Hanieh Rashid
Grandma Eternal :
memory, virtualisation, and the politics of the afterlife

If the dead could speak to us in the form of a digital double, what would they look like? Should they resemble the image they had of themselves before they died, or should they mirror how we remember them? Should these memories have been approved by the person who passed away? With her project, *Grandma Eternal*, Hanieh Rashid takes due note of the choices and renunciations implied in the preservation of memories. *Grandma Eternal* creates a special time to experience a relationship that's been translated, subtitled, negotiated – with a focus more on the connection than the illusion.

From chatbots to griefbots

Since their invention, media that record reality (phonographs, photography, cinema) have fuelled the mediumistic illusion of an encounter with the afterlife. Hanieh Rashid follows on from this long history, questioning what it is that artificial intelligence technologies promise to 'bring back'. For her Master's project in Media Design, *Eternal Us* (HEAD – Genève, 2024), Rashid explored the possibility of conversing with the double of a deceased person using AI. Popularised by the episode *Be Right Back* (Black Mirror, 2013), this promise is now offered by griefbot services (HereAfter AI, DeepBrain Re:Memory), which themselves derive from the rise of virtual companions for romantic or therapeutic purposes. However, these devices do raise many ethical questions, including data ownership and durability, and the effects on grief.

All memory is a choice

With *Grandma Eternal*, Rashid tackles these issues through a sensitive and relational investigation. Based on personal archives (text messages, WhatsApp messages, photographs) and audio interviews, *Grandma Eternal* offers a digital double of the artist's grandmother, who is still alive and with whom Rashid lived in Iran until she was 17. The question then arises of what to keep and what to discard – and this is never clearcut, since the memory belongs to both the grandmother and those close to her. The video making-of shows that the virtualisation of a person necessarily involves negotiations concerning the choice of data sources, language, voice, physical appearance, and the context of enunciation. The conversation with the avatar is therefore not intended to create the illusion of a return, but rather to examine the conditions in which there is the possibility of a mediated, situated, and imperfect presence.

A geopolitics of infrastructure

Any preservation project reflects the technical state of an era and the power relations that underpin it. In 2025, *Grandma Eternal* is confronted with the logic of proprietary AI: no voice synthesis in certain languages, restricted access to fine-tuning (model configuration), dependence on proprietary formats and Western servers, data exploitation, extraction of rare minerals, and high energy consumption. This geopolitics of AI infrastructure affects the form of the work: the 'human' grandmother speaks Persian, but her avatar doesn't. The project embraces this type of friction, highlighting technical mediations and their limitations. Implicitly, it reveals the political roots of technology: in the context of Iran's 'splinternet', a government-controlled Internet, it would be even more complex to collect and activate this type of archive.

Facial politics

Designing an avatar also means questioning the status of a body, a face, and their temporality. Rashid plans to eventually introduce variations in age, voice, and expression throughout the stories, asserting that identity is a journey rather than an essence. We remember by telling stories, and we transform ourselves by remembering. The work maintains the Otherness of the artist's grandmother by making her double something other than a double: a replica is always 'situated', both in terms of human perception and the technologies of an era. The standardised formats of contemporary AI (language, facial expressions), which tend to smooth out people's singularity, explain Rashid's choice to use 3D scans.

Towards an ethics of shortcomings

The biography of Rashid's grandmother, marked by repression, imprisonment, and mourning, sheds light on the ethical dimension of the project. The memory of Rashid's grandmother is selective, cautious, sometimes deliberately incomplete. She does not always say everything, and the interviews must therefore be supplemented with comments made at other times. This results in a tension between her own wishes and Rashid's desire to preserve a record. In this context, the 'fidelity' of a digital double cannot be measured by the exhaustiveness of the data, but by the quality of the thresholds set by both the artist and the AI. The transhumanist promise of immortality becomes a critical work of editing, where gaps, silences, and blind spots become part of the reconstructed memory. *Grandma Eternal* isn't just a promise to make the dead speak; it's an invitation to listen to what our technologies allow to be said, and what they're still keeping silent.

Anthony Masure

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