

REUNITED?

ON THE AESTHETICS AND RHETORIC OF MEETING THE DEAD THROUGH VIRTUAL REALITY

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DEATH
DISTANCE
VIRTUAL REALITY
NON-MEDIATENESS
UNFRAMEDNESS

Even though death creates irremediable distance between the living and the departed, human beings have been struggling since ages to bring the absent once again present through any form of available media. In all of the multifarious attempts at making the dead seem as if alive, a distance of the living from the departed was nevertheless retained in that the deceased was not really present, but only 'presentified' through a clearly perceivable medium. Yet nowadays, virtual reality promises to finally bridge the gap and make the living cross the border of the afterworld. By focusing

on the paradigmatic case study of a South Korean mother who in February 2020 'met' her dead daughter through a VR simulation, this essay takes into account both the visual and the linguistic strategies used to convey the idea of a direct, non-mediated 'encounter' or 'reunion' between the two. The overall objective of the article is to show that in immersive virtual environments, despite all rhetoric, the dialectic between proximity and distance which is common to the traditional notions of both the dead and the image is not only still present, but also greater than ever before.

Not only can death be conceived of as the creator of distance par excellence, but it also brings about a very specific form of distance: the irremediable distance between the living and the departed. Yet notwithstanding the fact that “there is a remedy for all things except death”, as a saying dating back to mid 15th century goes, human beings have always been struggling to counteract this most unsolvable of problems by bringing the absent once again present via every kind of available media. Indeed, ‘mediology’ itself (a term coined by Régis Debray to describe a scientific discipline of its own) has been put since the outset under the aegis of death, according to the thesis that *homo pictor* was only born when the disappearing of the first medium—namely, the living body—started being ‘remediated’ through ever-changing forms of technical and technological apparatuses (Debray, 1991). In this sense, image-making *tout court* would arise from the demand for a medium to re-establish the presence of the deceased and thus bridge the seemingly unbridgeable caesura established by death.

It is not by chance that one of the first and most famous foundational myths concerning the origin of art (Pliny the Elder, 1st century A.D./1938, XXXV, 151) claims that painting had been invented by a Corinthian girl who traced the outline of her lover’s shadow on the wall before he left on a long journey (and as is well known, “leaving is a bit like dying”). Upon seeing this, her father Butades filled in the outline by compressing clay upon the surface, and so made a face in relief, which he eventually hardened by fire; and this is how plastic arts in general came about. Much like the lover’s outline, the visual arts were generated by the desire to give a body to the incorporeal and so close the distance between the visible and what is not visible (anymore). The myth thus assigned a peculiar function to the image: far from being aimed at merely a more or less faithful replica of the human semblance, it is meant “to fill the emptiness left behind by someone who is no longer there, serving as an actual substitute for that absent person” (Bettini, 1999, p. 40).

Besides mythological narratives, archaeological evidence as well as material culture studies also bear witness to the intrinsic, cross-cultural link of picture-making with death (or, more precisely, with the dead) and to the strongly substitutive function of the image. From the well-known plastered skulls of Jericho to the many different practices of mummification and taxidermy, from Fayum mummy portraits to the death masks of the famous and the infamous, from post-mortem photography to the most recent uses of social networks to achieve what has been labelled 'digital immortality', countless attempts have been made to fulfil the dream of making the dead seem (almost) alive. Nevertheless, in all of the just-mentioned cases –including those where the function of the images as stand-ins for the absent bodies relies on hyper-mimetic resemblance to the physical traits of the dead persons– the distance between the living and the departed is retained, for the deceased are not actually present, but rather 'made present' or 'presentified' (Fink, 1930) through a medium. They are at the very same time present and absent, present while absent, ambiguously close and yet so far away. It is as if they were there, but only 'as if', for their presence is just a mediated presence –namely, a presence provided by means of specific media.

From this perspective, the founder of historical anthropology of images Jean-Pierre Vernant, while repeatedly calling attention to the crucial role played by the experience of death in the genesis of image-production and to the essentially human act of seeking to extend life through (mostly visual) representations, explicitly laid stress on the "distance and immeasurable difference" between the sacred agency of the dead and its visible manifestation. In its operative and effective function, the *eidolon* of the departed is aimed "to establish real contact with the beyond and to bring about its presence in this earthly world. Yet in the very attempt to do this it emphasises all the elements of the inaccessible, the mysterious, and the fundamentally foreign that the world beyond death holds for the living" (Vernant, 2006, p. 332; see also Vernant, 1990).

This tension found at the very heart of image production and consumption between proximity and distance, between similarity and otherness, is shared by the corpse, which, not coincidentally, has been interpreted by prominent visual culture scholars and techno-aesthetics theorists such as Thomas Macho (1987), Hans Belting (2011) and Christoph Wulf (1997) as the very first image, given that it possesses all the elements of the living body, except “that ungraspable ‘something’” (Agamben, 1999, p. 42) that makes it a living being. Death lurks under the mask of life exactly like absence manifests itself in the disguise of presence.

