

Digital Consciousness: Algorithmic Soul Reconfiguration in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*

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Abstract

Identity construction is a fluid process shaped by cultural, social, and technological forces, particularly in the digital era. Jennifer Egan's Look at Me critiques how technology and surveillance reshape selfhood, highlighting the commodification of personal identity. While it portrays fractured identities in a hyper-visible world, it also invites further inquiry into the philosophical impact of algorithmic systems on human consciousness. The paper follows a textual analysis methodology to throw light on the co-constructed identity. Further this paper applies Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in order to examine the relationships between humans and non-human entities such as technologies as part of a network that co-constructs identity. ANT critically examines how human beings interact with technology, highlighting algorithmic systems as active agents in shaping identities. Egan's narrative examines how technological systems and human actions intertwine, redefining personal identity in a dynamic network. It suggests that identities are fluid, continually reconstructed through the ongoing interplay between human and technological forces. The paper raises ethical concerns around corporate control of personal data but falls short of addressing the complexities of technological ethics, particularly accountability and moral responsibility. This gap calls for deeper critical engagement with how digital systems shape human identity and agency. Egan's portrayal of digital surveillance anticipates contemporary concerns about algorithmic governance and human autonomy. To what extent can the identities in the novel be viewed as algorithmically reprogrammed products of technological commodification rather than authentic self-expressions? The paper examines the interplay of human actions and technology to understand the fluid nature of selfhood.

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Introduction

Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) is an interesting reflection on identity, surveillance, and digital mediation in a world on the brink of full digitalization. Written at the dawn of the 21st century, the novel presciently critiques how personal identity becomes a commodity in a data-driven society. Egan observes, "Identity, in this era, is inextricable from how we are seen and perceived in digital spaces" (Egan 5). Her narrative anticipates contemporary concerns about algorithmic systems that influence self-perception and interaction. Through its portrayal of fractured identities and pervasive surveillance, the novel raises critical questions about human autonomy and authenticity. By delving into these themes, Egan not only reflects on the cultural shifts of her time but also provides a lens to examine the complexities of identity in the digital age (Egan 5; Haraway 65; Foucault 219).

Egan's exploration of algorithmic influence aligns with Katherine Hayles's concept of the posthuman, where "consciousness is an epiphenomenon, a by-product of complex systems operating below the level of awareness" (Hayles 2). Charlotte's struggles illustrate the dehumanizing effects of algorithmic governance, as her autonomy is eroded under the influence of technological systems that prioritize commodification over individual freedom. At the same time, Egan suggests that identities are not wholly determined by technology; they emerge as negotiated constructs within dynamic networks. This dual perspective reflects broader societal tensions between empowerment and disempowerment in the face of digital systems. Charlotte's fragmented selfhood exemplifies how individuals attempt to reclaim agency even within a system that often undermines it, offering a nuanced exploration of the complexities of selfhood in the digital era (Chun 17; Haraway 65).

This paper examines the philosophical and ethical dimensions of algorithmic identity construction in *Look at Me*. It investigates how human and technological forces converge to reshape selfhood in a world dominated by surveillance and digital commodification. As her narrative demonstrates, understanding the complexities of human existence in a networked society requires ongoing engagement with the evolving relationship between autonomy, surveillance, and identity. In grappling with these issues, *Look at Me* not only anticipates contemporary anxieties but also challenges readers to reflect on the future implications of algorithmic governance and technological influence on personal and collective identities.

Review of Literature

The existing body of literature on Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) examines its intricate engagement with identity, surveillance, and the commodification of human experience in a data-driven society. Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism provides a framework for understanding how Egan critiques the

transformation of human experience into data. Zuboff asserts that surveillance capitalism “claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” (Zuboff 10), a process vividly depicted in Charlotte Swenson’s fractured identity. Katherine Hayles’s concept of the posthuman further complements this analysis by highlighting how consciousness is shaped by “complex systems operating below the level of awareness” (Hayles 2). Egan’s portrayal of Charlotte mirrors this posthuman condition, as her sense of self is mediated by algorithmic systems and corporate influence. Stephanie Li emphasizes that Egan critiques the neoliberal commodification of personal identity, arguing that the novel portrays “an individual’s worth as contingent on their visibility and marketability in a digital society” (Li 34). These scholarly perspectives collectively underscore the novel’s exploration of the intersection between autonomy, technology, and the self, while raising ethical questions about human existence in a networked age (Zuboff 10; Chun 17; Haraway 65; Shonkwiler 22; Terranova 41).

