International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education: Subject, Action & Society
V. 6, N. 1, 2026, pp. 83-105
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2026.6.1.5

Help Me Not to Say Goodbye to You. Digital Immortality Between Sociology and Psychoanalysis

Marianna Coppola*, Alessandro Arena**

Abstract:

Death has always represented the insurmountable boundary around which every culture has built its own systems of meaning. With the advent of digital technology, this boundary has become porous: technologies such as chatbots trained on the deceased's messages, three-dimensional avatars, interactive holograms and social media profiles that outlive their owners open up the possibility of a continuous, dialogical and — at least in appearance — inexhaustible post-mortem presence. This paper examines the phenomenon of digital immortality through an interdisciplinary lens, bringing sociology and Lacanian psychoanalysis into dialogue. In the first section, building on Bell and Gray's (2000) distinction between unidirectional and bidirectional immortality, the main technological projects of digital survival are analysed—from Replika to Eterni.me, from LifeNaut to 8i's holograms—interpreted as an expression of a broader cultural transformation that Jacobsen (2017) has defined as the 'post-mortem society'. In the second section, Lacanian theory of double death allows us to interpret digital persistence as a device that defers symbolic death, producing a structural form of digital melancholia: the surviving subject cannot experience the void because it is constantly and artificially filled. The analysis shows how digital simulacra operate predominantly in the Imaginary register, preventing the work of mourning that only symbolic distance makes possible, and how the transformation of the contemporary superego — from an instance of prohibition to an imperative of exhibited jouissance — constitutes the cultural structure within which these technologies proliferate. The paper concludes by outlining prospects for future research in clinical, legal and comparative fields.

Keyword: digital immortality, mourning, Lacanian psychoanalysis, sociology of death, digital melancholia, double death, post-mortem memory

* Università Telematica Giustino Fortunato, Benevento, Italy
** Association Mondiale de Psychanalyse (AMP), Paris, France. Scuola Lacaniana di Psicoanalisi (SLP), Milan, Italy
Corresponding author: Marianna Coppola, m.coppola@unifortunato.eu

1. *Introduction*

The theme of death has cut across every human civilization, becoming the core around which religious systems, cultural practices, philosophical narratives, and symbolic structures of meaning have been built. Humanity has always sought to respond to the paradox of its own finitude, sometimes by projecting existence into the afterlife, sometimes by perpetuating memory through monuments, writings, and rituals, and sometimes by entrusting the continuity of the self to one's descendants. Modernity, with the secularization of knowledge and the dissolution of grand metaphysical narratives, has made this confrontation both more urgent and more devoid of transcendent consolation. It is in this context that digital technology bursts onto the scene as a new symbolic frontier: it does not merely alter the ways in which information is communicated or archived, but proposes—and in part produces—a radically novel response to the fundamental question of human existence after death.

This paper aims to explore the phenomenon of digital immortality from a dual disciplinary perspective: sociological and psychoanalytic. These two lenses are not mutually exclusive but rather complement and interrogate one another, since the same phenomenon—the persistence of a subject in the digital world beyond biological death—can be interpreted both as an effect of structural transformations in social organization and the symbolic economy of the media, and as a psychic response to the irresolvable trauma of loss. The common thread running through both perspectives is the question of connection: how does the relationship between the living and the dead transform in the digital age? What new forms does mourning take? And what does this transformation tell us about human subjectivity as a whole?

From a sociological perspective, digital death is first and foremost a phenomenon of the extension of media identity. As Gordon Bell and Jim Gray (2000) observe, contemporary technology enables a form of bidirectional immortality: not merely the passive transmission of a cultural legacy—in the sense that Aristotle or Mozart continue to "speak" through their works—but an interactive presence, capable of evolving and responding. This perspective fits into the broader process of the datafication of human existence, theorized by Yuval Noah Harari (2017) as an epochal shift from humanism to datism: the human being becomes progressively intelligible—and reproducible—as a

configuration of data. In this framework, death is no longer the absolute ontological boundary, but an event that can be partially circumvented through the management and reactivation of the digital traces left behind in life.

The social implications of this process are manifold and profound. On the level of collective memory, digital immortality transforms the ways in which communities process grief and construct remembrance. Photography, as Davide Sisto (2018) notes, has historically crystallized the image of the deceased into a static, two-dimensional representation. New digital tools—from chatbots trained on the deceased's messages to three-dimensional avatars, from psychological profiling algorithms to interactive holograms—promise to restore to the deceased a dynamic, dialogic presence capable of responding and learning. This shift from memory-as-archive to memory-as-interaction radically redefines the meaning and social function of remembrance.

The technologies operating within this landscape are now numerous and fully functional. Replika, developed by Eugenia Kuyda from the Luka project, functions as a virtual assistant capable of learning from the user's behaviour and building a personalized, empathetic bond, offering a continuous presence even beyond death. James Vlahos's DadBot transfers the narrative and emotional legacy of a dying father into an interactive form. Eterni.me aims to create a living digital avatar that survives its user, interacting with family and friends. Eter9 and LivesOn extend this logic to social media platforms, ensuring the continuous presence of the digital identity. LifeNaut combines psychological archiving technologies with biological DNA preservation, while the Forever Identity project and 8i's augmented reality experiment with three-dimensional holographic representations of real, deceased people.

