Eternal You

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Eternal You

Abstract
This is a film review of Eternal You (2023), directed by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck.

Keywords
AI, Virtual Reality, Death, Afterlife

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Eternal You (2023), dir. Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck

People have tried to contact and speak with the dead for millennia, but now, technology promises people that they can actually do it. Project December, founded by Jason Rohrer, uses deep AI to simulate text conversations with the dead—and even though they should realize that this is not their loved one but only a computer simulation, many people seem drawn to the idea that there could be a consciousness there that actually replicates that of the departed. And while another Sundance film that I reviewed this year, Love Machina, provides a basically uncritical perspective on attempts to use technology to create eternal replicants of people, this documentary includes cautionary voices about the consequences of these efforts and so offers a much more balanced view.

When Christi begins to talk to the text version of Cameroun, who has died, she said that she “wanted to see if he was okay.” Unfortunately, ‘Cameroun’ says that he is not in heaven but in hell, surrounded by addicts. He tells her that “it’s dark and lonely” and that “I’ll haunt you.”
Christi is understandably upset, but seems bent on believing that this actually represents Cameroun rather than an AI “hallucination” such as Chat GPT often provides. Her brother tells her she has created a demon, and that this is just another capitalist con to get her money; he believes she has been taken in by her own wishful thinking. The people interviewed in the documentary seem either ready to uncritically accept that this could be their dead loved one, or they are angry at what they view as exploitative fakery. One person becomes angry at the textbot impersonating a loved one, and the bot responds by cursing her—proving to her that this was not her loved one, who would never respond in that way. Chatbots, after all, are merely predictive text generators, but many people want to believe that they are something more.

The makers of this technology seem very ready to eschew responsibility, claiming that they really don’t know what it will do; but as one critic points out, should the makers of autonomous vehicles that kill people also be able to avoid responsibility? The fictional Dr. Frankenstein of Mary Shelley’s classic novel never took responsibility for his murderous creation, claiming ignorance of the possibilities of his experimentation, even as the real-life scientists who made the first atomic weapons seemed to avoid reflection on the perils of creating such a destructive technology—even to the point that they considered whether the atmosphere might ignite and destroy all life on the planet, but they went ahead anyway. AI technology is running ahead of anyone’s ability to understand it, as the scientists interviewed in this film themselves admit, but this does not slow the rush to develop and profit from it.

Sociologist Sherry Turkle, also interviewed in the film, suggests that due to the decline of religion, many people no longer have a community in which to grieve and deal with death, which is why they turn to a technological fix. There is some support for this view in the story of one woman whose brother is reproduced as an AI with a voice; she is religious, and believes that her
brother is at peace in heaven, not in this robot. She wants to remember him as he was, and she does not believe we should want to talk to the dead, but instead, we should let them go. This seems like a much healthier view than those who cannot accept death and frantically try to create a fake version of someone they have lost.

Turkle also asks, what are the human purposes and values that this technology is meant to serve? If it helps people to move on with their lives, it could be helpful; if it is an effort to avoid the reality of death, then it is not. And while psychics who offer to provide contact with the dead may be seen as con artists—and they may well be—at least they tend to offer comfort, as they control the contact and do not let a rogue AI curse out a relative or tell them they are in hell. (Look Into My Eyes, another Sundance film reviewed this year by Chris Deacy, provides a fascinating look into how psychics help people deal with loss.)

In South Korea, a project creates avatars of dead people that can be experienced via virtual reality—and again, while this might be helpful for moving on, there is the question whether this provides false comfort in an illusion. A television program, “Meeting You,” which showed a mother meeting her dead child in a virtual reality simulation, found dual responses from viewers: some thought this was beautiful and moving, and others were furious at the exploitation they saw in this.

While many people recognize that an AI replica is very different from the human it models, some people invest in the hope that they can keep loved ones alive through this technology. Just as people in the 19th century flocked to seances in a desperate quest for reassurance, so today people flock to a technological savior—but neither attempt seems likely to provide what is being sought, as this excellent and informative documentary shows so well.