

The Body, Dependence and Finitude in Digital Times*

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The body is never merely a physical object. It forms the very ground of our being, shaping how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world. In psychoanalysis, it is the primary register of our earliest experiences of being recognised as intentional beings. Our sense of self is woven from these earliest bodily encounters – long before words arrive to name them. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, as I understand it, the human body is also far more than a biological entity. It is a sacred, integral part of our being that participates fully in the divine life. This view transforms everyday physicality into a means of encountering and expressing the presence of God. Speaking from outside a theological frame, I nonetheless observe a shared premise: In my psychoanalytic register and in the Greek Orthodox Church, the body is conceived not as a dispensable shell but as the essential ground upon which subjectivity is formed.

Yet we inhabit a cultural moment that increasingly facilitates disembodied modes of engagement. Technological mediation allows participation in communal and intimate life while bypassing the physical co-presence of others. Liturgical rites can be witnessed without the sensory reciprocity of a shared space; relationships can begin and unfold without any corporeal encounter. These developments invite us to consider the psychic

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implications of a diminished role for lived embodiment in arenas where physical presence has historically been central to meaning-making and relational depth. My concern –and perhaps yours– is that these shifts risk loosening the tether between mind and body, between person and embodied community.

Today, I begin by examining our contemporary condition as “cyborgs” –beings whose selves are extended and transformed through technology– and how this changes our lived sense of embodiment. From there, I turn to why the body matters – not simply as a biological fact, but because it situates us ‘here’ in space and time, in the presence of others. I consider how our humanity depends on anchoring relationships in mutual recognition, and how this requires accepting that we are neither omnipotent in life nor in love – a theme through which I will briefly refer to an area of work I have been very involved with, namely the implications of pornography in the development of sexuality in digital times. I then address the challenge of cultivating presence –both in life and in death– including the emerging phenomenon of “griefbots” and their impact on mourning – amid a culture that often evades embodied encounter.

There is a certain irony in delivering this lecture remotely, speaking to you through a technological interface that itself mediates our contact. It is also an example of technology’s positive potential: without it, this exchange would not be possible. Yet, engaging meaningfully across virtual space requires a mindful presence – one that acknowledges not only what is gained but also what is inevitably lost when we are not physically together.

We are All Cyborgs

Bodily experience has always been mediated by a technical dimension. In the contemporary moment, digital technologies are increasingly lived as extensions of both body and mind. Writing in 1930, Freud shrewdly observed:

Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs, he is truly magnificent, but those organs have not grown onto him and they still give him much trouble at times¹.

Technology exists to solve problems, to remove what is uncomfortable or difficult to bear. Freud recognised that our relationship with technology deserves scrutiny precisely because it is born of our discontent. Technology changes shape, but the fundamental facts of being human do not: We are conflicted beings, riven with anxiety, desire, fear, and longing – and we must somehow reconcile ourselves to these tensions. Freud’s prescient image of man as a “kind of prosthetic God” captures this condition: Augmented in capacity, yet never fully at ease with the appendages that “have not grown on to him”, as he put it.

In today’s terms, smartphones, laptops, and other networked devices operate as prosthetic organs – externalising memory, perception, and even aspects of identity itself. We register phantom vibrations from absent phones; we experience anxiety when separated from these devices. Such phenomena indicate that they have been incorporated into our bodily schema, extending the body’s boundaries into the technological realm. As Donna Haraway² memorably observes, we are chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism – in short, “we are cyborgs”.

This primordial coupling of human and technical was also central to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology: “... to get used to a hat, a car, a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely to convert them into the bulk of our own body”³. His example of the blind person’s cane illustrates the point: no longer a mere object, the cane becomes an extension of the senses, absorbed into the body’s gestalt. Heidegger’s

1. S. Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, edited by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, vol. 21 (1927-1931), The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, London 1975, pp. 59-145, here p. 37.

2. Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London 1991.

3. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C. Smith, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1962, p. 143 (Original work published 1945).

analysis of our use of tools offers a parallel: for a tool to be “ready-to-hand,” it must, in his terms, “withdraw”⁴. The tool disappears into the body’s architecture, forming what he calls an “embodiment relation”.

Haraway frames the cyborg as both myth and lived reality, collapsing the line between the organic self and technological other. Such incorporations invite us to reconsider where the self ends and the tool begins – a shifting boundary that some experience as empowering, others as unsettling.

