

Original Article

From Flesh to Code: The Digital Afterlife of the Human Body in Contemporary Literary and Visual Culture

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Abstract

In the digital age, our understanding of the human body, memory, and mortality is undergoing profound change. The concept of a “digital afterlife” captures how human presence can persist, be simulated, or reactivated beyond biological death. This paper examines how contemporary literature and visual culture explore the transformation of the body from flesh into code, investigating the aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical implications of this shift. Drawing on posthumanism theory, media studies, and cultural memory scholarship, it analyses novels, short fiction, films, digital art, and interactive installations that depict digitized or algorithmically preserved identities. These works explore the tension between corporeal finitude and digital persistence, highlighting anxieties about authenticity, continuity, and moral responsibility. Central to the analysis is the interplay between memory, data, and algorithms, which can reconstruct or animate personal presence while raising questions of consent, privacy, and emotional ethics. The paper engages theoretical frameworks from N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, and Jean Baudrillard to understand how technology reshapes human subjectivity, identity, and social perceptions of mortality. By examining both imaginative representations and real-world digital memorial practices, the study argues that the digital afterlife is neither a mere extension of life nor a neutral archive. Instead, it is a complex, mediated space where culture, technology, and ethics intersect, demanding new ways of thinking about embodiment, identity, and posthumous presence. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the transition from flesh to code challenges conventional humanist assumptions, calling for interdisciplinary approaches to understanding life, memory, and legacy in digital networks.

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1. Introduction

The rise of digital technologies has fundamentally altered how we perceive the human body, memory, and mortality. In the contemporary era, human existence is increasingly intertwined with computational networks, virtual environments, and algorithmic systems, creating what is often called a “digital afterlife.” This concept refers to the persistence of a person’s presence, identity, or memory through digital traces, AI simulations, or virtual avatars after biological death. Literature and visual culture provide a rich lens through which to explore these transformations. Writers and artists imagine, interpret, and critique the ways technology extends or reconstructs human life, raising questions about authenticity, continuity, and ethical responsibility. The context for this study is shaped by the rapid growth of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and digital memorial platforms. Social media, online archives, and AI-driven chatbots now allow the dead to “speak” or interact in virtual spaces, offering both comfort and new ethical dilemmas for the living. These technological developments are not neutral; they reshape how memory, grief, and identity are culturally recognized, contested, and performed. Digital memorialization exemplifies how personal data—photos, messages, and online behaviour—can persist and circulate beyond a person’s biological life, transforming traditional understandings of presence, legacy, and mortality.

This paper investigates how contemporary literary and visual works represent these phenomena, asking how the body is transformed into information, how identity is preserved or simulated, and how cultural narratives negotiate the ethical and philosophical implications of posthumous digital existence. It focuses on works from the

late 20th century to the present, drawing on an interdisciplinary approach that combines close reading, visual analysis, and theoretical frameworks from posthumanism, media studies, and cultural memory scholarship. By exploring the interplay between flesh, code, and memory, the study aims to illuminate the complex ways technology reshapes human experience, extending life into new digital forms while raising profound questions about what it means to be human.

A. Context: Rise Of Ai and Digital Memorialization

Many factors, including massive data collection, advances in machine learning and natural language processing, increasingly immersive virtual and augmented reality environments, and ubiquitous platforms for sharing life traces, have contributed to the emergence of new cultural practices of presence and memorialization over the past 20 years or so. On the other hand, digital remembrance is institutionalized through the tools and services provided by platforms and outside services. Algorithms have the ability to scrape, rebuild, and revive the enormous archives of images, messages, geolocation data, and multimedia that people typically leave behind. Families and communities are presented with public, searchable memorial pages, visual reconstructions that can imitate a voice or likeness, and interactive "chatbots" trained on the posts of a deceased person. It is evident how these technological affordances affect mourning. Economic status, platform policies, and jurisdictional regimes all affect digital continuation experiences. Which afterlife is possible is determined by both legal and commercial forces at the same time—access is unequal, ownership is unclear, and data is commodified. Therefore, this context creates a social terrain where cultural texts both reflect and challenge these emerging practices by fusing the creative potential of AI-enabled continuity with real-world tensions around authenticity, consent, emotional labor, and the politics of memory.

