

# Grieving without soil: Digital spectrality and the necessity of physical space in *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming\_*

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## Abstract

*This article examines Janilda Bartolomeu's \_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming\_ (2023) as an audiovisual meditation on grief in the digital age. Through close formal and visual analysis, it argues that the film stages the structural incompatibility between digital permanence and the need for closure in the grieving process. Drawing on an interdisciplinary methodology that brings together media theory, spectral theory, and Black Atlantic thought (including the work of Lev Manovich, Mark Fisher, Édouard Glissant, and Gloria Anzaldúa), the article reads Bartolomeu's film as both a singular portrait of loss and a node within broader transnational and diasporic networks of mourning. The article follows a three part structure. First, it analyses how the desktop documentary format generates a specific form of subjectivity that immerses the viewer in the database logic of digital experience. Second, it situates the film's oceanic imagery within the Black Atlantic tradition. Third, it considers how the film theorises digital spectrality as a form of stagnation: a haunting that forecloses rather than enables mourning. The article concludes by examining the film's decisive turn toward physical memorialisation—the creation of a ceramic sculpture of Bartolomeu's deceased father—as an act of resistance against the immobilising temporality of cyberspace. Closure, the film proposes, requires grounding: soil, stillness, and embodied tactics of interruption.*

**Keywords:** grief, desktop documentary, Cape Verde, cyberspace, migration, spectrality.

This article stems from a personal and theoretical interest in the effects of the digital world on everyday life. Constant connection through online networks, a hyperaware state of being, the permanence of data: how do these phenomena change our experience of the world? And how do we relate to them? *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying<sup>1</sup>* is a short film that contends with these questions in relation to grief. The film documents the grief surrounding the loss of a parent and explores the digital dimension that contemporarily comes with this experience. A digital legacy, in the shape of pictures and videos across abandoned platforms online, is presented as a virtual connection to the lost person. The work, which occupies a space somewhere between lyrical video art and a poem set to moving image, considers the conscious and subconscious effects of an online archive of memories on the modern-day grieving process. Is there still a space for grief in the digital age? How do we deal with (im)mortality online?

The film ultimately moves toward a decisive gesture: the creation of a ceramic sculpture of the filmmaker's deceased father. This physical memorial interrupts the digital circulation of spectral traces and reintroduces grief into material space. This article asks: How does *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying* formally and thematically stage the limits of digital mourning, and how does it propose that closure requires stepping outside online cyberspace into grounded, material space? I argue that while the film initially immerses the viewer in the database logic of digital spectrality—where time collapses, absence becomes perpetual presence, and mourning risks stagnation—it ultimately demonstrates that creating space for closure in a grieving process requires stepping outside of online spaces. Through its final turn toward ceramic memorialisation, the film frames physical grounding as a form of resistance against the immobilising temporality of digital archives. Ground, and the practice of grounding in specific digital as well as physical spaces, will function as a theoretical hinge of sorts, leaning into and consciously blending the plurality of its definitions, in an

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<sup>1</sup> Janilda Bartolomeu, dir. *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying* (2023; Amsterdam: LI-MA).

attempt to bring these different facets—spatial, geopolitical, medial, emotional—into closer dialogue.

This article argues that *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying* can be seen as an exemplary case for exploring and depicting contemporary grappling with grief in a networked world. It employs a close reading and visual analysis of *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying*, paying careful attention to its form as a desktop documentary and the filmic techniques that come with it: editing strategies, textual overlays, duration, and sound-image relations. However, rather than treating the film as a mere illustration of theory, the article aims to approach the film as a complex audiovisual object whose formal decisions generate conceptual insight. By examining the interface as both creative and representational space, by considering how temporality is constructed spatially on a desktop, this article aims to make a link to the importance of rejoicing with spaces outside of the interface when faced with complex emotional situations.

