations. This shift reflects what Xisto (2012) terms a "de-corporization of death", where the deceased's physical remains are less central, and mourning becomes more spiritualized and personalized. Funeral directors and bereaved individuals alike now speak of "celebrating a life and memory" rather than emphasizing the loss itself. This change in attitudes towards the remains of the dead is significant and modifies the straightforward connection between the symbolism of the remains and where they are physically placed. This evolving relationship with death significantly alters the traditional connection between the symbolism of human remains and their physical placement. It challenges long-standing funeral customs, reshapes conceptions of the self—including body, mind, and social ties (Pina Cabral 2018)—and integrates new digital-age practices into the grieving process.

5. Connecting with Metapersons

In his 2008 book *Beyond the Good Death*, James Green discusses innovations in death rituals, emphasizing the eco-burial movement in the UK and parts of the US. He also highlights how the era described in Jessica Mitford's book, which exposed American funeral directors for their high prices and deceptive practices, is long gone. In the so-called

Western world, individuals have found countless new ways of disposing of the dead and maintaining relationships with them. Death and dying have become professionalized as people increasingly die in hospitals, nursing homes, or palliative care units, with professionals handling the deceased far from their families. Nevertheless, through media and the internet, Ariés's (1988) concept of "untamed death", once invisible, has become more visible, infiltrating our lives daily.

Academics have shown increasing interest in death, with figures such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross defining the stages of both dying and grief. Her work triggered a surge in the literature and self-help books on dying, comparable to the ancient *ars moriendi* ("the art of dying"). Contemporary postmodern "denial of death" is much more complex than it was in the 1950s and 1960s, as Gorer and others portrayed.

On one hand, society tries to minimize encounters with death, rushing through rituals to resume normal life. On the other hand, technological advancements and shifting mentalities have led people to seek ways of continuing relationships with the deceased. This desire encompasses both the hope for medical advancements to defeat death and digital innovations, including AI-driven communication. People want control—not just over their own death but over how they maintain relationships with those who have passed. Several authors (Bassett 2015; Davies 2024; Lingel 2013; Recuber 2023; Walter 2015a) argue that this control and agency of the dead comes to us through the postmodern digital means: social networks where the dead one communicates long after being dead; chatbots and avatars. Artificial intelligence has added a new dimension to the relationship between the living and the dead, enabling new forms of communication and agency through technological advancements.

The digital world has transformed how people engage with death. Virtual cemeteries, online memorials, and interactions concerning deceased loved ones on social media have proliferated. As Green (2008, p. 16) notes, "death ends a life, not a relationship". This notion underscores a deep human desire to maintain connections with the deceased. Digital means now offer unprecedented ways to fulfill this desire.

I want to argue that this digital communication parallels older traditions of engaging with spiritual entities. Anthropological literature is replete with references to spirits, ghosts, and *revenants* (those who return) communicating with the living. Daniel Fabre (1987), Giordana Charuty (1987), and Jean-Claude Schmitt (1994) explored these relationships extensively, highlighting the persistent belief in the agency of the dead. In one way or another, and in all cultures across the world, we attribute to all of these entities the ability to understand us; we feel that they can make sense to us, and we can make sense to them. Thus, people extend to metapersons (Sahlins 2022)[2] the same interpretive charity that makes communication possible between live persons (Pina Cabral 2025).

The new ways of relating to new forms of metapersons were made possible by the internet and artificial intelligence. What is the difference between this communication with a digital AI device and the communication with entities of all sorts and shapes, such as sacred mountains and animals, transcendental forces, ancestors, spirits, ghosts, demons, deities, online algorithms, long-absent relatives, etc., that humans have always communicated with and that are the basis for analysis undertaken by theologians and anthropologists of religion?

Lim observes that social networking tools and platforms have increasingly made it "possible to conceive of the dead as being co-present with the living" (Lim 2013, p. 399) and have active social roles and argues that "virtual technologies are changing conventional views on death" (Lim 2013, p. 400). I suggest that modern digital death practices are taking things one step further. What is the difference between talking to the spirit of a deceased one (a ghost) through the mediation of a ritual/spiritual mediator (as an *espírita*[3]) or having

a chatbot as a mediator? We might not know how the spirit of our grandfather came to talk with an *espírita*, but we know it was AI that recreated the voice and personality of the grandfather in the chatbot. These possibilities offer the survivors a great deal of agency (and therefore, the feeling that they "control" death), but they also provide the dead ones with new forms of agency; instead of just interpreting signs from the deceased, survivors now receive digital messages from a chatbot personifying their loved one.