The contemporary cyborg is enhanced by wearable devices, AI assistants, and medical implants, yet also inhabits a precarious embodiment: wholeness now rests on systems that can fail or become obsolete. This condition carries liberating potential –freedom from certain bodily or cognitive constraints– while simultaneously disturbing traditional notions of the autonomous, bounded self.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, such prosthetic extensions can be said to satisfy fantasies of omnipotence and completion: the machine-infused self appears augmented, invulnerable. However, they can also generate dependencies and unease. Bernard Stiegler’s⁵ philosophy of technics clarifies this dynamic. Technologies, he argues, are not external add-ons but co-constitutive of the human: the human invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool, becoming “exteriorised” in technics. Memory, knowledge, and culture are lodged in external archives –books, computers, cloud servers– rendering us inseparable from these prostheses.

Even though we have always been prosthetic creatures, today’s intimate interdependence with rapidly evolving technologies risks destabilising the self. Stiegler and Gilbert Simondon⁶ warn that failure to integrate the technical milieu psychically and culturally risks alienation. The prosthetic organs of digital life –social media profiles, virtual reality headsets– must be assimilated into the body schema, or the subject risks feeling dislocated, “not at home” in an extended embodiment comprising both flesh and

4. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Harper & Row, New York, NY 1962 (Original work published 1927).

5. B. Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, transl. R. Beardsworth & G. Collins, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 1998 (Original work published 1994).

6. G. Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, transl. C. Malaspina & J. Rogove, Univocal Publishing, Minneapolis, MN 2017 (Original work published 1958).

code. Thus, technology's role as both prosthesis and integral part of the self-forces a rethinking of embodiment: The human body is no longer a bounded organism but a shifting assemblage, a cybernetic body whose integrity and vulnerabilities are distributed across silicon and flesh.

Embodiment is an ongoing process underpinning our relation to the world. Technology modifies how the body is lived, requiring us to think in terms of dynamic interactions between the biological body, its virtual representations, its physical and social environment, and the conscious and unconscious processes that shape all three. We now function as overlapping digital and non-digital systems, and must recognise that technology is never purely digital, that is, it is never a-cultural, a-social, or untouched by the unconscious of its makers and users.

In my own psychoanalytic practice, I approach body and technology not as discrete entities but as mutually constituted. Our phenomenal experience of embodiment is increasingly stratified. In an era where mediated communication is routine, reflection on embodiment requires attending to at least three dimensions: (a) the objective body – the physical organism; (b) the virtual body – digitally represented and signified; and (c) the immersive body – lived within technologically mediated environments. Any reconstitution of the body through technology transforms subjective experience. For children born in the last fifteen years –“Gen Alpha”– their body gestalt will differ sharply from that of earlier generations because smartphones and laptops, present from birth, have become everyday prosthetic extensions.

The Body Matters because it Situates us ‘Here’ with Others

The body is disturbing because it always bears the trace of the Other. To think incarnationally is to acknowledge that without the flesh of another, one's own flesh could not exist. Flesh is inherently intersubjective: we come into being through the body of another. This recognition has deep psychoanalytic implications, but also theological ones, I imagine: It is in and through our finite, interdependent embodiment that we apprehend our dependency, our vulnerability, and our belonging to a world of

others. Facing this reality means accepting a paradox: The body must be owned as one's own while recognising that it is the site of difference, dependency, and separation. The desire for completeness with the other comes into conflict with the wish for self-sufficiency.

As Jean-Luc Nancy evocatively put it: "All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation"⁷. What Nancy so powerfully captures here is the paradox at the heart of relational experience – a paradox that resonates deeply within psychoanalytic thinking and clinical practice. His words suggest that connection, or 'touching', is never without a boundary. To touch, one must also remain distinct. There is no merging without a simultaneous acknowledgment of difference, of separateness.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this notion is deeply illuminating. It speaks to the foundational tension between our yearning for closeness and our need for individuation. Psychic life is marked by this dynamic – we long to be recognised, to feel in contact with another mind, another body, and yet even in our most intimate encounters, we are never fully fused with the other; there is always a gap, an edge, a skin.

Nancy's formulation thus invites us to consider that true intimacy is not found in fusion, but in the capacity to remain separate while still reaching out; to be touched without being engulfed, and to touch without consuming. It is this delicate, ethical relation –where contact does not erase difference– that psychoanalysis strives to foster.

