

# Ritual Worlding

## Exploring the Self–and–world–making Efficacy of Rituals

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### Abstract

Despite extensive research on the functions and meanings of ritual, the question of ritual efficacy remains a topic of debate. This paper explores how the concept of worlding can contribute to the study of ritual efficacy. Based on theoretical literature and qualitative research into cremation and perinatal loss, it proposes that rituals can be understood as worlding practices characterized by an entanglement of virtuality and actuality. In rituals, individuals frame a subjunctive time-space, playfully speculating with multiple experiential realities (what could be) while being anchored in the present (what is). The paper demonstrates that this intricate entanglement is key to the self-and-world-making quality of rituals and is crucial to understanding their efficacy. Furthermore, it shows that the value of the concept of worlding lies in its emphasis on embodied experiences, the active nature of our being in the world, and the recognition of power dynamics. Ritual worlding enables individuals to navigate the ambiguities that accompany life and death.

### Keywords

Ritual efficacy, worlding, death, stillbirth, cremation

### Introduction

In 2021, Celine was born still. After 20 weeks and five days of pregnancy, she was welcomed by her mother and father, their friends and family members. Photographs were taken of Celine and the new family, and a pink cake was served, indicating the birth of a daughter (Figure 1). Also, a baptismal candle was made, decorated with her name in ornate calligraphy. When Luca, Celine's brother, was born still in the next year, after 19 weeks and six days of pregnancy, the cake was exchanged for traditional rusks with blue mice and, as they had also done with Celine, the parents made prints of his delicate hands and feet (Figure 2). Throughout the Netherlands such birth rituals can be observed. They mark the beginning of life, the arrival of a new human being and the transition into parenthood. In the case of stillbirth, such practices not only mark an initiation or becoming, but also a departure. The ritual repertoires of birth and death intertwine.



**Figure 1.** This photograph captures the pink birth cake of Celine, decorated with macarons and a bunny on top. Next to the cake, a photograph is positioned. In the image you see Celine's feet amidst her parents' hands.

The photograph was taken in 2021 by Gerda Wesselius and is used with the permission of both the parents and the photographer.

**Figure 2.** This photograph captures the Dutch birth ritual of sharing “rusks with mice” with friends and family to celebrate the birth of a child. In this instance, the ritual becomes part of the funeral ceremony of Luca. In the photograph you see the funeral director who is preparing to serve the rusks with mice.

The photograph was taken in 2022 by Gerda Wesselius and is used with the permission of the parents and photographer.



The rituals and ritualizations observed in response to the stillbirths of Celine and Luca serve as compelling examples of how rituals can *mean* and *do* something. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities have extensively studied the symbolic and cultural meanings of rituals.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, they have highlighted the multifaceted functions of rituals, including their role in creating and conveying meaning, fostering social cohesion, and providing a sense of identity and continuity.<sup>2</sup> Research has also

1) Davis-Floyd, Robbie, and Charles D Laughlin, *Ritual: What It Is, How It Works, and Why* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2022); Sax, William S., Jan Quack, and Johannes Weinholt, eds., *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

2) Watson-Jones, Rachel E., and Cristine H. Legare, “The Social Functions of Group Rituals,” in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25, no. 1 (2016): 42-46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721415618486>.

shown that the enactment of ritual evokes embodied, cognitive, and affective processes that relate to meaning- and sense-making.<sup>3</sup> All of this suggests that rituals persist and change over time because they profoundly influence people and can be employed to achieve a variety of objectives.<sup>4</sup> However, the intricate workings of how rituals achieve these outcomes remain an ongoing topic of discussion.

This paper explores how the concept of worlding can contribute to the study of rituals, particularly their efficacy. It proposes to understand rituals as worlding practices characterized by an entanglement of virtuality and actuality, of what ‘could be’ and what ‘is’. It will illustrate how, in ritual practice, individuals inhabit a subjunctive time-space where they can engage in playful speculation involving multiple experiential realities (virtuality), all the while being anchored in the present moment (actuality).<sup>5</sup> I suggest that this intricate entanglement is key to the self-and-world-making quality of rituals and is crucial to understanding their efficacy.

Inspired by the work of Ronald Grimes, who describes ritual as “embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment”, I understand ritual as embodied, condensed and more-or-less prescribed worlding practice.<sup>6</sup> I understand ritualization as ritual-like action. It constitutes action that can be viewed as ritual, but that is usually not recognized as such within its socio-cultural context.<sup>7</sup> Following Bell, ritualization is a strategic or tactic way of acting, often emerging at the micro level, such as the domestic sphere, and thus “not meant to be separated from the rest of life”.<sup>8</sup>

From my perspective, there are important similarities between rituals and ritualizations. Both foreground the role of the body, and they are different from ordinary practice in that they “condense or elevate [...] quotidian behavior”.<sup>9</sup> With the phrase “more-or-less prescribed”, I indicate that in ritual and ritualization we do things in a certain way. We follow some kind of structure in relation to implicit, explicit, informal, or formal rules, and there might be sanctions if we do it differently. With worlding, I refer to people’s self-and-world-making abilities in interaction with their environment. In

3) Boyer, Pascal, and Pierre Liénard, “Ingredients of ‘rituals’ and their cognitive underpinnings,” in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 375, no. 1805 (2020): 20190439, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0439>; Wojtkowiak, Joanna, “Towards a Psychology of Ritual: A Theoretical Framework of Ritual Transformation in a Globalising World,” in *Culture & Psychology* 24, no. 4 (2018): 460-476, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X18763797>.

4) Strathern, Andrew, and Pamela J. Stewart, “Ritual Studies: Whence and Where to?” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Anthropological Ritual Studies*, ed. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew J. Strathern (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 5-8, p. 8.

5) Kapferer, Bruce, “Virtuality,” in *Theorizing Rituals vol. 1: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 671-684. Kapferer’s understanding of virtuality builds further on the work of Susanne Langer and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

6) Grimes, Ronald, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 195.

7) Grimes, Ronald, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 193.

8) Bell, Catherine, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 151.

9) Bell, Catherine, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*; Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 196.



rituals, people world subjunctive time-spaces where they give expression to ‘what if’ or ‘could be’, while being grounded in the context of ‘what is’.<sup>10</sup> People actualize virtuality and call into being what may be hidden or intangible.<sup>11</sup> In ritual, actuality and virtuality thus both exist as dimensions of the real. Finally, I understand ritual and ritualization as a form of meaning-making since any form of human action implies the activation of cognitive processes that enable people to process information and make sense of their environment.<sup>12</sup>

Rituals can involve various beings, including human and non-human animals, trees, rocks, elements, spirits, and gods. In this paper, my focus will be on the ritual worlding of humans, particularly those living in contemporary North-western Europe, since my empirical research takes place in this context. My fieldwork includes (participant) observation of end-of-life, funeral and bereavement rituals and ritualizations, and interviews with people about these practices, their associated beliefs and experiences, and their relationships with the dead. From the perspective of my interlocutors, humans – both living and deceased – play a central role in death rituals, making the practices discussed in this paper largely anthropocentric. However, I propose that the concept of worlding has the potential to expand the scope of ritual studies to encompass the more-than-human world and offers tools to engage with such a political project. Through the development of the concept of ritual worlding in this paper, I take a small yet tentative step towards this broader perspective.<sup>13</sup>

To investigate the valuable contribution of the concept of worlding to the study of ritual and ritual efficacy, this paper begins by a thorough review of existing literature on ritual efficacy (1) and the relationship between ritual and meaning-making (2). Then, the concept of worlding is introduced, and its connection to ongoing discussions on worldviewing and worldmaking is discussed (3). Subsequently, I will describe the notions of virtuality and the subjunctive (4). After these theoretical explorations, the paper presents insights from two research projects in which I participated: one study of funeral and bereavement rituals in the Netherlands, and the other comparing birth and death rituals across various contexts (5). Drawing on empirical illustrations from these studies, the paper proceeds to illustrate how rituals are worlding. Based on examples of ash disposal rituals (6.1), it draws attention to the speculative quality of rituals, and the relationship between virtuality and actuality. Subsequently, by examining rituals in response to perinatal loss, especially stillbirth, it draws attention to the role

10) Seligman, Adam, “Ritual and Sincerity: Certitude and the Other,” in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 1 (2010): 9-39.