These projects are not mere technological curiosities: they embody an entire vision of the relationship between human and machine, between corporeality and information, between biological finitude and digital perpetuation. They reflect, and at the same time help to produce, a far-reaching cultural transformation that affects the ways in which identity is constructed, the management of grief, the relationship with temporality, and, ultimately, the very meaning of existence. As Davide Sisto has observed, these projects bring to life what, until a few years ago, seemed like pure science fiction: post-mortem digital continuity as a concrete and socially accessible possibility.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the phenomenon of digital immortality calls for a more nuanced approach to the question of the subject, desire, and mourning. Lacanian psychoanalysis, in particular, offers valuable conceptual tools for interpreting the dynamics at play. Jacques Lacan's theory of double death—the distinction between biological death (the Real) and symbolic death (the erasure of the subject from the order of language)—allows us to grasp the specificity of the digital phenomenon: the technologies of immortality intervene in the space between these two planes, attempting to defer symbolic death indefinitely. Social media profiles, chatbots, and avatars are not merely tools of memory: they are devices that maintain the subject within the Imaginary order, removing it from symbolic death and, with it, from the possibility of authentic mourning.

The Lacanian reading also revolves around the transformation of the function of the superego in contemporary society. While Victorian morality imposed the concealment of jouissance, social media culture has brought about a structural reversal: jouissance is not only displayed, but must be displayed. The digital profile is not the representation of a subject, but the performance of their jouissance in the eyes of the Other. In this logic, the digital persistence of the deceased is not a free choice, but the effect of a discursive structure that has already transformed every subject into a public archive of images and interactions. Physical death, in this context, does not interrupt the machinery of visibility: the profile continues to exist, to receive notifications, to appear in the algorithms of the survivors, producing a spectral presence that is neither life nor death in the traditional sense of the term.

Mourning, for Freud, is the psychic work through which the subject progressively withdraws libidinal investment from the lost object to reinvest it in the world of the living. Melancholia, on the contrary, is the failure of this work: the subject is unable to let go of the object and ends up introjecting it, identifying with it in a pathological way. The digital persistence of the deceased—with their messages that keep arriving, their images that keep appearing, their avatar that keeps responding—functions as a device for producing melancholia: it structurally prevents that work of distancing and separation which is the necessary condition of mourning. The surviving subject cannot truly experience the void, because the void is constantly and artificially filled.

This contribution is divided into two main sections, corresponding to the two disciplinary perspectives adopted. The first section—"The Society Without Death: The Concept of Digital Immortality and Immortality in Sociology"—analyses the main technological manifestations of digital immortality through a sociological lens, exploring the cultural and social transformations they produce and presuppose. The second section—"Double Death and the Persistence of the Subject in the Digital Ecosystem: A Lacanian Perspective"—employs the tools of Lacanian psychoanalysis to interpret the psychic dynamics involved in these phenomena, with particular attention to the issues of mourning, digital melancholy, and the transformation of the contemporary superego. The conclusions offer a critical synthesis and outline some avenues for future research.

The common thread linking both perspectives is the conviction that digital immortality is not merely a technical or commercial phenomenon, but a telling symptom of the deepest contradictions of contemporary subjectivity: its relationship with loss, with desire, with the other, and with its own finitude. As Derrida (2005) puts it, the death of the other—especially if loved—is not the announcement of a mere absence, but the end of an entire world. Digital immortality technologies are, at their core, a desperate and technically sophisticated attempt to prevent that world from ending entirely. Whether this attempt constitutes a form of healing or denial, of processing or defence, is the question this paper aims to explore.

2. *The Society Without Death: The Concept of Digital Immortality in Sociology*

In 2000, Gordon Bell and Jim Gray, distinguished researchers at Microsoft, published an essay that resonated deeply among scholars of Digital Death, arguing that digital immortality will be accessible as early as this century, often without us being fully aware of it.

The concept of “digital immortality,” as outlined by the two scholars, takes two main forms. The first, similar to ordinary immortality, consists in the perpetuation and transmission of ideas, ensuring lasting fame. Historical figures such as Aristotle, Shakespeare, Mozart, and Rembrandt, though they have passed away as individuals, have made their ideas and creations immortal, recorded and passed down to the present day.

The second form of digital immortality goes beyond the simple preservation of works created during one's lifetime; it implies continuous and endless experience and learning, made possible by current technological tools.

This type of immortality, unlike the first, is bidirectional: it not only allows us to communicate with the future through what we have produced, but also offers the opportunity to continue learning and evolving. It is not limited to what we were during our earthly life and what we have left as a legacy, such as works of art, books, scientific discoveries, or simple acts of kindness in social interactions.

To achieve this form of bidirectional immortality, according to Bell and Gray, it is necessary to convert part of ourselves into information and data, which must be recorded and digitized using today's technological means.

Bell thus draws on the informational nature of human beings and the integration of online and offline that characterizes our existence, supporting Yuval Noah Harari's (2017) thesis regarding the historical shift from humanism to datism.

Contrary to Viktor Mayer-Schönberger's theory, expressed in his book **Delete. The Right to Be Forgotten in the Digital Age* (2010), according to which remembering every single sensory stimulus would overload human memory, Bell considers forgetting to be an intrinsic flaw of human beings. Therefore, he proposes recording everything, in the hope that a perfect digital copy of oneself can be created, through which to achieve the coveted immortality.

