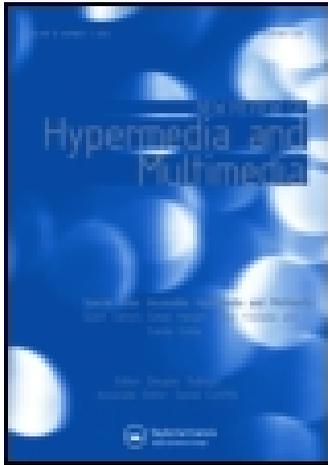


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The netlore of the infinite: death (and beyond) in the digital memory ecology

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In an era that celebrates instantaneity and hyper-connectivity, compulsions of networked individualism coexist with technological obsolescence, amounting to a sense of fragmentation and a heightened tension between remembering and forgetting. This article argues, however, that in our era of absolute presence, a netlore of the infinite is emerging, precisely in and through our digital memory practices. This is visible in the ubiquitous meaning-making practices of for instance personal digital archiving through the urges for self-perpetuation; it is evident at sites where the self may be saved for posterity; it is discernible in the techno-spiritual practices of directly speaking to the dead on digital memorials, as well as in the tendency among some users to regard the Internet itself as a manifestation of eternity, “heaven” and the sacred. This article shows that by approaching digital memory cultures existentially, and by attending to the complexities of digital time, we may gain insights into important and paradoxical aspects of our existential terrains of connectivity. This makes possible an exploration into how people navigate and create meaning in the digital memory ecology—in seeking to ground a sense of the eternal in the ephemeral.

Keywords: Digital memory cultures; Connectivity; Existence; Digital temporalities; Death; The afterlife

Introduction

In the summer of 2010,¹ iPhone4—a by now “old” device—appeared on the market by self-reflexively announcing: “iPhone4. This changes everything. Again”.² Apple knows too well what seems obvious for anyone studying digital culture: ours is the age of the absolute present (Davis, 2013). It celebrates the now, the new and the transient. In this context, compulsions of networked individualism and hyper-connectivity (Hoskins, 2014; Lagerkvist, 2013b) coexist with technological obsolescence. In other words: what was “me” yesterday needs upgrading today and what is “new” today will become e-waste tomorrow. Major concerns ensue among a generation living in the culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013), with whether our digital memories will last, and if lost (on rapidly ageing and dying machines and platforms), whether they can be restored (Peters, *in press*). Or to the contrary, may they uncannily and disturbingly both outlast our

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needs and haunt our intentions? What will our movements and memories online amount to, in the future? How might they rebound, and can they hurt us? Debates have been spurred, revolving around whether there is in fact both a deep-felt human need and an inviolable *right to be forgotten*³ (cf. Mayer-Schönberger, 2009)?

These are profound existential challenges of our time, marked by the heightened tension in memory cultures between remembering and forgetting (Assmann, 2008; Garde-Hansen, J., A. Hoskins & A. Reading, 2009).⁴ When major players, such as Google, moreover, attempts to *cover everything*, they are constituting themselves, as has been argued by John Durham Peters, as a God-like presence in our lives. The Google-God analogy describes the endeavour of Google to embody an all-encompassing, omniscient and omnibenevolent (“Do no evil”) presence and to conjure up the company of another—a *deity* (2010). As I will discuss in this article, this example displays a broader inclination as Google is, as I suggest, alluding to or in effect thriving on a sense of longing for the infinite, in a culture that lives in the absolute present.

This article places the current debates on “death online” in relation to recent theorizing about digital memories and memory practices. It argues that there are particular performances of memory in digital culture that bespeak existential ambivalences as well as a quest for meaning in the face of these. The role of these media technologies and of digital memory practices in particular, for existential meaning making that touches upon the profundity of our lives in dire times of death, loss and mourning—as well as mundane practices of self-making and archiving—also connect them with vernacular forms of religiosity (Axelson, 2014; Hoover & Lundby, 1997; Lövheim, 2013; Lynch, Mitchell, & Strhan, 2011).⁵ This is made manifest when, as will be argued in this article, they also bear witness in a number of different ways to the persistent presence of the infinite, in the age of temporal instantaneity.