In my work, I often observe how efforts to manipulate or redesign the body, for example, through cosmetic modification, can be understood as strategies for managing the otherness inscribed in the body⁸. The body is an arena where control is never total; it is marked by dependency and vulnerability, by its openness to the other. A body closed to otherness is incomplete, unable to sustain itself; yet openness requires relinquishing the fantasy of self-sufficiency. The tension between these imperatives generates the psychic drama of embodiment, and technologies –from

7. J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, transl. R. D. Richardson & A. O'Byrne, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2000, p. 5 (Original work published 1996).

8. Alessandra Lemma, *Under the Skin*, Routledge, London 2010.

social media to immersive VR– provide new stages on which this drama plays out.

A casual glance at daily life in 2025 reminds us of a longstanding wish: *not* to be embodied. Many of us would prefer to be free from the constraints of the body. Part of the reason is that bodies tie us to a material world in which we are neither sovereign nor infinite. In the 1990s, cyberculture popularised the fantasy that the body was redundant – at best an empty shell that new technologies could sculpt. Cyberspace was heralded by some as an arena for realising the disembodied mind, a form of “disembodied technocracy”⁹. Yet, ironically, what is at stake when we consider the body in virtual reality is not its obsolescence but the way its limits are thrown into relief. Even William Gibson’s cyber-cowboy in *Neuromancer* required a catheter to sustain prolonged virtual immersion¹⁰. The virtual body, far from eliminating the real one, situates it in perspective, highlighting the enduring struggle to integrate the fleshy, finite organism into subjective life. Kant’s dove offers a fitting metaphor: believing it could fly more easily without the resistance of air, it would soon discover that flight in a vacuum is impossible. Likewise, to deny the messy, finite nature of the body is to deny the very conditions for knowing who we are.

From the escalating popularity of cosmetic surgery to customise the body through to the use of generative AI tools that obviate the laborious process of writing, contemporary culture increasingly seeks to bypass the slow work of bodily engagement and acceptance of the given body. We strive for control, for liberation from the limits of embodiment. The desire to flee the anxieties of embodied empathy –of being with others in a messy, unpredictable way– is not new. What is new is the unprecedented ease and speed with which technology now facilitates this escape.

Digital culture idealises the instantaneous present, yet psychic development depends on movement – and movement always entails leaving

9. D. J. Gunkel, “Second Thoughts: Toward a Critique of the Digital Divide”, *New Media & Society* 4, 3 (1998), pp. 297-322, here 119.

10. P. Brians, *Modern Science Fiction and the American Literary Community*, Routledge, London 2011.

something behind. To move is to be connected with loss. The “work of desire” that has long been described by psychoanalysis as fundamental to our capacity to represent our experience gains its transformative power precisely through delay and frustration. In what I have elsewhere described as the ‘3D(-esire) world’, the triadic rhythm of Desire, Delay, and Delivery served not merely as an obstacle but as an essential terrain within which the subject could bear the tension of wanting and not-having, cultivating the capacity for symbolisation and for engaging the psychic work of representation¹¹. Desire now too often leaps directly to Delivery, whether in the boundless immediacy of pornography, the swipe logic of dating apps, or the constant availability of virtual therapeutic contact. However, without Delay, Desire is stripped of the dimensionality that makes it meaningful.

A decade on from first formulating this model, I see a further shift. For many young people, psychic life now unfolds in what could be called a “1D” psychic space. A one-dimensional object –a line, a point– has no area, no surface¹². Similarly, in clinical work with adolescents and young adults, I often hear narratives of relationships and experiences that loop endlessly in Delivery, disconnected from the unconscious roots of desire. Identity here is not anchored in a stable “I” but consists of a series of provisional selves, each generated and dissolved in the relay of online signifiers. Without Delay, psychic space contracts, foreclosing the encounter with Otherness essential to growth. Psychic development requires contact with that which does not instantly bend to one’s will – forces that frustrate, challenge, and transform. When the AI mirror reflects only the self’s undifferentiated desire, the psychic field collapses into inertia. Without the unpredictability of embodied human relations, the individual risks retreating into a closed circuit of projection and idealised self-reflection, reinforcing narcissistic defenses rather than moving beyond them.

11. Alessandra Lemma, *The Digital Age on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Practice and New Media*, Routledge, London 2017.

12. Alessandra Lemma, *Psychotechnical Becomings: Psychoanalysis, Identity, Desire and Mourning in Times of AI and Digital Mediation*, Routledge, London 2026.

The erosion of delay thus erodes movement toward Otherness. Emmanuel Levinas¹³ reminds us that the encounter with the Other –irreducible, opaque, and beyond our grasp– is foundational to subjectivity. When technological mediation collapses temporal and spatial distance, I am therefore suggesting that it can also collapse the psychic space in which alterity is registered and metabolised.