What happens now in Portugal, with the new technological possibilities of communicating with the dead, where the loved one no longer sends a sign that something is wrong in the relationship with the survivors as they did not accomplish the death rituals as they were meant to but simply sends a message through a digital bot?

In a 2018 text, Jenny Huberman reflected on how, in Western Christian–Judaic societies, people do not conceptualize the relationship with the dead as the Dayak of Borneo, portrayed in Hertz's classical work on death, do (Huberman 2018). Hertz's main argument is based on a threefold structure involving the deceased's physical remains, their spirits, and the survivors. The time lapse between the primary funerary ceremonies and the secondary rituals corresponds to an intermediary period, covering both the time the spirit needs to correctly travel to the world of the dead and the intense grieving period for the survivors. It is the survivor's duty to respect this period and perform the secondary rituals, ensuring that the deceased's spirit can rest in peace in the world of the dead. Huberman argues that, in western societies—specifically in the US—funerals typically take place shortly after the death. As a result, the bereaved are seemingly relieved of the responsibility to ensure the deceased's safe passage to the world beyond. The connection with the dead appears to end there or shortly afterward. However, she claims that the digital world is transforming American death practices, creating something akin to the enduring relationships between the living and the dead observed among the Dayak. She defends that many of the bereaved who engage in practices of online memorialization are not just commemorating the deceased through descriptive accounts of their lives and accomplishments (Huberman 2018, p. 340). She asserts that many bereaved individuals who engage in online memorialization do more than simply commemorate the deceased through descriptive accounts of their lives and achievements (Huberman 2018, p. 340). They also use these online memorials to communicate with the dead, actively keeping them involved in family affairs (Lim 2013; Odom et al. 2010 in (Huberman 2018, p. 340)). This practice mirrors older Portuguese traditions of consulting an *espírita* to resolve household issues by communicating with the dead.

6. A Portuguese in Memorium

In the US, a growing number of companies specialize in managing digital remains[4] and facilitating posthumous communication. LifeNaut, founded in 2010, allows individuals to create interactive avatars capable of engaging with loved ones after death (Rothblatt 2012). Platforms like *Final Thoughts* and *My Goodbye Message* enable users to compose messages that are emailed posthumously, allowing them to "speak from the grave" (Sisto 2023; Huberman 2018).

This research aimed to understand Portuguese perceptions of these technological changes and whether they view such innovations as helpful for the grieving process. Online memorials exist in Portugal but are not widely popular, and chatbots or avatars are not yet commonplace. The Portuguese site *In Memorium* was created in 2010, inspired by the American online memorial *Forever Missed* (launched in 2008). The platform's founder described its mission as follows:

> "Currently, in the dominant tradition in the country, there is a very striking moment in which the shock of the news and the funeral occur almost simultaneously.

> This moment is dominated by loss, and all attention and messages naturally focus on condolence and support for the closest family members of the deceased. After this moment of pain, there are very few spaces dedicated to memory and even fewer for paying tribute to the person who surely left a mark on many of us. With *In memorium.pt*, anyone can now pay tribute in an accessible way to family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who, in some way, have left their mark on our lives. This process of sharing and communication often helps in overcoming the period of mourning, especially for those closest to the deceased".

The site offers a free plan where users can create simple memorials with photos, virtual candles, flowers, and tributes, as well as invite others to join. A premium plan allows unlimited uploads of photos and videos, integration with social media, and the import of content from YouTube and Facebook. Inspired by its American counterparts, the idea behind the platform was to provide families with a way to pay tribute to their deceased loved ones under the motto of "celebrating their lives". It aimed to make stories, photos, and videos available online for everyone to share, fostering a virtual space where memories could be preserved and accessed. Ideally, it would also create a meaningful connection between long-deceased relatives—such as great-grandparents—and their descendants, who could learn about them through the platform's content. Additionally, by promoting the placement of QR codes on tombstones, the project sought to link physical memorial sites with their virtual counterparts, ensuring that the relationship with the deceased remained active and accessible, regardless of the survivor's physical location.

