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Digital Death and the Digital Afterlife: Oreet Ashery in Conversation with Korina Giaxoglou

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Digital Death

Korina Giaxoglou: Let's talk about digital death, an area we have both been interested in for some time now. To start with, what is digital death?

Oreet Ashery: Digital death for me is how death, dying, and mourning are experienced through digital technologies, such as online social media or digital wills.

KG: Yes, digital death is not just about the bereaved, but it's also about the dying. I use "digital death" as an umbrella term, which covers a really wide and diverse range of death-related practices. These practices have to do with how people "do" death, grieving, and memorializa-
tion in online environments by appropriating digital technologies and adapting them to their own emotional, social, and practical needs.
For some people, digital death has to do with unexpected encoun-
ters with death online, such as finding out about someone's death via
a social media platform. For others, it's about sharing their grief in
a public or semi-public forum and engaging in acts of public remem- brance with others. For the dying, digital technologies offer opportuni- ties for the live-documentation and broadcasting of their life with—and despite—illness. Although all of these different practices remediate existing death-related rituals and forms of life-writing about illness and dying, they inevitably raise tensions and challenges: for example, who is entitled to make a death announcement, when and for whom? And who (when and how) is entitled to share tributes or claim a part in mourning and in weaving someone's postmortem identity? What are the broader social implications of this extension of the domain of death online?

Emotional Wills

KG: As you pointed out at the start of our conversation, digital death also covers issues of legacy, i.e., what happens to our digital life when we pass away—you referred to this as "digital" or "emotional wills." There are, for example, companies like DeadSocial or SafeBeyond, which help you video record messages that can be sent at pre-specified times to your loved ones after you're gone. You have tackled some of these issues in Episode 8 of your web series on digital death *Revisiting Genesis*.

OA: In Episode 8 of *Revisiting Genesis* Nurse Jackie offers Bambi, an artist with cystic cibrosis (performed by Martin O'Brien, an artist with cystic fibrosis in real life), the service of posthumous video messaging to loved ones, which would go on for 25 years, and would be sent on specified occasions, such as birthdays, and is the kind of service offered by SafeBeyond, as well as other companies who offer afterlife digital services. This brings up big questions around neoliberalism and intimacy, because really, for me, it is something that one should do naturally with a friend or family.

You can record videos with your friends that they can watch later on as an intimate consented act of active mourning and memorialization.

KG: And the other facet of this is that giving control of memorialization to a company implies, to some extent, giving control of your bond to someone else, which makes me wonder whether this is something we'd really want to do.

Sharing and Visibilities Online

KG: Death-sharing is closely connected to life-sharing. There is an increas- ing trend for sharing and taking part in celebrations of "big" life events, which has been largely driven by social media's directive to users to share moments in the here and now. This goes back to at least the 2000s. As Nicholas John argues in his book *The Age of Sharing*, sharing has become a metaphor we live by, whereby users turn what were once private, intimate moments into public knowledge and commodities[1]. From pre-birth "events," such as the so-called gender-reveal parties (discussed in Gieseler)[2] to events related to death, mourning, and memorializing, there seems to be a push for over-celebrating life moments and events, using digital environments as performative spaces that afford a sense of community and increased visibility. In many respects, then, the digital death phenomenon taking shape in parts of contemporary networked societies needs to be seen as an extension of existing practices of self-making and sharing online, calling known and unknown others to take part in what we're doing, thinking, or feeling.

OA: Social performance dictates that you have "big events," a big wake, a big funeral. My initial thinking in *Revisiting Genesis* was to protest and resist the push artists feel to be constantly self-presenting, self-promoting, and visible online. *Revisiting Genesis* is in a sense also a call for our right to withdraw from online visibility without fearing career and income losses as a result. Digital legacies for dead or dying artists are part of this conversation.

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[1] Nicholas A. John, *The Age of Sharing* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016).

[2] Carly Gieseler, "Gender-reveal Parties: Performing Community Identity in Pink and Blue," *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 6 (2018): 661–671.

KG: I can see that performances of artistic visibility and more generally online performances of the self-seem to be motivated by a desire for hyper-presence as a resource for value, even if this value is not always easy to define or manage. Perhaps thinking about one's postmortem visibility and identity online is a way for developing more critical stances on what, why, and for whom we share online. It is the case that more and more people start to limit or even totally abstain from sharing...

Self-documentation of Illness and Dying in Vlogs

OA: Last time we spoke about vlogs and people who post—especially young people who are social media savvy—about their illness on blogs or vlogs. Are there ways of being a "good" sharer in this case?

KG: That's a really good question. Looking at all the negative press that sharing grief online attracts in the media, it becomes clear that there are specific norms about the amount and the type of sharing that
is acceptable, before someone's activity is considered "over-sharing." This is also because sharing is never a neutral act—moments and thoughts are shared as "small stories,"[3] which calls for others' partici- pation in the form of commenting, "likes," re-sharing, or choosing one of the available emotion-reactions. So a "good" sharer could be said to be someone who can actually prompt the audience's reactions. This works well for social media companies, which are encouraging user-gen- erated content creation for bringing people in a specific site and for generating engagement.