The methodology applied here is consciously interdisciplinary. It draws from media theory, spectral theory, and Black Atlantic thought. Importantly, the article situates the film within transnational and diasporic thought, particularly through the work of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*,<sup>2</sup> as an attempt at understanding the fragmented digital self and diasporic identity as structurally plural. This theory is again not simply applied but placed in dialogue with the film's form. The reading that cumulates from this theory and method is rather personal in tone; the argument set forth stays very close and true to Bartolomeu's film, resulting in conclusions about a singular experience of grief, ones that are best understood as an attempt of capturing a larger attitude towards grief in digitised society whilst not exhausting that category of experience in full. By combining close visual analysis with relational theoretical frameworks, this essay argues that the film's formal tactics enact its philosophical position: that digital accumulation without grounding produces spectral stagnation, and that mourning requires physical grounding. It requires soil, duration, and embodied interruption.

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<sup>2</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).

### Database form and desktop subjectivity

*\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying* is an experimental desktop documentary from filmmaker and researcher Janilda Bartolomeu. The short film, spanning a modest twelve minutes in total length, was originally presented in a museum exhibition titled “REBOOT. Pioneering Digital Art” at Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam and is now part of the collection of Living Media Art (LI-MA) in Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> Instigated by the grief for the sudden death of her father, Bartolomeu wanders through the data traces of her own digital existence. Not consciously looking for anything, she finds a digital legacy consisting of fragments of past presences scattered across forgotten platforms online. What is one supposed to do with roaming, outdated versions of oneself and others, existing in a plagued space that refuses to forget?

In the late 90s, digital media theorist Lev Manovich described the database as “a new symbolic form of the computer age [...] a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world”<sup>4</sup>. In a changing (media)world—which is increasingly presenting itself as a stream of unstructured images, texts and other data—we gravitate towards representing our experience of that world in the form of a database, because a linear narrative has increasing difficulty doing justice to the multifaceted nature of that experience. Complex emotions, such as grief in the case of *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying*, rarely behave as a linear narrative and are therefore perhaps better captured in the multifaceted form of the database. Cinema is a medium par excellence that sits at the intersection of database and narrative, when the material collected during a film shoot is seen as a database, and the editing of this material is seen as “a unique trajectory through

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<sup>3</sup> See the website of Nieuwe Instituut for further information on the exhibition and the film’s set-up, <https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/projects/reboot-baanbrekende-digitale-kunst>. The exhibition was a collaboration between LI-MA and Nieuwe Instituut. For this exhibition, 20 artists were asked to reinterpret canonical digital artworks. *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying* (2023) by Janilda Bartolomeu is a reimagining of *the\_living* (1997) by Debra Solomon.

<sup>4</sup> Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” *Convergence* 5, no. 2 (1999): 81.

the conceptual space of all possible films which could have been constructed.”<sup>5</sup>

The urge to represent stories of complex emotions does not, however, disappear with the advent of the database, nor does the urge to find “a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics”<sup>6</sup> of that form. *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming* seemingly embraces the database logic. The act of finding new photos, messages, and thoughts becomes the guiding method of information gathering, but these findings are not presented in a causal sequence. Instead, the film unfolds associatively through this searching narrative form: finding the story becomes the story. *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming* is more about a process than a final product. The process *is* the final product. It is therefore a misconception that database and narrative are two perfect opposites. Instead of a dichotomy, database and narrative produce an endless list of hybrid forms,<sup>7</sup> of which the desktop documentary is one.

Kevin B. Lee, the inventor of the term *desktop documentary*, writes on his website that it is an audiovisual recording method that treats the computer screen as a camera lens and a canvas simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the desktop displays the unique path—the element of the desktop being clicked—and the conceptual space—all the elements of the desktop not being clicked—at the same time. Furthermore, the viewer’s gaze merges with the filmmaker’s, digitised as a clicking mouse. The viewer is supposed to identify with the mouse, and thus indirectly with the filmmaker, through *desktop subjectivity*, “the unique form of first-person perspective that results from linking the spectator’s gaze with the author’s desktop.”<sup>9</sup> Pre-production, post-production, and final product converge in *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming*, as happens in many desktop

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<sup>5</sup> Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” 94.

<sup>6</sup> Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” 81.