Despite the cultural momentum towards reducing physical and psychic movement, the fact of our embodied nature remains inescapable. The body is the original site of our encounter with the world; thinking itself emerges from this grounding. As Merleau-Ponty argued, the body is “a primary access to the world”, a “universal setting” for perceptual unfolding¹⁴. The Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa¹⁵ adds that all experience is haptic; before language, we grasp the world through touch, we grasp and physically inhabit spaces.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, the body is the very condition of our existence – always exposed, vulnerable, and in relation. In this, his thinking resonates with psychoanalysis, where the body is the first site of dependency, inscription, and encounter with the other. Embodiment makes clear that we do not own ourselves: our boundaries are porous, traversed by touch, need, and desire. The body is therefore both a limit and a passage – the ground on which psychic life takes shape in and through relation, always marked by vulnerability to others and by the impossibility of self-sufficiency.

The Body, Perspective, and Empathy

The body matters because it situates us – ‘here’ and not ‘there’. Movement displaces the self, introducing an ‘elsewhere’ that is beyond

13. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. A. Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, PA 1969 (Original work published 1961).

14. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 326.

15. J. Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*, Wiley, New York 2009.

immediate control. It is through such displacement that we first encounter otherness.

The body anchors our humanity to ensure mutual recognition. However, the body not only roots us in our dependence on others, but it also teaches us about perspective. Because we are a body, we are an object for another's gaze. I see, and I am seen. Edith Stein¹⁶, the Carmelite nun and student of Edmund Husserl, offers a phenomenological lens on this. She argued that our embodied experience is always partial – we cannot apprehend our bodies in their entirety from the inside. The back of our head, for example, is inaccessible without a mirror or another person's description. This is not just an anatomical fact. For Stein, it points to a deeper philosophical truth: We are never fully transparent to ourselves.

To know ourselves more fully, we must meet ourselves through the eyes of another. And here, empathy becomes essential. Empathy bridges the gap between our own subjectivity and the external perspective that others bring. Self-knowledge is never a solitary achievement; it is always mediated through otherness. We must be willing to see ourselves as others see us – and to let others help us see. But contemporary life increasingly undermines the spaces in which such encounters can happen. Consumerism, the infotainment economy, remote connection, and the neoliberal celebration of autonomy all erode the communal, embodied spaces that sustain our relational life.

In psychoanalysis, the physical setting in which patient and psychoanalyst meet – the room, the postures, the gestures – is not incidental; it is part of the treatment itself. It provides the medium in which unconscious life can unfold. Yet online therapy, while vital during the pandemic, has accelerated a preference for disembodied modes of relating. As with the decline in shared religious rituals, we see a retreat into private, buffered selves.

Psychoanalysis as a process is demanding – it insists on the complexity, unpredictability, and physical presence of another human being. And that is precisely what sustains us in a complex, unstable world. Techno-

16. Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, transl. W. Stein, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. 1989 (Original work published 1919).

logy, whether AI interlocutors like ChatGPT or automated self-help platforms, may offer constant availability, but they cannot replicate the mutual recognition that comes from embodied presence between a patient and a therapist. If we trade human encounter for technological mediation, we risk losing the very capacities –empathic attunement, embodied recognition– that anchor our humanity.

We are not Omnipotent in Life or Love

Contemporary technological culture often promotes fantasies of transcending the body altogether. Immersive virtual environments, gaming avatars, and transhumanist visions of consciousness “uploading” or indefinite life extension all carry the promise of escaping corporeal limits, but of course we cannot escape physical disintegration. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such imaginings are not neutral – they are omnipotent defenses against mortality, dependency, and bodily vulnerability.

Lucas, 19, spent most of his waking hours inhabiting a virtual avatar – a flawless, invulnerable warrior. In the consulting room, he spoke disparagingly of his offline body, referring to it as “just the shell”. He rarely made eye contact, as though sustained gaze might pin him back into a body he wished to disavow. In our early sessions, his voice came alive only when describing the game’s landscapes and battles; the embodied young man before me seemed to have receded into the circuitry of the game. His identification with the avatar was an omnipotent solution to the developmental challenge he faced – of tolerating inadequacy and dependency. Over time, moments of embodied contact emerged: a shift in posture or a direct look. These became the starting points for addressing his terror of inhabiting a body that could fail, be judged, or be abandoned.