It's also interesting to note that young people who share posts about their illness tend to avoid sharing overtly sad or "down" posts and opt for a generally up-beat tone in their videos: for some, the main concern is to share to do "good," to support and inspire others, for example, rather than to invite support and empathy for their own experience. One example of this is a young vlogger who died in 2016 from a rare form of cancer. She had been vlogging about her cancer alongside her updates on fashion and bags. Her vlog is now maintained by her mother and brother, and continues to attract viewers even after her passing, and I think that the reason for this is that it's a vlog that showcases this young vlogger's vitality and life—she also comes off as being very much in control of her emotions and very clear about how she wishes her followers to react to her videos. Sometimes she would explicitly ask for their support and other times, she would be the one who'd offer them support and inspiration. In other words, her sharing is in line with existing norms of sharing, for example "avoid over-sharing" and "make your content relevant to others." What this suggests to me is that people are okay with facing the suffering of others or even death, as long as it's presented at some distance from them—what they can't face is

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[3] For more on "small stories," see Alexandra Georgakopoulou, "Sharing the moment as small stories: The interplay between practices & affordances in the social media-curation of lives," Narrative Inquiry 27, no. 2 (2017): 311–333.

the emotional chaos that comes with it and some people's seeming inability to contain and control it. This has, of course, implications about whose lives and suffering can gain online visibility, views, empathy, and support: at the moment, it seems to be mainly digital media-savvy, positive, emotionally contained, and communicative users—and indeed these users tend to be to a large extent white, middle-class, young digital media users, and mostly females.

OA: That's so interesting. You know with the vloggers what's really interesting is the kind of authenticity that comes out—I guess good or popular vlogs are ones where people feel like the person who's sharing is being authentic. And this way or portraying it by saying, for example, "I'm just out of the bath. I don't have makeup but I'm still going to post now." It's all about the "now." Have you come across vloggers who realize that they are dying, so it's not about getting well?

KG: In the vlog I was talking about, the vlogger started with more general posts about the overall impact the illness was having on her teenage life, but at the same time there was an underlying sense of hope she would eventually go through that and recover the time she'd spent on treatments. And as a viewer, you also thought and hoped the same.

Then there came a point when things took a bad turn with the tumor re-emerging, and this marked a turning point in the vlog. The videos became shorter and focused more on the actual experience of
the illness. In these videos, you can see the way the illness (and treat- ment) is transforming the appearance of the young vlogger and you can also hear it in her slurred speech. So something of the "ugly" and "dark" side of illness spills over, despite the vlogger's best efforts to contain it and to remain positive. I think her commitment to posting videos until the very end is what ultimately makes this vlog "authentic" and extremely popular to this day.

OA: And what I'm wondering also is about the value of these vlogs, these are emerging ways of narrat- ing death socially and publicly, so it's still hard
to assess the actual meaning of these vlogs

and Facebook pages. I wonder if the value is in sharing? Or validation? Or about socializing when perhaps it's hard to get out of bed or the house.
I wonder if there is also a sense of over-sharing when one feels vulnerable.

KG: It's difficult to assess their value given the sheer diversity of the vlogs or Facebook pages and groups out there. But certainly the aspect
of the need to share and communicate disruptive moments is really important in these practices. So far the literature suggests that such vlogs (and blogs) are having a positive impact on the vlogger: it's

a mode of sense-making for those living with illness that helps them come to grips with and validate their own changing identity and trans- formation. It also seems to have a positive impact on viewers who may be going through a similar experience as it helps to alleviate feelings
of social isolation—you can see evidence of this in comments to videos. But of course, as you say, it's still hard to fully assess the broader impact—positive or

negative—of these networked illness stories. I would tentatively say though, that vlogging on illness attests to a broader shift in making sense of personal experience and the self through seemingly fragmented, cumulative small stories focused in the here and now for and with others, where in the past this happened largely through long- form, coherent "big stories" based on one's reflection on past events.

OA: So maybe it's empowering?
KG: Yes, in some respects it certainly is for some people—but, as with

everything, there are many sides to it, and tensions. Although this
may be personally empowering on some level, sharing content online can also be disempowering, given that public disclosures of intimate moments in platforms are ultimately owned by these companies that profit on user content and engagement. Also, these empathic forms of sharing raise questions about the types of support afforded to vloggers themselves, and the kinds of empathy that they promote for viewers:
Is this kind of ritualistic, mediated support sufficient or appropriate for different people at different points in their illness experience? And on
a broader level, is our experiencing of empathy changing into a form of mediated empathy exhausted in keyboard tapping?

OA: What follows from this for me is the big question of replacing real-life care. Do AI technologies of care replace people visiting the video blogger for example? Do they replace us? Do they replace collective care where people create a roster of looking after somebody for example? If we know that someone who isn't well has a thriving vlog, do we feel less guilty about caring or not caring enough for them? Does documenting others and ourselves release us from full engagement in embodied life?