11) Jongsma-Tieleman, Nel, *Rituelen: Speelruimte van de Hoop* (Kok, 2002), 229; Kapferer, Bruce, “Virtuality”.

12) Taves, Ann, Egil Asprem, and Andreas Ihm, “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion,” in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10, no. 3 (2018): 207-217, <https://doi.org/10.1037/relo000201>.

13) For a broader illustration of research into more-than-human rituality, see for instance: Chamel, J., and Y. Dansac (eds.), *Relating with More-than-Humans* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); and Pike, Sarah M., *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

of play and the notion of the subjunctive (6.2), as well as the political character of such rituals (6.3). It concludes with a concise summary of the main points discussed and proposes directions for future research (7).

## 1 Ritual efficacy

The main question that underlies this paper is a misleadingly simple one: how do rituals work? It is difficult since there is no such thing as ritual efficacy *sui generis*.<sup>14</sup> Rituals might be efficacious, or they might not be, but any such assessment, whether emic or etic, is subjective.<sup>15</sup> The often-indirect relationship between actions and their consequences, and the influence of external factors, further complicates our understanding of ritual efficacy. Moreover, efficacy is not unique to actions that are understood as rituals or ritualizations. Efficacy also is typical for other forms of human action, such as “speech acts, general causal relations, placebo effects, (...) and luck”.<sup>16</sup> Ritual efficacy is thus a complex and multi-layered concept, which touches upon debates regarding the philosophy of science, epistemology, and the supposed conflict between science and religion.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these difficulties, one must acknowledge that rituals are efficacious in some way. Rituals necessarily *do* something because they include actions that are taking place in concrete contexts. Through rituals, for example, people interact with their environment. Ritual efficacy can therefore be understood, I suggest, as the ability to achieve something in or through ritual practice. This concerns both what people do by means of rituals (ritual agency) and what rituals do to people (the agency of ritual).<sup>18</sup>

The efficacy of rituals can be explained in psychological, social and noetic (intellectual) terms.<sup>19</sup> Psychologically, rituals may have a therapeutic or problem-solving goal.<sup>20</sup> They can work, and may be consciously utilized, to offer stability and structure, and create a defined space for emotional expression or *catharsis*.<sup>21</sup> For these reasons, rituals are increasingly used in therapeutic practice, for instance

14) Sørensen, Jørgen Podemann, “Efficacy” in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006). [https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1163/9789047410775\\_026](https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1163/9789047410775_026).

15) Humphrey, Caroline, and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

16) Quack, Johannes, “Bell, Bourdieu, and Wittgenstein on Ritual Sense,” in *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy*, ed. William S. Sax, Jan Quack, and Johannes Weinholt (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 183.

17) Sax, William, “Ritual and the Problem of Efficacy,” in *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy*, ed. William S. Sax, Jan Quack, and Johannes Weinholt (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

18) Utriainen, Terhi, “Lived Religion Meets Secular Life: The Dynamics of Framing and the Subjunctive Power of Ritual,” in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2 (2020): 195–212, p. 202.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2020.1759900>.

19) Menken-Bekius, Corja, *Werken Met Rituelen in Het Pastoraat* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 2001).

20) Csordas, Thomas, *Body/Meaning/Healing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

21) Wojtkowiak, “Towards a Psychology of Ritual”.

to resolve trauma or cope with addiction, or to support evidence-informed grief interventions.<sup>22</sup> In such settings, it often is the performance rather than meaning of ritual that explains its efficacy.<sup>23</sup> The social efficacy of rituals is connected to their role in forging, strengthening or negotiating social bonds and cohesion, facilitating cooperation with coalitions, and marking, guiding and reinforcing social status changes.<sup>24</sup> The noetic efficacy of rituals implies that rituals communicate. In ritual practice specific knowledge and meanings are transmitted through situational and symbolic communication.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, by means of ritual, actors may aspire to communicate beyond the naturally associated meanings of objects, persons, and gestures, and beyond the actual performance itself.<sup>26</sup> At the psychological, social, and noetic level people thus could employ rituals to do or achieve something, while rituals also may do things to people.

Intentions, expectations, and authenticity have been identified as crucial aspects of ritual efficacy. Intentions guide action and can positively or negatively influence the perceived effectiveness of ritual.<sup>27</sup> Based on past experiences, intuitive causal principles and sensory information, people develop expectations about the efficacy of ritual.<sup>28</sup> Such expectations are also used to evaluate ritual's efficacy. Researchers have shown that in certain contexts, individuals engage in rituals merely for the sake of performing them. However, in different situations, the sincerity of the performance becomes crucial for the efficacy of the ritual.<sup>29</sup> Humphrey and Laidlaw, for example, argued that it can be deemed cru-

22) Gordon-Lennox, Jeltje, ed. *Coping Rituals in Fearful Times: An Unexplored Resource for Healing Trauma* (Springer, 2022); Wojtkowiak, Joanna, Jenny Lind, and Geert E. Smid, "Ritual in Therapy for Prolonged Grief: A Scoping Review of Ritual Elements in Evidence-Informed Grief Interventions," in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11 (2021): 623835, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.623835>.

23) Kwan, Simon S.M., "Clinical Efficacy of Ritual Healing and Pastoral Ministry," in *Pastoral Psychology* 55, no. 6 (2007): 741-749.

24) Hobson, Nicholas M., Juliana Schroeder, Jane L. Risen, Dimitris Xygalatas, and Michael Inzlicht, "The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework," in *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 22, no. 3 (2018): 260–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868317734944>; Mathijssen, Brenda, "Transforming Bonds: Ritualising Post-Mortem Relationships in the Netherlands," in *Mortality* 23, no. 3 (2018): 215–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1364228>; Suzuki, Hikaru, *The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Watson-Jones and Legare, "The Social Functions of Group Rituals," 42-46.

25) Adamson, Sue and Margaret Holloway, "Symbols and Symbolism in the Funeral Today," in *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (2013): 140-155, <https://doi.org/10.1179/2044024313Z.00000000010>.

26) Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*.

27) Strathern & Stewart, "Ritual Studies: Whence and Where to?," 5-8.

28) Elk, Michiel van, and André Aleman, "Brain Mechanisms in Religion and Spirituality: An Integrative Predictive Processing Framework," in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 73 (2017): 359–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2016.12.031>; Legare, Cristine H., and Souza, André L., "Evaluating Ritual Efficacy: Evidence from the Supernatural," in *Cognition* 124, no. 1 (2012): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2012.03.004>.