One area that illustrates well the risk of digital technology is sexuality. For many adolescents today, psychosexual development unfolds in an environment where internet pornography is not peripheral but central – the primary arena for encountering and rehearsing sexual scripts. This shift alters the developmental conditions for becoming sexual. The erotic, in its fullest form, depends on tolerating uncertainty and

remaining open to the other's subjectivity – their rhythms, desires, and refusals. Whereas earlier generations encountered sexuality in embodied, reciprocal contexts –awkward, negotiated, and slow-moving– young people now access a visually saturated repertoire of sexual acts on demand, stripped of the relational and sensory complexity of mutual engagement¹⁷.

Pornography offers what might be called erotic omnipotence: total control over what is viewed, when, and in what sequence; the power to skip, replay, and escalate without attending to another's embodied subjectivity. The body is often deconstructed into parts –breasts, genitals– exaggerated for visual impact but severed from the lived significance they carry in intimate exchange.

At a cultural level, this reflects what I have called the *pornographisation of desire*: The seepage of pornographic aesthetics and scripts into mainstream media and social self-presentation. This reshapes not only private sexual behaviour but also public selfhood, influencing how individuals imagine, display, and evaluate bodies – their own and others'.

Anna, 15, was referred after her parents discovered explicit messages on her phone. She described first encountering pornography at age 11, when peers showed her explicit videos. The initial shock and disgust quickly turned into a compulsion to seek more – a trajectory fuelled by curiosity and a wish to master the disturbing images through repetition. In sessions, she often adopted a performative tone when describing sexual experiences, narrating them as if from a camera's viewpoint. In her first sexual relationship, she felt compelled to reproduce the scenarios she had internalised, even when uncomfortable. Her account was tinged with dissociation; she often described watching herself from "outside," preoccupied with how she looked rather than what she felt. For Anna, the erotic had been organised around an internalised camera lens – sexual subjectivity shaped by image management rather than sensory presence.

17. Alessandra Lemma, "Brief Report: Private Pleasures and the Damage Done: Asking the Unasked Question about Consumption of Online Pornography", *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 38, 2 (2024), pp. 121-131.

Being Present in Life

The subjective experience of presence has undergone a radical transformation in virtual space. Presence, once defined by embodiment in the here-and-now can now be displaced through digital media into telepresence, the capacity to be “elsewhere” while remaining physically in place, as I am doing with you today. Yet this technological affordance also fosters a paradoxical absence-in-presence: The increasingly familiar scene of people co-located but absorbed in separate screens.

Jonathan Crary¹⁸ has described the 24/7 digital environment as a “hallucination of presence,” in which one feels ubiquitously connected and permanently online, but where this “presence” is manic and flattened. It is hallucinatory because it overrides the human need for rhythm, rest, and absence. In a culture illuminated by screens without interruption, the natural alternation of day and night, and the bodily imperative of sleep, are devalued. The psyche is enticed by the illusion of omnipresence: The fantasy that one can, and should, be everywhere, know everything, and respond instantly. Yet this undermines the depth and attunement that emerge from sustained, embodied presence. Devices become perceptual prostheses; without them, many feel unsettled. In such conditions, the psychic capacity for absence –the generative void in which longing, imagination, and reflection take root– can be foreclosed. One is never “off” and thus never wholly alone with one’s thoughts.

Increasingly, solitude is reframed as a problem to be solved, and the preferred solution is technological. We slip into the assumption that perpetual “connection” will protect us from loneliness, when in fact the inability to be alone leaves us only knowing how to be lonely. Sherry Turkle¹⁹ has argued that we are increasingly “alone together”, seduced by the illusion of companionship without the demands of intimacy. Digital communication produces the appearance of relationship (constant connection, easy disclosure) but without the embodied, empathic engagement through which intimacy develops. We can present

18. J. Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso, London 2013.

19. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Basic Books, New York 2011.

a curated self and receive attention from many acquaintances yet remain profoundly lonely. Intimacy requires vulnerability and the laborious work of dialogue – processes that technology can smooth away. The paradox, as Turkle observes, is that we have more connections than ever, but weaker bonds.

Clinically, I frequently encounter individuals who choose the mediated safety of a screen, where responses can be edited and controlled, over the unpredictable immediacy of face-to-face contact. Psychically, this can function as a defence against the alterity of the other, favouring engagement with images or avatars, which are subject to one's control, over engagement with others whose independent subjectivity may unsettle or challenge. Younger patients sometimes describe telephone calls, let alone in-person meetings, as “intrusive” or “too demanding”, preferring text-based exchanges that allow for self-editing. Over time, diminished tolerance for unstructured, live interaction risks constraining the development of social and emotional capacities. Empathy, like a muscle, atrophies without use, and constant mediation through impersonal channels deprives us of opportunities to exercise it, for instance, by reading subtle facial expressions or adjusting in real time to another's affective state.