<sup>7</sup> Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” 92.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin B. Lee, “Desktop Documentary,” 2014, <http://kevinblee.com/desktop-documentary>.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin B. Lee and Ariel Avissar, “Desktop Documentary as Scholarly Subjectivity: Five Approaches,” *NECSUS* 12, no. 1 (2023): 277. The term desktop subjectivity appears in several places; it has been mentioned and used (undefined) in website descriptions and lectures since the conception of the desktop documentary in 2014.

documentaries. The collection of footage via screenshots (pre-production), in which a dynamic element adjusts that footage (post-production), is what appears in the film (final product). Although the final product doesn't encompass all pre- and post-production, the three move closer together. In Bartolomeu's film, this merging of gazes and faces of production creates a specific way of relating to the filmmaker's emotion. The viewer does not merely observe her grief; they are there with her, scrolling through it.<sup>10</sup>

One scene, early in the film, demonstrates how these technical strategies of database logic and desktop subjectivity intensify a sense of haunting. Bartolomeu types "He only calls me on Facebook. No one uses Facebook anymore."<sup>11</sup> A series of failed login attempts follows.<sup>12</sup> During the series of failed login attempts, multiple messages from Janilda's father (who goes unnamed throughout the film) appear on screen.<sup>13</sup> With all these overlapping frames on screen, one can talk about a "spatialized narrative,"<sup>14</sup> a form of narrative where time acquires a spatial dimension by being distributed across the screen's surface.<sup>15</sup> The old messages make multiple moments exist within the same frame—the present moment when Janilda tries to log into her Facebook account, the earlier

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<sup>10</sup> This approach leads me to believe that *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying* fits well within the emergent category of *thanatographical fiction*, a genre term recently coined in Cornelia Ruhe, "Thanatographical Fiction: Death, Mourning and Ritual in Contemporary Literature and Film," *Memory Studies* 17, no. 6 (2024): 1519–1535. The term points to works of (visual) fiction that have tasked themselves with commemorating unmentioned death and understanding grief as an attempt of being *with* the dead. Especially the first characteristic of thanatographical fiction as delineated by Ruhe is important: the central role for *implicated subjects*. Thanatographical works, as is the case for *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying*, do not centre perpetrators or victims; rather, they centre those affected by loss, those implicated in the death. They foreground the emotional, ritual, and psychological labour of grieving those whose deaths resist closure.

<sup>11</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling*, 00:00:49–00:01:01.

<sup>12</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling*, 00:01:54–00:02:12.

<sup>13</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling*, 00:02:12–00:02:32.

<sup>14</sup> Lev Manovich, "What is digital media?" In *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film* (REFRAME Books, 2016), 40.

<sup>15</sup> Manovich, "What is digital media?," 40–41.

moments when her father sent the messages to her, and an implied future moment when Janilda reads the messages.

These images, which function as a kind of unfolded file of memories, first gain meaning in relation to earlier images “No one uses Facebook anymore” so the calls remained unanswered and the messages remained unread. Secondly, the images acquire meaning in relation to each other: the unanswered “missed call” messages are made very definitive by the failed login attempts.<sup>16</sup> “No one uses Facebook anymore” and the non-answered phone calls may have been rebellious statements before, but now, combined with the impossibility of ever receiving such a Facebook call again, let alone (not) answering one, they acquire particularly bitter retrospective weight. Yet, in this online space where grief becomes entangled with interface logic, there is no true sense of tragic finality. The database form does not permit finality. Failed login attempts do not delete messages; they intensify their presence.

### **Memory and multiplicity in the Atlantic**

Midway through the film, a sequence unfolds in which various photos of Bartolomeu appear one by one, overlapping each other. Sourced from Facebook, Instagram, Google, and YouTube, these images accumulate across the desktop. Over them, Janilda repeats “Hundreds of my body / Washing up on shore.”<sup>17</sup> On an initial level, it refers to the multiplicity of archived<sup>18</sup> selves: profile pictures,

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<sup>16</sup> This technique – wherein images acquire meaning both in relation to previous or upcoming images as well as to simultaneous images – is what Harun Farocki calls *soft montage*: “There is succession as well as simultaneity in a double projection, the relationship of an image to the one that follows as well as the one beside it; a relationship to the preceding as well as to the concurrent one.” Harun Farocki, “Cross Influence / Soft Montage,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (London: Raven Row/Koenig Books, 2009), 70. This process occurs in *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming* in one and the same image, as opposed to the dual projection that Farocki describes, but this does not detract from the effect.