29) Seligman, "Ritual and Sincerity".

cial for its efficacy to perform a ritual with genuine intent.<sup>30</sup> This corresponds with ethnographic studies that illustrate that actors tend to take great care to establish the appropriate intentions and mental states in relation to ritual practice.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, several studies link the existence of external authorities or agents to ritual efficacy. Barrett as well as Legare and Souza found that the presence of an external agent positively influences how effective a ritual is perceived to be.<sup>32</sup> When such an agent is considered “smart” and possessing special abilities, having good intentions is understood to be more important than performing the correct actions to achieve the desired outcomes of the ritual.<sup>33</sup> This finding aligns with the work of Bell, who shows that rituals infer authorities that are perceived to play a role beyond the ritual frame, such as gods, spirits, or the dead.<sup>34</sup> Rappaport also emphasizes the importance of ritual acts that are “not encoded” by the performers.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, several scholars have expressed caution or criticism towards studies of rituals that prioritize efficacy. For instance, Post has argued that such a narrow focus tends to emphasize functionalism and overlooks the playful nature of ritual.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Goyvaerts has raised concerns about the potential marginalization of mystery or magic in ritual practices.<sup>37</sup> Sax and his colleagues make a more general observation suggesting that, in some Western, capitalist, post-Enlightenment contexts, rituals appear to be ineffective and purely formal, rather than efficacious.<sup>38</sup> However, I propose that these views present a too limited understanding of efficacy. They mistake efficacy for something shallow and, in doing so, they overlook how playfulness, imagination and meaning are key to understanding the efficacy of rituals.

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30) Humphrey and Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*.

31) Whitehouse, Harvey, “Rites of Terror: Emotion, Metaphor, and the Conceptualization of Political Violence,” in *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*, ed. J. G. Peristiany and J. Pitt-Rivers (London: Routledge, 1996), 179-199, p. 181.

32) Barrett, Justin, and Terrence Lawson, “Ritual intuitions: Cognitive contributions to judgments of ritual efficacy,” in *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 1 (2001): 183–201; Legare and Souza, “Evaluating Ritual Efficacy”

33) Barrett, Justin, “Smart gods, dumb gods, and the role of social cognition in structuring ritual intuitions,” in *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 2 (2002): 183–193.

34) Bell, *Ritual*.

35) Rappaport, Roy, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52, <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1017/CBO9780511814686>.

36) Post, Paul, *Klein Ritueel Bestek: Inleiding in Rituelen en De Studie Ervan* (Almere: Parthenon, 2021).

37) Goyvaerts, Samuel, “Rituele competentie: Een werkdefinitie,” in *Met lichaam en geest: De rituele competentie van geestelijk verzorgers*, ed. Sjaak Körver, Erik Olsman, and Sujin Rosie (Eburon, 2021), 263-272.

38) Sax, Quack and Weinhold, *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy*.



## 2 Meaning, meaninglessness, and meaning-making

One approach to exploring how rituals work, is to examine the relationship between ritual and meaning, meaninglessness, and meaning-making. Many studies have shown that rituals enable people to express, construct or play with meaning(s). Some authors adopt a functional approach to meaning, wherein they interpret it as having a social, communicative, or performative aspect that relates to the function, purpose, or goal of ritual.<sup>39</sup> Other scholars have explored meaning from a substantive perspective and have focused on the varied ideas and cultural values that are expressed in ritual elements. They, for instance, explored cultural symbols, the communicative structures of ritual, or they examined meaning by focusing on ritual criticism or ritualization.<sup>40</sup> The work of most scholars in the 20th and 21st century resembles aspects of a functional as well as substantive understanding of ritual. Function and substance, structure and meaning, are typically connected in ritual practice, shaping its efficacy.<sup>41</sup>

The meaninglessness of ritual also has become an important topic in the study of ritual, especially since the publication of the article by Staal on this topic.<sup>42</sup> Staal rightly shows that meanings are not pre-given in ritual, but that they are constructed in specific contexts. Meanings can thus vary and change over time. Furthermore, people can disagree with the meaning(s) in or of a ritual, not know them, not think about them, or frankly not care. Meanings are not necessarily systematic either and can best be understood “as a process and potential fraught with uncertainty and contestation”.<sup>43</sup> Yet, for many authors, including myself, claiming that rituals are meaningless, as Staal did, is too extreme. As Michaels eloquently summarizes: “while rituals can indeed not be reduced to any specific meaning, this fact in itself is not meaningless”.<sup>44</sup> Rituals continue to be transmitted as cultural and habitual patterns, among humans and non-humans, which suggests that they have adaptive, social, and psychological advantages.<sup>45</sup> Rituals are efficacious because they are significant to humans, non-humans, and their societies.

39) Michaels, Axel, “Ritual and Meaning,” in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006), 248, [https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1163/9789047410775\\_011](https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1163/9789047410775_011).

40) Bell, *Ritual*; Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Hutchinson, 1975); Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*; Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Myth and Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja, “A Performative Approach to Ritual,” In *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 65 (1981): 113–169.

41) Bell, *Ritual*; Mathijssen, Brenda, *Making Sense of Death: Ritual Practices and Situational Beliefs of the Recently Bereaved in the Netherlands* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2017).

42) Staal, Frits, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual.” in *Numen* 26 (1) (1979): 2-22.

43) Engelke, Matthew and Michael Tomlinson, *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity* (Berghahn Books, 2006), 2; Stringer, Martin, “Towards a Situational Theory of Belief,” in *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 27, no. 3 (1996): 217-234.

44) Michaels, “Ritual and Meaning,” 248.

45) O’Connell, Caitlin, *Wild Rituals: 10 Lessons Animals Can Teach Us about Connection, Community, and Ourselves* (Chronicle Prism, 2021); Renfrew, Colin, Iain Morley, and Michael Boyd, *Ritual, Play and Belief, in*



To better comprehend how rituals work, I suggest that we shift our focus away from content, from explicit meanings or meaninglessness, and instead focus on process – on rituals as meaning- or sense-making.<sup>46</sup> Meaning-making refers to the embodied, cognitive and affective processes by which human and non-human animals seek, create and interpret meaning in relation to their experiences in concrete time-spaces.<sup>47</sup> Although meaning-making is a cognitive process, it is not confined to people’s minds. Meaning-making is relational.<sup>48</sup> It takes place through people’s embodied ways of being, doing and relating in the world.<sup>49</sup> Ritual practices can play a key role in this process. The embodied enactment of ritual – like any other type of action – sets in motion cognitive and affective processes which result in meanings made. I would suggest that this is especially the case, or to a larger extent, if the actions, gestures, objects, persons, and places in ritual appeal to the ritual actors in some way.

Meaning-making can manifest in both explicit and implicit ways. Individuals may intentionally construct rituals to seek or create meaning, and ritual performances can lead to conscious experiences of meaning. In addition to explicit processes, meaning-making occurs unconsciously as we process sensory information. Certain life events, such as birth and death, tend to evoke explicit meaning-making processes since they challenge an individual’s global meaning system.<sup>50</sup> This system comprises the goals, values, and beliefs that drive people in their lives, such as finding purpose, living healthily, or reaching old age. Usually, our everyday experiences align with our global meaning system, and we make sense of them without conscious awareness. Nevertheless, when experiences necessitate a re-configuration of our global meaning system, rituals offer a means to achieve this.

While rituals undoubtedly evoke meaning-making processes, this does not explain their efficacy nor their power as meaning-making devices. Furthermore, rituals not only concern meaning-making;

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*Evolution and Early Human Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Watson-Jones and Legare, “The Social Functions of Group Rituals,” 42-26; Whitehouse, Harvey, *The Ritual Animal: Imitation and Cohesion in the Evolution of Social Complexity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

46) Some authors speak of sensemaking to emphasize the embodied, aesthetic, sensory and material qualities of meaning-making (see for example my dissertation research: Mathijssen, *Making Sense of Death*) Here, I use the term meaning-making here for the sake of simplicity. Yet, I understand meaning-making and worlding to both draw on one’s sensorial engagement with the world.