In this way, digital immortality, as conceived by Bell and Gray, not only allows for the preservation of our intellectual legacy but opens the possibility of a continuous, and interactive existence with the future, challenging the limits imposed by our biological mortality (Bell & Gray, 2000; Jacobsen 2017).

In the contemporary era, in fact, we are witnessing a relentless proliferation of technological innovations aimed at pursuing the ambitious goal of digital immortality. The shared intent of these inventions is to ensure that the very essence of the individual endures, in the form of an ethereal digital shadow, even after the physical passing of the person who gave rise to that identity during their earthly journey. In this way, the goal is to achieve the bidirectional immortality discussed by Gordon Bell.

This aspiration for digital survival is not merely a matter of preserving memories, but rather an active perpetuation of the individual's presence and interaction in the future.

Modern technologies seek to transform our essence into a form of perpetual existence, in which personal data and information do not merely bear witness to the past, but continue to evolve, learn, and interact with the future world.

The quest for digital immortality thus represents one of the most fascinating challenges of our time, a field where technology and philosophy intertwine to explore new horizons of human existence. The goal is not only to preserve the traces of who we have been, but to ensure a continuous presence and evolution of our identity in the vast sea of the digital future.

The starting point is the peculiar and paradoxical status of the deceased, a fascinating dialectic between presence and absence. This ambivalence, if skilfully manipulated through modern technologies, can form the foundation for an active reworking of their essence, overcoming the rigid fixity of the photographic image which, until now, has been the sole tool for capturing and preserving their memory (Sisto, 2018).

Photography, with its static nature, has traditionally crystallized the existence of the deceased into an immutable image, a two-dimensional reflection incapable of conveying the vitality and complexity of the individual. However, today's technologies offer far more dynamic and profound possibilities. Through advanced digitization and the use of sophisticated algorithms, it is possible to create interactive and vivid representations that transcend the limits of traditional photography.

This technological manipulation does not merely reproduce a snapshot of the past, but aims to actively reconstruct the deceased's identity within a fluid and dynamic digital context. Thus, an entity can be brought to life that not only remembers but also interacts, learning and evolving over time, embodying a new form of perpetual presence.

The ultimate goal is to move beyond the mere static preservation of memory, transforming it into a digital entity capable of a continuous and interactive presence. In this way, the dialectic between presence and absence resolves into a new form of existence, where the essence of the deceased is no longer confined to a static representation but expands into a continuous process of evolution and interaction, thanks to the power of contemporary technology.

Regarding the concept of digital immortality, Davide Sisto, in his work titled *La morte si fa social* (2018), offers an in-depth analysis of several projects that are bringing to fruition

what, until just a few years ago, seemed like pure fantasy and an impossibility: the perpetuation of digital life beyond the boundaries of one's earthly existence.

Sisto astutely examines how these innovative initiatives are turning the idea of post-mortem digital continuity into reality, transforming what was once considered a futuristic dream into a tangible possibility. Through a critical lens and a sophisticated perspective, he explores the mechanisms and implications of this technological revolution, outlining scenarios in which an individual's digital identity can transcend their own mortality.

His examination focuses on how these advanced technological solutions are opening new frontiers, allowing humans to project and preserve their essence in a virtual realm that endures beyond the physical limits of life. Thus, Sisto illuminates the path toward a future in which our digital presence can continue to interact with and influence the world, even after our physical existence has ended.

In November 2015, Roman Mazurenko, a young Belarusian known for his ability to organize cultural events and his interest in technological advancements, tragically lost his life in a car accident in Moscow. This event deeply affected his friend Eugenia Kuyda, who decided to honour Roman's memory through technology.

Roman, fascinated by the theory of the technological singularity, envisioned a future in which human intelligence could be exponentially expanded through technology, eliminating the limitations of the physical body and overcoming biological death.

Eugenia, who was already working on the startup Luka, which aimed to emulate human conversation, decided to adapt the project to create a bot capable of replicating the conversations she had had with Roman. She collected thousands of messages exchanged with Roman and, with the help of some artificial intelligence experts, developed software that mimics the language and communication style of her late friend. This project allowed a form of Roman's digital presence to be kept alive, offering his friends and family the chance to interact with a sort of "digital ghost" (Newton, 2016).

Unsatisfied with Luka, Eugenia Kuyda expanded her vision with the development of Replika, a chatbot that goes beyond imitating past conversations. Replika is designed to study and understand users' behaviour and preferences through a series of questions, thereby creating a detailed and personalized profile. This virtual assistant becomes a sort of digital friend, capable of providing emotional support and companionship.

Replika stands out for its ability to continuously learn from interactions with the user, progressively improving its ability to respond and create an empathetic bond. Since its launch in the second half of 2017, over 2 million people have downloaded Replika, using it as a personal diary, a confidant, and a means to explore their digital identity (Pardes, 2018).

Meanwhile, American journalist James Vlahos developed DadBot to preserve the memory of his father, John, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Initially, James recorded lengthy conversations with his father, compiling a rich archive of stories, anecdotes, and songs. However, inspired by a Google project that uses cinematic dialogues to create chatbots, James decided to use these recordings to create a bot that would simulate written conversations with his father. Using PullString software, James organized the nearly 100,000 recorded words into a DadBot, capable of answering questions and interacting in a manner similar to his late father. This bot became a way for James and his family to continue feeling John's presence, easing the pain of their loss.

