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The Dead Do Not Log Out: AI, Digital Resurrection, and the Commodification of Grief in Contemporary Science Fiction

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Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence capable of reproducing voices, images, memories, and conversational patterns has transformed digital immortality from a speculative fantasy into an increasingly plausible technological practice. Contemporary science fiction has anticipated this transformation by imagining artificial systems that allow the dead to remain communicatively present among the living. This article examines Charlie Brooker's *Be Right Back*, an episode of *Black Mirror*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* to argue that artificial resurrection does not simply preserve the dead; it reorganizes the experience, temporality, and economy of mourning. While existing scholarship has examined digital resurrection through posthuman identity, authenticity, affective computing, technological ethics, and posthumous privacy, this article focuses on the transformation of grief into a data-mediated and potentially commercial relationship. It proposes the concept of "algorithmic mourning," referring to a technologically mediated form of grieving in which memory, attachment, and continued communication with the dead are processed through artificial systems. In *Be Right Back*, Ash's digital remains become the basis of a commercial service that promises Martha continued access to her deceased partner, while *Klara and the Sun* imagines an artificial being prepared as a possible substitute for a dying child. Both texts reveal that the central problem of digital resurrection is not simply whether machines can reproduce human identity. More significantly, they demonstrate how emotional attachment can become data, how data can become a service, and how grief itself can become commercially exploitable. Science fiction consequently exposes an emerging contradiction of digital immortality: the dead may become technologically accessible while simultaneously becoming objects of technological ownership.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, digital resurrection, algorithmic mourning, griefbots, digital afterlife, science fiction, commodification.

INTRODUCTION

Death has traditionally marked the point at which physical presence becomes memory. Contemporary artificial intelligence, however, increasingly unsettles this distinction by allowing fragments of the dead—photographs, messages, recordings, social-media posts, and other digital remains—to be reorganized into interactive simulations. AI griefbots, deadbots, posthumous avatars, and related technologies can reproduce aspects of a deceased person's appearance, voice, personality, and conversational behaviour. The development of such systems has generated a rapidly expanding interdisciplinary field involving media studies, philosophy, psychology, ethics, law, and artificial-intelligence studies. Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska identify this emerging market as a "Digital Afterlife Industry" and distinguish among the data donor, data recipient, and service interactant, thereby demonstrating that digital resurrection involves more than a private relationship between the bereaved and an artificial representation (Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska). More recent scholarship confirms that the field has moved rapidly beyond speculation. Soh et al.'s 2026 systematic review of thirty studies identifies AI chatbots, digitally reproduced images and voices, virtual reality, memorial platforms, and other technologies as emerging forms of digital grief support, while also identifying risks including emotional overreliance, misrepresentation, privacy violations, and data insecurity. At the same time, Paumen and Gabriels demonstrate that AI grief technologies increasingly frame grief itself as a technical problem that can be treated, optimized, or even avoided through technological intervention.

These developments make contemporary science fiction particularly significant. Charlie Brooker's *Be Right Back*, first broadcast in 2013, imagined a service capable of reconstructing a deceased person from his online data long before generative AI became an everyday cultural technology. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* similarly imagines artificial intelligence entering the emotional space surrounding death, replacement, memory, and parental attachment. Existing criticism has productively examined these works through questions of posthuman identity, affective computing, artificial consciousness, spectrality, and ethical responsibility. Kirk, for instance, reads *Be Right Back* through "networked spectrality," emphasizing how online traces allow the dead to persist as technologically mediated presences (218–32). Sabre and Meads subsequently describe the episode as a form of "digital necromancy," stressing its implications for posthumous identity, consent, privacy, and commodification. Zhao's 2026 study goes further by examining how affective computing transforms emotional interaction into processes of information recognition and transmission. Scholarship on *Klara and the Sun* has likewise explored AI affect, self-sacrifice, posthuman ethics, and the relationship between artificial beings and human vulnerability.