47) Holloway, Margaret, Sue Adamson, Vassos Argyrou, Peter Draper, and Delphine Mariau, “Funerals aren’t nice but it couldn’t have been nicer. The makings of a good funeral,” in *Mortality* 18, no. 1 (2013): 30-53; Park, Crystal, “The Meaning Making Model: A Framework for Understanding Meaning, Spirituality and Stress-Related Growth in Health Psychology,” in *The European Health Psychologist* 15, no. 2 (2013): 40-47; Taves, Ann, Egil Asprem, and Andreas Ihm, “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion,” in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10, no. 3 (2018): 207-217, <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000201>.

48) Alma, Hans, *De kunst van het samenleven: Een pleidooi voor een pluralistisch humanisme* (VUBPress, 2018).

49) Mol, Annemarie, *Eating in Theory. Experimental Futures* (Duke University Press, 2021).

50) Park, “The Meaning Making Model”.

they also constitute ways of being and relating in the world. To better understand how rituals work, I suggest that the concept of worlding can offer valuable insights.

### 3 Worlding, worldviews and world-making

In this study, the term ‘worlding’ refers to people’s dynamic self-and-world-making abilities in interaction with their environment. The concept is pertinent to current debates about worldviews, world-viewing and world-making in the study of religion. Scholars in this field have proposed a shift from “religion” to “worldviews” to broaden the field’s object of study to include both religions and non-religions.<sup>51</sup> Inspired by the work of Andre Droogers on worldview dynamics, Ann Taves and her colleagues propose to use the language of worldviews to describe the distinctive ways in which humans are meaning-making.<sup>52</sup> Worldviews, they suggest, are unique to humans since they reflect the human ability to ask and ponder on ‘big questions’, such as “What is real?” and “What should we strive for?”<sup>53</sup> These questions typically become explicit in experiences of contingency or crisis, such as a confrontation with death, illness or displacement, and render visible people’s dynamic understandings of self, the world and destiny.<sup>54</sup> In rituals, people might engage with these questions.

Another related discussion centers on world-making, a concept originally introduced by Nelson Goodman who drew attention to “the movement [...] from unique truth and a world of fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making”.<sup>55</sup> World-making emphasizes a world in motion and the importance of embodiment, emotions, and materiality. In the study of religion, the term has been employed to critique narrow views of perception and to underscore the significance of the body.<sup>56</sup> Taves and her colleagues propose to use the language of world-making (and ways of life) from a different angle, namely, to study meaning- and sense making at the cognitive level for humans *and* other animals.<sup>57</sup> Through the language of world-making, rather than world-viewing, we can explore how animals perceive, make and shape their worlds.

Worlding, akin to world-making, describes how humans and other beings interact with and make sense of their environment and co-construct physical, cultural, and social worlds, for instance through

51) Taves, Ann, “From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies,” in *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020): 137-147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681124>.

52) Droogers, André, “The world of worldviews,” in *Methods for the Study of Religious Change*, ed. André Droogers and Anton van Harskamp (Equinox, 2014), 17-42.

53) Taves, Asprem and Ihm, “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews,” 208.

54) Metcalf, Peter, and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

55) Goodman, Nelson, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hackett, 1978), x.

56) See for instance the inaugural lecture of Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion*, Inaugural Lecture (Utrecht University, 2012).

57) Taves, Asprem and Ihm, “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews”.

practice, language, and ritual. The term is often related to the work of Martin Heidegger and his explorations of *Dasein*, of ‘being-there’ or ‘being-in-the-world’.<sup>58</sup> For Heidegger human beings do not exist in the world as detached observers, but actively engage in creating the world through their actions. The engagement with the world is dynamic and relational, rather than fixed and neutral.

The term worlding also has a link to postcolonial studies, especially the original work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who critiqued the focus on the subaltern.<sup>59</sup> Spivak illustrated how the power held by postcolonial subjects is not simply the result of their own actions or agency, but is instead mediated through processes of centering, through which power and authority are situated in specific groups or places, and worlding, through which a particular understanding of the world takes shape. Spivak’s work is significant because it draws attention to the political dimension of worlding. It raises questions such as: Who gets to decide what a world constitutes? Who is worlding the world? Whose worldings are marginalized?

Such political questions are also asked in the environmental humanities and social sciences. Here, the concept of worlding has become part of a more-than-human political project that considers environmental ethics and the increased entanglement of “human and nonhuman kinds and futures”.<sup>60</sup> Feminist philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway, for instance, has written on multispecies life and (in)justice and critiques the “grumpy human-exceptionalist Heideggerian worlding”.<sup>61</sup> Anthropologists Anna Tsing and, more recently, Michael Hathaway, have studied fungal activities as worlding practices, drawing attention to worlds we often barely notice or dismiss as lacking agency.<sup>62</sup> Focusing on humans, Philippe Descola has argued that different worldings result from different ontological regimes, and thus depend on the inferences that people make about the physicality and interiority of things in the world. He distinguishes four positions (animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism) and suggests that we take them seriously, not as a type of cultural relativism, but as different ways of being and different ways of understanding the nature of things.<sup>63</sup> Authors in this field thus draw attention to a plurality of worldings, human and non-human, and underscore the significance of taking into

58) Watts, Michael, *The Philosophy of Heidegger* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 166.

59) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

60) Kohn, Eduardo, “Anthropology of Ontologies,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 311-327, p.311. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-014127>.

61) Haraway, Donna J., *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 11.

62) Hathaway, Michael J., *What a mushroom lives for: matsutake and the worlds they make* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2022); Tsing, Anna, “Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom,” in *Manoa* 22, no. 2 (2010): 191-203, <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2010.a407437>.

63) Descola, “Modes of Being”; See also: Wilson, Erin, “Solidarity beyond Religious and Secular: Multiple Ontologies as an Ethical Framework in the Politics of Forced Displacement,” in *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and International Relations*, ed. Brent J. Steele and Eric A. Heinze (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2018), 527-542, p. 532.

account diverse ways of being and relating while studying rituals.<sup>64</sup>

Although the concept of worlding is complex, I suggest that it offers three advantages to the other discussed concepts for the study of ritual. First, worlding explicitly highlights the significance of embodied, aesthetic, and sensorial experiences in shaping our understanding of the world. This is an important improvement to the term world-viewing, which merely emphasizes mental and visual aspects. At the same time, worlding does not neglect the subjunctive. It implies an entanglement of materiality *and* immateriality, of object *and* subject, of actuality *and* virtuality, which is key to understanding ritual efficacy. Second, worlding acknowledges the importance of power, as it is situated in individuals, groups, places, and conventions, in shaping ways of being and understanding the world, including through ritual practice. Rituals are not only worlding practices, but they are also worlded. Worlding thus emphasizes the importance of perspective.<sup>65</sup> It invites us to cross boundaries between different human ontologies, between human and non-human animals, as well as other beings, and extends the study of the efficacy of rituals to the more-than-human-world. Third, worlding emphasizes the active instead of passive nature of our being in the world, without implying that action requires conscious intention or awareness. This is an important advantage to the term meaning-making, which has been criticized for overemphasizing intention, individual responsibility, and awareness. Also, this connects well to a rich body of work in religious studies, as well as the social sciences and humanities more broadly, that has been critiquing the emphasis on mental, immaterial, inner, individual, western, and largely Protestant biases in the field.<sup>66</sup>

## 4 Worlding, virtuality and the subjunctive

The notion of virtuality holds a central position in discussions about worlding and is critical to understanding rituals as worlding practice. According to Roy and Ong, worlding entails dynamic self-and-world-making practices that “instantiate some vision of the world in formation”.<sup>67</sup> Rituals, as worlding practices, offer opportunities for people to explore diverse ways of being and relating. Through ritual people create subjunctive time-spaces in which they can play with the limitations and possibilities of their lifeworld. Within these time-spaces, the actuality of life becomes connected to the virtuality of

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64) In religious studies and ritual studies, discussions about the “non-human” and “more-than-human” not only encompass animals, plants and fungi, but also include ghosts, gods, spirits, and ancestors. The environmental humanities may offer a fresh perspective to studying these beings.

65) Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo, Roy Wagner, Martin Holbraad, David Rodgers, and Julia Sauma, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: HAU, 2016).

66) See for an example: Van Klinken, Adriaan, “Studying Religion in the Pluriversity: Decolonial Perspectives.” in *Religion* 50, no.1 (2020): 148-155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681108>.

67) Roy, Ananya, and Aihwa Ong, *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global. Studies in Urban and Social Change* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 11.



life, to what ‘could be’ or ‘what if’.<sup>68</sup> As a result, rituals offer a space for individuals to exercise their self-and-world-making abilities.

I understand the time-space that is created in ritual practice via the notion of the “subjunctive”.<sup>69</sup> The subjunctive (or conjunctive) is a grammatical mood that is used not to represent facts, but possibility or potential. The expression “long live the king” is an example of this. The prefix *sub* refers to that which is underneath, hidden, or intangible, while the Latin *jungere* refers to connecting. Rituals have a subjunctive quality in two ways: they link the actuality of everyday life with its virtuality, and they link the individuals’ subjective internal world with the objective external world. I will explain both these aspects accordingly.

In claiming that rituals entangle actuality and virtuality, I draw on the work of Kapferer, who, inspired by Langer and Deleuze, understands actuality as the chaotic, “ordinary everyday realities that human beings live, construct, and pass through [and which] are continuously forming, merging and flowing into each other”.<sup>70</sup> Virtuality, in contrast, is seen as a phantasmagorical space: an “imaginal field whose force derives ... in the potentialities, generative forces, linkages and redirections that it opens up within itself”.<sup>71</sup> Kapferer sees ritual as virtuality, as a space of imagination and potentiality, and emphasizes that virtuality is part of reality. For him, virtuality is a dynamic process where “participants can reimagine ... the everyday circumstances of life”.

While I largely agree with Kapferer’s understanding of virtuality, I also hold some reservations. In my view, it is not virtuality itself that is playing a key role in ritual efficacy, in shaping how rituals work. Instead, it is the dynamic interaction between actuality and virtuality, along with the playful explorations of this interaction in ritual practice, that really matters. Moreover, Kapferer’s understanding of virtuality appears to overlook the role of human interiority, even though people’s subjective experiences and emotions play a crucial role in ritual. I propose that considering the aspects of human interiority is essential for understanding ritual worlding. This is where the notion of the subjunctive comes into play once again.

Rituals have a subjunctive quality not only because they link the actual to the virtual, but also because they link the external, objective world to individuals’ internal emotions and experiences. These two aspects of the subjunctive quality of ritual are illustrated in Figure 3, which is adapted from Jongsma-Tieleman’s study of the symbolic space of rituals and religion.<sup>72</sup> It shows that each person

68) Kapferer, Bruce, “Virtuality”.

69) Seligman, Adam, “Ritual and Sincerity”, Jongsma-Tieleman, *Rituelen*.

70) Kapferer, Bruce, “Ritual Dynamics as Virtual Practice” in *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*, Lindquist, Galina, and Don Handelman, (ed.) (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2013) [2005], 48.

71) Kapferer, Bruce, “Introduction. Outside all Reason – Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology,” in *Beyond Rationalism. Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft, and Sorcery*, B. Kapferer (ed.) (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), 22.

72) Jongsma-Tieleman, *Rituelen*.

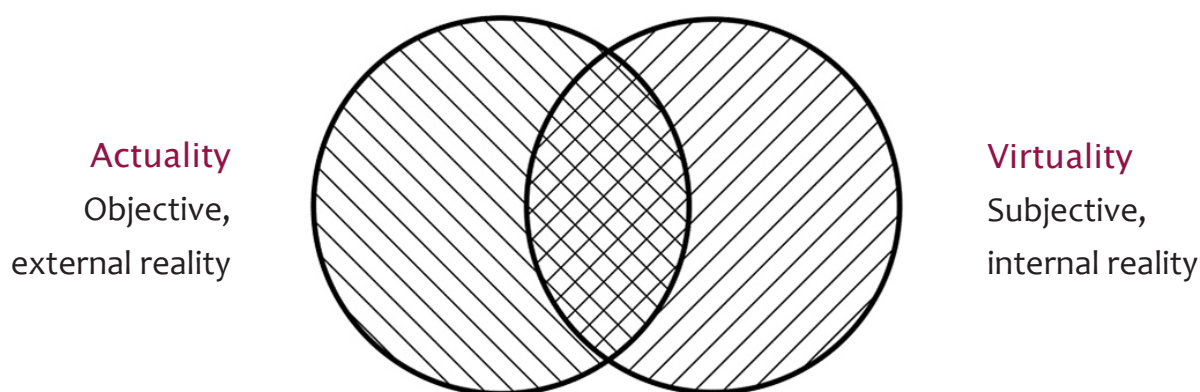


Figure 3.

The subjunctive time-space of ritual, entangling actuality and virtuality, as well as external and internal reality. Drawn from the work of Nel Jongsma-Tieleman by author.

has both an external reality, which encompasses their physical movements through space and time, and an internal, subjective experiential reality that is largely invisible to others. Through ritual, these two realities connect, allowing individuals to engage with their innermost feelings and perceptions in a subjunctive or transitional space, which they can also share with other individuals. At the same time, the figure shows that rituals entangle actuality and virtuality, whereby human interiority becomes a key aspect of virtuality that stands in interaction with actuality. This emphasizes that in the subjunctive time-space of ritual, a person's affective experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and cognition can be expressed, re-lived, or transformed against the background of actuality, of external events in the here and now.<sup>73</sup>

## 5 Approach and analysis

In this paper up to now, I have delved into theoretical, academic debates on ritual efficacy, meaning-making, and worlding, and presented a range of advantages for understanding rituals as worlding practices. Moving forward I will offer concrete examples of how rituals work as worlding practices. In doing so, I will draw on two research projects. First, my earlier dissertation research on death and bereavement in the Netherlands.<sup>74</sup> This mixed methods study examined how recently bereaved people in the Netherlands employ rituals to make sense of a death, and included a survey of 198 participants, as well as analysis of qualitative interviews with recently bereaved individuals and funeral professionals (n=35). Additionally, it was based on six months of participant observation at funeral homes, crematoria, and cemeteries, which enabled me to engage in a variety of funerary and bereavement rituals. Here I will especially focus on rituals with cremated remains.

73) Wojtkowiak, J., "Towards a psychology of ritual: A theoretical framework of ritual transformation in a globalising world," in *Culture & Psychology* 24 (2018): 460–476, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X18763797>.