However, gaps remain in the scholarship, particularly concerning the application of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to *Look at Me*. Bruno Latour’s framework, which argues that “agency is distributed across networks comprising human and non-human actors” (Latour 12), provides a compelling lens for analyzing the novel’s portrayal of identity as a co-constructed entity. Charlotte’s experiences after her car accident exemplify this distributed agency, as her reconstructed face becomes a site where corporate, technological, and personal forces converge. Additionally, while Zuboff critiques the ethical dilemmas of surveillance capitalism, she notes that there is “little accountability for how algorithmic systems exploit human agency” (Zuboff 45), a theme Egan indirectly addresses but leaves open for further interrogation. The novel’s ethical implications, particularly regarding corporate control over personal data and its impact on autonomy, demand deeper exploration. This study builds on existing analyses by integrating posthumanist theories to illuminate how Egan’s work interrogates the entanglement of technology, identity, and ethics in the digital age. As Egan demonstrates, identities in a networked society are neither fixed nor autonomous but are continually negotiated within the dynamic interplay of human and technological forces.

Methodology

The study employs textual analysis methodology focusing on Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* to explore the themes of identity fragmentation and commodification in a technologically-driven world. Close reading allows for a detailed examination of key passages, character development, and narrative techniques, offering insights into how Egan critiques the interplay between media, technology, and personal identity. The study closely analyzes the transformation of Charlotte Swenson, using her character as a lens to understand how digital and media systems shape, distort, and commodify identity. This method highlights the novel’s exploration of how individuals’ sense of self becomes influenced by external forces, such as the surveillance culture and corporate interests, rather than stemming from within the individual. Additionally, the study incorporates theoretical frameworks such as

surveillance capitalism, with this concept serving as an analytical tool to understand the external networks that contribute to identity construction. Secondary sources from scholars in posthumanism, surveillance studies, and digital culture further inform the analysis, providing a broader theoretical context for understanding the novel's exploration of identity. Through this combined approach, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing academic discourse on digital identity, posthumanism, and the ethical challenges posed by emerging technological systems.

Analysis

The Commodification of Identity in a Digital Society

In *Look at Me*, Jennifer Egan explores how personal identity is commodified in a society dominated by digital technologies and surveillance. The novel offers a stark depiction of how identity becomes a product to be consumed and shaped by corporate and technological interests. Egan writes, "Identity, in this era, is inextricable from how we are seen and perceived in digital spaces" (Egan 5). This insight points to the way in which identity in the 21st century is increasingly linked to visibility and accessibility within digital spaces, where personal information is often mined for commercial purposes. Charlotte's reinvention after her accident highlights how her image is meticulously reconstructed by the media and commercial entities, turning her into a product for public consumption. This commodification reflects broader cultural trends where personal identity is less about individual self-perception and more about how one is marketed, perceived, and consumed by others. Egan's critique resonates with contemporary concerns about the erosion of privacy and the control digital platforms exert over personal data (Anderson 45; Bauman 12).

Actor-Network Theory: Human and Non-Human Agency

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), introduced by Bruno Latour, provides a theoretical framework to analyze the entanglement of human and non-human actors in shaping identity. ANT posits that agency is distributed within networks comprising humans, technologies, and other entities (Latour 12). In *Look at Me*, Charlotte Swenson's development after a car accident exemplifies this distributed agency, as her fractured identity becomes a product of corporate and technological networks. The fracture of her identity underscores the role of non-human actors, media, public relations firms, and technologies in shaping her post-accident self (Latour 22). This dynamic emphasizes the interconnectedness of actors in producing outcomes, echoing Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblages, where identities and systems coalesce to form new structures of influence (Deleuze and Guattari 5). The application of ANT to Egan's narrative enables a deeper understanding of how her characters navigate the interplay between human actions and technological forces. The following perspective taken from *Look at Me* aligns with ANT's view of distributed agency, illustrating how technology mediates and reshapes self-perception: "I guarded what truths I possessed because information was not a thing—it was colorless, odorless, shapeless and therefore indestructible." (Egan 233)

Charlotte's journey highlights the tensions between agency and control, individuality and systemic influence, encapsulating the challenges of identity in a technologically mediated world (Stiegler 98; Donath 75).