Despite its potential, the platform has not, according to its founder, achieved the success he had expected. In a long interview, he explained that, while it has recently attracted some Brazilian users, it remains far from the popularity of its American equivalents. Even funeral agencies that initially adopted the concept and offered it to clients often withdraw their participation over time. Most users engage with the site much as they would with traditional newspaper obituaries—using it primarily to announce deaths and funeral details—or as a digital condolence book for expressing sympathies. Only a smaller number actively contribute content such as videos, photos, or personal stories about the deceased.

7. "Be Right Back": Portuguese Dead Avatars?

The US online memorial service *Forever Missed* presents itself on the web as a community of 190M+ visitors who have created more than 200,000 online memorial pages to preserve and share memories of their loved ones. The Portuguese version, *In Memorium*, shows 2064 memorials, 1310 visitors, and 9295 tributes. Besides the obvious differences in scale between the USA and Portugal, we must consider the profound importance of various religious views in both countries, particularly in the collective imagination. Beyond the large religious diversity, the US remains a country with a strong Calvinist, Puritan, and Evangelical (and, hence, Protestant) base, which emphasizes the lack of a mediating institution between man and God, leading to an individual relationship with the supernatural. This may contribute to the widespread digital practices concerning death. In a Catholic country like Portugal, despite recent changes, the mediation of the Catholic Church remains strong. To explore this further, and keeping in mind the limited success of the *In Memorium* platform, I conducted interviews with ordinary people, users of online memorials, and funeral specialists to inquire about the Portuguese willingness to adopt chatbots or avatars of the deceased, as seen in countries like the US, South Korea, or Japan.

Companies that offer such services use digital material from the deceased—such as videos, voice recordings, emails, and social media interactions—to recreate the voice, personality, and even the hologram of the deceased, allowing survivors to continue interacting

with them. Therefore, you may come home and talk to the chatbot of your deceased husband or the hologram of your departed daughter. The responses I have received so far all agree that this is not possible in a country like Portugal, as several interviewees put it: "We are not like the Americans or the Koreans". Some were adamant, calling it an impossible "science fiction scenario":

> "If the Portuguese are not even ready to book a funeral online (there is more than one enterprise doing it, but people do not adhere), they would certainly not accept chatbots. The generation of people who are now in their fifties or sixties do not handle the digital well, and youngsters do not care so much about their elderly dead".

Even in an interview with one of the first enthusiastic users of *In Memorium*, an expert on computers and social networks, he classified the possibility of creating an avatar of his beloved dead father as unthinkable:

> "I would never let the machines beat me! I do not like or use AI because it would mean that a machine is above me, which I do not admit to! Humans have to command the machines, not the other way around"!

Another funeral director, responsible for the largest international funeral enterprise, is a firm believer in the importance of performing death rituals fully. He states that when rituals happen too quickly—such as skipping the traditional Portuguese wake, which lasts several hours into the night—there are often problems with the grieving process. Still, he believes the chatbot/avatar scenario would not be feasible in contemporary Portugal. He argues that people tend to fulfill customary rituals when death occurs, but over time, the desire to continue a relationship with the deceased gradually fades. The company once tried to implement a service where the bereaved family provided photos of the deceased, which were then displayed on a large screen during the wake, so people could reminisce about the happy moments the deceased lived. These photos were later copied to a tablet, which was given to the family, allowing them to relive those memories in a virtual way. The idea, highlighting what Davies (2024, p. 8) calls "the ludic character of ritual", was to help in the grieving process, allowing individuals to reflect on the deceased's positive moments rather than focusing on the death itself. However, the acceptance of this service was low:

> "When the impact of the death vanishes, people want to move on. Of course there are individuals who go three times a day to the cemetery to visit the grave of the dead wife, but in general the impetus is to carry on with life, and not keep remembering the dead. Would such thing as chatbots or avatars of the dead ones work in Portugal? I do not think so, not in a romantic and Latin culture like ours. I would certainly not invest in that, from an enterprise economic logic".

