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Ageivism Roundtable

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Katrien Jacobs - The ageing feminist who died (and came back)

An appropriate, ‘just right’, way of enjoying and praising the wit and spirit (in Flemish; *geestigheid* or *geestdrift*) of older women and (widely defined) feminists came to me when I saw an artwork at the Dutch Gogbot Festival in September 2021.¹ The topics of the festival were ethical and aesthetic challenges of Deepfake Technology, a specific type of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Deep Learning Technology, through which recorded videos of a person, specifically their faces and facial expressions, are synthetically merged to create a virtual composite of that person. Deepfake videos have been used, for instance, in political campaigns in order to discredit one’s opponent, they have also led to a specific kind of misogynist hate-speech by means of simulated porn videos (Maddocks, 2020). In Deepfake pornography, the faces of (mostly female) celebrities, movie stars, journalists, activists and feminists are synthesized into porn scenes. The Gogbot festival interrogated various uses of the technology, including the artwork *Deepfake Therapy* by Roshan Nejal in which he used the technology to summon up people who have died and to experience a warm or loving, ‘spirited’ and healing contact with them.

In this art work and concurrent documentary, Nejal explains that he adopted Deepfake technology after he lost his grandmother, experienced deep grief and wanted to speak to her by way of prayers according to his Hindu religion. He began experimenting with Deepfake videos so he could have a simulated moment of contact with her. The documentary shows only a small clip of this encounter, but as viewers we can immediately witness the glowing personality of the grandmother and the special bond she had with Nejal. Nejal was satisfied with his sessions and also decided to share benefits with other people by hosting therapy sessions in collaboration with a group of therapists in the Netherlands.² As shown in the documentary, the Deepfake Technology was used to set up ‘therapy sessions’ for people who had recently experienced the death of a beloved. More specifically, it was utilized to synthesize the facial expressions and mouth movements of the dead, while actresses and actors were hired to improvise the speech of the deceased and hence, ‘embody’ them. The documentary details the psychological journey of the participants, who experience a return of their beloved, while interviews with them show that it is indeed a highly emotive and immersive AI experiment. We witness an elderly man and woman who are able to chat extensively with their deceased partners, as well as a couple who lost a daughter through suicide. All of them consented to engage in this therapeutic experiment and are more deeply affected by the images than they imagined. The participants also commit to analysing the impact of the session and the actors or intermediaries themselves are interviewed about their experiences with embodying the dead.

The various participants act out their experimental roles in an open and ethical manner; the effect is uncanny and deeply emotional. In this essay, I suggest that we further adopt the technology to evoke dead feminists and have fulfilling immersive experiences with them. This experiment would be set up to counter the negative representations of ageing feminists, their ailing bodies, or their embattled and marginalized presences and personalities; to experience and enjoy them one-on-one, to ‘hang out with them’, bringing them back to life. As noted elsewhere in this roundtable, issues that specifically affect older women have been largely absent from the feminist agenda. To add to this much-needed agenda, I propose to recall feminists who lived, suffered and died—both those who witnessed glory, as well as those who died in dire circumstances or dwindled away without renown. Deepfake feminism would set up heartening experiences and spirited conversations with fragile and the dead, or forgotten or side-lined feminists, which is different from conversing with canonical feminists and celebrities. These proposed Deepfake sessions would be available to multiple ages and publics responding to an emotional or cultural need for experiencing a feminist presence or embodied spirit.

The proposed experiment also pays homage to certain Chinese literary traditions and related or adapted movies which involve fragile female ghosts, such as Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* (1988), a movie which positively represents a long-gone woman who returns to a future world in order to contact extant humans, triggering in those living beings unusual bodily feelings, which even include feelings of sexual arousal.³ Chinese ghosts are sometimes older women who were social outcasts, who died out of grief and loneliness, but who came back to offer a special kind of companionship towards the living. In contemporary popular culture, such as the Icelandic

¹ The Gogbot Festival Symposium was curated by Josephine Bosma. It was entitled ‘Infocalypse Now’ and devoted to various applications of DeepLearning as well as fake news and conspiracy theories <https://2021.gogbot.nl/creative-technology-festival/> and <https://2021.gogbot.nl/symposium>.

² The video of *Deepfake Therapy* can be found at <https://www.2doc.nl/documentaires/series/2doc/kort/2020/deepfake-therapy.html> ; An interview with Rosjan Nejal is available at Lucile Bourliaud, ‘Deepfake therapy: From therapeutic experiment to documentary,’ May 23 2021, The Flatpack festival, <https://flatpackfestival.org.uk/news/deepfake-therapy>

³ Information about Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* can be found at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093258>

televised mystery-drama *Katla*, ghost-like figures similarly arrive in a small town as highly attractive and slightly devious beings who start seducing particular citizens. Some of the living are elderly men and women who lost a spouse to illness. A much younger 'spouse' spirit visits them to provide an alternate kind of love, a type of physical-sexual chemistry and intimate dialogue that is no longer present in their actual lives.⁴

Besides summoning 'spouse' ghosts who provide a type of chemistry that has dwindled, we can summon dead feminists for a moment of healing contact based on different emotional needs. This would be different from an intellectual and generational feminism, where the younger people or 'daughters' of feminism worship and study the 'mothers' based on their higher status and accomplishments. This type of spirit can be seen as a feminist tool against sexageism as related to Jack Halberstam's idea of 'shadow feminism'-a person who may remain invisible and is not commemorated in any traditional manner, but who can be evoked in order to manifest a gratifying and spirited interaction. As Halberstam argues in the *Queer Art of Failure*, we need to stop evoking the 'legacy' of feminism or evoking feminist struggle in terms of achievement, fulfilment, and heroic liberation. As with the people who contacted the dead by means of Deepfake therapy, these sessions might be very personal and unique, not necessarily 'positive', as they evoke and process memories of self-destruction, pain, suicide, illness, broken love, emotional disorganization, and incoherence. (Halberstam, 2011, 125)

That is why shadow feminism, or 'Deepfake feminism,' argues for intimate and strange encounters with dead 'feminists,' widely defined here as coveted celebrities, semi-celebrities or ordinary persons, the 'backgrounded' type, anti-heroines who have refused to trod the traditional paths of heroic liberation. We might evoke feminists who are in our immediate family, deceased lovers, former friends or close and intimate contacts, or otherwise, feminist thinkers and artists whom we desire a chat with as a pleasurable or challenging experiment. Shadow feminism also means that people can think beyond one's own cultural and educational background, or circumvent patriarchal or matriarchal family origins, while gaining definition and identity by way of contact with others. The experiment is consensually 'fake' yet deeply imagined and experienced as a significant 'lived' moment. It does not speak in the language of accomplishments but instead articulates satisfaction by means of an ongoing and chaotic interactions with the dead, their intermediaries (or performers) who tease out our search for them.

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⁴ *Katla* streams on Netflix and information about the series can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katla_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katla_(TV_series))