B. Overview of the "Digital Afterlife" Concept

After a person's biological life ends, their traces may be kept, reactivated, or reinterpreted within digital systems. This is referred to as the "digital afterlife." From a conceptual perspective, it encompasses at least three related registers: representational afterlives in art and narrative (literary and visual works that imagine or critique these forms of persistence); algorithmic or interactive continuations (instances in which those traces are used to generate dynamic representations—chatbots, avatars, and voice syntheses—that can "respond" or appear to act with agency); and archival persistence (the passive survival of data and media traces across servers and platforms). Therefore, rather than being a mere technical fact, the digital afterlife is a status that is mediated by culture. This is due to the fact that the concept relies on the social understanding that audiences, organizations, or mourners view these remnants as a form of enduring presence. Thus, the overview distinguishes between the issues of temporality (the compression or stretching of presence across past and future), ontology (what kinds of identity or personhood, if any, can be attributed to code-based continuations), and materiality (data as stored versus data as performative). It also draws attention to its limitations, such as the fact that not all preserved files reflect a meaningful afterlife and that the designation is dependent on legal framing, aesthetic treatment, and remembrance practices.

C. Research Questions and Scope

This study asks three questions, the first of which is how contemporary literary and visual works depict and analyse the processes through which bodies and identities are converted into data. Second, how do artists use visual and narrative techniques to make algorithmic continuation both comprehensible and morally dubious? Third, how do these cultural representations contribute to broader societal concerns about accountability, grief, authenticity, and ownership in an era of digital persistence? A carefully curated collection of recent works—novels, short stories, films, digital artworks, and media-installation projects—that explicitly stage forms of vitalization, technological resurrection, or memorialized presence are analysed in order to address these questions. Online memorial practices and real AI-mediated interaction are also pertinent context. Temporally, the Prioritizing texts and practices in transnational circulation, the paper considers notable non-Anglophone examples as well as Anglophone sources when available. In order to document the period when the required technological infrastructures and cultural responses co-emerged, the focus is contemporary (roughly the late 1990s to the present). The study's methodology combines in-depth textual and visual analysis with cultural-contextual interpretation, drawing on posthumanism theory, memory studies, and media ethics scholarship. It does not, however, make an effort at technical reconstruction, assess empirical claims about specific proprietary systems, or provide legal advice, among other

restrictions. Instead, by mapping the literary and visual lexicon of the digital afterlife and providing theoretical and ethical avenues for contemplating what it means to live on in code, it contributes conceptually and interpretively.

2. Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism and Digital Ontology

A. Defining Key Concepts: Posthumanism, Digital Embodiment, and Cybernetic Identity

Posthumanism is a theoretical framework that challenges the humanist conception of the human as a bounded, autonomous, and central agent of knowledge, morality, and culture. Instead, it emphasizes the entanglement of humans with technology, ecological systems, and information networks, highlighting how identity, cognition, and agency are distributed across biological and technological substrates. Within this context, digital embodiment refers to the representation, preservation, or simulation of a person's body, consciousness, or identity within digital or computational media. This includes both archival forms—such as photographs, social media accounts, or biometric data—and interactive, algorithmically mediated forms—such as avatars, chatbots, and virtual recreations—that simulate presence or response. Cybernetic identity extends this concept further by describing the feedback loops between human cognition and computational systems, where data, algorithms, and networks co-construct notions of selfhood. Cybernetic identity underscores the idea that the human subject is increasingly distributed across code and networked infrastructures, blurring traditional distinctions between organic and digital, living and posthumous.