In several interviews with laypeople, the idea of a Black Mirror-style "Be Right Back"[5] avatar was met with consensus: people found it creepy, macabre, and unacceptable. Even though many internet social groups honor the memory of deceased friends or relatives, most comments I received mentioned how awful it is to receive a post or message from a deceased cousin inviting them to his/her birthday when the person has been dead for years. Individuals also believe that the digital world is for "others", "the outside world, the world of digital social interactions", but maintaining a relationship with loved ones requires something physical and tangible. For instance, one young man whose brother died in a car accident saved up money to commission a large mural on a building wall so his brother could be "physically" present, visible to relatives, friends, or passers-by who knew him, and "not just on Facebook", as he put it.

Individuals believe that *almas* (souls) are beings "like us", and therefore it is normal to communicate with them: "He was my uncle, my grandfather. . ." They do not see chatbots or other digital devices, which are created by machines, as the same. We might ask: was the *espírita* not a mediator between a concerned survivor and the deceased uncle, whose spirit haunted the house because his promise to Our Lady of Fatima had not been fulfilled and thus his spirit could not rest in peace? The *espírita* interprets the uncle's communication, the survivors fulfill his promise, and the spirit rests in peace and ceases to communicate. Can a chatbot serve as a mediator between the living and the dead? Both are the voices of the deceased. While the *espírita* seeks to free one from the *encosto* (the unwanted ghostly presence), which is the remnant of someone who should be properly placed in the world of the dead to free the living from their influence, chatbots seem to do the opposite: to facilitate and even encourage the continuation of the relationship with the dead.

Hermínia is a woman I often accompanied during my fieldwork in a village in Northwestern Portugal about twenty years ago. We would visit an *espírita* because things in her house were not going well, and there was suspicion that the spirit of a dead uncle was trying to communicate. On several occasions, the spirit of the deceased relative did indeed speak through the mouth of the *espírita*. Other times, the *espírita* would close her eyes and relay what the uncle was communicating. This was not an isolated case; it was (and still is) common for people to seek out a mediator between the living and the dead. A few months ago, when I asked her how she would feel about communicating with her dear uncle through a chatbot (and possibly receiving a response), she immediately exclaimed:

> "Jesus! That is unthinkable! The spirit of my uncle was there, in that room, when I spoke with him. He was a person, like us, a part of our family. What you're talking about is something produced by a machine! It has nothing to do with us. A machine is not a person, and it is not family"!

When I reminded her that the chatbot would have the same voice and manner of speaking as her uncle, just as the *espírita* did when she embodied the uncle's spirit, Hermínia paused and commented, "True. . . but still, it is a machine, just like a cell phone. . ." Still, both the *espírita* and the chatbot are mediators between the two worlds: that of the living and that of the dead.

I argue that the relationship people establish with the dead through chatbots is, *mutatis mutandis*, of the same nature as the relationships they establish with spirits of the deceased who come to communicate with them. Often, spirits (*encostos*) come to signal that something is wrong—they want to beg forgiveness for something they did while alive but never had a chance to redeem or to explain a promise (*promessa*) to be fulfilled with the saints. In this sense, those spirits have agency. The dead communicating through the internet go one step further: in our digitally saturated society, the dead also want to communicate using modern technologies. Therefore, does the digital world augment the agency of the dead? It allows the dying to have more agency—through blogs by dying individuals or by planning their posthumous agency (such as programming messages to be sent periodically to specific survivors or groups of friends), maintaining the flow of communication after they are gone. The dying uncle in rural Northwestern Portugal did not know his spirit would communicate, but he probably felt uneasy knowing he was dying without fulfilling his promise. This is why so many demands and wishes are made by dying individuals, urging those around them to make promises that may be uncertain or even unlikely to fulfill.

8. Grieving in Portuguese

Communicating with the dead through virtual means is now in fashion, as biological death is increasingly less congruent with social death in a world of hyper-connectivity (Huberman 2018, p. 334). Some argue that digital means have democratized death rituals

and mourning processes, as one can do it online without paying expensive undertakers or psychological counseling. The internet provides grievers with a public forum to express their feelings, allowing everyone to extend their grieving processes across time and space. The deceased may be kept "alive" or remain in circulation through the posts of online friends and others: "The active use of profile pages of deceased users raises questions about the nature of death in this sociotechnical context" (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010, p. 1).

Without a doubt, digital saturation in society impacts death: the dying, those in grief, and those who remain active in digital form despite their physical death (Christensen and Sumiala 2024, p. 2). The transition to online protocols has disrupted traditional patterns of grieving (Lingel 2013). The question of whether digital communication and the creation of chatbots and avatars actually helps individuals in grief is a complicated one. In my interviews, all individuals agreed that this is a very intimate and personal matter, and people may react in various ways: it may help some and not others.