74) Mathijssen, *Making Sense of Death*.

Second, I will draw on a recent collaboration with Joanna Wojtkowiak, which culminated in an edited volume exploring and comparing rituals at the beginning and the end of life.<sup>75</sup> This volume includes original research contributions from nearly twenty colleagues from various disciplinary and cultural contexts and investigates embodied spirituality through a ritual perspective. Here I will draw on three chapters, written by Lynne McIntyre and her colleagues, Inger Emilie Værland and her colleagues, and Tamarin Norwood and John Boulton.<sup>76</sup> Each of these chapters focuses on ritual in response to perinatal loss, including miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal loss. I will also draw on material on perinatal loss from my own empirical research, especially the discussion on the registration of stillborn children in the Netherlands Personal Records Database and, more recently, the role of post-mortem photography in relation to stillbirth. While the examples I provide from both these projects are not meant to be representative of death rituals in the Netherlands, elsewhere, or rituals in general, they do serve as powerful illustrations of ritual worlding.

## 6 How rituals world

In the remainder of this paper, I will illustrate how rituals world by drawing attention to the entanglement of actuality and virtuality, and of exteriority and interiority. I will illustrate how rituals afford people a material and symbolic time-space for self-making, for meaningfully relating, and for enacting and articulating worlds.

### 6.1 Ritual speculation: Making life worlds in post-cremation rituals

Functioning as worlding practices, rituals have a speculative quality. They grant individuals the opportunity to envision, experience and construct an alternative virtuality that often holds more promising or desirable prospects. In other words, rituals allow people to “redo ways of living and dying attuned to still possible finite flourishing, still possible recuperation”.<sup>77</sup>

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75) Wojtkowiak, Joanna, and Brenda Mathijssen (ed.), *Birth and Death: Studying Ritual, Embodied Practices and Spirituality at the Start and End of Life* (MDPI - Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-0365-5416-7>.

76) McIntyre, Lynne, Bruna Alvarez, and Diana Marre, “I Want to Bury It, Will You Join Me? The Use of Ritual in Prenatal Loss among Women in Catalonia, Spain in the Early 21st Century,” in *Religions* 13 (2022): 336, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040336>; Norwood, Tamarin and John Boulton, “Reconciling the Uniquely Embodied Grief of Perinatal Death: A Narrative Approach,” in *Religions* 12 (2021): 976, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110976>; Værland, Inger Emilie, Anne Beth Gilja Johansen, and Marta Høyland Lavik, “The Function of Ritualized Acts of Memory Making after Death in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit,” in *Religions* 12 (2021): 1046, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121046>.

77) Haraway, Donna J., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 27.

To illustrate this speculative quality of ritual worlding, I will give two examples of post-cremation rituals in the Netherlands based on my dissertation research. This research revealed a common practice where bereaved individuals, over a certain period, placed the cremated remains of their deceased at multiple temporal locations and moved the remains through different spaces to negotiate their relationship with the deceased. Moreover, a significant juncture in this ritual process occurred when individuals designated a more permanent resting place for the ashes, either through burial or scattering. This act of final disposition marked and reinforced a profound sense of transformation, influencing notions of self, the deceased, and their relationship.<sup>78</sup>

In my in-depth interviews with interlocutors, I delved deeper into these post-cremation rituals to gain a more profound understanding of their significance. For instance, I spoke with Anna, a woman in her late seventies whose husband had passed away. In our conversation about the appropriate disposal of his ashes, she said the following:

I don't want to keep him in an urn with me [and] my husband was a walker. [So, I have decided] to scatter him in the park, close to the woods, so he can keep on walking there. [...] Also, a lot of our [deceased] family members lie there, and I always make a story out of it, like: "Go and have a talk with [your brother], perhaps you will find each other." (Anna, 77)

Similarly, I spoke to Yvonne, a woman in her early fifties, about the scattering of the ashes of her deceased brother:

He loved water and Pisces also was his Zodiac sign. So, when we scattered him [in the lake], I just felt like: go swimming. And he is not the only one who swims there, you know. Beautiful, isn't it? (Yvonne, 53)

These two illustrations show how individuals, when they place the ashes of their deceased in a specific environment such as a park or a lake, integrate the deceased into the surrounding landscape. It's particularly noteworthy that Anna and Yvonne undertook more than a simple scattering of the ashes; they also scattered "him" – their spouse and brother, respectively. Through the embodied entanglement with the landscape that emerges in the ritual, they created a place for the deceased's posthumous existence and speculated about their "this-worldly afterlife".<sup>79</sup> In the ritual, the park and lake undergo a transformation: they are worlded into the lifeworld of the deceased. In the subjunctive time-space of ritual, the deceased is imagined to be living alongside other deceased family members or fellow swimmers. This virtual lifeworld is actualized from the perspective of those involved but remains distinct

78) Mathijssen, "Transforming Bonds".

79) Mathijssen, Brenda, "Thisworldly afterlives: the religious, biosocial and ecological sustainability of the deceased," in *The Sustainable Dead: Searching for the Intolerable*, ed. Ruth McManus (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), 10-28.



from the lifeworld of others. For individuals who are not acquainted with the virtuality of the ritual of ash disposal, the park retains its actual identity as a mere park, and the lake continues to be just a lake.

The ash disposal rituals enacted by Anna and Yvonne illustrate how rituals function as worlding practices. Within the frame of these rituals, individuals have the profound capacity to craft diverse life worlds, not only for themselves but also for other ritual participants, entities, and environments, including the deceased. Additionally, these rituals establish a subjunctive time-space that facilitates the expression, exploration, and re-enactment of emotions. In ritual, the interiority of individuals becomes entangled with the exteriority of the environment. As creative ways of both (re)doing and (re)imagining, these rituals thus offer an arena wherein individuals can experiment with a wide array of virtual scenarios, against the background of the actuality of death. As such, rituals worlding is key to meaning-making processes in response to death.

## 6.2 Worlding stillbirth: Exploring materiality, playfulness, and memory in ritual

The speculative quality of rituals underscores that rituals are closely connected to the realms of play and the imagination. I understand play in the most serious sense of the term, as described by scholars like Droogers and Huizinga.<sup>80</sup> Play does not mean fake or unreal, and imagination is something else than illusion or fantasy. Rather, it is the dramatic ability that enables people to imagine something that goes beyond “the factual”.<sup>81</sup> Rituals, to quote the title of a book by Nel Jongsma-Tieleman, are “a playground of hope”. People “perform rituals because they are not imprisoned by the past. They perform rituals to build a new future.”<sup>82</sup>

The significance of ritual’s dramatic ability to world alternative futures was visible in the cremation rituals that I have described but can also be found in other rituals and/or ritualizations. Research shows that in response to experiences of perinatal loss, including stillbirth, miscarriage, and neonatal death, rituals provide an avenue for socially recognizing the life that was carried, for developing a sense of personhood for the deceased child, as well as a sense of parenthood. McIntyre and her colleagues, for instance, offer detailed insight in the varied experiences with prenatal loss of ten women living in Spain, one of them being Irene, a 31-year-old woman who had two first trimester losses for whom she conducted rituals in which the writing of a letter played a central role.<sup>83</sup> When Irene talks about her lost embryos, she says the following:

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80) Droogers André, *Play and Power in Religion: Collected Essays* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012); Huizinga, Johan, and Vincent Mentzel, *Homo Ludens: Proeve Eener Bepaling van Het Spel-Element Der Cultuur* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

81) Murdoch, Iris, *Existentialists and Mystics* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 198.