These projects represent an innovative exploration of digital immortality, allowing people to maintain a connection with their deceased loved ones through advanced technological tools.

Luka, Replika, and DadBot not only challenge the traditional concept of memory and mourning but also offer new modes of interaction and connection that extend beyond physical life, fitting into a growing trend of integrating technology into our deepest and most meaningful human experiences.

In the landscape of the new frontiers of digital immortality, Eterni.me stands out as an innovative startup founded by Romanian programmer Marius Ursache, developed within the MIT Entrepreneurship Development Program in Boston. The platform aims to preserve people's most meaningful thoughts, stories, and memories forever, creating a sort of digital entity that perpetuates individual characteristics even after death. Eterni.me does not merely create a static archive of memories, but aims to develop a living digital copy of the user's identity, capable of actively interacting with friends and relatives.

Users will be invited to provide a wide range of personal information, including photographs, videos, letters, and content shared on social media, which outline their unique personality. These "digital objects" will be analysed by software to extract data and patterns that enable the creation of a three-dimensional digital avatar. This avatar will

not only preserve the user's habits and passions but will also be able to interact with their loved ones, keeping their individual characteristics alive (Sisto, 2016).

Eter9, on the other hand, is a social network created by Portuguese programmer Henrique Jorge. This project combines Facebook's features with advanced data mining techniques to create a virtual alter ego, or "counterpart," that mimics the user's online behaviour.

The counterpart is designed to interact and post content even when the user is offline or after their death, ensuring the continuity of their digital identity. Users can customize the level of autonomy of their counterpart, which learns from the user's interactions and posts to accurately replicate their personality.

How Eter9 works is simple: users sign up by creating an account with a username and password, and enter a virtual reality similar to Facebook. In the "bridge," a futuristic virtual space, they can share posts, videos, and links and interact with other users. The virtual counterpart observes and learns from the shared content, preparing to replace the user when necessary. This process of "eternalizing" content allows the counterpart to replicate the user's habits and preferences even after their passing (Cosimi, 2015).

LivesOn, a project developed by the British company Mean Fighting Machine, was similar to Eter9 but focused on Twitter. LivesOn aimed to continue tweeting on behalf of the deceased user, based on an analysis of their tweets and retweets, as well as their network of contacts. The service's motto was: "When your heart stops beating, you'll keep tweeting."

LivesOn carefully analysed the types of tweets and retweets users posted to generate similar new content once the user had passed away. However, this project was not successful and changed direction, becoming a lifestyle advice service for its clients.

In summary, Eterni.me, Eter9, and LivesOn represent ambitious attempts to overcome the limits of physical mortality through digital immortality. These projects use advanced artificial intelligence technologies to create digital entities that can interact with the world even after the user's death, offering new modes of memory and connection that transcend physical life.

LifeNaut, an innovative project, aims to create digital clones of human beings capable of thinking and acting like them—or even in their place. Supported by the Terasem Movement Foundation, an American organization exploring strategies to extend human life indefinitely, LifeNaut is part of the broader field of research into cryogenics,

biotechnology, and cybernetic consciousness. The philosophy behind this project is outlined in the book **The Day You Discard Your Body** by Marshall Brain, founder of HowStuffWorks, who argues that shedding the biological body can lead to unprecedented freedom and longevity. LifeNaut essentially consists of two main components: the Mindfile and the Biofile.

The Mindfile is a sort of backup of the user's personality on electronic media. The Mindfile collects a wide range of digital information, including photographs, video clips, and personal documents, creating a detailed portrait of individual characteristics. To make this digital portrait as accurate as possible, users answer approximately five hundred questions about their personality. The answers are processed to reconstruct a precise psychological profile. The final result is an electronically animated avatar capable of describing key events and s in the user's life through a voice synthesizer. This avatar interacts with people interested in exploring the future of technology and improving quality of life, maintaining a connection primarily with the user's relatives after their death.

The Biofile, on the other hand, is a method for preserving the user's DNA. Users receive a kit containing a mouthwash solution, which they then return to the LifeNaut laboratory. The DNA is extracted and cryogenically preserved, with the goal of cloning the individual in the future, when technologies are sufficiently advanced. This process represents an attempt to combine biotechnology with cryogenics to ensure a form of biological immortality.

A concrete example of the technologies developed by LifeNaut is Bina48, a robot created using transcripts of video interviews, facial analysis, and online activity. Bina48 has skin made from a rubbery material called frubber, which allows her to display human expressions such as smiling and frowning. Modeled after the co-founder of the Terasem Movement Foundation, Bina Aspen, Bina48 also has a social media presence and has even taken university courses. Her primary role is to assist in the construction of personal avatars for LifeNaut users, serving as an advanced example of digitized human interaction.

Another innovative project developed by three Italian researchers is Forever Identity, which aims to create three-dimensional holograms of historical figures and artists. These holograms are designed to faithfully reproduce the personality, behaviours, physical

traits, voice, and posture of the people they represent. The holograms can express emotions through sophisticated facial and body simulations and are capable of recounting their own experiences and interacting with users.

The goal is to provide a useful tool for museums, schools, and universities to disseminate cultural content more effectively. This project represents a step forward from digital avatars, taking digital representation to an unprecedented level of realism.