New relational forms are also emerging. The rise of AI interlocutors, such as voice assistants, AI “friends”, therapist chatbots, illustrates a growing willingness to form attachments to artificial agents. An AI companion may be imbued with human qualities through projection of one's needs onto it, yet entirely subject to the user's control. Such companions are infinitely patient, perfectly attentive, and can be switched off at will. While they may provide comfort, particularly to those who are isolated, they also risk reinforcing narcissistic relating, in which the other remains fundamentally an extension of oneself. Optimists contend that AI agents might augment human connection, such as elder-care robots, but the question remains whether such objects expand the capacity for relationship or provide an avoidance of its complexities.

In virtual reality (VR), the sense of presence itself is re-engineered. Users may experience a potent illusion of occupying another body or environment – a controlled dissociative state akin to a waking dream.

The ego temporarily identifies with an avatar –possibly of another age, gender, or species– navigating a world governed by altered physical and social rules. Such experiences can be liberating, offering symbolic enactments of unconscious wishes and even therapeutic benefit, as in VR exposure therapy. Yet sustained immersion can blur the line between the reality principle and fantasy. When the virtual becomes more gratifying than the actual, our emotional investment in real-world pursuits and relationships may diminish, impairing motivation and tolerance for frustration.

These altered modes of presence, and the ways they shape our capacity for recognition, raise pressing questions when technology begins to mediate encounters not only with the living, but also with the dead.

Being Present in Death: Finitude and the Griefbot

So far, I have underlined that the body roots us in the reality of finitude. No matter how we modify it or deny it, ultimately death is the reminder that we cannot escape the body and its limits. But we all struggle with acceptance of the body's finitude, not only our own but also of those we love. I now want to explore this through the example of a relatively new technological development: The griefbot, which I imagine will be of interest to theologians who have historically played a central role in supporting people in their moment of grief²⁰. This technology is marketed as a tool for helping us reconcile ourselves to loss and support the process of mourning.

Mourning, too, is reshaped by technology. Freud described grief as the gradual withdrawal of libidinal investment from the deceased other. But what does mourning mean when the lost other persists digitally? Facebook memorials, algorithmic reminders, AI chatbots – these sustain a presence that is both comforting and disturbing. Grief now

20. Alessandra Lemma, "Mourning, Melancholia, and Machines: An Applied Psychoanalytic Investigation of Mourning in the Age of Griefbots", *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 105, 4 (2024), pp. 542-563.

involves negotiating not only inner absence but technological artefacts that preserve and disrupt presence at once. Ever since the invention of photography, which allowed us to retain images of our lost loved ones, the course of mourning has evolved alongside technology. AI-assisted grief now appears as the next step, promising a form of connection that persists after death.

Griefbots are AI-powered chatbots created to simulate a conversation with someone who has died. Natural language processing algorithms track the use of language in conversations mined from chats, emails, videos, social media posts and other digital traces, detecting patterns that are then fed into the griefbot. The aim is to mimic the personality, quirks of expression, and speech patterns of the deceased, allowing the bereaved to ‘converse’ with them beyond death.

In keeping with Freud’s²¹ later formulations about mourning and melancholia, we now have a more nuanced appreciation that it is both inevitable and desirable to maintain psychological connections with the dead. Yet, when a griefbot offers ongoing conversation with the dead, we must ask: What kind of remembering does this encourage?

All memorialisation projects deserve scrutiny: Do they deny the passage of time, mummifying memory, or do they preserve the lost one as truly other, allowing us to grieve their irretrievable absence with all its pain, guilt, and impossibility of reparation? Mourning at its best maintains a living connection with the dead while recognising that they are gone. The challenge, and the ethical task, is to bear this reality.

Here, Jacques Derrida’s²² reflections on mourning are instructive. For him, death is not simply an event that arrives at the end of life. Death is constitutive of life – what he calls “life-death”. If death is woven into life from the outset, then mourning is present from the beginning: every relationship already contains the knowledge, however repressed, that

21. S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, edited by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, vol. 19 (1923-1925), The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, London 1975, pp. 12-66, here p. 37.