<sup>17</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling*, 00:05:30–00:06:15.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussions of the concept archive, which unfortunately falls outside the scope of this article, see Ernst van Alphen, “The Decline of Narrative

tagged images, curated identities. These representations crash over the present self like a tidal wave. How do these bodies relate to one another? Can they be reconciled? Because they exist simultaneously within one frame, their friction becomes visible, multiple but not integrated.

More importantly, this passage carries racial and historical charge. When a Black filmmaker speaks in oceanic metaphors, invoking the image of bodies washing ashore, the image resonates beyond the personal. Think here of bodies of colour washing ashore as a result of experiences on slavery ships or refugee boats. In this sense, water and race, but also water and death, become closely intertwined. Here, *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming* becomes more than a portrait of individual loss: it becomes a meditation on Black death at sea that resonates with collective genealogies of transatlantic violence. The ocean, specifically the Atlantic Ocean, continues to function as what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls “a cathected space of history and a sea [of] slavery”—a body of water that, quoting from Gaston Bachelard’s *Water and Dreams*, “remembers the dead.”<sup>19</sup>

Édouard Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation* that for enslaved Africans, “the next abyss was the depths of the sea [...] For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea’s abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> When Bartolomeu speaks of bodies

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and the Rise of the Archive,” in *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2017), 68–83. In this text, Van Alphen discusses how the archive relates to the database, using the paradigm–syntagm considerations from Manovich, and considers the changing role of the archive in the modern-day context.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity,” *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 704; Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983), 56. For a contemporary exploration of the inherent interrelation of grief–water–race, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 6–8.

washing ashore, the metaphor participates in this longer Atlantic temporality. Her digital selves become entangled with historical bodies. The desktop becomes an alluvial field. What makes the wave of bodies so discrepant for her, on a personal level, is the recognisability of all previous bodies on the one hand—the recognition of all bodies as previously lived selves—and the transience of all previous bodies on the other—the decay of those same bodies into unremembered memories. In the accumulation of all these bodies, time collapses in upon itself, rather than being allowed to meaningfully layer upon itself. The digital ocean floods: it does not ground.

Glissant's poetics, thus, guide this essay's interpretive strategy. Rather than read *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_scrying* as a story about individuals alone, I read it as a node within a larger, transgenerational network of Black oceanic death and survival. Still, it is crucial to keep sight of the specificities of different historical moments within the Atlantic context, to better understand and represent the social context surrounding a locally specific "culture of migration" and "culture of mobility."<sup>21</sup> When thinking of Cape Verde's culturally specific position as a key juncture point of many forms of (in)voluntary (im-/e-) migration,<sup>22</sup> certain parts of this collectivising argument become quite convoluted, perhaps harder to strictly separate.<sup>23</sup> However, when thinking of Rotterdam, specifically of the large diasporic Cape Verdean community living in

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<sup>21</sup> Stefano degli Uberti, "Victims of their Fantasies or Heroes for a Day? Media Representations, Local History and Daily Narratives on Boat Migrations from Senegal." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 213-214 (2014): 90; 105.

<sup>22</sup> Jørgen Carling and Luís Batalha, "Cape Verdean Migration and Diaspora." In *Transnational Archipelago: Perspectives on Cape Verdean Migration and Diaspora*, ed. Jørgen Carling and Luís Batalha (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Extensive discussion of Cape Verde's position within transatlantic slavery exceeds the scope of this article. It seems worthy of mention however that historically speaking the Signare, also known as the Nhara in Portuguese, is a pertinent figure in (neo)colonial history, whose role has been researched extensively. See, for example, Hilary Jones, "Women, Family & Daily Life in Senegal's Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Towns," *African Women in the Atlantic World: Property, Vulnerability*, ed. Mariana P. Candido and Adam Jones (Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 233—247.

the district Delfshaven, one can definitely speak of a specific group with similar migratory experiences across the Atlantic Ocean (even if that experience could perhaps be better marked as one of labour migration instead of slavery migration).<sup>24</sup>

Continuing with Glissant, while the Atlantic abyss produces relational knowledge through duration, cyberspace produces repetition without transformation. Here, Gloria Anzaldúa's theorisation of a new consciousness, her titular "new *mestiza*," becomes illuminating. She writes:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. [...] She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.<sup>25</sup>

Anzaldúa's formulation resonates with Bartolomeu's digital multiplicity.<sup>26</sup> The database self is pluralistic. Nothing is rejected. Everything persists. Yet the crucial difference lies in actionability: the *mestiza* "turns the ambivalence into something else." The database, by contrast, produces simultaneity without reconciliation or transformation. It sustains the contradictions but does not shift them into something productive or meaningful.