B. Engaging Key Theorists: Hayles, Haraway, and Baudrillard

This framework is informed by foundational posthumanism and media theorists. N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, investigates the historical and cultural processes through which humans have been reconceived as informational beings, arguing that consciousness and embodiment are entangled with technological systems. Hayles' insights illuminate the ways digital afterlives represent extensions of human presence beyond biological mortality. Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* destabilizes the boundary between human and machine, proposing the cyborg as both metaphor and analytical tool for hybrid identities. Her work emphasizes that technological and biological systems co-construct subjectivity, directly relevant to understanding avatars, AI simulations, and digitally mediated memorials. Jean Baudrillard, particularly in *Simulacra and Simulation*, contributes a critical lens on the ontology of representation, emphasizing how simulations and signs can take on a reality independent of their referent. Applying Baudrillard to digital afterlives reveals how virtual avatars or AI reconstructions may operate as autonomous presences that evoke authentic social and emotional responses, even if they are technically artificial.

C. Technology and the Extension, Replacement, and Archiving of Human Presence

The theoretical framework also discusses how technology mediates human continuity in three ways in which they are interdependent. First, technology extends human presence through preserving memory, activities, and traces of digital after biological life, making individuals continue to influence social and cultural networks. Second, technology can potentially replace aspects of the embodied self by simulation, vitalization, or algorithmic reconstruction, raising ethics and ontological issues of authenticity, continuity, and moral responsibility. Finally, technology retains human presence, creating ordered, retrievable repositories of personal information that enable mediated encounters with the deceased. The technical processes redefine the knowledge of embodiment and identity: the body is networked, data-centric, and modularized, and human presence increasingly is explained in terms of informational persistence rather than physicality. Posthumanism theory and digital ontology collectively provide a conceptual platform for the study of literary and visual narratives of the digital afterlife as cultural negotiations of embodiment, memory, and technological mediation.

3. The Body as Data: Fictional and Media Representations

A. Literary Depictions of Digital Bodies

This subtheme addresses how contemporary novels and short stories handle the transformation of human bodies into information, code, or digital form. Such novels include Don DeLillo's *Zero K* and Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2*, which describe characters whose mind, memory, or self is stored, transferred, or copied to computational or virtual spaces. These types of stories raise metaphysical concerns about the self, embodiment, and death, asking whether uploaded consciousness remains real or is an algorithmic imitation. Speculative short stories tend to extrapolate these kinds of questions further, setting futures in which uploading consciousness, copying virtual

performers, or storing memory as recoverable data is feasible, raising issues of ethics with regard to identity, control, and continuity. Literary devices—like multiple narrators, unreliability of the narrator, and fragmented narrative—reflect the intellectual breakdown of the body digital, allowing readers to have an intellectual as well as an emotional involvement with the posthuman condition.

B. Transforming the Physical Body into Information Systems

Attention here shifts from narrative material to the processes whereby literature and media describe the body-as-data. These works frequently depict the bodily body as a location of conversion: flesh is digitized, encoded, or mapped into databases, simulations, or algorithmic form. The procedure is typically literalized through technological metaphors, i.e., memory appropriation, brain-computer interfacing, or biometric mapping, foregrounding the body's transformation from organic, bounded materiality to informational abstraction. Texts chart the consequences of this process for subjectivity, agency, and social recognition, revealing the ways in which individual identity, affective presence, and even death is recapitalized when bodies are modular, manipulable, and networked data structures. These mappings challenge traditional presuppositions about embodiment, demonstrating that, in digital culture, the distinction between the organic self and its virtual likeness is permeable and ethically contested.

C. Visual Media Representations: Avatars, AI, and Resurrection Digital

Visual media—film and digital art through to immersive installations—offer further arenas for investigation of digital embodiment and posthumous presence. Films can showcase AI consciousness or digitally raised human beings in realist avatars, holograms, or virtual proxies, presenting spectators embodied experiences of presence beyond the biological lifespan. Interactive installations and digital art can typically enable participants to interact with algorithmically produced or responsive avatars, creating embodied experiences of data-driven representations of identity. Such visual objects not only illustrate the potential for persistence but also complicate issues of authenticity, emotional fidelity, and ethical responsibility. In aesthetic forms of interactivity, simulation, and visual hyperrealism, visual media stage the digital afterlife in complementary ways to literary experiences, bringing to light the cultural, emotional, and technological aspects of being alive—or remembered—by code.

