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**Technology and Embodiment in Jennifer Egan's  
Fiction: the Digitisation of Bodies, Brains, and Books**

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MA(Hons), MLitt

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of PhD

School of Critical Studies

College of Arts

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## Abstract

This thesis offers a reading of Jennifer Egan's fiction that names the relationship between technologies and bodies as a central thread uniting all of her work. Combating the critical tendency to focus on 2010 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as the primary example when discussing Egan's work, my argument takes a thematic approach and pairs Egan's many texts together in varied combinations in order to highlight the consistent featuring of this relationship across her body of work. In charting this, I utilise cognitive and digital theories in order to map the ways in which Egan's characters and texts adopt the abilities of technologies. To begin, I explore the importance of flesh within Egan's novels and analyse bodies in her work as crucial locations that mediate and contribute to the interaction between brain and world. Later chapters move onto discussing the active use of technologies to alter and improve human ability, using cognitive theory as a lens to determine the varying success of these technologies within Egan's texts. Through doing so, I foreground embodiment as a central concern within Egan's fiction and an important component of her discussions of technology and digital culture.

Another level to this analysis considers the transformation of fiction and the digitisation of the novel. I perform a similar analysis of the book body as with the human body, charting the ways in which Egan's work demonstrates a progressive reliance upon digital technologies—incorporating them into the visual form of her books, as a site of reading, and as a method of publicity and type of paratext. Within this analysis I comment upon the adaptive nature of fiction and situate Egan's narrative experimentation within the long legacy of literary experimentation with narrative form.

An undercurrent to my argument concerns Egan's interaction with the legacy of postmodernism: her work begins in the countdown to the millennium and carries on into the twenty-first century. My thesis demonstrates how Egan's relationship with technology shows her adaptation of certain postmodern concepts, bringing its ironic critique of a mediated, information heavy society into the increasingly digitised world of the 2000s. This thesis emphasises the lack of critical attention given to female authors in the postmodern and contemporary periods, and attempts to combat this by providing focused analysis of one female author.

# Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
List of Figures	4
Acknowledgements	5
Author's Declaration	6
Introduction	7
Embodiment, Cognition, and Postmodernism	26
Chapter 1: The Human Body	44
Sensory Bodies: Building Humanity	49
Authentic Bodies: Proving Humanity	63
Broken Bodies: Failing Humanity	74
Chapter 2: The Extended Body	85
Extending the Human	89
Overtaking the Human	97
Ending the Human	107
Chapter 3: The Textual Body	113
Extending the Narrative Body in <i>A Visit from the Goon Squad</i>	117
Losing the Book Body in 'Black Box'	133
Continuing the American Short Story	145
Chapter 4: The Virtual Body	153
Dematerialisation	158
Virtual Lives	166
The Candy House	179
Anticipation and Publicity	181
Own Your Unconscious	187
Lulu the Spy, 2032	191
Conclusion	197
Bibliography	204

## List of Figures

Figure 1: 'Black Box' Tweet, from Twitter	113
Figure 2: <i>Goon Squad</i> p. 265	123
Figure 3: <i>Goon Squad</i> p. 282	128
Figure 4: <i>Goon Squad</i> p. 291	129
Figure 5: <i>Goon Squad</i> p. 310	131
Figure 6: <i>Goon Squad</i> p. 312	131
Figure 7: <i>Goon Squad</i> p. 244	132
Figure 8: 'Black Box' Tweet, from Twitter	139
Figure 9: 'Black Box' Tweets, from <i>Paste Magazine</i>	141
Figure 10: <i>Tristram Shandy</i> pp. 70, 71	149
Figure 11: 'The Candy House' Artwork by Noah Scanlin	183

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## **Author's Declaration**

Unless otherwise stated, all work contained in this thesis is my own. Citations are included for all quoted material.

# Introduction

Reconstructive facial surgery after a car crash so alters Manhattan model Charlotte Swenson that, within the fashion world, where one's look is oneself, she is unrecognizable. Seeking a new image, Charlotte engages in an Internet experimentation that may both save and damn her. As her story eerily converges with that of a plain, unhappy teenager — another Charlotte — it raises tantalizing questions about identity and reality in contemporary Western culture.

Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me* (2001: back cover)

Jennifer Egan calls her 2001 novel *Look at Me* her 'favorite child'.<sup>1</sup> A novel too quickly dismissed by many readers and critics as chick-lit (a term too often used dismissively simply for its focus on women's stories)<sup>2</sup> for its focus upon a model who struggles to connect with her authentic self,<sup>3</sup> *Look at Me* has not received the critical attention it is due. Aligning with Egan's own favouritism, I view *Look at Me* as a key text within Egan's oeuvre as it establishes the thematic obsessions within Egan's fiction that this thesis elucidates. Depicting struggles with image culture as stories worth telling, this novel is held together by a focus on the tools that can improve, alter, and destroy human bodies. Charlotte Swenson transforms from a famous supermodel whose appearance is always airbrushed and edited, to an unrecognisable nobody when disfigured by a brutal car crash, to a virtual celebrity (literally): her identity is sold to a digital editing team who create and manage her virtual likeness. This journey provides a concentrated overview in one character's lifetime of the relationship between bodies and technologies that I see as taking place on a larger scale across Egan's entire body of work.