When all the photos in the aforementioned scene from *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_scrying* have appeared, they are closed

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<sup>24</sup> Carling and Batalha, "Cape Verdean Migration," 22.

<sup>25</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*, 79.

<sup>26</sup> A discussion on multiplicity, in relation to unity, also appears in Manthia Diawara, "One World in Relation," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 28 (2011): 5. When asked by Diawara what departure means for him, Glissant replies, "It's the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me every diaspora is *the passage from unity to multiplicity*." He argues that when enslaved people return to their country of origin, they return as a free entity, as a being who has gained something. "And what has this being gained? Multiplicity. In relation to the unity of the enslaving will, we have the multiplicity of the anti-slavery will."

one by one. Sporadically, it still sounds “Hundreds of my body / Washing up on shore,” but the new recurring phrase is “I do not remember anything.”<sup>27</sup> In the digital age, remembering a memory is no longer a prerequisite for its existence, provided the memory is stored as data. When photos and videos allow us to be never more than a few clicks away from a captured version of a forgotten memory, it can be easy to get sucked into this memory archive. In her personal essay *Notes on Grief*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes “I watch videos, saved on my computer, that feel like revelations because I do not remember them, even though I made some of them.”<sup>28</sup> Video footage, from personal archives or on social media, functions not only as recorded fragments from the past, but also as an external memory of forgotten moments which can be accessed again at any time. How do we as humans cope with this permanent access to the past? And what happens when the recorded, stored, and stagnant past lingers around in the present?

### **Digital spectres and the necessity of soil**

About halfway through the film, just before the “Hundreds of my body / Washing up on shore” scene, a Tumblr post titled *the internet is haunted* appears onscreen. It describes abandoned forums, frozen profiles, obituaries disguised as incomplete accounts, and concludes “what a fuckin graveyard.”<sup>29</sup> A new screen appears in the background, on which the text “What have I been doing on

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<sup>27</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_scrying*, 00:06:15.

<sup>28</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Notes on Grief* (New York: Knopf, 2021), 35.

<sup>29</sup> fairycosmos, “the internet is haunted,” *Tumblr*, 28 June 2019, <https://fairycosmos.tumblr.com/post/185909202096/embed>. The full post goes as follows: “the internet is an inherently haunted place if you think about it like. it’s so weird to see long abandoned discussion boards stuck in a snapshot of the past, old conversations between kids from over a decade ago who have now grown into their own lives, obituaries taking the form of half finished profiles. and the silence that fills the gaps between. there’s a constant ghostly record of each generation’s thoughts, fads, their sense of humour. back when the future was at their fingertips. even stranger, people used to know exist openly in that space, and they watch you watching them. if you want, deceased musicians can play through your headphones. there’s always an underlying sense of reminiscing and time escaping our ever shortening attention span. what a fuckin graveyard.”

here? Who is using my time besides me? I do not remember anything.” is typed repeatedly. The two screens gradually merge, a process by which the text of the Tumblr post becomes increasingly difficult to read due to increasing transparency, and the typed text resembles the original less and less, due to increasing uncorrected typos. Finally, both screens fade away into the black background.<sup>30</sup> In this section, I argue that the topic of this scene from the film—the idea that the internet is a cemetery haunted by the digital spirits of the deceased—is crucial for understanding grief in the digital age.

The usage of this Tumblr post, alongside other academic sources cited throughout the film, situates the work amidst a larger academic debate surrounding spectrality and hauntology. The origin of the spectral turn is often dedicated to the book *Specters of Marx* (1994) by Jacques Derrida, in which he conceptualises hauntology as the opposite of ontology, and typifies cinema as an inherently ghostly medium.<sup>31</sup> A contemporary voice that has become formative for spectral readings is Mark Fisher, specifically his book *Ghosts of My Life*. In the preface to this book, he writes, “In conditions of digital recall, loss is itself lost.”<sup>32</sup> This aligns closely with the idea of a digital ghost that continues to haunt us, thus hindering moving towards closure.<sup>33</sup> Unlike a classic haunting by a ghost, there’s little supernatural about digital haunting. Fisher writes that it is useful “to think of hauntology as the *agency of the virtual*, with the spectre

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<sup>30</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling\_*, 00:04:28–00:05:27.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Derrida very explicitly remarks this in the documentary film *Ghost Dance*, dir. Ken McMullen (1983) when he states that “Cinema is the art of ghosts.”