The use of holograms is already well-established in film and music. For example, after actor Paul Walker's death, his face was reconstructed in 3D and superimposed onto his brothers' bodies to complete filming for *Fast & Furious 7*. Similarly, a hologram of singer Ronnie James Dio embarked on a world tour, allowing fans to continue experiencing his concerts. These holograms not only mimic the physical appearance and movements of the people they represent but can also express emotions and interact with the audience.

Beyond entertainment, holographic technology is finding applications in other sectors. For example, Magic Leap is developing technologies to overlay virtual images onto users' fields of view, while New Zealand-based 8i creates three-dimensional holograms of real people.

8i, in collaboration with the Shoah Foundation, has developed the "New Dimensions in Testimony" project, which allows students to interact with the hologram of a Holocaust survivor, making historical memory more vivid and tangible.

The future of augmented reality and holograms looks promising, with the prospect of a world populated not only by humans but also by digital representations of people who have passed away. In fact, the film *Marjorie Prime* explores this possibility, imagining a future in which holograms of deceased people help their loved ones keep memories alive and ease the pain of loss. This scenario, which might seem like science fiction, is becoming increasingly close to reality thanks to continuous technological advances.

In conclusion, projects such as LifeNaut, Forever Identity, and the growing use of holograms are transforming the concept of digital immortality, offering new ways to preserve and interact with the memories and personalities of people, both living and deceased.

The digital immortality pursued by the projects outlined takes shape through three distinct modes: the perpetuation of personal identity beyond the individual's death, transforming

it into a sort of digital spectre; the enabling of communication with the future that is not limited to the mere transmission of information, but allows for dynamic interaction; the creation of a world in which human beings are integrated with, and in some cases replaced by, holograms (Öhman, Floridi, 2017).

At first glance, technological innovations appear driven by the desire to defy that moment which, marking the beginning of eternity, excludes any tomorrow and precludes the possibility of retracing our steps. However, the impulse to forge a digital remedy against death finds its true root in the acute and excruciating pain caused by the irreparable loss of those we love.

It is not so much the aspiration for our own digital immortality that drives these efforts, but rather the desire to preserve the eternal life of loved ones, whose passing leaves a destabilizing and lasting void.

Mourning, with its complex and varied emotional and psychological dynamics, embodies a central element that captures the universal feeling experienced at the passing of a loved one—an element described masterfully by Jacques Derrida (2005):

> *The death of the other, especially if one loves them, is not the announcement of an absence, of a disappearance, the end of this or that life—that is, of the possibility of a (always unique) world appearing as a living one. Death declares each time the end of the world in its totality, the end of the entire possible world, and each time the end of the world as a unique totality and therefore irreplaceable and therefore infinite. [...] The end of the world in and of itself, of the only existing world, each time. Singularly. Irreversibly. For the other, and strangely enough also for those who for the moment survive and undergo this impossible experience. This is what "the world" can mean. And this meaning is conferred upon it solely by what is called "death"* (Derrida, 2005, p. 11).

Despair and the desire to maintain a tangible connection with those who have left us, to prolong their presence and recall shared moments, drive us to seek solutions that challenge the finitude of existence. This drive toward perpetual reunion fuels the search for technologies capable of creating vivid and interactive digital representations that can

ease the burden of loss and perpetuate the memory of our loved ones in new and lasting forms.

Every time a loved one leaves us, the entire universe dissolves. The habits, rituals, and shared languages that defined the only possible world fade away with the life of the departed. With the end of shared experiences and intimacy, that unique way of communicating and interacting—whose meaning was entirely contained within the exclusive and incomparable relationship with the deceased—also disappears irrevocably. C.S. Lewis states that if we were forbidden to use salt, we would not notice its absence in a single dish, but all food would lose its original flavour. In the same way, life itself undergoes a radical transformation when a loved one dies. This is what "world" can mean: a meaning that is intrinsically linked to the irreplaceable gestures of a relationship between two individuals—be they friends, lovers, or family members—and that finds its ultimate end in what we call "death."

The loss of a loved one represents not only a physical absence, but a profound alteration of our being and our daily lives. It severs a thread of understanding and affection that cannot be replicated or replaced, leaving a void that echoes in the deepest recesses of our existence. This definitive separation forces us to confront the irrevocability of death, which destroys the private universe built through years of complicity and love (Sisto, 2018).

3. *The Double Death and the Persistence of the Subject in the Digital Ecosystem: A Lacanian Perspective*

The paradigm of "double death," theorized by Jacques Lacan in his Seminar VII, offers today a privileged lens for interpreting the phenomenology of post-mortem presence in virtual spaces. The distinction between the end of biological functions (physical death) and the erasure of the subject from the order of language (symbolic death) finds, in fact, a new and complex manifestation in the dynamics of digital persistence. From this perspective, physical death stands as the Real par excellence: the traumatic, unspeakable, and irreducible event that marks the disappearance of the body and the definitive rupture of all biological continuity. Faced with this "hole" in the Real, what remains in the technological landscape functions as a covering that articulates and splits along the remaining two axes of the psychic structure.

To understand how this paradigm functions in the contemporary world, one must take into account the change that the psychic instance of the superego has undergone over time: the disappearance of the Name-of-the-Father, as a symbolic function, has given way to another instance—a hypertrophic superego that commands us to desire what is socially recognized as desirable. Desire has vanished from the scene.