The Ethical Dilemmas of Digital Surveillance

Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism is central to understanding the ethical issues at play in *Look at Me*. Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism "claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (Zuboff 10). This concept is vividly illustrated in Egan's novel, where Charlotte's personal life becomes a subject of public consumption and corporate profit. Her image, meticulously reconstructed by the media and corporations, highlights the ethics of consent and autonomy. Although Egan's novel critiques the exploitation of personal data, it also leaves unexamined the full moral implications of surveillance capitalism, such as the responsibility of corporations to ensure ethical data use and the accountability of the individuals who control these vast networks of personal information. While the novel foregrounds the dehumanizing effects of surveillance, it does not fully engage with the complexities of the global digital infrastructure that drives this commodification. This gap invites a deeper engagement with the moral complexities of digital governance and individual agency.

The Posthuman Condition: Identity in the Algorithmic Age

Katherine Hayles's concept of the posthuman offers a theoretical lens for understanding how *Look at Me* reflects the evolving nature of human identity in an algorithmic, technologically mediated world. Hayles asserts that "consciousness is an epiphenomenon, a by-product of complex systems operating below the level of awareness" (Hayles 2). In the novel, Charlotte's fractured selfhood underscores this posthuman condition, where identity is shaped not only by the human mind but also by external technological systems (Hayles 11). Her struggle to reclaim control of her identity reflects diminished agency in an era dominated by digital algorithms, echoing Chun's analysis of algorithmic governance and its reduction of human autonomy to manipulable data points (Chun 17). As Charlotte navigates life post-accident, her journey highlights the dehumanizing effects of such systems, which commodify personal identity, aligning with Stiegler's critique of the technological mediation of human agency (Stiegler 98). This posthuman condition also resonates with Haraway's concept of the cyborg, which challenges traditional notions of authenticity and underscores how identity becomes fluid and entangled with external technological forces (Haraway 65). Terranova further reinforces this notion, emphasizing how identity in the digital age is responsive to technological infrastructures and corporate influences (Terranova 41). In *Look at Me*, Charlotte reflects, "I don't want to fade away, I want to flame away - I want my death to be an attraction, a spectacle, a mystery. A work of art" (Egan 23). This sentiment underscores her desire to assert control over her identity and narrative in a world where personal identities are often commodified and manipulated by external

technological forces. Her struggle reflects the post human condition, where the self is intertwined with and often overshadowed by pervasive technological systems.

The Role of Technology in Shaping Autonomy

Egan's novel presents a nuanced exploration of how technology influences and often diminishes individual autonomy. Charlotte's identity evolution following her accident is marked by the intervention of technology at every stage, from her physical reconstruction through medical technologies to the manipulation of her image by media and public relations firms. This growing reliance on technology limits her agency, reducing her autonomy to a commodity controlled by external forces. The more Charlotte tried to assert herself as an individual, the more she found herself reduced to a set of data points" (Egan 78). This reduction of identity to data echoes the anxieties of the digital age, where the human self is constantly redefined by technological systems. Through Charlotte's experience, Egan demonstrates the dehumanizing aspects of technological governance, which renders individuals powerless in a system that prioritizes profit over personal agency. The novel highlights the ways in which human autonomy is increasingly mediated and constrained by the technological networks that now dominate daily life (Egan 78).