22. J. Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986 (rev. edit.); J. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. P. Brault & M. Nass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2001.

one will survive the other. We are who we are, Derrida suggests, because of the memory of those we have loved and carry within us; we come into being in dialogue with the dead, and can only think of ourselves in bereaved allegory. This leads to his stark aphorism: “I mourn, therefore I am”.

For Derrida, mourning can never be completed. The deceased other should never be entirely ‘digested’ into the self, nor expelled entirely; they remain as another within. This is the ethical imperative of mourning – and it is precisely what the griefbot risks undermining. The algorithmic replica closes the gap that death opens, smoothing over absence with simulation. In filling the void, we efface the other’s irreducible otherness and defend against the pain of loss.

Derrida suggests that what matters in mourning is our ongoing *love for* the other rather than a fixation on our own deprivation consequent to our loss. But the griefbot, far from sustaining the otherness of the deceased, risks turning them into an instrumental good – valuable only for the comfort they provide. It encourages retreat from the shared, embodied work of mourning into a privatised, endlessly curated simulation.

A griefbot plugs us into a feedback loop of exactly what we wish to hear. The yearning for a reply –sometimes for forgiveness– cannot ripen into the inner work of mourning if it is instantly gratified. Judith Butler’s²³ call to “tarry with grief” (i.e., to linger in it) is relevant here: Grief can undo us, and in undoing us, remind us of our shared vulnerability. She argues that grief need not be privatising; it can be even be politicising, reconnecting us to the interdependence that defines us.

The development of griefbots powerfully illustrates technology’s “restlessness”²⁴, and its speed can be out of step with the psychic time required for grief. Derrida warned of the incommensurability between digital speed and thought. Paul Virilio²⁵ too, saw in technological

23. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London 2020.

24. H. Jonas, “Toward a Philosophy of Technology”, in: R. C. Scharff – V. Dusek (eds.), *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA 2006.

25. P. Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst*, transl. M. Cavaliere, Semiotext(e), New York, NY 1999; P. Virilio, *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, transl. M. Degener, Continuum,

acceleration a danger to the moral encounter with the other: If the temporal space in which we approach one another is collapsed, we risk rejecting the other altogether.

In Praise of Living Speech

This brings me to some concluding observations. Technology does not simply alter what we do and how we do it; it reconfigures who we are. Despite the concerns I have shared today, I do not, however, subscribe to an entirely dystopian reading of technology. It can be emancipatory, expanding rather than contracting our capacities. As an extension of the self, technology can open doors, amplify expression, and broaden access. But if it supplants embodied relating, then we run into risk. Especially for the current and new generations, we need to support the value of embodied conversation, genuine solitude, and the capacity for boredom capacities that psychoanalytic dialogue has long nurtured, and that religious contemplation has also safeguarded. Psychoanalysis and religion alike should stand at the forefront of defending these values, for they preserve a kind of humanity worth fostering.

Moreover, in the present moment of accelerated AI development, some questions become urgent: How do we ensure that new generations of intelligent beings –organic or synthetic– align with human values? How do we teach them kindness, compassion, and mutual recognition? How should we relate to forms of mind unlike our own? What are the implications if successive generations of human and artificial minds surpass their predecessors in intelligence and capability?

Already the continuum of life is populated with hybrids – “cyborgs” in the form of human beings with insulin pumps, cochlear implants, and other bio-technical integrations. Soon, neural interfaces will radically extend our cognitive and sensory capacities, allowing mind-to-mind connectivity and capabilities we can scarcely imagine. Alongside them will be engineered robots –potentially incorporating human cells– capable

of complex communication with biological systems, even organs, that previously had no “voice”²⁶. Such developments compel us to reconsider embodiment, agency, and the meaning of sentience. They also shatter older, more rigid narratives of human identity, transformation, and value.

Navigating this future requires interdisciplinary thinking capable of holding complexity. We must discern how to co-exist safely with proliferating forms of intelligence and embodiment, and how to ensure that technological change enhances rather than erodes the values that sustain flourishing for all sentient beings. The worth of an innovation should be judged by its quality and its ethical implications, not its origin. To privilege “human-made” over “machine-made” simply because of provenance is to fall into the oldest trap of in-group versus out-group, with its predictable legacy of prejudice and conflict.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato distinguishes between “living” speech and writing. For him, spoken dialogue is animated by reciprocity: Ideas are tested, reshaped, and enlivened through the immediacy of response – “A discourse that is written down ... in the soul of the listener”, as he put it²⁷. Writing, by contrast, is fixed, unable to adjust to the needs of its reader. While I do not share Plato’s concerns about the written word, I do share his concern that without the vitality of live dialogue in a shared physical space, something essential is lost. For both psychoanalysis and communal life, it is this living embodied presence that sustains our capacity to think together. In the end, what sustains us is “living” speech – the unpredictable, embodied exchange that transforms both speaker and listener. When dialogue occurs through virtual means, as ours has done today, its value depends on our willingness to be fully present while also recognising what cannot be carried across the screen. Without that awareness, we risk mistaking connection for contact.