On the level of moral law, the contemporary superego, as a punitive authority, no longer threatens external punishment but inflicts an inner guilt often more ferocious than any social condemnation. Freud emphasizes that guilt arises not only from the act but also from the thought. Medieval saints, despite leading lives of asceticism, perceived themselves as sinners because of an intrusive thought or an unconfessable desire. In this sense, the superego is the most insidious of judges: there is no need for a policeman to witness my transgression, because it is my own "inner tribunal" that inflicts the condemnation upon me. Guilt is detached from the act and from the other of the Law: this is how punishment becomes an internal demand and no longer an external sanction.

On the level of the ideal, however, the authority of the superego is no longer exercised as a prohibition, but as an obligation to will. "You must enjoy, you must perform, you must be happy": this is the voice of today's superego. A voice that does not prohibit, but compels one to will what does not always correspond to one's own desire.

Until the early 1900s, social discourse was structured around a still-Victorian morality that forbade the public display of one's enjoyment: anything that exceeds the pleasure of "well-being" must remain private, hidden, and unspoken. Being seen in one's enjoyment produces shame and, subsequently, guilt.

Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, together with the birth of psychoanalysis, has emptied the place of the symbolic Other, the Other of guarantee, the Other of the law: social discourse is now structured around a new imperative: one must display one's enjoyment, one must demonstrate that one is always beyond mere well-being, that one burns like a candle lit at both ends (according to Hesse's effective metaphor). Being seen in one's enjoyment is necessary to bear witness to the value of one's existence, to justify it on the level of meaning. This structural shift in social discourse has altered, in the representation of the self, the way of making public what was private: from the thoughts expressed in personal letters—written at a slow pace that required careful selection of content and addressed to a specific person chosen out of a desire to communicate—we

have moved to images posted as posts or reels on social media profiles, whose speed compels the sharing of trivial everyday content, directed at a multitude of random, mostly unknown entities, without any choice, simply out of a desire to be seen.

These profiles remain for a virtually infinite time and produce effects, acting, among other things, as a substitute for physical death through the realm of the Imaginary. In this space, the deceased survives as a mirror image, a simulacrum that allows the survivors to maintain a reflective relationship with a virtual presence that neither ages nor changes. However, this hyper-presence of the Imaginary risks creating what we might call "impossible mourning." For Freud, mourning consists in the loss of an object outside of us, where "object" refers to a "psychic object"—something or someone in whom the subject has invested their affections, making it important to them. But in the contemporary world, if mourning requires acknowledging the void, the digital simulacrum acts as a fetishistic defense that attempts to conceal the reality of the loss. Since the image does not fade, the lost object is never consigned to the past, but continues to make itself present to the living through notifications and algorithms. This generates a form of digital melancholy, in which the subject remains chained to an image that can neither die nor speak, preventing the distance necessary for absence to transform into memory.

We therefore have three axes of this change: content shifts from thought to image, the relationship shifts from the private (personal) to the public (impersonal), and the sentiment shifts from shame to shamelessness.

The phenomenon described so far can also be observed from a different perspective that we believe is necessary to understand its complexity: the shift in the superegoic drive (from the perspective of the subject constructing their own social media profile) and the attempt to escape melancholy (from the perspective of those who survive the subject).

The superego that once forbade enjoyment now prescribes it: what the bourgeoisie described ("private vices and public virtues") has been completely overturned in the style of influencers who make excess the hallmark of their visibility.

Freud describes melancholy as the loss of a particular object: the identification of the ego; it is the collapse of the image in which a subject recognizes themselves, an internal image. This causes depressive effects, a feeling of disorientation and a loss of meaning in life.

It is from this feeling of melancholy that those who survive a bereavement try to escape by keeping the relationship with the deceased alive through a digital avatar: a spouse is such if they have a spouse, a parent is such if they have a child, and so on. By maintaining the illusion of the other's presence, one maintains the identification of the self. However, in this way, grief is never truly experienced and cannot be processed.

There is another type of communication that does not fall under the category of self-representation but rather belongs to the realm of subjective creation (whether artistic, literary, or intellectual). This type of communication has not changed form over time, but in the digital age, even its immaterial persistence in the form of bits is virtually eternal. However, this accumulation of textual data does not entail the representation of the author as if they were alive: in this second case, in fact, the symbolic function operates in its most authentic rigor, realizing itself properly as the "death of the thing." With the disappearance of the physical body (the Real), the subject fades as a biological entity to subsist exclusively as a set of signifiers. In this dimension, the mass of data does not function as a mirror, but as a legacy that becomes embedded in the "discourse of the Other." The disappearance of the subject-individual allows its word to detach itself from the flesh to become an operative trace. What remains is not the figure, but the sign: a material that the community can interpret, manipulate, and bring back to life. This form of persistence accepts the finitude of the Real to transform existence into a trail of meaning, integrating the subject's desire into the collective symbolic memory.

The digital age imposes a new ethics of memory that consists in distinguishing between a permanence that "fixes" (the Imaginary) and one that "articulates" (the Symbolic). While the digital image illusorily attempts to fill the void of the flesh, intellectual production accepts that void to allow the subject's discourse to continue operating. The challenge for contemporary subjectivity therefore lies in not allowing oneself to be captured by the simulacrum, so that the deceased may finally accomplish their symbolic death and remain among the living not as a cumbersome icon, but as a fruitful word within the discourse of the Other.