In her 2015 text, Debra Bassett argues that current trends on grief moved away from the letting go theories of Freud and Kubler-Ross in favor of Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's continuing bonds approach (Walter 2015a). Maintaining relationships with the dead is no longer seen as unhealthy for mourners but rather as a meaningful and possible way (amongst others) to process grief (Morse 2024). Pennington (2013) has shown how Facebook users "do not de-friend the dead" but renegotiate their relationship with them, redefining the bonds, even if they do not actively engage with the virtual online personas residing in cyberspace. Kasket's (2012) theory that there is an overall perception that "the dead are listening" online confirms the continuation of (more or less) active bonds (Bassett 2015).

Grief is often understood either as a universal experience shared by most bereaved individuals or as a process with a common form, pattern, or goal applicable to all. O'Connor (2024) stands against this "grief universalism", arguing that different forms of grief should be acknowledged. Analyzing the often-overlooked emphasis in the Continuing Bonds theory (Klass 2006) on how social, cultural, and temporal contexts shape the ways in which bonds are maintained, I suggest, in line with O'Connor, that bond continuation in simulated engagement is also deeply influenced by the bereaved person's social, cultural, temporal, religious, or ethnic background. Since digital technologies have opened up a host of new possibilities for post mortem self-presentation and agency exists on both sides—the dead and the living—I would further suggest that context is important for both the bereaved and the dying. Multiple forms of continuing bonds may exist for reasons that go beyond grief. It may happen, as O'Connor (2024, p. 4) suggests, that a grieving person is motivated to engage with a digital simulation of their deceased loved one not only out of personal desire but also due to the influence of others in their grief network who have done the same. This is one more reason to follow Recuber's (2023, p. 4) recommendation on the need to study empirically how, when, and by whom technological online advances are used to communicate with the dead. Morse's (2024) research in Israel serves as a strong example of the insights that empirical studies can provide. In Portugal, while the country has a predominantly Catholic background, its contemporary cultural and religious diversity has to be taken into account.

In my interviews, individuals reiterated how personal the grieving process is and how interactive photos of the deceased, messages coming "from the grave", commemoration websites, memorialized profiles (Altaratz and Morse 2023), chatbots, or other digital technologies may or may not facilitate the mourning process, depending on the social context, the personality of the bereaved, their spiritual convictions, the circumstances of death, and the type of relationship they had with the deceased. Furthermore, if online practices of coping with death began since the early days of the use of the internet, individuals have mixed feelings and report varied experiences processing loss via digital platforms (Morse

2024, pp. 243–44). Pervasive mobile social media facilitates social interaction anytime, anywhere—not only among mourners but also with the deceased (Walter 2015a). If digital technologies do facilitate posthumous bonds, it remains to be analyzed whether it is a good thing to maintain them long-term. In fact, as Davies (2024, p. 9) recalls, there is a sort of contradiction in talking about "continuing bonds" in a dual perspective if the "dead are part of the living" in our memory, emotions, dreams, and even our sense of embodiment. Mediatizing emotions and affects in digital mourning practices is not an easy task (Giaxoglou and Döveling 2018, pp. 2–3), and it requires understanding that social media platforms are new mourning spaces that are not disconnected from other social spaces (Wagner 2018).

As Recuber (2023, p. 7) mentions, quoting a critic on the ethics of postmortem communication who uses the character in the famous Alfred Hitchcock film *Psycho*, "Some may argue that pretending to conduct conversations with the dearly departed is merely a coping mechanism, but to me it is like Norman Bates keeping his mother in the fruit cellar. Sometimes it is good not to talk".

9. Conclusions: Portuguese Digital Ghosts?

Hertz has shown that there are very few societies—outside the Western ones—where people believe that the deceased are either entirely alive or entirely dead (Bloch 1971). There is always an intermediary state—Turner's famous liminality—which triggers a period, varying in length, during which the dead—whether referred to as their soul, spirit, or something else—engage in a journey to become a "real dead", properly placed in the world of the dead. Becoming a "real dead" has never prevented the deceased from communicating with the living. . . or the living from communicating with the departed.