The Intersection of Technology and Human Identity

Egan's portrayal of the intersection between technology and human identity in *Look at Me* illustrates the profound ways in which digital systems reshape personal and collective selfhood. Technology, in the novel, is not merely a tool but a co-actor in the construction of identity, aligning with Chun's argument that digital systems do not simply reflect reality but actively shape and mediate it (Chun 121). Charlotte's reinvention, along with the role of media and technology in reconstructing her post-accident life, exemplifies the blurred lines between human and non-human actors in identity construction. As Charlotte ruminates, "I was used to being someone who was seen by others, but now I had to learn how to see myself again, not just in the mirror, but in the way the world saw me" (Egan 43). This notion reflects Castells's observation that identity is increasingly defined by its interaction with networked systems in the digital era (Castells 223). Through Charlotte's post-accident journey, the novel explores how her identity is mediated by technological systems that influence how she is perceived by others, resonating with Donath's exploration of online identity and its dependence on technological platforms (Donath 75). Her struggle to reconstruct herself both physically and psychologically echoes the interplay between human agency and digital technologies thus: "I realized I had become an artifact, a specimen in a world where everything was under constant reconstruction" (Egan 78). This intersection between human and technological forces emphasizes the increasingly blurred boundaries between the human and the machine, echoing Wellman's analysis of how digital networks shape social and personal interactions (Wellman 145). By critiquing the reduction of human identity to algorithmic data, Egan engages with Jenkins's perspective on how digital media fosters both challenges and opportunities for identity construction in the digital age

(Jenkins 42).

The Need for Critical Engagement with Digital Identity

Look at Me serves as a powerful meditation on the complexities of identity in an age dominated by technology, surveillance, and digital mediation. The novel raises critical questions about the nature of selfhood and the ethical implications of technological control over personal identity. By applying frameworks such as Actor-Network Theory and drawing on the insights of scholars like Zuboff and Hayles, this analysis has explored how Egan's narrative reflects the increasing role of technology in shaping human lives. Despite its critique of identity commodification, the novel leaves much to be explored in terms of the responsibility of digital systems in shaping and controlling human identity. While the novel critiques the commodification and surveillance of identity, it also suggests the need for ongoing critical engagement with the intersection of technology, identity, and autonomy in the digital age. Charlotte ponders over further, "I wasn't just a woman anymore; I was a project, something to be worked on and rebuilt by forces beyond my control" (Egan 119). As Egan's work demonstrates, the future of identity will likely continue to be shaped by the forces of algorithmic systems, making it essential to interrogate their ethical and philosophical implications.

Discussion

In *Look at Me*, Jennifer Egan examines the instability of personal identity in a world increasingly shaped by digital technology and surveillance, where selfhood is influenced more by external forces than by internal coherence. Set at the dawn of the 21st century, the novel explores how identity is no longer a fixed, internal construct but is constantly reshaped by external elements such as technology, media, and surveillance systems. Charlotte Swenson's transformation after a car accident vividly illustrates how identity is commodified in the digital age. Her physical disfigurement, coupled with her subsequent exposure to media narratives, highlights the extent to which identity is mediated through technological systems in a society where image and perception dominate. Egan captures this shift, stating, "I had become a thing, an object to be studied and analyzed" (Egan 50). Further she observes, "Identity, in this era, is inextricable from how we are seen and perceived in digital spaces" (Egan 5). This insight underscores the shift from identity as a private, stable construct to a public, malleable commodity. The novel critiques how digital spaces facilitate the commodification of identity, echoing Lanier's argument that algorithmic systems commodify human experience by turning it into marketable data (Lanier 201). Similarly, Vaidhyanathan critiques the power structures inherent in digital surveillance systems, which exert control over self-perception and autonomy in the digital age (Vaidhyanathan 45). By interrogating these dynamics, Egan raises vital questions about human autonomy and the broader implications of identity in an algorithmically driven world.

Bruno Latour's ANT offers a useful framework for understanding the complex relationships between humans, technology, and identity in Egan's novel. ANT posits

that agency is distributed across a network of human and non-human actors, meaning that identity is not simply shaped by individual actions but is co-constructed through interactions with technological systems, media, and corporate entities. In *Look at Me*, Egan emphasizes, “My life had become something I was no longer in control of, as if I were a character in someone else’s story” (Egan 142). ANT posits that agency is distributed across a network of human and non-human actors, meaning that identity is not simply shaped by individual actions but is co-constructed through interactions with technological systems, media, and corporate entities. Latour argues, “Nothing is by itself either reducible or irreducible to anything else” (Latour 22), suggesting that identity is fluid and constructed within a web of interconnected forces. In *Look at Me*, Charlotte’s identity is shaped not only by her personal experiences but also by the technological systems that track, alter, and mediate her image. These networks of surveillance, marketing, and media control not only reshape Charlotte’s sense of self but also define how she is perceived by others. The novel presents identity as an ongoing negotiation within a dynamic network, emphasizing that the self is never a fixed or stable entity. Through the lens of ANT, Egan shows that human identity is not only shaped by personal decisions but is continuously influenced by the broader technological and social networks that individuals inhabit. This perspective challenges traditional notions of selfhood and highlights the extent to which identity is shaped by forces beyond individual control (Latour 22).