KG: This brings to mind to the mediated documentation of illness and self-documentation that you've been working on in your most recent project. What has this process been like?

Self-documentation Using Mobile Media

OA: Yes, I am making a film called *Dying Under Your Eyes*. It's a film that intimately documents the aging and dying process of my father who recently passed away that is on my phone. I think people always took pictures and wrote about death in the family, but now with constant intimate surveillance there are new, creative subjectivities that emerge, and the film is part of that. It is about subjectivities around distance and proximity. It is the same phone I am using to speak to him when I'm in London and he is in hospital in Jerusalem; it is the same phone I am using when we are physically.

KG: That's really interesting, this exploration of how mobile media mediate our affective positioning to our loved ones.

OA: Yes, the mobile phone is really important for so many people like you and me, who are immigrants - we don't live in the same city or country or even continent

where our parents live, so connecting technologies are tools of intimacy and of keeping in touch. I've noticed that now seeing my mum on the phone on FaceTime is so important to me since my dad died. Before we just used the phone. Now I want to see her, to hold onto her.

KG: You can see her in her home.

OA: Yeah, I'm always looking for signs of aging. Her attentive carer sent me snippets of her on the phone and I'm watching them over and over. For example, she recently sent me a 30-second video of her playing bridge with her women friends; they come now to the care home to see her. And I find myself checking to see if she is actually playing, like a parent checking the abili- ties and sociability of her child.

KG: Going back to your film, are you noticing anything so far you hadn't noticed while you were recording?

OA: Yes, there is an aesthetic attached to this kind of mobile communication. There is definitely an aesthetic to FaceTime—like Skype there is the small window and the big window. You're in the small window and the images are moving and you're with them in a sense and they see you and then the glitches and the time gaps, it is a painterly aesthetic that is always retro because technology changes so rapidly. It's interesting that I've been using the mobile phone to take pictures of my dad's prescriptions because I need to make sure I have them for practical reasons, but these photos also become a form of everyday memorializing.

KG: And is it also a way of documenting something that's difficult to process at that moment?

OA: That's how I feel. I really use the phone footage and the editing of the film to process a lot of this stuff emotionally. It is very powerful. Death, dying, and art have a sense of heightened reality in common. Watching the footage in editing is like making sense of my dad, getting to know him better or differently, researching him.

Conclusion

KG: Digital death is opening up new opportunities for documenting and making death, dying, and mourning visible, and also for connecting people across time and space. At the same time, it's also opening Pandora's box, bringing up tensions in families – and society more broadly – about how sharing disruptive moments changes our affective positioning to death, the dead, and our own sense of self in the face of loss.

OA: Are we imagining something? Are we becoming more reflexive? Or are we becoming more intimate, more distant? Or as you say, it is all quite complicated. I feel like the intimacy potential of connecting technologies is a sales pitch for mobile and social media companies, this is why this stuff is so complicated. Our need for connec- tion is being capitalized on.

KG: Yes, as is emotion. To quote Anne-Cécile Robert, we may want to talk about the "emotion doctrine" (compare Naomi Klein's "shock doctrine")[4] as part of a new modality of social regulation. So we just have to keep this conversation going and continue to critically reflect on the different ways in which emotion is mobilized in our everyday life.

Bios

Oreet Ashery is a London-based, transdisciplinary visual artist and educator working with biopolitical fiction, gender mate- riality, and potential communities in local and international contexts. Ashery's established practice mani- fests through distinct multiplatform projects and spans live situations and performances, moving and still image, writing and assemblages. The work turns to areas such as commissioned music, costume, workshops, and activism. Ashery's current work, for which she won the Film London Jarman Award 2017, is an artist web series titled *Revisiting Genesis*, which considers digital death and sociopolit- ical loss. She has presented her works at Les Ateliers de Rennes – Contemporary Art Biennale (2018); Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2018); Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art (2017); Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö (2017); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2017); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2015); and Tate Modern Turbine Hall, London (2014), among others. Ashery is an associate professor of art at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford. Oreet Ashery took part in the *PTV: Performance TV* project at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw.

Korina Giaxoglou is a sociocultural linguist with a special interest in narrative analysis. Her research activity spans the fields of linguistic anthropology, (mediated) discourse analysis, and the sociolinguistics of narrative. Having developed a framework for the study of "traditional" lamentation in Inner Mani (Southern Greece) as ethnopoetic narratives that carry affect and bonds through time and space, she has gone on to explore the narrative dynamics of contemporary practices of mourning in online environments. Her articles on stories of grief as acts of sharing, affective positioning in Facebook memorials, the mediatization of affect, hashtag mourning, and the ethics of digital mourning research have appeared in special issues in the *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia, Discourse, Context & Media*, the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *Social Media + Society*, and *Applied Linguistics*, among others. She is a lecturer in English Language and Applied Linguistics at the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University, where she convenes the interdisciplinary research group Health Discourse.

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[4] Anne-Cécile Robert, *La stratégie de l'émotion* (Québec: Lux, 2018).