

Les morts à l'oeuvre

by Vinciane Despret (2023) Paris, Les Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond/La Découverte, 176 pp.

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Vinciane Despret's latest book, *Les morts à l'oeuvre*, once again tackles the theme of how the dead continue their existence through the lives of those left behind, a topic the author has already dedicated a book-length investigation to in *Au bonheur des morts/Our Grateful Dead* (2015/2021b). Although the Belgian philosopher is more widely known for her many forays into animal worlds – where she employs a unique methodological combination of speculative-pragmatic philosophy, Science and Technology Studies, History of Science, and Environmental Studies – her work on the agency of the dead is equally thought provoking. *Les morts à l'oeuvre* is an important book for researchers seeking to make sense of the relationships between the living and the dead, and the many shapes they can take both on a personal and on a public, political level.

There exists, of course, vast literature in multiple disciplines about the dead. Anthropology, Sociology, Archaeology, History, and other fields, all have recorded and analyzed the ways different peoples across the world grieve, worship, remember, erase, and deal with their deceased and their remains. STS has often brought to bear its specific competencies to this subject with studies ranging from how disciplinary memory, and who is remembered, is sociotechnologically mediated (Bowker 2005) to large surveys about “perceived interactions with the dead” (Cerulo 2023). *Les morts à l'oeuvre*, as we will see, calls forth its own research partners, both from within and without the canon of STS.

The book presents its readers with a meaningful and often touching inquiry into how the living make place for the dead in their lives and become able to transform their history into something to be shared in common. The book is structured in five chapters, each analyzing one work of art produced in the context of the *Les Nouveaux Commanditaires* (“The New Patrons”) project. According to the New Patrons’ website, their mission is to allow every person in civil society to commission an artwork from an artist. As a non-profit association, The New Patrons act as mediators, connecting commissioners, artists, funding sources, and local governments and institutions (see Debaise et al. 2013 for a very thorough presentation of the project and its potentials). Despret focuses on works of art which were commissioned on behalf of someone that had already passed, either as homage, remembrance, or other less evident purposes. Despret analyzes the works themselves, but she is more interested in what the person(s) commissioning

these were aiming to achieve by doing so. Therefore, she interviews different parties involved in each of these commissions in order to show us how in each of these situations the dead act through the living, giving their lives (and deaths) new meanings, and, through a relay effect, affecting others that are often much beyond what was the immediate circle of these people.

The reader will not find a chapter describing in detail the methodology for the interviews or for the analyses presented; these will remain implicit throughout the text. This does not mean, however, the lack of a strong thesis or direction to the book, which its introduction makes very clear. In Despret's prologue, she rejects the usual script of the "work of mourning" approach to assess how people are dealing with loss. In Sigmund Freud's classic 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, he describes melancholia as a failure to recognize the loss of an object possibly leading to a pathological attachment, and he defends rather the necessity of engaging with the work of mourning, that is, untangling the ego's attachments to what/who was lost. The desirable healthy outcome would be that the living cease their emotional investment in the deceased, redirecting their libido towards their new reality. What she finds in her inquiry – an *enquête*, as she calls her works and way of working – is that those that were left behind in this case do not wish to "let go" of those they have lost not because of a failure to recognize their death nor due to an unhealthy attachment leading to melancholia, but because together with their dead they can go farther, do more, become something else, while, in the same gesture, making space for their dead, extending their lives.

The chapters that follow the prologue are philosophical inquiries into the nature of the agency of the dead, but they are also five stories to be told in a style befitting them, employing Despret's literary talents already shown in many of her books, especially *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* (2021a). Thus, the book is perhaps more properly described as a collection of five stories where we learn from those left behind how someone important to them mattered, and how they may come to matter differently for others. In these stories, the author often invites the reader to consider that there could be many different beginnings to the tales told. In what could easily be reduced to five tragedies, we find instead hopeful tales that, although unavoidably marked by sadness, show us that the departed can keep acting in our world long after they are gone, expanding the existence of their living ones.

The textual effect is quite remarkable. We are told stories in Despret's unique style of scientific-literary fables or fabulations – a poetics developed in her many texts concerning animals – stories that make us feel and think differently, but in this case they foreground the persistence of the departed, weaving together snippets of the conversations of the people commissioning the works with words from members of the Nouveaux Commanditaires, and quotations from thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, and William James. The most important feature of this style is how deeply it values the experience of the commissioners of the works, and the way in which they narrate these experiences. Those directly affected are the key thinkers of what has happened. It is not a matter of explaining to them what happened through external concepts, because what matters is how their own capacity to connect things, people, and ideas was and keeps being reshaped through their connection to the deceased. Despret cares about how the words being used "keep the dead alive", "maintain the living presence" of the singular characters and personal projects of the departed. Because of these choices in style and methodology, it is helpful to go over some of these tales, to understand

what matters in them to Despret and how her analyses emerge from the act of storytelling.