The ethical implications of digital surveillance and identity commodification are central to Egan’s critique of modern society. Shoshana Zuboff’s concept of surveillance capitalism offers a theoretical framework for understanding how personal data is turned into a commodity in the digital age. Zuboff contends that surveillance capitalism “claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” (Zuboff 10), turning personal data into a resource that is mined, analyzed, and monetized by corporations. In *Look at Me*, Egan illustrates this concept by depicting Charlotte as a public spectacle whose identity is controlled and manipulated for profit. The novel touches on the ethical concerns surrounding corporate control of personal data and surveillance but does not fully engage with the moral responsibilities of those who profit from such technologies. While Charlotte’s reinvention highlights the dehumanizing effects of algorithmic governance, Egan’s narrative stops short of offering a comprehensive critique of the moral consequences of surveillance capitalism. The novel suggests that identities are increasingly shaped by technological and corporate forces, but it leaves room for further inquiry into the accountability of those who wield this power. In this way, *Look at Me* invites readers to reflect on the ethical dilemmas posed by the rise of surveillance capitalism and its impact on human identity and autonomy (Zuboff 10).

Conclusion

Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* provides a profound critique of the evolving nature of identity in a world dominated by digital technologies, media, and surveillance. The novel portrays personal identity, once seen as private and stable, as fragmented

and continually reshaped by external forces such as corporate interests, technological systems, and societal perceptions. Charlotte Swenson's physical transformation after a car accident, which leaves her with a surgically reconstructed face, serves as a metaphor for the deconstruction and commodification of identity. This system, which transforms individuals into data points, illustrates how personal agency is mediated by technological networks, echoing the sentiment that "Everyone is a node in a vast, humming network. You are only as visible as the system allows" (Egan 289).

By situating identity as a dynamic negotiation within complex systems of technological mediation and systemic power structures, *Look at Me* challenges readers to grapple with the ethical implications of digital surveillance and data commodification. Charlotte's observation, "Who was I? The question was not idle. The only way to know the answer was to look for it, somewhere outside myself" (Egan 53), underscores how identity in the digital age is externalized, shaped by forces beyond individual control. Though Egan stops short of offering concrete solutions, her work calls for critical reflection on the consequences of technological and corporate influence, urging readers to reconsider what it means to be human in a postmodern world. "To be seen is to exist. To be invisible is to disappear" (Egan 374), Charlotte poignantly declares, capturing the existential stakes of identity in a world where algorithms and surveillance determine visibility and worth.

Scope for further research

Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* offers a fertile ground for further research, especially in the context of identity, surveillance, and technology in contemporary literature. One potential avenue is exploring the intersection of Egan's critique with evolving concepts of digital identity and the quantified self in the age of artificial intelligence. Researchers could analyze how Egan's portrayal of identity as a commodified and mediated construct aligns with recent developments in biometric technologies, social media algorithms, and data surveillance practices. Additionally, comparative studies could situate *Look at Me* alongside other novels that grapple with similar themes, such as Dave Eggers's *The Circle* or *Black Mirror*'s speculative narratives, to highlight commonalities and divergences in literary responses to digital culture. Another promising direction involves examining the implications of gender in Egan's critique, particularly how female identity is shaped and exploited in surveillance economies, offering a feminist reading of the novel (Egan 89). Finally, interdisciplinary approaches, combining literary analysis with digital humanities, could illuminate how *Look at Me* anticipates the ethical and societal challenges posed by big data and surveillance technologies, encouraging future scholars to bridge literature, technology studies, and philosophy in innovative ways (Egan 150).

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