<sup>32</sup> Mark Fisher, “Lost Futures: The Slow Cancellation of the Future,” in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London: Zero Books, 2014), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Later, in the same chapter, Fisher states that “Haunting, then, can be construed as a failed mourning.” (22). The word “mourning” in this quotation refers to the term coined in Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 14)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1917]), 243–258. This text is an indispensable point of reference when writing academically about grief. Arguably, a form of “failed mourning” occurs in the “No one uses Facebook anymore” passage in *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming\_*.

understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing.”<sup>34</sup> A “spectre,” a type of ghost similar to what I call a digital ghost in this chapter, is thus primarily defined by a presence that isn’t physical, but only virtual.<sup>35</sup>

A digital ghost inherently occupies a virtual, and therefore non-physical, space, but this doesn’t prevent them from bringing things about in the actual, physical world. Precisely in their absence, digital ghosts maintain a fractured presence. In this sense, they function as a broken hyperlink. In a chapter on the broken hyperlink, Ilios Willemars argues that the broken hyperlink creates a presence of absence, which thus nullifies presence.<sup>36</sup> Broken hyperlinks are “hyperlinks that go on living even after their physical correlates have no need for them any longer. They live-on, so to speak, they persist, they remain in place, even when the place they occupy no longer warrants their holding of that place.”<sup>37</sup> Maintaining a space when it is no longer justified also applies to Janilda’s father; his virtual self, in the absence of his actual self, has no real reason to continue existing. In a discussion of a similar Facebook ghost, Willemars writes that when a digital ghost continues to exist, it is a

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<sup>34</sup> Fisher, “Lost Futures,” 18, emphasis in original.

<sup>35</sup> *Virtual*, here, is a word Fisher borrows from French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In his book *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Deleuze describes how an optical image always carries within it an actual image and a virtual image. He explains this dichotomy using the example of the mirror image: the individual looking in the mirror carries actuality within them, and the image of the individual that exists in the mirror carries virtuality within it. This also applies to an individual with a digital mirror image: the individual carries actuality within them, while the digital image carries virtuality within it. What happens with a digital ghost, then, is a lack of actuality creating an imbalance: there is no longer any actuality of the individual to which the virtual can attach itself. As a result, the virtual is dependent solely on itself for existence, while the essence of the crystal relies precisely on the constant interplay between actual and virtual. See Gilles Deleuze, “The Crystals of Time,” in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005 [1989]), 67–68.

<sup>36</sup> Ilios Willemars, “Cécile B. Evans’ “Hyperlinks Or It Didn’t Happen (OIDH),” in *The Political Life of Placeholders: Poetics of Sacrifice in Digital Video Art* (Lisbon: UCP Press, 2025), 227.

<sup>37</sup> Willemars, “Cécile B. Evans,” 219.

way to continue living after death.<sup>38</sup> This stationary sustained existence becomes problematic when something variable is needed. When Janilda continues interacting with her father's digital ghost, she can only keep having the same conversations, experiencing the same moments, repeating the same patterns. The movement she makes is not fruitful and dynamic, but repetitive and stagnant.

Then, the film's conceptual turning point happens. A new textbox appears, in which Bartolomeu types "What remains?"<sup>39</sup> What will be left? When all parts of her father exist in this constantly accessible yet completely untouchable space, what will, actually, materially, remain? In his text "The Internet is a Graveyard," Oliver Misraje writes "Like traditional ghosts, HTTP ghosts are everywhere, invisibly haunting the annals of cyberspace."<sup>40</sup> Cyberspace is a rather undefined, intangible space; this intangibility is one of the difficulties Janilda faces at the end of the video work. Misraje writes "Whereas a tombstone is vulnerable to erosion, cyberspace can transcend time."<sup>41</sup> While cyberspace makes good use of its dimension of time, there is only very little concrete *space* in cyberspace. Because an entire history of times past come to exist in an immediate and simultaneous space, despite their spatial distance, the space where all time coexists becomes nonspatial.<sup>42</sup> Cyberspace contracts time and space. Cyberspace is primarily a collection of past time. Cyberspace will not erode, or otherwise wear away spatially. Cyberspace is a space you cannot touch.