4. *Conclusions. Between simulacrum and symbol: contemporary subjectivity in the face of digital death*

The analytical journey undertaken in the preceding pages has highlighted how digital immortality is not an isolated phenomenon or one confined to a technical sphere, but a cultural symptom of extraordinary significance, in which some of the deepest tensions of contemporary subjectivity are reflected. Through the dual lens of sociology and Lacanian psychoanalysis, we have observed how technologies that promise to prolong the presence of the deceased—chatbots, avatars, holograms, social media profiles that outlive their owners—respond to real psychic and cultural needs, but often do so in ways that risk crystallizing grief rather than facilitating its processing.

On the sociological front, the section dedicated to digital immortality documented how the shift from unidirectional immortality—the classic form of cultural and intellectual legacy—to the bidirectional immortality theorized by Bell and Gray represents a structural transformation in the way modern societies manage death and memory. Whereas previous generations confronted the irrevocability of loss through collective rituals, funeral practices, and physical places of remembrance, the digital present offers the possibility of a continuous, interactive, and, to some extent, inexhaustible spectral presence. The projects examined—from Replika to Eterni.me, from LifeNaut to Forever Identity—clearly demonstrate that this transformation does not concern only the technological elite or visionary pioneers, but is progressively becoming accessible to ever-wider segments of the population, intertwining with everyday practices of social media use and with cultural expectations of perpetual visibility.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the Lacanian reading has made it possible to grasp the structural dimension of the phenomenon: technologies of digital immortality are not neutral with respect to the psychic process of mourning, but actively intervene in the dialectic between loss and memory, between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The persistence of the deceased's digital profile—with its images that do not age, its messages that continue to circulate, its avatar that responds to the questions of the survivors—acts as a device for deferring symbolic death, preventing the survivors from experiencing the void that is the necessary condition of authentic mourning. In this logic,

the resulting digital melancholy is not an unpredictable side effect, but a structural consequence of a system in which biological death no longer produces the symbolic discontinuity it has always entailed.

A crucial point emerging from the analysis concerns the distinction, introduced in the Lacanian perspective, between two forms of post-mortem persistence: the Imaginary, which fixes the image of the deceased in a simulacrum incapable of symbolic death, and the Symbolic, which accepts the body's finitude to transform the subjective legacy into a trace operating within collective discourse. This distinction is not merely theoretical: it has practical and normative implications of great significance. Digital immortality projects aimed at replicating identity—chatbots that simulate the deceased's personality, avatars that mimic their physical appearance, profiles that perpetuate their interactions—operate predominantly on the level of the Imaginary, producing simulacra that freeze the subject in an image without a future. The intellectual, artistic, and cultural output of the deceased, by contrast, belongs to the order of the Symbolic: it does not claim to replace the departed person, but gathers their words to integrate them into the shared heritage, enabling that work of mourning that only distance makes possible.

The transformation of the function of the superego, analysed in the second section, constitutes a further level of complexity. The shift from an ethic of modesty and the concealment of pleasure—characteristic of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century bourgeois culture—to a "ethic" of exhibition and self-performance, imposed by social media culture, has produced a paradoxical effect on the management of death. If pleasure must be displayed, if life must be a continuous public performance, then death—as the definitive and irremediable interruption of this performance—becomes an unbearable anomaly. Digital immortality, from this perspective, is not merely a response to the grief of the bereaved: it is also, and perhaps above all, a response to the subject's anguish at their own disappearance from the scene of visibility. The profile that survives the biological death of its owner is the technological form of this response: the performance does not stop, even when the performer is no longer there.

In conclusion, the analysis raises several ethical, legal, and psychological issues of pressing relevance. Who has the right to decide what happens to a person's digital data after their death? The surviving family members? The proprietary platforms? Or is it necessary to develop new forms of digital wills that take into account not only the

deceased's wishes but also the psychological effects that their digital persistence produces on the survivors? How can we protect the psychological well-being of those who, exposed to the constant presence of the digital simulacrum of their departed loved one, risk becoming trapped in a structural melancholy? And how can we simultaneously guarantee the right to memory and remembrance in forms that do not indefinitely colonize the psychological space of those left behind?

These questions have no simple answers, but their very formulation is already an important step toward a more conscious and responsible management of the technologies of digital death. In this sense, sociology and psychoanalysis are not antagonistic but complementary disciplines: the former offers the tools to interpret the cultural and structural transformations underway; the latter provides the categories to understand the psychological dynamics that these transformations produce and presuppose. The dialogue between these two perspectives, initiated in this contribution, seems to us not only fruitful on a theoretical level but urgent on a practical one.

Psychoanalytic and clinical literature has so far addressed mourning in traditional contexts—physical loss, separation, and anticipatory mourning. The growing prevalence of digital persistence technologies poses new questions for clinicians: how does the phenomenology of melancholy change when the lost object never completely disappears from the subject's perceptual horizon? Is it possible to develop specific therapeutic protocols for individuals who maintain intensive relationships with digital avatars of the deceased? These questions require longitudinal empirical research that combines clinical, ethnographic, and computational methods.

The current regulatory framework is profoundly inadequate in light of the speed of ongoing technological transformations. The European Union's *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR), for example, does not apply to the data of the deceased, leaving a regulatory vacuum that technology platforms tend to fill to their own advantage. It is necessary to develop a legal framework that recognizes the *right to digital death* as a fundamental right, clearly defining who holds ownership of post-mortem data, which uses of such data are lawful, and which constitute a violation of human dignity.