Memory in the culture of connectivity

But what of memory in today’s world, and how does it differ from in the past? Cultural memory is habitually defined as is a selective construction by representational strategies through which the past is retrieved or, rather, reinvented for purposes serving the needs, goals and politics of the present, with an aim towards the envisioned future. Typically, collective memory has been related to the identity work and interests of a nation, group or community (Halbwachs, 1925/1992) and has been conceived of as forged through different technologies of memory such as monuments, artefacts, texts or photography. The notion of a collective memory has however been challenged on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Memory is forged transnationally across cultural contexts that in turn shape new communities of memory. And memory is located neither in one physical place nor within the nation. The “memory site” (Nora, 1989) seems to be vanishing as the locus of memory formation (and memory studies) in a world of global, digital, globital, transmedial, transcultural and cosmopolitan memories (see an overview in Lagerkvist, 2013a).

For those of us devoted to the study both of media and cultural and individual memory and of media memory, this is a time of reconstitution of our endeavours (cf. van Dijck, 2007; Garde-Hansen et al., 2009; Lagerkvist, 2013b; Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, 2011). The very idea of a collective memory has become precarious, since memory has been transformed into a matter of choice. Memory in our digital age, as has been argued by Amit Pinchevski for instance, is foremost a question of subjectively choosing your affinities and by consequence both what to remember and where you belong (2011). Memory is thus fragmented, endlessly versatile and reconfigurable. As sociality has turned into a project of self-promotion in the culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013), memories are now, furthermore forged through “subjective public horizons of consciousness” (Volkmer, 2014). In addition, they have turned into something beyond both our conscious intents and tangible purview; after the connective turn, memories are also forced upon us (Hoskins, 2011c; van Dijck, 2014). Our “personal digital archive fever” (Garde-Hansen et al., 2009) is thus paralleled, and in fact surpassed, by the sense in which everything we ever searched for online is remembered, recorded and saved for posterity by Google.

This article proposes, hence, that digital memory in our age is both *subjective* (as part of a culture of networked individualism) and profoundly *beyond subjective control*. Personal memories in our digital shoeboxes, often on display before a public in social networking, for instance, are emphasized by leading scholars as the centre of attention for digital memory studies (van Dijck, 2007). But, in addition, memory has simultaneously become *connective* and is forced upon us through the entanglements of networks, automation and sociality (van Dijck, 2014). Connective memory assemblages are accumulated, then dissolve only to reconfigure through sociotechnical flux beyond both human purposeful intention and deliberate acts of representation (Hoskins, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2014). Connective, algorithmic memory operates through the culture of connectivity where our “trace bodies”, as Sun-ha Hong calls them, are present; they are actively out there, “visible”, recorded and monitored (Hong, n.d.). While knowing that Google remembers everything, our exact digital whereabouts become unbeknownst to us and, importantly, beyond our sense of control. Hence, opaque digital assemblages seem imbricated in our existence. In this way, network memories of for instance our search and consumer behaviour, have also become our “surrogates” that operate irrespective of our subjective and wilful wishes and goals. These surrogates remain invisible from any possible overview of the everyday person. This means that digital memory cultures are ripe with insecurities, as to the status of our digital data substitutes, and our possibility to gain a hold on them. Hong develops a digital phenomenology from the perspective of emphasising the impervious sense presences in our communication culture, in relation to the possibility to capture, secure or keep track of our memories and traces. He stresses that we know that these traces exist, that they are “present”, while not feeling their exact clout. He further distinguishes between two “user bodies”: the “act body” that we consciously perform on a daily basis in social networking for instance, and the “trace-body”, that while we sleep or are elsewhere (but awake), is actively out there, present in our “name”. Simultaneously, we dread their potential power and their transparency vis-à-vis

surveillance or future prospects in life. On the other hand, as discussed above, many of our challenges today also revolve around those memories that run the risk, to the contrary, of being lost forever.