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<sup>38</sup> Willemars, "Cécile B. Evans," 236.

<sup>39</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling\_*, 00:08:48–00:08:54.

<sup>40</sup> Oliver Misraje, "The Internet is a Graveyard," *ZORA ZINE*, 6 December 2022, <https://zine.zora.co/web3-hauntology-oliver-misraje>. Bartolomeu also cites from this text in *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming\_*, namely "On Facebook alone there are over 30 million dead people, with 3 million additional users dying each year. By 2070 the dead will outnumber the living online." While this citation is being shown in the film, a voiceover speaks the following sentence three times: "The web will soon consist of spectators and spectres. / From spectators to spectres." Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling\_*, 00:02:56–00:03:22.

<sup>41</sup> Misraje, "The Internet is a Graveyard"

<sup>42</sup> Fisher describes something similar when he writes about teletechnology (an umbrella term for communication and entertainment technologies like television and telephone): they collapse space and time, with the newest iteration of teletechnology, cyberspace, having "most radically contracted time and space". Fisher, "Lost Futures," 20.

After the question “What remains?” the voiceover calls for a “PAUSE.” The background noise disappears, the image freezes, and nothing happens for almost 10 seconds. A new text box appears, and Janilda types “Grief requires a standstill.”<sup>43</sup> The “PAUSE” seems like a kind of breaking point. Until this point, the video had been operating within the logic of cyberspace: multiple images and sounds simultaneously, various times intertwined, in completely indefinable, ephemeral spaces. The demand for a pause, a standstill, in a space that is by definition mobile, is quite radical. A final text box appears, this time typing “How does one grieve without soil?”<sup>44</sup> Mourning requires ground, and the experienced lack of ground derives from the groundless nature of cyberspace, due to the presence of a ghost. The film argues that a grieving process cannot take place in this space.

Additionally, and again looking from a history in which the land of people of colour has been structurally dispossessed, the statement “How does one grieve without soil?” carries more than just an individual load.<sup>45</sup> As Anzaldúa writes “The struggle is inner [...] The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.”<sup>46</sup> From this perspective, the final scene of *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_scrying* can be understood. For the entire last minute of the film—a fairly substantial portion of a film that runs only twelve minutes—the viewer sees only an image of a ceramic statue in the shape of Janilda’s father’s face. Simultaneously with the image of the statue, a video of a few gently flickering candles appears. The screen surrounding this video is titled “Rest.”<sup>47</sup> The turn towards physical

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<sup>43</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling*, 00:08:54–00:09:14, underlining in original.

<sup>44</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling*, 00:09:18–00:09:36.

<sup>45</sup> This scope of larger histories is also reflected in Bartolomeu’s own description of her research. For example, she states that her works aim “to question ambiguous, non-linear histories and interact with immaterial heritage”. See „Janilda Bartolomeu,” *mediakunst.net*, <https://mediakunst.net/professional/#!/artwork/ma-1022484?query=~>.

<sup>46</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Bartolomeu, *\_when\_scrolling*, 00:11:28–00:12:28.

material at the end of the film aligns once again with a turn towards physical space in the theory; Anzaldúa closes her theory as follows:

*Mamagrande Ramona también tenía rosales.* Here every Mexican grows flowers. [...] We water them and hoe them. We harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are plowed under. Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la tierra madre*.

This land was Mexican once  
was Indian always  
and is.

And will be again.<sup>48</sup>

A sculpture, a garden: both ways of commemorating and celebrating the growth, death, decay and birth of lived cultures, people, and spaces. In *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming*, creating a ceramic sculpture, a physical piece of earthenware, is a way to give grief the ground that it calls for. Keeping the ceramic sculpture on screen for a full minute, offering it a moment of peace and stillness within the span of the video, is a way to give grief the standstill it needs. By showing the explicit actions taken outside the stagnating realms of the virtual, the video breaks the echo chamber that cyberspace formed around Janilda's grief, in order to move toward the conclusion of the grieving process, to move towards closure. Cyberspace gave a static dimension to the grieving process. This dimension gets broken by Janilda by creating a space for her grief outside this undynamic dimension.