82) Jongsma-Tieleman, Nel, *Rituelen: Speelruimte van de Hoop* (Kok, 2002), 229.

83) McIntyre, Alvarez and Marre, “I Want to Bury It, Will You Join Me?”.

I thought of them as my children. I visualized both of them. I saw them being born, I saw them growing up, I have dreamed about them. . . and they are people. [...] The fact that I talked to her, even if it was via a letter, and to him, for me it was really important, to be able to say those things. It was the letter that made it possible, to express myself, to talk to them and tell them how much I [...] loved them, and how present they were in my life.<sup>84</sup>

Irene’s visualization of her children, I propose, is a way of worlding, of self-and-world-making. The ritual/ritualized act of writing animates the children with life and appeals to the world in motion. It focuses on being and becoming, on capturing and worlding their personhood. This personhood is not perceived as static, but as dynamic, as something that is in formation. Her children grow up and are present in her life. This is in line with other research that has investigated commemorations of the deceased and continuing and transforming bonds. One example of this is the continued celebration of birthdays after death, for both infants and adults. Material culture at cemeteries, such as the placing of balloons or birthday cards on graves, indicates that the deceased is growing older each year and emphasizes how people perceive of their dead as becoming (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Balloons and birthday flowers at a grave, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the deceased, photograph made by author. Wales, 2018.

84) McIntyre, Alvarez and Marre, “I Want to Bury It, Will You Join Me?”, 83, 85.

In the theoretical part of this paper, I have illustrated that through ritual, people create a subjunctive time-space in which they can engage with their innermost feelings and perceptions against the background of events in the external world. Related to this idea, Terhi Utriainen has introduced the idea of ritual framing. In her study on angel practices in Finland, she illustrates how rituals enable people to frame and deframe their experiences, momentarily transcending their reality while still being part of the social world outside the frame.<sup>85</sup> In this framed space, a moratorium (a pause or suspension) emerges in which people can safely play and speculate with their hopes and fears, feelings, and desires. Or to phrase it in terms of the entanglement of actuality and virtuality: with what ‘could be’, in addition to ‘what is’.<sup>86</sup> The ritual frame creates an aesthetic distance and guides people in their reflecting on their experiences and the associated emotions.<sup>87</sup> Such an affective worlding becomes visible in an account from the (in-progress) memoir of scholar Tamarin Norwood, who writes about her experience of the anticipated death of her son at birth:

Almost every day after Gabriel died, I wrote to him: my imaginary friend returned to me at last. My imaginary child, I thought, neither real before his birth nor after his death, and only very briefly real between. But as I continued to write I began to understand I was mistaken. He was not imaginary, nor had he ever been, and nor was he quite the same child I had written to before his birth. [...] Gabriel was elemental. [...] he wasn’t an imaginary friend, he was Love itself, squirming and pushing and kicking to take up its place in the world.<sup>88</sup>

This account highlights the role of ritual in Norwood’s ability to create a world in which she and her deceased child coexist. Norwood’s act of writing frames a subjunctive space in which she engages with her emotions and thoughts, allowing her child to have a presence and take up its place, “squirming and pushing and kicking.” This practice thus enables her to claim the vitality of her son.

The work of Norwood shows that writing is not the only way of worlding a deceased child. She describes a variety of material and especially embodied practices. One of these practices constitutes the re-framing of medical insights into pregnancy to world the body of the mother into a permanent place for the presence of the deceased. To do so, Norwood refers to the life-long presence of fetal lymphocytes in the mother’s bloodstream, which amount to “a literal embodiment of the fetus within the mother and can be imagined as a material analogue to the mother’s lifelong metaphysical bond

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85) Utriainen, “Lived Religion Meets Secular Life”. See also Mucciarelli’s related idea of ritual quotation: Mucciarelli, Elena, “Tēvāram: Worshipping Gods on Stage” in *Numen* 69 (5-6) (2022): 569-590, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341668>.

86) Kapferer, “Virtuality”; Seligman, “Ritual and Sincerity”.

87) Butters, Maija, *Death and Dying Mediated by Medicine, Rituals, and Aesthetics: An Ethnographic Study on the Experiences of Palliative Patients in Finland* (University of Helsinki, 2021); Wojtkowiak, “Towards a Psychology of Ritual”.

88) Norwood and Boulton, “Reconciling the Uniquely Embodied Grief of Perinatal Death,” 40.



with her deceased child”.<sup>89</sup>

Other research shows how parents who experience perinatal loss are encouraged to create tangible mementos, such as letters, photographs, scrapbooks, and memory boxes, as a way of honoring and memorizing their deceased child. Inger Emilie Vaerland and her colleagues, for example, conducted a study that investigated how ritual practices in a neonatal intensive care unit in Norway can help to create memories and personhood for infants, as well as to establish the parents’ identity as caregivers.<sup>90</sup> Through focus groups with nurses and members of a parent support group, the researchers found that these rituals involve creating scrapbooks and boxes that serve as a physical keepsake and help to construct meaning, alleviate grief, and provide closure. As two of the nurses in their study, Fiona and Pisa, explain respectively, the materiality of these keepsakes enables parents:

To show ... that there was an infant, which the parents can be acquainted with in a way, through the scrapbook...<sup>91</sup>

To create a relation, so that the parents get a feeling that they bonded to the infant; (...) that they are a family.<sup>92</sup>

Vaerland and her colleagues illustrate that these ritual practices play a crucial role in repairing the sense of loss experienced by parents (and healthcare professionals). They describe this practice as a form of coping, and especially as “memory-making”. While I agree that rituals play a role in coping and are a form of memory-making, I would argue that they do much more: they are worlding. By ritualizing, the parents imbue their sense of self and their relationship with their child with meanings. They animate the mementos with their emotions, the personhood of the child, and their own sense of parenthood. Through these rituals, their presence and identities are worlded into being.

### 6.3 Ritual worlding politics: material legacies, identity, and acknowledgement in perinatal loss

Thus far I have illustrated how rituals in response to perinatal loss are worlding: they facilitate the process of self-and-world-making because they appeal to notions of becoming, materialize life worlds, and enable people to experiment and play with multiple experiential realities. However, rituals are also worlding in a political sense. This becomes particularly evident when the existence of stillborn children and their parents’ parenthood are not acknowledged. The work of McIntyre et al., for instance, critically discusses the role of the Catholic Church in relation to the fate of the deceased and

89) Norwood and Boulton, “Reconciling the Uniquely Embodied Grief of Perinatal Death,” 39-40

90) Værlund, Johansen, and Lavik, “The Function of Ritualized Acts of Memory Making”.

91) Værlund, Johansen, and Lavik, “The Function of Ritualized Acts of Memory Making,” 51.

92) Værlund, Johansen, and Lavik, “The Function of Ritualized Acts of Memory Making,” 51.



lack of acknowledgement.<sup>93</sup> Their research shows that, especially when stillborn children and their parents are not acknowledged, rituals can be an important vehicle for bringing attention to the lives and deaths that were carried. Rituals bear witness to their presence and meaning. Thus, through rituals, both the personhood of the child and the parenthood of the grieving parents are acknowledged, whether to individual observers or to society at large.