If we can hold this awareness, the very technologies that tempt us toward disembodiment can also extend our reach allowing us to preserve, and even deepen, the living speech that keeps us human.

26. Dr. M. Levin, “Forms of life, forms of mind 2025”, <https://thoughtforms.life/> [15.5. 2026].

27. Plato, *Phaedrus* 276a.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Σῶμα, ἐξάρτηση καὶ περατότητα στὴν ψηφιακὴ ἐποχὴ

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Τὸ παρὸν ἄρθρο ἐξετάζει τὴ σωματικότητα, τὴν ἐξάρτηση καὶ τὴ φθαρτότητα στὴ σύγχρονη ψηφιακὴ κουλτούρα μέσα ἀπὸ μία ψυχ-
αναλυτικὴ προοπτικὴ, σὲ διάλογο μὲ τὴ φαινομενολογία καὶ τὴ
φιλοσοφία τῆς τεχνολογίας. Ὑποστηρίζει ὅτι τὸ σῶμα δὲν εἶναι ἓνα
τυχαῖο ἢ ἀναλώσιμο δοχεῖο, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀπαραίτητο θεμέλιο τῆς ὑπο-
κειμενικότητας, τῆς σχεσιακῆς ζωῆς καὶ τῆς ἡθικῆς εὐθύνης. Ἐνῶ ἡ
ἀνθρώπινη σωματικότητα ἦταν πάντοτε τεχνικὰ διαμεσολαβούμενη,
οἱ ψηφιακὲς τεχνολογίες ἐντείνουν τὶς μακροχρόνιες φαντασιώσεις
περὶ ἀποσωματοποίησης, παντοδυναμίας καὶ ἀμεσότητας, ἀναδια-
μορφώνοντας τὸν τρόπο μὲ τὸν ὁποῖο βιώνονται ἡ ἐπιθυμία, ἡ σεξουα-
λικότητα, ἡ παρουσία καὶ τὸ πένθος. Τὸ ἄρθρο διερευνᾷ αὐτὲς τὶς
δυναμικὲς μέσῳ ἀναλύσεων τῆς διαδικτυακῆς πορνογραφίας, τῶν
εἰκονικῶν καὶ διαμεσολαβούμενων ἀπὸ τεχνητὴ νοημοσύνη σχέσεων,
καθὼς καὶ τῶν ἀναδυομένων πρακτικῶν ὅπως τὰ “griefbots”, τὰ ὁποῖα
ὑπόσχονται συνεχῆ ἐπαφὴ μὲ τοὺς νεκρούς. Ἰδιαίτερη προσοχὴ δίδεται
στὴ διάβρωση τῆς σωματικῆς συνύπαρξης, τῆς χρονικῆς καθυστέρησης
καὶ τῆς ἀμοιβαίας εὐαλωτότητας – συνθῆκες κεντρικῆς σημασίας τόσο
γιὰ τὴν ψυχικὴ ἀνάπτυξη ὅσο καὶ γιὰ τὴ θεολογία τῆς Ἐνσάρκωσης.
Ἀντιστεκόμενο σὲ μία καθαρὰ δυστοπικὴ στάση, τὸ ἄρθρο ἐπιβεβαιώνει
τὴ δυναμικὴ τῆς τεχνολογίας νὰ ὑπηρετεῖ τὴν ἀνθρώπινη εὐημερία, ὅταν
παραμένει προσανατολισμένη πρὸς τὴ σωματικὴ συνάντηση καὶ ὄχι πρὸς
τὴν ἀντικατάστασή της. Τὸ ἄρθρο καταλήγει καλώντας τὴ θεολογία καὶ
τὴν ψυχανάλυση νὰ δώσουν ἐκ νέου προσοχὴ στὴν σωματικότητα, στὸν
ζωντανὸ λόγο καὶ στὴν ἀποδοχὴ τῶν σωματικῶν ὁρίων ὡς θεμελίων γιὰ
τὴν κοινωνία, τὴν εὐθύνη καὶ τὴν ἐλπίδα στὴν ψηφιακὴ ἐποχὴ.

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