

Recursive Necropolitics: Historical antecedents and contemporary practices of AI afterlives

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of recursive necropolitics in the context of AI death technologies, tracing historical antecedents and contemporary manifestations. By analyzing 19th-century phenomena such as the Paris Morgue, L'Inconnue de la Seine, and anatomy museums alongside modern AI innovations like deepfakes and griefbots, the study reveals enduring patterns in how societies use technology to mediate, commodify, and control death. Through the frameworks of spectacle gaze, mechanical virality, and necro-technological recursion, the article demonstrates how AI death technologies extend long-standing practices of managing mortality while reinforcing social hierarchies. The analysis engages with ethical implications such as posthumous privacy, consent, and environmental impact, situating these concerns within a broader historical and necropolitical context. By illuminating the recursive nature of death technologies across time, this research offers critical insights into the societal and ethical challenges posed by AI's role in shaping our relationship with mortality.

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This article builds upon research I conducted during my doctoral studies at Stanford University, where I first began exploring the historical intersections of technology and death through case studies of anatomy museums*, L'Inconnue de la Seine*, and the Paris Morgue. I am grateful to my PhD advisors and mentors -- Tanya Luhrmann, Lochlann Jain, and Robert Pogue Harrison -- for their guidance during the early stages of this long-term project. Their insights have been instrumental in shaping my approach to this complex topic. Any errors or omissions remain, of course, my own.

I. Introduction: Recursive Necropolitics and the Afterlife of AI

In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), technologies are reshaping many aspects of human life, and their potential impact on death and mourning is particularly provocative. AI-driven innovations include griefbots, which simulate conversations with the deceased, and deepfakes, which offer "digital resurrections." While these technologies seem novel, this article argues that they are part of a long historical continuum of technological interventions in death. Rather than representing radical breaks from the past, contemporary AI death technologies extend centuries-old practices of using technology to mediate, commodify, and control experiences of death.

To understand this historical continuity and its implications, this article draws upon Katherine Verdery's (1999) concept of enchantment, which examines the non-rational, emotional, and often sacred qualities attributed to dead bodies and their representations. Verdery demonstrates how this enchantment imbues the dead with profound cultural and political significance, shaping collective memory and reinforcing social hierarchies. This article extends Verdery's framework beyond physical bodies to encompass digital remains, arguing that AI death technologies generate new forms of enchantment that bridge material and virtual domains. This technological enchantment operates alongside what Walter Benjamin (1935/2008) termed "aura"-the unique presence of an artwork in time and space. As death-related imagery moves from physical to digital reproduction, these technologies transform rather than diminish the aura of the dead, creating new forms of posthumous presence and power.

Through this theoretical lens, the article introduces the concept of "recursive necropolitics." Building upon Achille Mbembe's (2003) notion of necropolitics-which

examines how sovereign power determines who may live and who must die-recursive necropolitics explores how power over death recursively manifests through technology across different historical periods. This recursive nature is evident in three key mechanisms through which technological enchantment operates, each examined in both historical and contemporary contexts:

The Spectacle Gaze: The technologically mediated transformation of death into a public exhibition that paradoxically combines rationality and objectivity with spectacle and fascination. This manifestation of enchantment reinforces social hierarchies and cultural norms through the commodification of mortality, mutually constituting scientific epistemologies and affective intensities.

Mechanical Virality: The widespread dissemination of death-related imagery through various technologies, both historical and contemporary. This process amplifies and transforms the enchanted aura of these artifacts, shaping collective imagination and cultural memory. By revealing how viral spread predates digital media, this concept illuminates longstanding patterns in societal engagement with death.

Necro-technological Recursion: The iterative process by which death-related technologies, often rooted in violent or exploitative practices, are repurposed as socially beneficial. This form of enchantment obscures ethical concerns by framing these technologies as advancements in education, science, or well-being, thereby concealing the violence inherent in their creation and perpetuation.

These mechanisms, while manifesting differently across historical periods, reveal the persistent ways in which societies leverage technology to shape our relationship with mortality. Their power derives from the enchanted nature of death technologies, which transform the dead into potent symbols that both reflect and reproduce power relations.

While the artifacts and technologies examined in this article-ranging from contemporary griefbots and pornographic deepfakes to 19th-century morgue tourism, death masks, and anatomical models

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