

Artificial Symbionts of the Afterlife: Navigating Presence of the Absent in the Posthuman Umwelt

Peter Mantello, Ritsumeikan University

This paper examines the semiotics of digital survival after biological death. With rapid advances in generative AI, voice cloning, deepfake avatars and affect recognition, artificial agents can simulate human cognition and emotion. One of the important implications of these recent iterations consists in their standing in for the dead, not just the living. Focusing on this, the paper responds to a growing industry of AI-powered memorials, holograms and chatbots that now extend the horizon of mortality beyond the grave, either through pre-mortem replicas built with the subject's participation or posthumous clones trained on social media data, messages, and voice and video recordings. Drawing on biosemiotics, the paper traces a shared notion of absence in Charles Peirce, Terrence Deacon and N. Katherine Hayles to explore how meaning, agency and affect persist when the biological organism no longer does. It proposes a thanasemiotics: semiosis continuing without life, where the digital remains of the deceased sustain meaning-making beyond metabolic closure.