Yet an important question remains insufficiently developed in literary criticism: what happens when the technological reproduction of the dead becomes economically inseparable from the experience of mourning? The issue is not merely whether an AI can reproduce a dead person accurately. It is whether the dead become informational resources from which technological systems can generate continuing emotional value. This article therefore proposes the concept of "algorithmic mourning." Algorithmic mourning refers to a technologically mediated form of grieving in which memory, attachment, and communication with the dead are processed through artificial systems. Unlike conventional mourning, which develops through memory, ritual, interpersonal relationships, and the gradual accommodation of absence, algorithmic mourning introduces a technological intermediary between the bereaved and the absent person. The intermediary does not merely preserve memory; it generates new responses from old data. Consequently, the dead person becomes simultaneously a memory, a dataset, and a service. The central question is therefore not simply whether AI can resurrect the dead, but who owns the reconstructed dead, who controls their data, and who profits from the continuing attachment of the bereaved.

From Digital Remains to Artificial Presence

Digital resurrection depends upon a fundamental transformation in the meaning of memory. Human memory is selective, embodied, incomplete, and continually reconstructed. Digital memory, by contrast, can accumulate indefinitely. Messages, photographs, videos, voice recordings, browsing histories, and social-media interactions can survive the biological subject who produced them. When artificial intelligence reorganizes these fragments into a conversational personality, memory ceases to be merely something retained by the living and becomes something technologically operational. *Be Right Back* anticipates this transformation with remarkable precision. After Ash dies in a car accident, Martha is introduced to an AI service that reconstructs his conversational personality from his online activity. The technology initially appears modest: Martha communicates with a textual version of Ash. The system, however, soon expands from text to voice and eventually to a physical synthetic body. Each stage increases the apparent immediacy of Ash's presence. The movement from data to voice and then from voice to embodiment demonstrates that digital resurrection is not a single technological event but a process of increasing simulation.

Kirk's concept of networked spectrality is useful here because Ash survives through the very networks that constituted his digital identity during life. His online presence becomes a technological ghost, but it is a ghost produced through data rather than supernatural agency (Kirk 218–32). The episode consequently transforms the traditional metaphor of haunting. The dead return not because they possess supernatural power but because technological networks have preserved enough traces of them to make computational reconstruction possible. Zhao argues that the resurrected Ash is fundamentally different from the person who died because affective AI reduces emotional interaction to the recognition and transmission of informational patterns. The system can reproduce aspects of Ash's linguistic and behavioural style, but its apparent emotional responsiveness remains computationally generated (Zhao). This distinction is central to algorithmic mourning. The machine does not retrieve Ash from death. It converts the traces left by Ash into an interactive product.

The distinction between preservation and generation is particularly important. A photograph of Ash preserves an image produced during his lifetime; an AI Ash can generate statements he never made. A recorded voicemail preserves an actual utterance; an AI-generated voice can create a new sentence and present it as if Ash were speaking. Spitale and Germani describe precisely this shift in their 2026 analysis of "digital ghosts": generative systems differ from traditional memorials because they produce novel utterances rather than simply preserving existing records. The ethical problem therefore moves from remembering the dead to authorizing the dead to speak. This transformation produces what Thommandru and Mone call the "datafication of mourning." Digital systems convert emotional labour and remembrance into forms of information that can be stored, processed, displayed, and managed algorithmically. The dead therefore leave behind more than memories; they leave behind informational resources. Once those resources can generate new interactions, they acquire a posthumous technological value.

The Commodification of Grief

The commercial dimension of digital resurrection is essential to understanding *Be Right Back*. The technology is not represented as a neutral scientific discovery. It is a service through which grief becomes an occasion for consumption. Martha is not simply remembering Ash; she is purchasing continued access to an artificial version of him. Öhman and Floridi were among the earliest scholars to identify this problem through their concept of the Digital Afterlife Industry. They argue that digital remains have become subject to commercial interests and that the economic structures surrounding them can alter the informational identity of the dead (639–62). Their later ethical framework emphasizes that digital remains require treatment comparable to other culturally significant remains because commercial systems can otherwise transform remembrance into a commodity. This framework is

particularly relevant to *Be Right Back*, where Martha's grief becomes the point of entry into a technological market.