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<sup>48</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 90-91, emphasis in original.

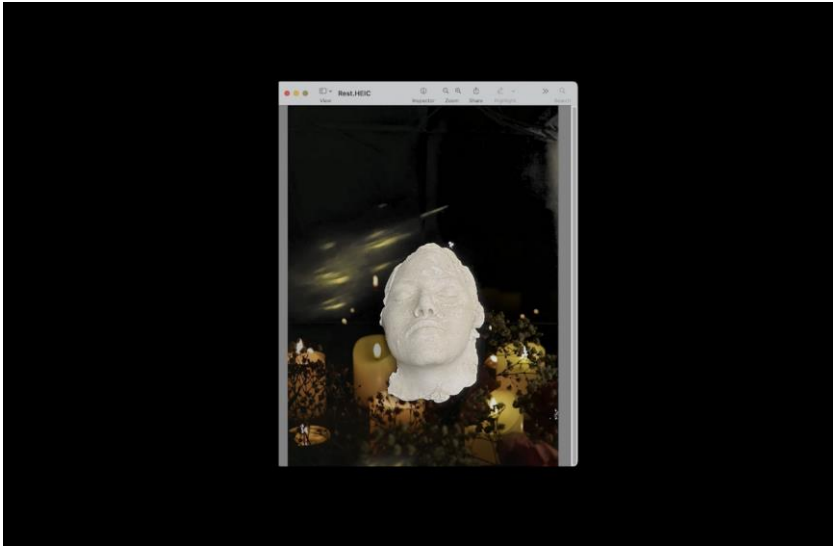


Figure 1. Still from *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying*. © Janilda Bartolomeu, 2023.

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have explored topics of grief in digitised society through an analysis of *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screying*. In my reading, the film demonstrates the structural incompatibility between digital permanence and grief's need for closure. In the final movement of the film, Bartolomeu steps outside cyberspace. The desktop documentary ends not with more scrolling but with stillness. Grief requires a standstill and standstill requires ground. Creating a ceramic sculpture—a piece of earthenware—is a way to give grief the ground it needs. The sculpture refuses the logic of cyberspace; it embodies a stillness appropriate to death. Unlike the digital ghost, which simulates animation, the sculpture acknowledges immobility. It does not repeat past conversations, it does not promise return: it offers rest. Janilda's father's life is captured in a tangible statue, a tribute to his life. The sculpture brings the stagnation of the virtual mind into the actual world. It is precisely the permanent stillness in the sculpture that falls in line with his absence, and restores a sense of balance. Moreover, it is a tribute to the inefficiency of human emotions. The database and cyberspace are not constructed with this in mind; they are not made to care about a tangible tribute in

the same way people are. One way to counter the pragmatic, purely functional logic of the controlling network is to refocus on human impulse and emotion. Bartolomeu manages to give her grief and her reflections on sustained existence in online spheres a place, by removing those emotions and actions from digital cyberspace, in order to place life and physical ground at the centre of her grieving process again.

Grief in the online era cannot solely happen online. Or, at least, so Bartolomeu concludes in *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming*, and I am inclined to agree. While this article has mainly argued in favour of analogising grief, it does not necessarily argue against virtualising grief. In an era marked by polarising and pluralising experiences of the world, wherein practices of/with/against digitisation are still actively being shapen, this paper is not meant as a prescription of the quintessential way of grieving in times of digitisation. Rather, it is best understood as an example of a singular exploration within a broader network of theorisation of digitalised grief. Taking charge of one's grief by, in Bartolomeu's case, taking it outside its digital atmosphere, and thus creating the conditions for closure on one's own terms, can be seen as a form of personal resistance to that atmosphere, given that it feels oppressive to you. Closure, the film suggests, does not lie in deletion; it lies in grounding. In *\_when\_scrolling\_becomes\_screaming*, clay becomes a method of closure, and physical memorial practice becomes a tactic of digital resistance.

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