

## DIGITAL DEATH

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It. *Morte digitale*; Fr. *Mort digitale*; Germ. *Der digitale Tod*; Span. *Mort digital*. The term *Digital Death* is used to identify a group of interdisciplinary studies explaining the different ways in which our present-day digital technologies are changing the human relationship with death, grieving, memory and immortality. Death is a part of life and life has become digital, remarks Stacey Pitsillides, a British designer and university researcher, on her website *Digital Death* (<http://digitaldeath.eu>). The site offers a wide collection of articles, statistics, interviews and videos specifically focused on the relationship between digital culture and death. Therefore, *Digital Death* scholars try to understand what happens to online data after our death, and to what extent said data can influence the relationship between public space and the end of life. Those who study Digital Death focus on three specific problems: 1) the consequences that the death of an individual produces inside digital reality, and from there on the "real" life of those who suffer from loss and grief; 2) the consequences that the loss of personal digital objects and information produces in the physical reality of an individual (a sort of 2.0 version of grief); 3) the unprecedented meaning acquired by the concept of "immortality" concerning both the individual and personal digital information.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The term *Digital Death* is an evolution of the concept of *Thanatechnology*, coined by the sociologist Carla Sofka in 1997. That concept was used to identify the several technological and digital procedures through which we can access information about deceased people and, more importantly, the procedures that make available to us a wide variety of stories, memorial representations and multimedia expressions that can help us deal with clinical practice, issues related to the grieving process and new perspectives in humanity's hope for immortality. Nevertheless, at the end of the 1990s the use of the web was still limited to a small number of people. Their interactions mostly took place in the context of massively multiplayer

online role-playing games, or on forums offered by many websites where people were able to talk with complete strangers.

In 2009, when the first forms of social media began to spread throughout the world, Michael Massimi and Andrea Charise coined the term *Thanatosensitivity*. This concept describes the inclusion of mortality, death and dying within the systems where the interaction between man and computer takes place in its many forms. *Thanatosensitivity* involves both the field of humanities and of science. It is an in-depth analysis of the changes that mortality, death and dying have undergone as a consequence to the progressive development of digital technologies. Therefore, it focuses on the constant changes in the way we understand the relationship between the real and the virtual inside human life, and on their unprecedented consequences on both an ethical and aesthetic level.

Nowadays, the above-mentioned neologisms – *Thanatechnology*, *Thanatosensitivity* – are based on the belief according to which we can no longer afford to neglect the problem concerning the *future* of online data, once the person who created them has died.

Therefore, *Digital Death* is put in relation to four fundamental issues:

1) the ways in which our relationship with images is changed by the web. As our digital body survives online after our physical body dies, a series of experiments is made possible to try and reach digital immortality. There are chatbots that allow us to keep talking to the “digital ghosts” of the dead: for example, the iPhone app created by Eugenia Kuyda, called [Luka](#), which brings to reality the fictional events taking place in the episode *Be Right Back* from the Black Mirror TV series. There are virtual counterparts that can take our place on the web whenever we are offline or after we die: for example, [Eterq](#) and [Eternime](#). There are holograms that carry on the performances of deceased musicians or actors: for example, the hologram of Ronnie James Dio, the late singer of hard rock bands Rainbow and Black Sabbath, going on a worldwide tour with living musicians (the *Dio Returns* tour).

All these examples update the notion of the dead as the embodiment of the presence of the absent (as defined by T. Macho). Whereas photographs could substitute the body of the dead in a static way, today the web gives motion and activity to this “eternal” image and endows the digital ghost of the dead with a kind of “vitality”. Digital Death scholars, therefore, deal with several aesthetic, ethical, psychological and theoretical issues concerning this new quality of images, that are now able to carry on their own life online, causing the life of the deceased person to proceed after its own end in an independent way.

2) Biographies on social networks. Facebook is the largest graveyard in the world, with its nearly 50 million deceased users. Therefore, it can be seen as a technological chest full of biographical tales. It can also be seen as a Durable Biography of the dead, as an interactive digital tomb, or a techno-spiritual space. Indeed, the presence of dead profiles in social networks is changing, first and foremost, our relationship with autobiographies and with the construction of personal memory. Secondly, it is changing our relationship with the grieving process, which is becoming more and more a shared rather than individual experience. Thirdly, it is changing our bond with the spiritual presence of the dead, updating Schelling’s notion of *Geisterwelt* (cf. the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders).

3) Digital memory and heritage. As shown by Adam Ostrow, Mashable's Editor in Chief, 48 hours of video are uploaded on YouTube each minute, two hundred million tweets are posted on Twitter each day, and the average Facebook user produces about 90 posts each month. This staggering quantity of material – both private and job-related – mirrors the defining quality of the web, that instantly overcomes the past and turns it into a static, endless and all-pervasive present, where we are encouraged to ignore any possible reference to the "future". Firstly, digital memory and digital heritage are put in relation to the cultural phenomenon known as "retromania" (S. Reynolds), according to which we are living in a society projected towards the past, and not towards the future. Secondly, they are considered in the context of legal and archival problems, highlighting how radically digital objects transform our historical and archaeological heritage if compared to the past, where all we had were physical objects.

4) Changes in funeral rituals. There are interdisciplinary studies trying to demonstrate how funeral rituals are changing with the spreading use of QR Codes on headstones, the birth of graveyards that digitalize the memories of the dead (for example, Ruriden in Tokyo), the development of new practices such as funeral broadcasts through livestream and funeral selfies. All these new practices imply a reconsideration both of aesthetic spaces dedicated to the memory of the dead and of the ways in which we relate life and death with one another.

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