Hence, the above deliberations point to anxieties within the lived experiences of our digital lives, as well as to the multiplicity of meaning and non-meaning of the digital (cf. Pinchevski, 2014). This constitutes an emerging situation, a way of being-in-the-world without clear demarcations and coordinates. My argument is that the new “network memory” enhances the anxieties and vulnerabilities of what it means to be human. But as I will propose, at the same time, digital cultures provide new means for exploring existential issues—and thus for making meaning (Lagerkvist, 2013b, 2014). As opposed to the stress on presentness, our embodied digital existence⁶ today, I will argue, has to a large degree to do with the hopes for and/or ominous intimidations of an eternal memory: our relationship to the immediate and individual past is always verging on worries about the potential forever of data and the uncertain dashes we leave behind before the eyes of uncertain beholders. The fundamental and unresolvable ambivalence in all human–technology relations (as well as in our existence more profoundly; Ihde, 1990) seems to be brought to a new level in the culture of connectivity. One key example, already touched upon, is the fact that in digital memory cultures, data—in the shape of digital memories that have become *us* (Garde-Hansen et al., 2009)—reside in an unsettling position between the ephemeral and the eternal, mortality and immortality.

The return—or the persistent presence—of the infinite

Here we are encircling one of the major themes that I see as worthy of further exploration in digital memory studies and in media studies more broadly: the fact that the *infinite* has made an important return—or perhaps it is manifesting its persistent presence in human culture?—both online and in digital cultures at large. What we might term *a netlore of the infinite* seems to be emerging.

One important disclaimer here is that what this notion of the netlore should mean in this context is a focus on the lived experience of cultural belief systems, rather than signifying the presence of “legend” or “myth” in digital media. Similarly, in *Beyond the Threshold: Afterlife Beliefs and Experiences in World Religions*, philosopher Christopher M. Moreman follows in the phenomenological tradition of Mircea Eliade in discussing the human experience of death and the afterlife. He not only outlines major differences—such as the belief in reincarnation versus resurrection—but also discusses some themes that seem to be discernible across the different creeds, transcending geography and history. The existence of something ethereal that we call the soul or the spirit as separated from the body—in religious experiences and at the time of death—is one such common denominator between vastly different cultural contexts. His definition of “folklore as a collection of what might be considered unofficial cultural knowledge, as opposed to the orthodox official cultural knowledge” (2008, p. 6), will be a cue in the subsequent discussion on the “netlore” of forever. In the following, I will expound five examples of how the theme of forever and the infinite are played out in contemporary cultures of connectivity and digitalization. This will also comprise

the question of death (and beyond) in the digital memory ecology. I will be discussing particular performances of memory online that gravitate to something eternal taking shape within these existential terrains of connectivity.

The *first* example has to do with *post-mortality*. Scholars have argued that forever has both disappeared (through entropy and extinction) and been reintroduced through science's promises in today's world. The most spectacular example, discussed by sociologists Michael Kearl and Michael Hviid Jacobsen, is no doubt the predictions made for software-based post-mortal humanity by Ray Kurzweil at Google who foresees that only within a few decades, immortality will be a realistic and viable prospect. According to Kearl and Hviid Jacobsen Kurzweil, "envisions cybernetically enhanced humans genetically improved through internet download" (2013, p. 70). These imaginary and "devout" digital memory practices are part of a wider pattern in transhuman science, art and design where the aim is to prevent death at any cost.

Despite contending that there is a fading allure of traditional beliefs in an afterlife, Kearl and Hviid Jacobsen furthermore conclude that "with the new technologies that allow the post-selves to be seen and heard by others far removed in time, the illusions of death transcendence and permanence are preserved" (2013, p. 75). Hence, there is a "return" of the infinite, *second*, through *practices of remembering the dead*. These involve memory work on web memorials and memorialized social networking site (SNS) profiles that can keep you socially alive after biological death, for an extended period of time (Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010). Here the digital afterlife is constituted by theoretically eternal circulations of meaning, as the meaning of the memorial is redefined through the Internet into an ongoing process "that depends less on the implied eternity of a built physical environment than on the entirely different eternity of circulation of information" (Grider in Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013, p. 162). In relation to this, I have suggested elsewhere that it seems that today in social networking, death is both de-sequestered and deferred in a sense through the symbolic omnipresence of the dead, thus expanding the meanings of both death and mourning (Lagerkvist, 2013b, cf. Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011/2012; Brubaker et al., 2013).