4. Digital Afterlife and the Persistence of Memory

A. Online Memorialization

New sites of mourning and remembrance have been opened up by the digital, altering the dynamic between societies and death. Platforms like Facebook allow for the potential of turning profiles into memorial pages so friends and loved ones can continue to interact with the digital form of the deceased via posts, photos, and comments. In the same way, AI chatbots instructed through an individual's past communications, writings, or voice recordings can replicate conversations with the deceased, reenacting experiences that erase the distinction between the living and the dead. This memorialization is both intimate and publicly visible, generating hybrid social spaces where grieving is performed, exchanged, and sustained through ongoing mediation by technological infrastructure. They illustrate how computer technology enhances old rituals of remembrance, offering continuity to memory but problematizing consent, ownership of digital information, and ethics in the reproduction of the dead.

Table 1: Digital Afterlife and Online Memorialization

Dimension	Digital Practice	Ethical / Social Implication
Memorial Platforms	Social media profiles converted into memorial pages	Public-private boundaries of grief are blurred
Interactive Remembrance	Posts, photos, comments by the living	Mourning becomes ongoing and communal
AI-Based Reenactment	Chatbots using past data of the deceased	Challenges distinction between life and death
Continuity of Memory	Persistent digital presence	Memory extended beyond biological death
Consent & Ownership	Use of personal data after death	Unclear rights over digital legacy
Ethical Tensions	Reproduction of the deceased	Raises concerns over authenticity and agency

B. Preservation of Identity Through Data and Algorithms

At the core of digital afterlife practice is the conversion of human existence into eternally enduring impressions of information. Memory, personality, and behaviour are inscribed into social media profiles, digital images, biometric data, and algorithmic trace so that fragments of identity can live beyond biological death. Algorithms can fragment, reconstruct, or even create content that mimics a person's behaviour, style, or connections, creating living forms of presence within virtual environments. This persistence asserts a redefinition of cultural conceptions of identity: no longer tied to the meaty body, identity can be dispersed across servers, networks, and virtual interfaces. This preservation raises questions regarding fidelity and authenticity since the computational representation is by its nature incomplete, put together, and mediated, at once near and alien to those who knew the deceased during life.

C. Philosophical Questions: Authenticity, Grief, and Digital Immortality

Digitally mediated afterlife troubles classic ideas of mortality, memory, and authenticity into incoherence. Philosophically, therefore, the question is whether algorithmically produced interaction or virtual avatar can do right to the dead, or whether they represent some sort of new quasi-presence that is affectively charged but ontologically different. Mourning, historically based on material loss of the loved one, gets interwoven with constant experiences of electronic traces to establish a sustained but mediated persona of mourning. Moreover, the idea of digital immortality provokes reflection on the ethical and existentially relevant implications of saving human life in perpetuity in digital terms: it might bring comfort, continuity, and a sense of mastery over memory, but it might also commodify identity, interfere with closure, and redefine the boundaries between life and death. Literary and film accounts of these events describe both the possibility and the unease of survival through code, an act of cultural negotiation between human desire for enduringness and the impermanence that organic being demands.

5. Ethical and Philosophical Implications

A. Virtual Life and the Meaning of "Living"

The meaning of "living" in virtual terms presents fundamental ethical and existential questions, pushing us beyond ordinary understanding of life, being, and self. When a human being's memory, habits, or personality are deposited within AI machines, avatars, or network data, they continue to affect and act as close to living as one can get. But it is life mediated first by code and algorithm, and thus the question inevitably follows: is continuance in electronic form genuine continuance, or simulation only of life? Philosophical questions are whether the fundamental nature of being human—conscious experience, embodiment, affective presence—can be captured in data, and how this affects bereavement, attachment, and sociality if the "living" can be algorithmically reproduced. The idea of digital life thus challenges one to reconsider traditional categories of death, temporality, and moral agency to images of the dead. B. Ownership, Permission, and the Data of the Dead

B. Digital Afterlives Also Pose Unsettling Issues of Legal and Ethical Ownership.

Who is owed authority over the digital remains of the dead, ranging from social media profiles to intimate photos to AI-simulated simulacra? In practice, however, these queries bleed over into privacy law, site policy, and cultural inheritance and family authority norms. Consent is tricky, as well: few folks explicitly consent to posthumous use of their online persona, leaving corporations, institutions, or families to make the morally uncomfortable decision. The management of digital legacies—selecting which memories are retained, deleted, or remapped—warps questions of ethics, affect, and law, calling for models that allow for agency, dignity, and the intersubjective quality of memory. C. Consciousness Without the Body

C. One of the Key Philosophical Questions Regarding Digital Afterlives Is Whether Consciousness Can Be Separated from Embodiment.

