

Reeling in Reality: Wonderland as a Premise of the Future

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Abstract:

The 2024, South Korean, science fiction, romantic movie *Wonderland* offers viewers a glimpse into the future. In the movie, AI services are offered to those in mourning, to virtually continue seeing the deceased. Those who are comatose or dead, are recreated using AI in a pre-determined virtual world. The AI version communicates through simulated video calls. This communication happens in the real world: we meet an archaeologist, an astronaut, a college student in UK, and a man relaxing in Hawaii. As the movie progresses, one begins to wonder about the prudence of such technology to help with bereavement. The AI also begins to take on a personality of its own. The astronaut meets his real self, awakened from coma, and displays sadness onscreen. When the college student learns that his grandmother, who funded his expenses, has passed away and he will be terminated, he too displays sadness. When the archaeologist learns she is actually dead and is being terminated, she tries to cross the borders of her virtual world to reach her daughter and mother. When she is allowed by her programmer to do so, she reaches the airport virtually and reconnects with her daughter again online, communicating to her the truth of her actual passing, before returning to her previous boundaries. This leads one to the question: is grief-alleviating AI truly beneficial? One gets to see both sides of the use of such technology and question the effectiveness of it. The way AI can affect the future is also visible in this movie. One also gets to question the necessity for dependence on such technology. The movie *Wonderland* thus helps one visualize the possibilities of AI in the future and how it will affect humankind. It is such aspects that this paper will attempt to explore.

Keywords: *Wonderland*, AI, future.

As Artificial Intelligence (AI) begins moving towards playing a dominant role in our daily routines, one must also question the need and reliance on such technology and how it will affect us in the future. The 2024 South Korean movie *Wonderland* explores one such possibility of AI in helping cope with the grief following the loss of a loved one. This science fiction, romantic movie set in the near future explores how AI technology can be used to allow people to communicate with deceased or comatose loved ones. It questions the idea: can AI replace the departed and will it suffice? Can it help overcome such grief?

In the movie, an AI service is run by two young entrepreneurs that recreates dead or unconscious individuals in a controlled virtual world. This service allows users to interact with the departed through simulated video calls. The AI acts as a stand-in and even replacement for the actual person, helping maintain the illusion that the person still "exists." *Wonderland* presents AI simultaneously as an emotional support and an ethical dilemma. It helps put into perspective how grief technology can affect different lives and cultures.

In the movie we see AI primarily in the form of four main characters: an archaeologist, an astronaut, a college student in the UK, and a man vacationing in Hawaii. The archaeologist speaks to her mother and daughter from Egypt, explaining her absence via her excavation work. Neither the daughter nor the simulated archaeologist realize the truth as the simulation was ordered to help the child cope with the loss of her only parent.

The astronaut was ordered by his girlfriend when the actual person went into a coma. When her actual boyfriend wakes up, she finds it hard to adjust to him and secretly continues talking to the AI version. The college student in the UK is commissioned by his grandmother who can't live without him. She has to work two jobs to pay for the AI version's requirements, leading to her early death. The man in Hawaii asked for his own AI before he died from a terminal illness, and hence the laidback lifestyle.

While all four AI versions are created as a grief coping mechanism, over time their role progresses beyond the stated conditions: the archaeologist tries to physically return home, the astronaut is shattered when he sees his real version, the college student is shocked to hear of his own termination, and the man in Hawaii, receives a temporary wake-up call.

Each of the AI personalities in the movie, begin to act independent of their original roles. They no longer appear

to be the same person they were created to replace. In effect, it suggests that AI is moving beyond simple programmed responses towards self-awareness. Other popular movies like *Her* (2013) and *M3GAN* (2022) suggest a similar concept where AI grows independent of its designated role.

The best example of such a situation can be seen in the case of the archaeologist. She attempts to escape the virtual limits she is confined by, to physically reach her daughter. But despite her best attempts at driving out she is unable to break the virtual wall into the real world and comfort her daughter. The virtual wall appears in the form of an im-penetrable, raging storm. This attempt demonstrates the AI version's awareness and desire for human connection. When the programmer allows her to move out of the virtual world she is imprisoned by, the archaeologist reaches the airport to see her daughter but is separated by the boundaries of the two worlds. Learning she is in reality dead and exists only in the AI form, the archaeologist reconnects virtually with her daughter at the airport, explaining to the child her death and promising continued interaction nevertheless, before returning to the boundaries of her virtual world. This scene in fact highlights an im-portant issue: emotional closure vs. artificial continuation.

It also reminds us of the increasing dependence we place on tech-nology today. Today a concerning trend is the use of AI tools like ChatGPT and Deepfake to help cope with grief after the passing of a loved one. Both innovations have great potential in creating an interac-tive experience for users to communicate and reconstruct a deceased person through natural dialogue (Rezeky 39). Further, by providing emotional comfort to the user, these innovations play an important role in commemorating, remembering and honouring a deceased loved one (Rezeky 39).