The paradoxical aspiration of the image of the dead to inscribe absence in presence and to take the place of the body in order that communication with the living might resume is an idea probably as old as death, and it has continued to thrive over the centuries in a myriad of myths, stories, novels, theatrical pieces, movies and television series. However, a formidable and seemingly insurmountable obstacle has remained to actually re-uniting the living with the departed: the interposition of a clearly perceivable medium, which makes the reunion appear as a necessarily mediated, and hence non-direct, experience. Adding movement—a key feature of living beings—to previously motionless images was made possible by the invention of cinema, but this did not solve the issue, on the contrary: “Howsoever many single frames the film used to produce its illusion of life, it never accomplished its goal of freeing the image from the frame and allowing it to break out into life” (Belting, 2011, 122).

Yet nowadays the medium of virtual reality promises to eventually close the gap by allowing the living to cross the threshold of the afterworld. Plunging the user into an immersive environment in which the traditional separation of the real world from the image world seems to vanish, virtual reality challenges the endless dialectic between proximity and distance that is common to both the dead and the image, since it elicits in the perceiver a strong feeling of being incorporated into alternative realities characterised by

almost the same ‘immediateness’, ‘presentness’, and ‘framelessness’ heretofore regarded as the exclusive prerogative of flesh-bound reality (Pinotti, 2017; Conte, 2020).

As unsettling as it may appear, meeting the dead is becoming less and less a matter of just fantasy and dystopian sci-fi narratives. Innovative start-ups, young tech enterprises, and an entire cottage industry are already attracting the attention of big companies by developing cutting-edge technologies to remain somehow connected to a late loved one. The most popular tactic appears to be collecting all existing data of the person – pictures, video, audio – and then using machine-learning algorithms to construct a digital simulacrum endowed with a virtual reality ‘self’ which can live on forever. A recent event can be used as a suitable case in point to provide a glimpse into the state-of-the-art of technology (as well as into its current limitations).

On 6 February 2020, Korean television show *Meeting You* aired a segment about the tearful ‘reunion’ between a mother, Jang Ji-sung, and a virtual recreation of her daughter Nayeon, who passed away at the age of seven in 2016. The documentary production team spent more than eight months crafting a faithful model of the child. The digital avatar was generated using real photographs of Nayeon and paying particular attention to recreating her voice. In order to achieve maximum simulation accuracy and enrich the movements with believable expressions of emotions, an actor was recruited for motion capture. An elaborate park scene – Nayeon’s favourite playground until she died – was added as the backdrop of the ‘meeting’.

At the beginning of the documentary, Jang Ji-sung is shown wearing a virtual reality headset and specially designed touch-sensitive gloves which give her a sense of touch. Shortly after the experience started, an illuminated white butterfly appears fluttering close by Ms Jang, preparing her for the advent of Nayeon. Racked with emotion, the mother bursts into tears as soon as her ‘daughter’ emerges from behind piles of wood asking: “Mum, where have you

been? Did you think about me?”. When Nayeon says she missed her mom, Ms Jang replies “I missed you too”. Then the video shows the two picking flowers together, taking pictures, and celebrating Nayeon’s birthday, the mother sitting on a virtual bench overlaid onto a physical bench in what is called a mixed- or cross-reality environment. After making a few wishes (namely, that dad would stop smoking and mom would not cry anymore), the virtual child asks Jang Ji-sung to stay with her beside the bed, until towards the end of the simulation she falls asleep, turns back into a shining butterfly and floats away.

A nine-minute clip of the documentary clocked up more than 13 million views in a week on YouTube, bringing an outpouring of emotional reactions and sparking fierce debate about the appropriateness of taking advantage of virtual reality to deal with such an unbearable and private thing like the loss of a child. Whilst some argued that the experience was designed to help people cope with the grief of death and to give relatives the chance to say goodbye to a virtual version of their lost family member, thus opening new possibilities for treating chronic depression resulting from a crisis event of sudden bereavement, others claimed that the show amounted to mere exploitation of both individual pain and social voyeurism, and that it did not foster, but rather complicated or even impeded the closure portion of the mourning process.

Besides these often mentioned but overall downplayed ethical issues, what is most striking about the whole thing is how the virtual reality experience has been described in terms of a long-dreamed dream that finally came true. The analysis of the terminology used in newspapers, specialised magazines, websites and blogs shows that a few terms recur over and over again: the Korean mother would have once more ‘seen’, ‘met’, or ‘visited’ her daughter, and thanks to virtual reality the two would have been ‘reunited’, if only for a while.

On closer inspection, however, these verbs turn out to be misleading, especially when they are not put in inverted commas so as to highlight their merely metaphorical signifi-

cance; for, to be sure, the power of immersive hardware did not make the grieving mother's dream a reality. For evidence, one need only look at how the lack of genuine eye movement imparts an artificial, lifeless, and therefore uncanny appearance to the little girl's avatar, which, moreover, could not honestly react to the mother's grief or answer any of her questions. Even if recordings of the deceased daughter's voice were used, still it was not the child speaking into the headset, nor it was someone else who could actually interact in real time with Ms Jang (as happens, for instance, in the case of so-called avatar therapy, where it is the psychiatrist who lends her voice to the avatar while also speaking as herself).