This deferral is also visible, *third*, in the ubiquitous meaning-making practices of personal digital archiving (see Garde-Hansen et al., 2009) through *the urges for self-perpetuation*—a project that in its extreme variant, life logging, harbours the fantasy of total recall of all that was me, all I ever did (Bell & Gemmell, 2009). Another extreme is the Liveson concept (www.liveson.org), a service that allows you to keep on tweeting forever after you are gone. Its main motto is: "When your heart stops beating, you'll keep tweeting". Another example that turns the netlore of the infinite into something of a spectacle is "The Tweet Hereafter" which simply publishes people's last tweets with the tag: "Each of us will utter a final word. Some of them will be on Twitter".

The return—or persistent presence—of the infinite through self-perpetuation is also evident at sites where the self may be saved for posterity or where we may decide who inherits our Facebook images. Some services offer us to design a farewell message, and our final tweet (for instance at DeadSocial, <http://www.deadsoci.al/>) and services such as Google Inactive Account Manager allow us to

construct a self for the future to remember or forget. Hence, these are examples where we are offered ways to manage the digital afterlife. In managing total capture, or how people will, should, or may remember you, there is the promise that death or our future memory, like everything else, is in our hands, thereby deferring a sense of absolute loss of control before one's own finitude. Yet, as I discussed at the outset, continued worries about our digital assets and about losing control of our media memories, and ensuing ownership and inheritance problems (Moncur, *in press*), coexist with the contrary sense of loss of control before the imagined forever of data, which also pervades our age.

The forever of data leaves us ambivalent, anxious and quite vulnerable about where our traces may be situated, and how they may bear on our lives and afterlives (cf. Mayer-Schönberger, 2009, Peters, *in press*). Ghostly media memories that haunt our cultures, return and bring something back that never left completely (the media schemata or templates that surround us in news and popular culture; Hoskins, 2009) seem to have been given a sibling in those ghostly memory “surrogates” whose action ratio and propensities constitute a new predicament: we know about them, without knowing where they are hiding or showing themselves. This potentiality or threat seems related to an everyday notion of Web 2.0-eternity—a netlore of the infinite.

But forever is also discernible, *fourth*, in the practices of directly speaking to the dead on digital memorials as well as in techno-spiritual beliefs expressed among the living online (Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010; Walter et al., 2011/2012). Brubaker and Vertesi argue that “the use of SNS to continuously communicate with a user in the afterlife and engage in posthumous profile management can be framed as another example of ‘techno-spiritual’ practice” and that the ethereality of the “Ethernet” is often underplayed, but “this quality may be central to users’ experiences, explanations and emergent interactions with such intangible media” (2010, p. 3). This techno-spirituality also involves the belief among mourners in an everlasting, ultimate and joyful reunion with the departed after their own death, as shown by Anders Gustavsson in his studies on memorial Internet websites in Sweden and Norway (2011). In Gustavsson’s own words:

The concept that the deceased is somewhere in heaven is very common. There she or he can meet with others who have died and live together with them. (...) Existence in heaven is thus considered to be very similar to that on earth. (Gustavsson, 2011, p. 147)

This seems somewhat at odds with previous scholarship on eternity and afterlife beliefs and conceptions in the West. According to Death Studies scholar and sociologist Tony Walter in *The Eclipse of Eternity: A Sociology of the Afterlife* (1996), there are six main notions of eternity in Western postmodern materialistic culture:

(1) Nothing happens—we come to an end (materialism or naturalism); (2) One can never know what happens after death (agnosticism); (3) We come back as something or someone else (reincarnation); (4) Our soul pass to another world (immortality of the soul); (5) Our bodies await resurrection (resurrection of the body); (6) Trust in God, all is in his hands. (Walter, 1996, p. 6)

These broad positions are rooted in “dogmas of the world religions”, while they are often in an unorthodox and postmodern fashion recombined in different ways (Walter, 1996, p. 12). The two most common of these are according to Walter materialism and the reunion of souls (Walter, 1996, p. 42). In sum, a dominating tendency in this research on afterlife beliefs shows a recession in belief in heaven and hell, but by contrast, “popular belief in life after death is buoyant” (Walter, 1996, p. 48).

While an embodied reunion is in sight after death, as argued by Gustavsson, the dead are now somewhere where they may be contacted. They seem to be online. There is a strong belief that the dead can be reached through the computer (Gustavsson, 2011, p. 149). The death online contexts however display yet another tendency. It seems in fact that “heaven” has reappeared, since scholars have also noted a tendency among some users (in this case in Germany) to regard the Internet itself as a manifestation of eternity, heaven and the sacred (Jakobi & Reiser, 2014). Hence, what I have cautiously termed a netlore of the infinite is also emerging through these examples.