The commercial logic becomes more troubling because the product is not an ordinary commodity. It is emotional continuity. The system offers something that cannot normally be purchased: continued interaction with someone who has died. The service therefore derives its value from the impossibility of the consumer obtaining what she actually wants. Martha wants Ash, but the system can only provide a simulation. The gap between the two creates the very demand that sustains the technology. This is why the episode's technological progression matters. The textual chatbot is insufficient, so Martha moves to voice. Voice is insufficient, so she acquires the physical android. Each technological improvement promises greater proximity to the deceased while simultaneously demonstrating that complete resurrection remains impossible. The market therefore operates through an economy of approximation: the more convincing the simulation becomes, the more desirable the next level of simulation appears.

Kidd and Nieto McAvoy's 2025 study of contemporary "deathbots" reaches a strikingly similar conclusion through an examination of actual digital-afterlife platforms. They argue that these systems create a tension between preserving the past as an archive and continually reanimating it through generative AI. Their analysis shows that remembrance can become a consumer interaction designed for affective engagement. In other words, memory is no longer simply stored; it becomes something repeatedly activated through a platform. The same logic is visible in *Be Right Back*. Martha's grief becomes an interactive experience, and interaction produces further emotional engagement. Zhao describes this process as a form of affective labour in which the mourner's emotional activity helps sustain the technological relationship. The machine therefore does not simply serve grief; it can become structurally dependent upon continued grief.

Cheng's 2026 study makes the ethical problem explicit by arguing that griefbots require principles of consent, non-addiction, and non-manipulation. Such systems should not encourage excessive reliance or compulsive attachment, particularly because bereaved users may be emotionally vulnerable. The relevance to Brooker's episode is obvious: the more successful the technology becomes at maintaining Martha's attachment, the more difficult it becomes for her to confront Ash's absence. Paumen and Gabriels identify the broader cultural logic behind this process. Their 2026 study shows that AI grief services frequently present grief as something that should be repaired, optimized, or avoided. Some services frame AI as a temporary technological "band-aid," while others promote the possibility that users may never have to say goodbye. The two approaches appear different, but both transform mourning into a technological problem. *Be Right Back* anticipates this logic by presenting digital resurrection as an answer to the unbearable fact of absence.

The Artificial Substitute in *Klara and the Sun*

Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* develops a related but more complex version of technological substitution. Klara is purchased as an Artificial Friend for Josie, a genetically modified and chronically ill child. After losing her older daughter Sal, Josie's mother becomes increasingly afraid of losing her second child. She therefore participates in a plan with Mr. Capaldi through which Klara can learn Josie's behaviour and potentially serve as a substitute if Josie dies. The plan transforms grief into technological contingency. The mother does not merely fear Josie's death; she prepares a technological replacement for it. The novel therefore moves beyond the question of whether AI can preserve the dead and asks whether technological society might gradually redefine death as a problem of replacement.

Klara's position is especially revealing because she is initially treated as a product designed to perform emotional and social functions. Her value partly derives from her capacity to observe. She studies Josie's behaviour, relationships, gestures, and patterns of interaction. The possibility of replacement consequently depends upon the assumption that a human being can be reconstructed from

observable information. This assumption parallels the logic of digital resurrection in *Be Right Back*. If sufficient data can be collected, sufficient identity can supposedly be reproduced. Klara's observations provide information about Josie, but information does not automatically produce Josie's identity. Human existence emerges through relationships, memories, experiences, contradictions, and unpredictable forms of attachment that cannot be reduced to a stable dataset.