Furthermore, genuine interaction between the mother and the virtual replica of her daughter was hindered, if not fully inhibited, by the technical constraints peculiar to all the existing versions of haptic gloves. In spite of the rapid intensification of development efforts in this technology, processing instructions for outputting a plausible haptic signal to the device still proves to be among the most challenging issues in the agenda for augmented, virtual, and cross reality. At one point in the video, Jang Ji-sung looks visibly distressed as she can see the illusion of her 'daughter' but cannot touch or hug her. Stretching out both of her gloved hands, she grasps desperately toward, around, and through the space where the child appears to stand before her; but it simply does not work (Figure 1).



Fig. 1 Image from the MBC documentary *Meeting You* (2020).

She reaches out and tries to stroke her hair, again and again, but in vain. “I want to hug you”, “I want to touch you, just once” she insists, but to no avail.

Then the computer-generated daughter asks Ms Jang to put herself in a specific position, so as to give her the impression of them really joining their hands (Figure 2). “You like holding my hand, right?” asks Nayeon’s avatar, to which the mother cannot help but resignedly answer: “I would like to”.

Fig. 2 Image from the MBC documentary *Meeting You* (2020).



All of these limitations make more than clear that the developers of *Meeting You* focused primarily, if not solely, on achieving visual and sonic realism, without taking enough into account the fundamental role of interaction in enhancing virtual embodiment and the user’s sense of presence (Welch et al., 1996; Cummings & Bailenson, 2015; Sanz et al., 2016). Much to her chagrin, and despite the positive feedback she gave regarding the whole experience, Jang Ji-sung had to face the inconvenient truth that all during the meeting with her ‘daughter’, chatting was not really chatting, touching was not really touching, and even seeing was not really seeing.

Last but not most importantly, these considerations do not apply only to the particular experience of *Meeting You*, but to virtual reality in general. The concurrence of, or oscillation between, proximity and distance, immersion and emersion,

which has been found out to be so characteristic of the 'reunion' between Jang Ji-sung and the digitised version of her daughter, proves to be much more a feature essential to the medium of virtual reality than a just temporary obstacle to be overcome in the future. Now, this is precisely what so many narratives about immersive virtual environments aim to conceal. "Magical thinking" (Murray, 2020) has spread rapidly from popular to academic discourses according to which virtual reality would be a technology that will someday completely override the sensorium, thus producing experiences indistinguishable from physical reality. The whole arsenal of rhetorical topoi that has been used to overemphasise the immersive quality of *Meeting You* is often also exploited to celebrate the alleged ability of the new medium not to simply 'reduce' the distance between the world of the image and the real world, but to 'erase' it. Virtual reality is enthusiastically hailed as being capable of overcoming the technical constraints of older media such as photography, television and cinema by providing fully transparent, non-mediated experiences. More specifically, the traditional framing devices that keep the image separated from reality in the flesh would be gone, and an all-encompassing experience would be achieved. The rhetoric of absolute presence, non-mediate-ness, and unframedness is recognisable not only in science-fiction novels, dystopian movies and TV series but also in scientific literature, where theories are becoming increasingly popular which claim that virtual reality makes it possible for the experiencers to step beyond the frame and be freed from the traditional limits (and limitations) of the image world.

The critical process of unveiling the rhetorical nature of this discourse has already begun (Kubiński, 2014; Zucconi, 2018, pp. 149-181; D'Aloia, 2018; Dalmasso, 2019; Conte, 2020). To debunk the metaphysics of presence and complete annihilation of distance is to recognise virtual reality not as a magical tool capable of placing the experiencer right in the midst of the events, but rather as "a medium of representation that the brain will process in its appropriate cultural context, just

as it has learned to process speech, writing, photography, or moving images, without losing its grip on what is commonly accepted as reality” (Murray, 2020). Stepping into immersive digital environments does not imply transcending the distance of the image-world from actual reality, no matter how more and more blurred the threshold between the two domains may be. The peculiar dialectic of transparency and opacity, non-mediateness and hyper-mediateness, should be regarded not as a weakness but as the hallmark of virtual reality experiences, as well as what makes them so enthralling. After all, Jang Ji-sung did not mistake the digital avatar for her real daughter, not even for a moment; but this did not prevent her from sobbing and weeping. Thus, if on the one side electronic images “rob us of more than the analogy with the body”, since “they also exchange the mortal body for the invulnerable body of simulation, which conveys immortality upon us”, on the other side one should be reminded that this immortality “is only a new fiction with which we conceal death” (Belting 2011, p. 122). At the end of the experience, while saying goodbye to (the virtual replica of) her daughter, Ms Jang’s words unintentionally bore witness to the unbridgeable gap which continued to keep her essentially, immeasurably away from the child: “No matter where you are, I will look for you Nayeon. I still have things to do... But when I’m done, I will be with you. Then we will be fine together”. “Then” –but only “then”– every distance between the living and the dead would be actually crossed.

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