With the rise of online memorials, social media accounts where people discuss and grieve their loved ones, the internet has become a medium that transcends death, crosses religious borders, and is accessible to anyone with a mobile phone. Digital death brings transformations in society's conceptions of death and alters the relationship between the living and the dead. But to what extent does it alter it? Bloch (1971) claimed that understanding death requires understanding the conception of the person as a bounded (delimited) individual within each culture. This bounded individual is a self that is part of a larger whole; when they die, their self remains embedded in networks and communities and continues to engage in limited forms of contact and communication, exchanging emotions and affections with others in the digital society. This agency of the dead transforms them into "digital souls" (Recuber 2023, p. 9). Precisely, this is the idea behind recognizing the concept of metaperson: the fact that our presence as communicative beings involved in social life is not limited to living entities. However, if there are no living beings (persons wakenly alive in the world), there are no metapersons (Pina Cabral 2025).

Beyond the pursuit of far-fetched technologies aimed at achieving immortality, simple digital tools—such as blogs, social networking sites, hashtags, postmortem memorials, messaging services, and AI chatbots—are already shaping how we engage with the deceased. . . and how they engage with us. Postmortem messaging services are just one of the many ways people are using online tools to extend their presence beyond their lifetime. This is not a vision of some utopian or dystopian future; rather, these technologies are redefining death in practical and accessible ways, enabling loved ones to continue "speaking" to us even after they are gone (Recuber 2023, pp. 5–8).

The material from the conducted interviews points to a Portuguese reluctance to enter the digital death age and a kind of re-enchanted digital way to enhance communication between the living and the dead. The one online memorial platform has not been as successful as its founder imagined; there are no enterprises offering chatbots of the dead to

communicate with the living. In spite of the wide use of social media, in many interviews the idea that the communication with the dead must be kept to its usual mediators, in a predominantly Catholic society—the *espírita*, the saints, and the priest; "It was awful receiving a Facebook invitation from my dear cousin to his birthday celebration, as he passed away five years ago"!

I believe the changes will occur, some faster (as postmortem messaging and memorials are already here) and others at a slower pace. I recall once, in the late 1990s, during fieldwork in the hills of Northwestern Portugal, hearing an old woman sitting on top of a hay wagon asking her son if he had turned off the computer. I was with an older ethnologist, one of the founders of the Museum of Ethnology, who had conducted his fieldwork mainly in the 1960s. He looked at me and commented on how fast things had changed and how we were witnessing the coexistence of two worlds separated by several centuries. The woman had just used agricultural tools dating back to Roman times (like the *arado de garganta*, an archaic wooden plough), which were still in use in the narrow strips of the slopes, while simultaneously engaging with new technology.

Agreeing with suggestion that the dead are our present-day "imagined communities", James Green (2008, p. 85) advocates that "eschatological imagining is a last defense against what nature is going to inflict on us. Given the odds, it seems a reasonable thing to do". The use of chatbots and avatars of the deceased is certainly part of a strong eschatological imagination. Since the Portuguese do not lack imagination, are they just too tied to traditional death ways? Does the move towards digital forms of the presence of the dead represent a danger, or will they facilitate the grieving process?

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: There is thus far no archives for this data.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Assuming this as the beginning of deeper research, the main purpose of this text is to outline the key issues at stake in the Portuguese context. To this end, I conducted interviews with ordinary people, users of online memorials, and funeral and cemetery specialists. The interviews were carried out in the Greater Lisbon area using qualitative methodologies—informal, open-ended interviews. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 65 years.

2 Marshall Sahlins (2022) refers to metapersons a worldwide phenomenon, defining them as gods and minor deities, ancestral spirits, demons, indwelling souls in animals and plants, who act as the intimate, everyday agents of human success or ruin.

3 Spiritual medium. Designation given to a woman—in this case—who, through mediumship, communicates with the spirits of the dead.

4 The issue of the care of one's digital remains and of the "digital death manager", a person chosen by the individual while alive to manage his digital remains after he/she is gone (Sisto 2023, pp. 14–9) will not be addressed here. We will also not address the legal and ethical aspects of the digital will.

5 Episode of the Netflix series Black Mirror, broadcasted in 2013, where the widow of a young man killed in a car accident, devastated by grief, hires the services of a company that uses his past online communications and social media profiles, to create a chatbot that reproduces his voice and personality with which Martha is able to talk and interact.

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