

# Digital Séance: Fabricated encounters with the dead

Extended Abstract for Helsinki Photomedia 2024

---

Doron Altaratz and Tal Morse

Keywords: digital immortality, computational photography, post-indexicality, mourning and commemoration, virtual encounters

Scholars studying death and society have explored the concept of digital immortality and its accompanying challenges. Although the physical realization of immortality is yet to come, its digital manifestation is already growing. This paper discusses how computational photography enables posthumous interactions that were previously impossible. The analyzed case studies include three projects: 1) the Shoah Foundation's *New Dimensions in Testimony* (NDT) project, which allows audiences' interactions with holograms of Holocaust survivors; 2) a South Korean TV production titled *Meeting You* (MY), which digitally reconstructs deceased individuals for one final encounter with their loved ones; and 3) *Listen to my voice*, a social campaign in which victims of domestic violence were digitally resurrected using DeepFake technology. The article compares and analyzes these cases, reflecting on temporality, indexicality, and interactivity to explore new possibilities for re-connecting with the dead. These endeavors signal the reintegration of photography into practices of remembrance, farewell, continuity, and disengagement.

The advancement of VR, deepfake, and AI technologies have made it possible to interact with representations of deceased individuals. The projects under study allow a series of encounters, negotiations, and responses between photographic representations and their subjects and the viewers. These encounters create new memories and knowledge through the ability to look at the past and to reintegrate it into the future.

In all three cases, there is a compelling memetic depiction of a deceased person that was designed to represent the dead as if he or she never died. These projects rely on the indexical trait of photography to serve as a transparent medium, that enables interactions with the dead. They do so by concealing the realization that the depicted person is dead, as an agreed deception. For that matter, the photographic medium serves as a spirit medium that facilitates communication between the spirits of the dead and living human beings.

*New Dimensions in Testimony* (NDT) is a project currently under development by *The Shoah Foundation*, that combines human-computer speech interaction capabilities with three-dimensional holographic imaging to create an immersive experience of a "live" conversation with Holocaust survivors long after they are gone. Holocaust survivors were interviewed and filmed for many hours, telling their stories and allowing the developers to generate an archive of their personal histories. Images of the survivors are then projected as a hologram, and a speech-recognition software retrieves the segment on the archive pertaining to the question asked from the audience. This allows infinite spontaneous experiences even though the actual interaction is with finite archived materials.

*Meeting You* is a South Korean TV production in which Nayeon, a seven-year-old girl, was digitally resurrected four years after she died so that her mother could meet her one last time. Drawing on Virtual Reality (VR), *DeepFake*, and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, the developers “cloned” Nayeon’s image and voice into a 3D embodiment. Further, they reconstructed a virtual playground where she used to hang out. Using a VR headset and haptic gloves, Nayeon’s mother was able to converse with the animated figure of her daughter and even “touch” her in a highly immersed environment.

*Listen to My Voice* is an Israeli production initiated by *Forum Michal Sela* that aimed at bringing awareness to domestic violence against women. The video, which accompanied the televised and social-networks campaign, presented five Israeli women who were murdered by their male partners. Through the use of *DeepFake* technology, still images, and voices of actors, the deceased woman addresses the audience, recounts their tragic story, and warns against violent behavior in the domestic realm. This campaign showcases how the use of *DeepFake* and AI technologies can generate public debate and raise awareness of social issues by utilizing animated representations of deceased people and re-presenting them in the public sphere.

We argue that the pictorial evidence of the deceased immortalizes his or her existence, ensuring that as long as the photograph exists, so does their memory. In this condition, the photograph acts as a technological continuation of life that has passed away. In that sense, the photograph acts not only as a memoir that preserves the photographed person, forever young but also as a companion to the survivors, helping them to make sure that one will not be forgotten. However, unlike commemorative practices via traditional photography, which are confined to a frozen moment and a stable representation, the rise of computational photography invites ongoing interactions between the living and the dead, or more precisely, an interaction between a viewer and a medium. Such interactions defy the finality of death and entertain new comprehension of time and temporality.

Does the rise of computational photography herald the age of post-indexicality? Photography’s indexical component is maintained in these projects, as photography’s essence as a representation of reality is still central to the interaction with the image and with the dead. And yet these technologies invite socio-technological transformation, in which means of representation respond to users and habituate contemporary practices of mourning and commemoration. However, in contrast to traditional photography’s visual realism, which allows viewers to see and partially relive past events, new augmented technologies enable viewers to experience imaginary, non-realistic events by (re)placing deceased individuals in new scenarios or interactions that never occurred in reality. These imagined futures add an innovative dimension of temporality to photorealistic imagery.