

Afterlife: Exploring the Social Lives of the Digital Dead

The performance *Afterlife: Conversations with the Living Dead*, staged at the Finnish National Theatre in November 2024, was developed and produced as part of The Digital Death: Transforming History, Rituals and Afterlife (DiDe) research project. This collaboration was a unique experiment based on a new type of co-creation between media and communication studies scholars, data scientists, and performing artists. The collaboration was a joint effort between two institutions: the University of Helsinki and the Finnish National Theatre.

The play *Afterlife* featured two characters: a husband who had lost his wife in an accident and a bot named Tina, programmed with the wife's digital footprint. The husband was played by National Theatre actor Pyry Nikkilä. Tina was modelled using AI by researcher-programmer Anton Berg. It was based on a real, deceased person, but her footprint and AI modelling were artificially modified. The plot and storyline were fictional, though they reflected real-life events.



Photo: Still image from *Afterlife*, a short film by Petter Korkman (DiDe/Tiuku ry)

As a play, *Afterlife* invited the audience to experience what happens when the dead continue to live among us, “biologically deceased, virtually alive, and socially active” (Bassett 2022; see also Harju 2025; Kneese 2023; Morse 2023; Recuber 2023; Sumiala 2021; Sumiala & Jacobsen 2025; Stokes 2021). The play was written and directed by Joel Teixeira Neves in close collaboration with the artists and members of the research team.

Afterlife made a difference to the research team, and it also attracted national media interest. For us as researchers, the project offered the possibility to learn new ways to communicate academic research to the public and a chance to learn about novel means of collaboration with artists and a well-established art institution. It was fascinating to learn how our findings became transformed into the scenes performed on stage. As academics, we also had a unique chance to learn about the artistic process and how the play was written and developed, especially the close interaction between Teixeira Neves, the main scriptwriter and director, and the main human actor, Nikkilä, as well as with the team responsible for audio and visual design.

The artists reported learning a great deal about digital afterlife and were eager to reflect on the

ethical, cultural, and social implications with the scholars, experts in the research field.

The November 2024 premiere was followed by a panel discussion in which the team members and guest speakers in the panel reflected on their thoughts and ideas provoked by the play, with the audience also invited to participate.

The *Afterlife* project was motivated by the academic determination to enhance public scholarship and to reach out to the wider public. The DiDe project was based on the idea that digital afterlife is already a lived reality affecting both the living and the dead (Harju 2025; Sumiala 2021; Sumiala & Jacobsen 2025). Collaboration with artists and institutions beyond academia made a difference in generating public debate on this fundamental concern in which the boundaries between life and death are shifting.



Afterlife, a short film by Petter Korkman (DiDe/Tiuku ry)

<https://vimeo.com/1083909878?share=copy>