Finally, and *fifth*, we are seeing in post-human design projects, *a production of a post-apocalyptic memory of our entire civilisation* (Jeffreys & Pitsillides, 2013; Kera, 2008). These projects design for a world without humans and address users who are either dead, or completely alien, and strive to create a memory of humanity, after the end of our world. As their mission is to save us for eternity and posterity, these fictionalizations of a future without us seem however to include an idea about an ever-lasting consciousness that is the receiver of this epitaph of the human race. Another example where forever is present is in “Mission Eternity”: an “information technology-driven cult of the dead” and a community of the living and the dead. It is at once a corporate, scientific and artistic endeavour to investigate the afterlife, by storing data about the dead (called Mission Eternity Pilots) in “arcanum capsules”. In their own words and idiom:

The ARCANUM CAPSULE is a unique, digital portrait of a M ∞ PILOT—a data package of at least 50 Mega Byte – that travels space and time forever. The production of a regular ARCANUM CAPSULE requires the active presence of a living PILOT and follows a standardized procedure that includes the completion of the M ∞ ADMISSION FORM, a series of photo sessions, voice and video recordings etc. The encapsulation involves interaction with trained etoy. AGENTS to devise the POST MORTEM PLAN, which is a substantial part of the work of art. (<http://missioneternity.org/arcanum-capsule/>)

The dead are under the protection of the living (called Mission Eternity Angels), and they are imagined to travel across the globe, as well as across time—forever.

Conclusion

How can we make sense of the netlore of the infinite? Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers have suggested that it is the shortcomings and inadequacies of our own grasp on the technologized world that gives birth to what they call “religions of Modernity”: that is to re-enchantment, vernacular forms of religiosity and

techno-spirituality (2010). The process in which technologies have become more opaque, when not even the experts themselves have a full understanding of them, generates new magical discourses.

Let me propose a complementing possibility that more explicitly focuses on lived experience and how people navigate life in our late modern digital age. Relating the discussion to the temporalities of the digital will crystallize, I argue, the need for an existential approach to digital culture. As is clear from the above, an argument can be made for describing the digital memory ecology as pervaded by the present, by versatility and the sense in which memory is endlessly revisable, created when needed or even the outcome of connectivity that forcefully moulds our memories. Our life world has become technologically enforced. In contrast with theorizing about digital cultures that stress their role for the continued fragmentation of cultural memory and society, there is reason to highlight that what I call the existential terrains of connectivity also display tendencies towards cohesion, continuity, and a quest for “existential security” (Lagerkvist, 2013b). Hence, new memory cultures, as I have put forward, also display a continued search for meaning and *communitas* (Lagerkvist, 2014)—as well as a persistent presence of a notion of the infinite. In the face of a culture that lives in the absolute present, these digital memory cultures gravitate towards the eternal, and as I have discussed in this article, they tend to reaffirm beliefs about an afterlife. It should be noted that the notion of bodily resurrection seems present within the netlore of infinity, but it is primarily through a kind of immortality of the communicative soul that the dead are believed to reside somewhere where they can be contacted, *or connected to*, in Internet heaven.

On reflection, it seems that the absolute present is intriguingly at once infinite: the network conceived as a stream of both—an eternal now as it were. To complicate matters further, this relates to discussions on the eternal as in effect timeless—as something that is permanent and changeless—something that is always there (Kearl & Hviid Jacobsen, 2013, p. 60). As argued by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun “(t)he always-there-ness of digital media was to make things more stable, more lasting” (Chun, 2011, p. 188), but in actuality, it ended up creating new problems of keeping, saving and archiving. One of the ostensible paradoxes here is that that late modern digital culture seems to be grounding the lasting (and even the eternal) in the ephemeral: in effect what Chun calls the *enduring ephemeral*, based on the non-human clock of endless repetition of the new (Chun, 2011, p. 184). She explains: “If our machine’s memories are more permanent, if they enable a permanence that we seem to lack, it is because they are constantly refreshed so that their ephemerality endures” (Chun, 2011, p. 197).