Recent criticism reinforces the importance of this distinction. Li's 2026 study of Klara's self-sacrifice argues that Ishiguro places artificial affect within an unresolved posthuman ethical horizon rather than offering a simple narrative of technological progress. Klara's capacity to care does not make her an uncomplicated replacement for a human being; instead, it reveals the difficulty of distinguishing programmed behaviour from meaningful affect. The novel thereby complicates the assumption that artificial reproduction can solve human vulnerability. The mother's plan ultimately exposes a deeper problem: a person is not merely the collection of behaviours that another entity can observe and reproduce. Josie exists within a network of relationships involving her mother, father, Rick, and Klara herself. The meaning of Josie therefore exceeds the information that Klara can gather about her.

This distinction becomes crucial near the end of the novel, when Klara recognizes that she could never completely replace Josie. Her recognition suggests that identity is relational. A person survives partly through the memories and attachments of others. Technological reproduction can reproduce characteristics, but it cannot automatically reproduce the social world through which those characteristics acquire meaning. *Klara and the Sun* therefore provide an important counterpoint to *Be Right Back*. In Brooker's episode, digital resurrection occurs after death; in Ishiguro's novel, technological substitution is prepared before anticipated death. One reconstructs the dead after loss; the other prepares a replacement before loss occurs. Together they reveal an expanding technological desire to control the emotional consequences of mortality.

From Mourning to Algorithmic Mourning

The concept of algorithmic mourning allows these two texts to be read beyond the familiar opposition between human and machine. In *Be Right Back*, the machine does not simply replace Ash; it reorganizes Martha's relationship with his absence. In *Klara and the Sun*, Klara does not simply become a technological duplicate of Josie; she becomes part of an attempt to prevent the emotional consequences of Josie's possible death. In both cases, technology intervenes in the temporal structure of mourning. Freud's classic account of mourning understands grief as a process through which the subject gradually negotiates the loss of an object of attachment. Later scholarship on "continuing bonds" complicated the assumption that healthy mourning necessarily requires complete detachment from the dead. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman demonstrate that maintaining symbolic relationships with the deceased can form a normal part of bereavement (3–27). Digital resurrection technologies therefore cannot simply be dismissed because they maintain relationships with the dead. The crucial distinction is between maintaining a symbolic bond and outsourcing the production of that bond to a commercial algorithm.

Nieuviarts, Ferenczi, and Bacqué's 2026 psychoanalytic analysis is particularly relevant because it identifies interactivity as the qualitative difference introduced by AI. Traditional traces of the dead remain silent. A photograph does not answer. A letter does not generate a new response. A digital ghost, however, responds. This transforms the structure of the continuing bond because the dead no longer merely persist as an object of memory; the technological representation participates in the interaction. This is precisely where algorithmic mourning departs from ordinary remembrance. Memory preserves traces, whereas algorithmic systems generate responses from traces. The dead consequently appear to remain available even though that availability is computationally produced. The technological system creates a present from the informational remains of a past.

Soh et al.'s systematic review demonstrates why this transformation requires caution. Digital grief technologies can provide accessibility, social support, and potentially reductions in grief-related symptoms, but the same literature identifies risks involving emotional overreliance, misrepresentation, privacy, detachment, and the trivialization of culturally significant mourning practices. The technology therefore cannot be classified simply as either beneficial or harmful. Its consequences depend upon how the system is designed and how its users understand the artificial presence. Spitale and Germani's 2026 framework is useful because it identifies design features that determine ethical risk: consent, data sources, interaction modality, disclosure, purpose, governance, ownership, and behavioural agency. Their argument suggests that the ethics of digital resurrection cannot remain at the level of abstract principle. Design itself becomes an ethical decision. Whether an AI openly identifies itself as a simulation, whether it generates new statements, who owns the underlying data, and whether it can continue interacting indefinitely all shape the meaning of digital mourning.

The literary texts examined here make these abstract questions emotionally visible. Martha learns that technological presence cannot restore the relationship she had with Ash. Klara learns that observing Josie cannot make her become Josie. Both narratives therefore insist upon a distinction between preservation and substitution. The dead can be remembered through technological traces, but a technological representation should not be mistaken for the return of the person.