The first story told by Despret, in Chapter 1, concerns the Van Uystel family. Martine and Eddy lost their daughter Annick in April 2007. She was only 18 years old and her death shook not only her family but also her community in the small city of Diest, in Belgium. At its starting point, this is a more personal story, a familial tragedy. However, Despret shows us how Annick's parents continue to engage with the promise of Annick's life. The work of art resulting from the Van Uystel's commission is *The Ever-Blossoming Garden*, by the Italian artist Mario Airó. As the name suggests, it is a garden with a combination of flowers that make it bloom all year. The goal was to create a place that invited quiet reflection and mourning, where one could be at peace. Per Airó's suggestion, a fountain resembling a brook was also added to this garden, to stimulate a contemplative feeling. This addition is not without a deeper meaning. Annick Van Uystel's body was finally found in water, on May 3, 2007, in the Canal Albert. By adding this element with running water, Airó helps in creating what Despret calls a benign inversion. The water is now associated with the blooming garden, with Annick at peace. Despret tells us of another such shift in the meaning of water that had happened before. One year after Annick's death, Eddy, her father, was presented by his company with the opportunity to go to Kenya to do voluntary work. He hesitated, but his wife encouraged him to go, because that was one of Annick's wishes. There, he felt her with him, as he helped dig for new wells that would give people access to drinking water. In the book, per Annick's parents' wishes, Despret shares ways for the readers to contribute to the endeavors of digging wells and donating sewing machines – another of the parents' initiatives motivated by their daughter's projects – further relaying and giving new shapes to Annick's goals.

The last story told in the book, in Chapter 5, is about Stéphane Albertini's family. He was a victim of the Bataclan terrorist attack that took place in Paris on November 13, 2015. His mother, Louise Albertini, and stepfather wanted a way not only to memorialize Stéphane's death, but also to honor the other victims and to make a statement about the horrors of terrorism. The personal tragedy is evident, but the political and public tragedies are also at the forefront. Two years after his death, Louise was inspired by the history behind Picasso's *Guernica* to ask for the creation of a work of art that, like the famous painting, would depict the horror of violence, the insanity of war, and the pain of those involved. After many attempts to get this project off the ground, Louise learned of the existence of the New Patrons, where she finally found someone willing to make it real. Going over the idea with others made it take the form of a musical piece by the French-Lebanese composer Bechara El Khoury. The result was the symphonic poem *Il fait novembre en mon âme* ("It is November in my Soul"). Building upon Louise's own reflections on this outcome, Despret shows how, instead of cutting ties in order to move on from the loss of a loved one, it is possible to find meaning in creating even more attachments: Stéphane's own love of music was one of the deciding factors. Instead of an explicit denouncing of terror, the musical piece offered an oblique counter attack: music, interrupted at the Bataclan that night, will not cease, and beauty will not surrender in the face of violence.

In *Les morts à l'oeuvre*, Vinciane Despret's style of philosophical inquiry, her *enquêtes*, provides many insights. However, its workings and methods cannot easily be reproduced, since much of the language and reasoning present in the text come from the interviewees and are carefully connected to the academic and literary authors she summons, paying attention to

not let disappear the words of those who were left behind. In this careful work, it is possible to see a kinship with the traditions of the Social Sciences and the Humanities that are deeply committed to taking their interlocutors or co-researchers seriously. Among her references, we can find well-known names in STS coming from Philosophy – such as Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers – or Anthropology – like Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser, or Thom van Dooren. But we can also find philosophers that adhere more closely to their discipline, such as William James, Étienne Souriau, and David Lapoujade, and novelists like Ursula K. Le Guin or Michel Tournier, as well as authors coming from other backgrounds, such as Psychology. However, Félix Guattari's and, especially, Gilles Deleuze's ideas about works of art are possibly the strongest inspiration for this inquiry. The connection between art, resistance, fabulation, and a coming people made by Deleuze is not only often cited, but can also be felt throughout the work.

Les morts à l'œuvre teaches us that there can be another work to be done by the living besides Freud's "work of mourning". In the Van Uystel's case, what started as a family tragedy became a common space for reflection, as well as voluntary work and donations, motivated by Annick's goals and dreams. Her unfulfilled wishes increased her parents' power to act and engage with the world. In Stéphane's case, his death was eminently political, but the resulting work of art avoided memorializing terror, offering instead beauty. In both cases, instead of detachment and reinvestment, the attachments of the living towards the departed were recrafted and multiplied, making space for the dead in the world of the living, and inviting others to inhabit these new commons that were created. *Les morts à l'œuvre* resonates deeply with the field of STS, even if it is not completely situated in it. It redirects the methods and ideas developed by Despret in her studies on animals – much more explicitly located in STS – in order to analyze the practices through which the living engage with their dead and death, devoting attention to discursive, artistic, and vernacular knowledge practices. Its unique approach to the subject opens avenues of investigation where Western interlocutors' relationship with the dead is not treated as a matter of personal beliefs, but as a complex of practices where this relationship is enacted through various technologies of knowing, being, and communicating.

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