AI simulations, virtual avatars, and uploaded memory archives challenge the inference that personhood has to be embodied. While fiction and cinema stereotypically imagine worlds where consciousness persists as code, these imaginings ontologically question the nature of such beings: are they prolongations of an individual, or computational surrogates on the basis of information? This inquiry raises the boundaries of human existence and technological simulation, assuming that ethical systems must try to harmonize not only the rights of the deceased but also the social and psychological effects on the living that are in accord with these virtual simulations. D. Privacy, Consent, and Digital Legacy Management

D. Besides Abstractions of Life, The Digital Afterlife Also Raises Pragmatic Concerns of Privacy and Agency.

Impermanence of digital data on servers and cloud computing can render personal histories accessible to unwanted readers at the time of death. Family members, archivists, and computer companies must weigh against each other possibilities of public availability, erasure, or commercial use of digital remainders. Moral stewardship of such legacies requires weighing respect for the dead, survivors' emotional interests, and technical demands of digital persistence. Researchers in digital humanities and bioethics similarly call for anticipatory planning, transparent consent processes, and institution policy that safeguards dignity and autonomy in posthumous online environments.

E. Intersections with Bioethics and Digital Humanities

E. Finally, Such Philosophical and Ethical Issues Converge with New Controversies in Bioethics and Digital Humanities.

Bioethicists analyse the consequences of posthumous data exploitation, algorithmic resurrection, and digital immortality for autonomy, moral agency, and social norms of life and death. Digital humanities scholars disentangle cultural representations, platform practices, and societal narratives to disclose how communities negotiate meaning, memory, and identity within networked settings. They together provide paradigms with which to grasp technical and symbolic forms of digital afterlives, informing policy, art practice, and scholarship as they illuminate the urgent ethical task of flesh-to-code translation.

6. Conclusion

Literature and visual culture are key to prefiguring, interrogating, and critiquing the idea of an afterlife of the digital. Through novels, short stories, films, and digital art installations, artists envision how human consciousness, memory, and self could be kept alive after death, sensing the allure and grappling with the ethical dilemmas of existing in code. These texts disclose the cultural anxieties and imagistic potentiality of flesh becoming data, providing readers and viewers with a context in which to think through technological incursion into mortality, memory, and presence. In depicting algorithmic avatars, AI-mediated experiences, and virtual memorials, literature and visual culture offer us frames to try out the authenticity, continuity, and relational worth of posthumous digital existence, while luxuriating in its potentiality and uncovering its constraints. The virtual afterlife, disclosed by these artifacts, is a profound shift in the nature of human identity. Freed from the body, identity is a distributed system, mediated by data, networks, and process algorithms. Memory, personality, and social presence assume new temporalities and specialities, enduring in ways that question historical notions of life, death, and legacy. This shift challenges us to rethink self, moral agency, and relational ethics, since the dead and the living now coexist in a domain where technology expands the horizon of human agency and redesigns social and affective relations.

In the future, interdisciplinary studies can continue to shed light on the complexities of digital embodiment and afterlife. Interdisciplinary studies combining literary analysis, media analysis, posthumanism theory, bioethics, and digital humanities can begin to respond to questions of agency, consent, authenticity, and ethics of remembering. Cross-cultural and comparative, world-wide examinations of practices, attitudes toward death, and technological advancements—like neural emulation, artificial intelligence avatars, and virtual reality memorialization—will continue to refine understanding of how cultures adapt to technological transcendence. Finally, the conflict between flesh and code serves to remind us of the necessity for critical models that diagnose the promise and the limitations of digital immortality according to the pace of technological advancement to preserve cultural, ethical, and philosophical issues.

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