The Dead as Informational Property

The most troubling implication of digital resurrection is therefore the conversion of identity into a form of posthumous property. Öhman and Floridi describe personal information as constitutive of an "informational body," suggesting that digital remains are not simply objects external to identity but part of how identity exists in informational society. When these remains are used to construct an artificial representation, the technology does not merely preserve information about the dead; it potentially reorganizes the informational body into a new agent.

This creates a problem of posthumous consent. A deceased person may leave behind enormous quantities of digital information without ever consenting to its use for AI simulation. Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska consequently advocate "mutual consent," involving both the person whose data is used and the person who interacts with the resulting system. Cheng similarly argues that consent must apply to the creation, use, and deletion of griefbots. The issue is particularly important because the deceased cannot later withdraw permission. The absence of the deceased creates an unusual asymmetry. A living consumer can theoretically cancel a subscription, delete an account, or withdraw from a platform. The deceased person whose identity has become the basis of the service cannot object to new statements generated in their name. Spitale and Germani therefore emphasize governance and ownership as central ethical dimensions of digital ghosts. The problem is not merely who can access the system but who possesses authority over the identity that the system produces.

This problem is already anticipated by *Be Right Back*. Ash's digital representation speaks in his name even though the person who might have authorized or rejected such representation no longer exists. The machine can produce a sentence that sounds like Ash but was never spoken by him. In effect, the technology creates a posthumous author. *Klara and the Sun* explores the same problem from another direction. The mother and Capaldi assume that Josie's identity can be reproduced because they believe her observable characteristics can be sufficiently captured. The novel exposes the violence implicit in this assumption: the individual becomes an object of technological knowledge before she has even died. The political economy of digital resurrection therefore depends upon a paradox. The more intimate the technology becomes; the more valuable the underlying data becomes. A photograph has limited informational capacity; an interactive AI trained on years of correspondence, photographs, audio, and personal records contains a far richer representation. The dead do not merely leave memories behind. They can leave datasets capable of generating economic value.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary science fiction suggests that one of the most consequential transformations produced by artificial intelligence may not be the creation of artificial life but the technological reorganization of human death. *Be Right Back* and *Klara and the Sun* imagine worlds in which the boundary between death and continued presence becomes technologically negotiable. Yet neither narrative ultimately presents artificial resurrection as a genuine victory over mortality. Instead, both expose the consequences of converting memory into data, absence into presence, and grief into technological service.

The concept of algorithmic mourning helps identify this transformation. It describes a condition in which mourning is increasingly mediated by systems that store, reconstruct, and potentially monetize the traces of the dead. In such a system, the dead do not simply remain in memory; they remain as data. Their voices can be regenerated, their appearances reconstructed, and their behavioural patterns simulated. The possibility is simultaneously consoling and disturbing because the persistence of the dead becomes inseparable from technological ownership. The argument of these texts is therefore not simply that machines cannot become human. Their deeper warning concerns the transformation of human vulnerability into technological value. If grief can become a service, memory can become data, and presence can become an interactive commodity, then death itself becomes another domain of the digital economy. Öhman and Floridi's early concept of the Digital Afterlife Industry becomes particularly prescient in this context: the contemporary expansion of generative AI intensifies the commercial possibilities of posthumous identity rather than eliminating them.

Science fiction consequently asks a question that current AI development has made increasingly urgent: not "Can AI bring back the dead?" but "Who owns the version of the dead that AI creates?" The answer has consequences for privacy, dignity, memory, consent, and the cultural meaning of mourning. The dead may become computationally accessible, but accessibility is not identity; simulation is not presence; and preservation is not resurrection. Most importantly, the continued technological availability of the dead may transform the living more profoundly than it transforms the dead. In a future where machines can make the dead speak, the ethical challenge will not simply be determining whether their voices are authentic. It will be deciding whether grief should remain a human experience or become another market in the expanding economy of data.

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