



Call for Papers

Thanatomeia. Death, Mourning, and Technological Afterlives

Edited by Pietro Conte, Maria Serafini, and Johanna Sumiala

Deadline for submissions: 31 January 2026



Digitally altered version of *The Séance*, Johnny Craig, 1952

Online Open Access Journal "AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images"

Recent technologies (like virtual and augmented reality) have given new impulse to a type of images that negate themselves as such and that can therefore be named "an-icons". Traditional images are grounded in a material medium; they are separated from their context by framing devices; and they refer to something in the real world. By contrast, an-icons conceal their mediateness, ideally getting rid of any framing devices, and aim at constituting autonomous quasi-real worlds. The result is a radical "environmentalization" of images that ask to be inhabited and experienced more than viewed and observed.

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As Robert Hertz observed in his seminal essay “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death” (1907), “in constituting the society of the dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself.” This mutual constitution is never immediate. Embedded in human cultures, techniques and technologies have always played a fundamental role in shaping it, establishing how the dead are cared for, preserved, remembered, represented, and kept present among the living, thereby defining the terms of collective social existence.

“Thanatomedial” names this structural entanglement of death and mediation. Resonating with related conceptualizations such as Marcel O’Gorman’s necromedia (2015), the term encompasses the full range of practices and strategies through which a connection between the living and the dead is imagined and materialized. Through media, death is represented, mourning is enacted, and forms of communication between seemingly separate realms are made possible. As anthropology and media archaeology have long shown, media ranging from the ancient *kolossoi* to modern and contemporary electronic technologies—whether telegraphy, radio, television, or digital networks—have repeatedly been thought of as channels of spectral presence and communication across the boundary between life and death (Vernant 1965; Sconce 2000).

Today, the accelerating pace of digital technological development has radically transformed the conditions under which relations between the living and the dead are mediated. This transformation unfolds across two interconnected levels.

On the one hand, thanatomedial enable new forms of presence: digital environments allow individual identities to be virtually reanimated while simultaneously preserving and reinforcing collective memory through the continued circulation of shared images, visual motifs, and cultural stereotypes (Conte and Serafini 2026). Social media profiles outlive their owners; artificial intelligence generates voices, images, and conversational agents modelled on the deceased; virtual and extended reality promise encounters with lost loved ones (Conte 2020); holographic projections and synthetic performers bring dead celebrities onto the stage once again (Matthews and Nairn 2024). At the same time, online

memorials, livestreamed funerals, mobile practices of everyday mourning, and virtual shrines have contributed to the renewed visibility of mourning (Sumiala 2021; Sumiala & Jacobsen 2024; Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska 2024; Hjorth 2025). From this perspective, rather than presuming either a decisive break with the past or its seamless continuation, this issue of *An-Icon Journal* examines how inherited desires and media imaginaries are reconfigured within contemporary infrastructures, political economies, and regimes of power.

On the other hand, the notion of thanatomedial draws attention to the mortality of media themselves. Technologies become obsolete (Alexander 2021); platforms close; archives become inaccessible; virtual worlds are abandoned; systems entrusted with resisting disappearance remain vulnerable to decay, interruption, and loss (Ernst 2012; Hu 2015); and artificial agents are discontinued, altered, or replaced (Acland 2007; Hertz and Parikka 2012). Other media never fully come into existence, surviving as unrealised promises that continue to haunt technological culture (Kluitenberg 2006). At times, we find ourselves mourning media once imagined as immortal or even celebrated as the *ultimate machines of immortality*.

These two dimensions intersect. Virtual reality, for instance, can stage encounters with the dead and itself be declared a “dead” medium. Artificial intelligence can reconstruct an individual, reactivate cultural remains, and generate companions whose disappearance is experienced as loss (Banks 2024; Donard & Ribeiro 2026). Social platforms can preserve profiles, host mourning, return memories, and eventually disappear with the communities and archives entrusted to them.

Moreover, processes of mediation between the living and the dead are never politically neutral. Thanatomedial redistribute control over posthumous identities and memories, shaping who may preserve, reconstruct, circulate, commercialise, or terminate a posthumous presence. Digital afterlives are governed by contested regimes of consent, ownership, privacy, inheritance, access, and platform control, while personal data may become raw material for synthetic identities and mourning itself a source of commercial value (Öhman and Floridi 2017; Gillespie 2018; Harbinja 2022). At the same time, thanatomedial shape whose deaths become visible, publicly grievable, and historically memorable, and whose traces are marginalised, censored, or erased (Butler 2009; Sumiala 2021). Images of the dead, commemorative hashtags, public mourning, and digital archives may challenge official narratives, sustain communities after



violence or displacement, and transform private loss into collective claims for recognition and justice (Sandvik 2020; Sumiala 2021). Thanatomedia are therefore contested infrastructures through which memory, visibility, agency, and power are negotiated across the boundary between life and death.

The next issue of *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* examines the interplay between mediation, mortality, and survival: how media configure relations between the living and the dead; how technological systems produce posthumous presence; and how media themselves die, persist, are mourned, and return.

The issue invites contributions addressing these interconnected dimensions:

Death in media: the images, narratives, environments, and experiences through which death, dying, resurrection, and the afterlife are represented, imagined, aestheticised, or made perceptible across photography, cinema, television, videogames, social media, virtual environments, AI-generated imagery, and artistic practice. This dimension also concerns the politics of visibility: whose deaths are represented, rendered publicly grievable, amplified, censored, or excluded from dominant visual cultures.

Media for the dead: the objects and infrastructures through which deceased persons are remembered, addressed, reconstructed, or made socially present, from graves, relics, portraits, photographs, and recordings to memorial profiles, virtual cemeteries, deadbots, synthetic voices, holographic projections, and immersive reconstructions. These practices raise questions of consent, ownership, inheritance, access, and authority over the preservation, modification, commercialisation, or termination of posthumous identities.

Media of dying and mourning: the ways technologies mediate death and bereavement, reshaping the ritual and collective forms through which societies respond to the crisis opened by loss (de Martino 1958), including livestreamed funerals, digital memorial rituals, remote participation, public grief, political mourning, and digital protest. This dimension examines how grief is circulated, moderated, surveilled, monetised, and transformed into collective claims for recognition, memory, and justice.

The death of media: obsolete devices, discontinued platforms, abandoned virtual worlds, deleted archives, inaccessible formats, retired agents, replaced models, and unrealised technologies whose disappearance becomes an object of memory, preservation, nostalgia, or mourning. The death of media also raises political questions about who controls technological continuity, which communities and archives are

preserved, and whose histories disappear when infrastructures are withdrawn or allowed to decay.

Possible topics include:

- digital mourning, online memorialisation, and social media afterlives;
- deadbots, synthetic voices, AI avatars, and digital doubles;
- virtual and extended-reality encounters with the dead;
- digital tombstones, smart cemeteries, and networked funeral spaces;
- holograms, synthetic performers, and posthumous celebrity;
- generative AI, cultural reanimation, and collective afterlives;
- posthumous data, consent, ownership, privacy, and inheritance;
- ritual, public, political forms of mourning;
- historical technologies of spectral communication;
- dead media, obsolete technologies, and abandoned platforms;
- technological mourning for discontinued models, agents, and communities;
- the commercial, infrastructural, and ecological costs of virtual immortality.

We welcome theoretical, historical, ethnographic, artistic, comparative, and practice-based contributions from media studies, visual culture, aesthetics, death studies, philosophy, art history, film studies, media archaeology, anthropology, cultural studies, game studies, digital humanities, sociology, history of science and technology, legal studies, and related fields.

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