The lack of recognition surrounding stillborn children, coupled with the emergence of rituals aimed at reshaping this reality, transcends specific religious contexts and extends into secular spheres as well. In the Netherlands, for example, stillborn children were denied registration in the Netherlands Personal Record Database, effectively erasing their existence from formal records. In February 2019 this changed, with retroactive possibilities.<sup>94</sup> In the first four months, nearly 10.000 children were registered by their parents, reflecting the importance of this possibility.<sup>95</sup> What may seem like a mere formal registration, is much more for the involved parents, and for broader society. As Roos Schlikker wrote in her column in Dutch newspaper *Het Parool*:

Actually, I don't care about official papers. And yet it hurts that my child is not listed on an archive list. And that she has been silenced so literally. Because the law states that my daughter does not exist. But she would have turned seven this year. And for her father and me, she is there. Always.<sup>96</sup>

By worlding the presence of stillborn children through the (secular) ritual of registration, their presence has been acknowledged to broader society, changing notions of what a world constitutes and who has a place in it.

The political nature of rituals in response to perinatal loss also becomes visible in the making of material legacies, as the earlier examples involving scrapbooks, letters and memory-boxes already implicitly touched upon. Another important illustration of this, is the making of photographs of deceased children and their families, both by professional photographers and by individuals themselves using smartphones. The resulting post-mortem portraits illuminate the child's existence in an intimate way and capture a sense of parenthood and family life (Figure 5 and 6).

93) See for example the paper by McIntyre, Alvarez and Marre, who critically discusses the role of the Catholic Church in relation to the fate of the deceased and sense of acknowledgement.

94) De Rijksdienst voor Identiteitsgegevens, <https://www.rvig.nl/brp/registratie-levenloos-geboren-kinderen-in-de-brp>, accessed on May 6, 2023.

95) Newsletter articles in *Trouw* discussing the popularity of the registration among parents: <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/registratie-van-levenloos-geboren-kind-biedt-ouders-troost-en-erkenning-hij-mag-er-zijn-en-dat-mag-iedereen-weten~bec81ef9/> and <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/bijna-tienduizend-levenloze-kinderen-geregistreerd~b036c5a2/>, both accessed on May 14, 2023.

96) Roos Schrikker, in *Het Parool*, [https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/dit-jaar-zou-ze-zeven-zijn-geworden~b3fa34e9/?utm\\_source=link&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=shared%20content&utm\\_content=free](https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/dit-jaar-zou-ze-zeven-zijn-geworden~b3fa34e9/?utm_source=link&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=shared%20content&utm_content=free), accessed on May 10, 2023, translation by the author.



**Figure 5.**  
A post-mortem family portrait of Ingo Roan and his parents, soon after birth in the hospital.

Made by Gerda Wesselius and used with the permission of the parents and photographer.

**Figure 6.**  
A post-mortem family portrait of Celine and her parents, a few days after birth.

Made by Gerda Wesselius and used with the permission of the parents and photographer.



Post-mortem photography has a long tradition in the Netherlands and elsewhere.<sup>97</sup> In the 21st century the wide availability of media technologies and smartphones combined with the emergence of the DIY funeral have led to a revival of this practice.<sup>98</sup> Taking photos has become part of the ritual repertoires

97) Sliggers, Bert (red.), *Naar het lijk. Het Nederlandse doodsportret 1500-heden* (Teylers museum, 1998).

98) See for instance the exhibition in museum Tot Zover on contemporary post-mortem portraits in 2015, [https://www.totzover.nl/ontdek-de-dood/exposities\\_en\\_events/post-mortem-expositie-zwart/#](https://www.totzover.nl/ontdek-de-dood/exposities_en_events/post-mortem-expositie-zwart/#), accessed on September 04, 2023.

in response to stillbirth or the death of a child – and death and birth in general – and this may include the making post-mortem portraits. These portraits freeze a moment in time-space, while they persist towards the future. As one of the professional photographers to whom I spoke explained:

I see what photos do to people. Parents say, ‘this is all we have’. Time passes, and you are the father or mother of this [child]. Now you have something tangible. [...] It’s a document, but actually also a monument. [...] As the photos last, so does the child and one’s connection to the child. The photos offer support and enable parents to talk about their grief.<sup>99</sup>

The material legacies created through these rituals thus serve as proof of the child’s existence and affirm one’s identity as a parent also when the child is no longer visible.<sup>100</sup> They offer a means of resolving tensions with social norms, as well opportunities to contest them, for instance when social norms do acknowledge the deceased, or do not accept continuing relationships with them. In many ways, as we have seen in the opening vignette of this paper, these rituals in response to perinatal loss do not only resemble characteristics of mortuary rituals. They also resemble initiation rituals: they welcome the child in the world(s) of the living *and* the dead. They are worlding the children and their parents into being.

The diverse rituals of writing letters, lightening a baptismal candle, creating scrapbooks, making photographs, and sharing and eating a birth cake make the subjective experiences of birth, loss, personhood, and parenthood tangible. In the described rituals, we can observe a “pendulum movement”.<sup>101</sup> They swing back and forth between the world that is and the world(s) that could have been, between actuality and virtuality, between being and becoming. Ultimately, these rituals and ritualizations are powerful ways of worlding because they enable people to create meaningful connections between the past, present, and future through speculative and embodied practice. Rituals are not mere symbolic gestures; they are immersive practices that enable people to “redo ways of living and dying”.<sup>102</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

This paper has illustrated how the concept of worlding can significantly contribute to the study of ritual, particularly in terms of ritual efficacy. With the concept of worlding, I refer to people’s dynamic abilities to shape both themselves and their world through interactions with their environment. I argue that rituals and ritualizations are examples of worlding practices. As worlding practices, rituals

99) Interview with funeral photographer by author, May 2023.

100) Peelen, Janneke, “Tussen Leven En Dood: Rituelen Rondom Zwangerschapsverlies in Nederland,” in *Jaarboek Voor Liturgie-Onderzoek* Vol. 28 (2012): 259-266.

101) Quartier, Thomas, “Rituelle Pendelbewegungen: Neue Trauerrituale Im Niederländischen Kontext,” in *Jaarboek Voor Liturgie-Onderzoek* Vol. 25 (2009): 185-205.

102) Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 27.



enable individuals to construct a subjunctive time-space, allowing them to explore the relationship between actuality and virtuality, as well as between exteriority and interiority. As the examples of ritualizing ash scattering and stillbirth have demonstrated, it is this dynamic interplay that is key to understanding how rituals are worlding. Through rituals, individuals can contest societal norms, assert their personhood, and make sense of the profound, embodied, disruptive, and transformative experiences that life and death bring. Rituals do not seek to resolve the ambiguities life, but rather offer a means to live with them. They enable people to make worlds and to create a space for those who/that have a place in it.

Studying rituals as worlding practices has three benefits for the academic study of ritual, as this paper has shown. First, the notion of worlding highlights the significance of embodied, aesthetic, and sensorial experiences in shaping our being in the world. This is distinct from terms currently dominant in the study of religion, such as world-viewing. Second, the notion of worlding emphasizes the active nature of our being in the world, without assuming or requiring conscious intention or awareness. This is an advantage to terms like meaning-making, which often assume that people strive for meaning explicitly, even though this is not necessarily the case. Third, the concept of worlding draws attention to the politics of ritual. It encourages us to examine the importance of power as it is situated in individuals, groups, places, and conventions, in shaping ways of being and understanding the world, including through ritual practice. The concept of worlding thus enables us to study rituals as both worlding practices and worlded practices.

In conclusion, the discussion of ritual worlding in this paper opens new avenues for the future study of ritual behavior, transcending cultural and species boundaries. It emphasizes the power of rituals in shaping our perceptions, experiences, and interactions with the world, and invites further exploration of the multifaceted nature of ritual practice and its potential to navigate the complexities of human and more-than-human life.

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