What I would like to add to Chun’s media archaeological excavation is the level of lived experience. Through focalizing the experiential and existential dimensions of the digital memory ecology, we will be able to perceive these socio-technological entanglements as breeding notions of a transcendent reality and of a posthumous existence—however, vague at times or perhaps derivatory of diverse (and mixed) religious discourses. Through digital memory practices of meaning making in relation to death and beyond, the infinite forcefully emerges

as a horizon against which the existential struggles of a networked generation becomes visible.

In this article, I have discussed the ways in which notions of forever are present as media users conceive of and navigate their experiences online, at both life-defining moments of for instance loss (when the profundity of our lives becomes manifest) and within the mundane every day, when proliferating selves and memories are managed. I propose that despite, or perhaps because of, the contingencies of our present condition of technological hyperflux and the complex temporalities of the digital, digital memory practices include a quest for existential security and meaning—here exemplified in variations on the infinite. By turning attention to these variations, and through a new existential optics for media studies, I suggest that we may perceive some of the key ambivalences and vulnerabilities of our technologized existence. It compels us to attend to them, not simply through the mainstream lenses of the cultural, social, political or economic but as in effect, and above all, a question of being in the world.

Notes

- [1] This article outlines key themes (synthesized primarily from previous research in Northern Europe and the USA) and theoretical lines of inquiry within my new research programme “Existential Terrains: Memory and Meaning in Cultures of Connectivity”, which is funded by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation and The Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg Foundation (2014–2018). Combining approaches in digital memory studies, with existence philosophy and the debate on media, religion and culture, my research focuses on digital memory cultures and specifically the memory practices that relate to the realm of death, the digital afterlife, bereavement and mourning online in contemporary Sweden—allegedly one of the world’s most secularized countries. This focus is accompanied by the awareness, however, of the fact that the phenomena I am attending to exist in across many cultural contexts. The studies on primarily Swedish materials will be thoroughly compared to similar studies in other countries, which will allow for discerning what is contextually specific, what is transculturally present and what is medium specific. The importance, in addition, of acknowledging possible differences between people *in Sweden* cannot be underestimated. Therefore, the project will (as much as the materials permit) take into account the diversity of religions present in the country, the potential differences in terms of participation on the platforms and in the practices of interest in this article—along the lines of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, class, sexual orientation and cultural context—as well as how these dimensions play out intersectionally in these memory practices and practices of existential meaning making.
- [2] Source: <http://www.apple.com/ca/channel/iphone/iphone-4/tour/>
- [3] The European Commission court ruling from May 2014 states that Google is a data processor under European law. The ruling makes it possible for citizens to make an erasure request of personal data to search engines such as Google. The European Commission’s “Right to be forgotten” ruling (C-131/12) from 13 May 2014 is summarized in this fact sheet: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/files/factsheets/factsheet_data_protection_en.pdf
- [4] In discussing the rise of “erase your history” software such as X-pire! and ephemeral apps like Snapchat and Wickr, Dale Lately of the *Guardian* argues that while we seem “preoccupied with an urge for removal and erasure”, many of us are never read or retweeted and hence have a right to be remembered. He concludes that: “the social web is a place of stark power law distributions—a tiny number of people commanding all of the attention, while the vast majority

- languish on the long tail, heard, seen and read by almost nobody". The *Guardian*, Wednesday, 30 July 2014, "Right to be forgotten? Most of us are still trying to be remembered", <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/30/right-to-be-forgotten-most-trying-remembered>
- [5] The current project engages the rich debate on new emerging forms of vernacular religiosity and new ways of relating to transcendent and sacred aspects of life in late modernity. To comprehensively represent this extensive debate falls outside the scope of the present article. For more on these dimensions, see Lagerkvist (2013b, 2014).
- [6] Following N. Katherine Hayles' (1999) thorough critique of how information "lost its body" in the information age, digital memory cultures need to be embodied. One way to achieve this in the debates on death online, moreover, has been to propose a broad medium concept and to stress that memories are forged and performed across the online/offline distinction (Refslund Christensen & Sandvik, 2013, 2014). The formidable task for digital memory studies is to further theorize memory transmedially across the modalities of algorithm, symbol (content), matter, bodies and milieu.

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