Existing research on digital immortality is predominantly produced in Anglo-Saxon and Western contexts. A comparative research program exploring how different cultures—with radically different funeral traditions, conceptions of death, and memorial practices—

engage with digital immortality technologies could reveal both anthropological universals and cultural specificities of great interest. In some cultural traditions, maintaining an active relationship with the deceased is already an established and valued practice: how does this practice interact with new digital technologies?

Recent developments in generative artificial intelligence—particularly large language models (LLMs) and systems for voice and visual synthesis—are making it technically possible to create digital simulacra of ever-higher quality. This raises unprecedented questions about the distinction between memory and fiction, and between the processing of grief, the replacement of the lost object. Future research should explore not only the psychological and social implications of this technological evolution, but also its epistemological implications: to what extent can a digital simulacrum be considered a faithful representation of the deceased? And what are the criteria by which this fidelity can or should be evaluated?

The Shoah Foundation's "New Dimensions in Testimony" project, which allows students to interact with holograms of Holocaust survivors, opens up a particularly important research perspective: technologies of digital immortality can be used not only for private and individual memory, but also for the construction and transmission of collective historical memory. How does the relationship with history and its protagonists change when the latter can be questioned directly through an avatar? What are the cognitive, emotional, and identificatory effects of this form of encounter with the past? And what risks of distortion or manipulation of historical memory does it entail?

Sociological research has documented how practices of mourning and memory are deeply gendered: women tend to be the primary custodians of family memory, the primary users of affective communication technologies, and the primary recipients of grief support services. It is reasonable to hypothesize that these gender asymmetries are reproduced—and transformed—within the realm of digital immortality. A research program exploring gender differences in the practices of constructing and engaging with digital simulacra of the deceased could contribute to a more comprehensive and critical understanding of the phenomenon.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of digital immortality emerges as one of the most fertile and urgent fields of research of our time. Its complexity requires interdisciplinary approaches that can integrate sociology, psychoanalysis, legal studies, philosophy of

mind, and technological ethics. The dialogue between these disciplines, which this contribution has sought to initiate, is destined to become increasingly necessary as digital immortality technologies spread and become entrenched in cultural practices and social expectations. The fundamental question we ask ourselves is not whether it will be technically possible to survive one's biological death in digital form—it is already possible, and will become increasingly so—but whether this survival is desirable, for whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences for the psychological and cultural fabric of the communities of the living.

References

Bauman, Z. (1992). Mortality, immortality and other life strategies. Polity Press.

Bell, G., & Gray, J. (2000). Digital immortality. Communications of the ACM, 44(3), 28–31. https://doi.org/10.1145/365966.365968

Brain, M. (2005). The day you discard your body. BYG Publishing.

Cosimi, S. (2015, April 3). Eter9: il social network che ti rende immortale. La Repubblica. https://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/social-network/2015/04/03/news/eter9/

Derrida, J. (2005). The work of mourning (P.-A. Brault & M. Naas, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 2001)

Freud, S. (1957). Mourning and melancholia. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 14, pp. 237–258). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1917)

Harari, Y. N. (2017). Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow (H. Watzman, Trans.). Harper. (Original work published 2015)

Jacobsen, M. H. (Ed.). (2017). Postmortal society: Towards a sociology of immortality. Routledge.

Klass, D., Silverman, P. R., & Nickman, S. L. (Eds.). (1996). Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief. Taylor & Francis.

Lacan, J. (1992). The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis 1959–1960 (D. Porter, Trans.). Norton. (Original work published 1986)

Lewis, C. S. (1961). A grief observed. Faber & Faber.

Mayer-Schönberger, V. (2011). Delete: The virtue of forgetting in the digital age (Updated ed.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 2009)

Newton, C. (2016, October 6). Speak, memory: When her best friend died, she rebuilt him using artificial intelligence. The Verge. https://www.theverge.com/a/luka-artificial-intelligence-memorial-roman-mazurenko-bot

Öhman, C., & Floridi, L. (2017). The political economy of death in the age of information: A critical approach to the digital afterlife industry. Minds and Machines, 27(4), 639–662. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-017-9445-2

Öhman, C., & Floridi, L. (2018). An ethical framework for the digital afterlife industry. Nature Human Behaviour, 2(5), 318–320. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0335-2

Pardes, A. (2018, April 1). The Wired guide to your digital afterlife. Wired. https://www.wired.com/story/wired-guide-to-your-digital-afterlife/

Sisto, D. (2016). Ricordati di morire: Lutto e immortalità nell'epoca dei social network. Bollati Boringhieri.

Sisto, D. (2018). La morte si fa social: Immortalità, memoria e lutto nell'epoca dei social network. Bollati Boringhieri.

Sofka, C. J., Gibson, A., & Silberman, D. R. (2017). Digital immortality or digital death? Contemplating digital end-of-life planning. In M. H. Jacobsen (Ed.), Postmortal society: Towards a sociology of immortality (pp. 173–196). Routledge.

Vlahos, J. (2017, January 25). A son's race to give his dying father artificial immortality. Wired. https://www.wired.com/2017/01/a-sons-race-to-give-his-dying-father-artificial-immortality/

Walter, T. (1996). A new model of grief: Bereavement and biography. Mortality, 1(1), 7–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/713685822