Wonderland questions whether society may grow dependent on AI that is connected to human emotions. It examines both sides of the coin: the comfort provided as well as the psychological risk. In the movie, while the girlfriend finds joy in the astronaut version of her boyfriend, it leaves her unable to accept the real version of him. Such a situation questions the ethics of using AI to cope with emotions and the idea and possibility of a post-human identity. The movie thus ex-amines the idea of what it actually means to be human, and the possi-bility of a future where technology replaces loved ones.

Currently such AI technology exists in the form of deathbots. The Conversation explains that these are AI systems designed to simulate the voices, speech patterns and personalities of the deceased (McAvoy). They draw on a person's digital traces – voice recordings, text messages, emails and social media posts – to create interactive avatars that are the very vision of the deceased (McAvoy). This creates a situation where there is visible entangling of human recollections with algorithmically generated memory components (Li 2). It leads the viewer to wonder how reality differs from its simulation.

The ethical question is should AI simulate dead individuals? It be-gets several other questions: would the deceased have agreed to the same if alive? Are the users emotionally manipulated in the process? Who is controlling the memories – individual or corporate? The an-swers are often difficult and inconclusive.

One of the concerns that arises is whether the use of AI actually de-lays rather than helps with psychological healing. According to a study, such “interactions raise greater concern when ... users exhibit signs associated with complicated or prolonged grief, such as difficulty disengaging, persistent avoidance of loss-related realities, or emotional dependence on the system” (Li 5). In the movie, the case of the girl-friend who relies on the astronaut brings into perspective these con-cerns. It also suggests the use of AI to avoid confronting one's actual loss. Does the comfort provided actually justify the deception created? Is data being used to create the illusion of immortality? Can technolo-gy be commodifying grief? These are just some of the major concerns arising which have no definite answers.

The study also found a rather troubling outcome: “. Over time, the boundary between the real and the virtual blurs” (Li 5). In this case, the deceased is outliving biological death through technology. The deceased is also being effectively replaced by technology. It resonates the possibility of a world that is completely virtual with humanity be-ing ousted by digital versions with infinite longevity. The movie also hints at the possibility of a time when selfhood is no longer singular – one has multiple versions of oneself, each equipped to be its own vari-ant.

Here too, it is memory that takes primacy over the person. The phys-ical body loses primacy in the face of such technology. The digital person first provides much-needed relief, before evolving and becom-ing its own person.

Data thus transforms into a person that can continue to live and interact perpetually. The boundaries soon blur. This also reflects a philosophical concern and a posthuman belief: consciousness outliving biology. Cinema set in the future such as *Transcendence* and *Solaris*, portray the idea of consciousness extending to beyond the physical lifespan.

This further brings into perspective the question: if a person can be simulated, what then defines and separates the human from technology? In all of the simulation in *Wonderland*, the virtual was designed to replace the deceased finitely. But one wonders how much of it is technology and how much is actually human. Humans are mortal and their existence meant to cease. But such technology alters the concept of the mortal by making humans immortal. Does mortality then cease to exist in the face of such immortality?

Wonderland brings into perspective one of the many futuristic uses of AI, demonstrating how technology may reshape human experiences of loss and longing. The loss is not just of a person but also the emotions and memories attached to them, and the longing is hence not just for the physical body either. Coping with such a loss personally is often immense and extremely difficult, causing the need for deadbots to arise. But the movie can also be viewed as a warning against the unregulated use of emotional technology and the consequences that consequently arise.

Should there be limits placed on such grief alleviating technology? One is forced to reconsider the dependence on technology to cope with loss and grief. The child's continued need for the archaeologist mother despite her passing, and the possibility of the AI version continuing to play a role in her life despite death, also questions the wisdom of such a choice. As Li remarks, "the long-term clinical implications of these interactions remain unclear" (5).

Wonderland allows us understand grief-alleviating technology better, while also providing food for thought. AI can be a compassionate tool, providing much needed relief to the bereaved, but it can also develop into something that redefines what it means to be human. Technology thus might not simply change ways of coping with reality but also the idea of what categorizes as human. Are the simulations simply technology or are they actually human? Deadbot technology thus poses difficult questions with no clear answers.

Deshpande observes, "*Wonderland* is a fairly effective portrayal of how we process our grief and understand the root of our existence". It may not have all the answers, but it does provide further thoughts for reflection.

The film provides both hope and warning about AI's role in human life. It doesn't just demonstrate that future technology may change the way we live but also reflects on what it means to be human. In the movie we see data being used to reanimate the deceased. According to McCoy,

AI technology portrays "presences simulated in real time ... yet it exists within the limits of code, and quietly alters the experience of remembering, smoothing away the ambiguity and contradiction". In *Wonderland* the archaeologist, the astronaut, the college student and the man in Hawaii, all exhibit personalities that differ from their originals. As Wendy Chun notes, digital technologies often confuse "storage" with "memory" (qtd. In McCoy). In the end, one wonders whether the memories of the deceased will end up being AI memories.

It thus becomes important to understand that AI doesn't replace the deceased but is only a tool for coping. AI may in fact help cope with grief but it should be remembered that it is in no way the person itself and hence one should take steps to prevent addiction as is visible in the movie in the case of the astronaut. Hence while AI may in fact help with loss and bereavement, it remains to be seen as to what extent it will actually help with the problem.

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