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<sup>1</sup> Egan has continuously made this statement—it is most frequently made in Twitter replies to readers discussing the book: 'LAM is my favorite child.' (2022), 'LAM is my "favorite child," so I especially appreciate your careful attention!! Thank you 1000x.' (2019), 'Thank you so much, Paula. LAM is my "favorite child," so your reaction is especially meaningful!!' (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Criticism on 'chick-lit' and its dismissal in discussions of art and literature has advanced in the past two decades, such as with Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young's *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (2005, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed.), a collection of essays which critiques the genre from a range of critical perspectives, considering its conflicted relationship with feminism and postfeminism, heterosexual romance, body image, and consumerism.

<sup>3</sup> A review from *The Guardian*, though largely positive, notes this erroneous impression of the novel with an ironic introduction: 'Jennifer Egan is so hot right now. Her new book? It's about a model! And the quote on the back saying how marvellous it is? Vogue, darling!' (O'Grady 2011: n.p.).



This thesis offers a framework for analysing Jennifer Egan's fiction in which digitisation is revealed as a fundamental interest across Egan's work, specifically as it interacts with ideas of embodiment and cognition.<sup>4</sup> My approach to creating this framework is not ordered by text or genre, but divided into aspects of embodiment that are brought to the fore across Egan's texts and how bodies are altered or augmented by various technological forces. My goal in this thesis is to question how human, textual, and digital identities are impacted by this variable relationship between body and technology, pointing towards Egan's body of work as a study into how humans and books have already embraced digital abilities, and one that questions where this relationship could go. Inherent to this relationship are questions of authenticity and loss: asking where, if ever, in this journey of integrating body and technology does the definition of the human change, and considering the depletion of some analogue practices and facets of material embodiment.

Alongside this discussion about bodies and technology, I consider Egan's position in the literary canon. Just as technologies are built on the practices and innovations of the past, so too does fiction turn to its past in order to create new material. In this sense, I question how Egan refers to and expands upon the ideas and styles of her literary predecessors. Examining Egan's inhabitation of a period adjacent to postmodernism, I reveal images, interests, and characters in Egan's work which twist postmodernist ideas into new, contemporary incarnations. Continuing a critique of consumerism and the domination of image

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<sup>4</sup> Cognition and cognitive literary studies are broad, umbrella terms with extensive applications (these many variations are well explained in Zunshine 2015). When speaking of cognition and cognitive processes within this thesis, I largely refer to the internal neurological resources of the human brain, including memory, thought, and logical reasoning. I consider these distinct neurological properties in contrast to and in partnership with technological abilities in order to analyse the relationship between humans and technology in Jennifer Egan's fiction. This project argues for a version of embodied cognition within Egan's fiction, an argument which sees the shared fleshy nature of body and brain as an important component of their unification. The brain as a bodily organ already crosses the mind-body divide, but when speaking of cognitive activity this highlights the brain's role in instructing and responding to the body through neural signals: such as sensing injury and creating pain signals as a response, and controlling the transition between waking and sleeping. Many applications of cognitive literary study focus on the representation of cognitive actions in fiction, or the cognitive response to the act of reading, but my argument here centres upon the hierarchy of control between brain, body, and technology—using cognitive as a label for marking the flexible boundaries of the brain's authority, or lack thereof, within Egan's depictions of humans and technologies.

culture, Egan echoes many postmodern efforts within her characters' relationships with technology.

The majority of critical work on Egan has tended to focus on her 2010 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.<sup>5</sup> This has also largely been true in terms of teaching Egan, yet, in my own literary education I was lucky enough to find myself enrolled on a master's programme with two of Egan's novels on my reading list. *Goon Squad* was one, and *The Keep* (2006) the other. In my master's courses we studied many great modernist, postmodern, and contemporary authors, discussing their impact upon the path of fiction and the overarching trends within their writing. This particularly occurred when we discussed postmodernism: we referred to all of David Foster Wallace's novels when we read *Infinite Jest* (1996), and conversations about Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* (1976) always included comparisons to *White Noise* (1984) and *Underworld* (1997). My peers and lecturers spoke of eagerly anticipating the next novel from DeLillo or Jonathan Franzen. And so, when I read two novels from Jennifer Egan for different classes, I wondered why there was little discussion in each of her other works. We studied *Goon Squad* and *The Keep* in isolation, in separate classes with different focuses, and unlike when Wallace, DeLillo, or Franzen were read, there was zero expectation that we would have read any of Egan's other works. This omission reveals a habit within conversations around contemporary American fiction to name male authors as those who characterise larger trends and establish features of the genre, while female authors are named as individual examples of contributing to or aligning with these trends. There are particular rewards for reading Egan's fiction within this larger context of literary heritage and the dominance of male authorship, which this thesis will reveal in Egan's twisting of postmodern interests into new, contemporary incarnations.

Since the time of my master's degree, there has been some development in the field: Ivan Kreilkamp and Alexander Moran have both published wonderful entry-level texts about Egan, giving interested readers a place to go to learn about Egan's writing style and interests. Kreilkamp's *A Visit from the Goon Squad REREAD* (2021) focuses on Egan's 2010 novel—somewhat continuing the *Goon*

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Goon Squad*.

*Squad* dominance, though Kreilkamp does make links to Egan's other work within his book—laying out the key influences and interests within the novel, especially regarding temporality and materiality. Moran's *Understanding Jennifer Egan* (2021) offers detailed accounts of each of Egan's published novels (as of its publication date, which was before the release of *The Candy House* (2021)), naming authenticity as a constant thread throughout each book. *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* (2019) includes a chapter on Jennifer Egan, in which Dorothy Butchard outlines Egan's career and the major critical approaches to her fiction, and comments on the key themes within her writing. These texts give interested readers a place to go to learn about Egan's writing style and interests, exploring overarching themes in Egan's work and offering a kind of reading guide for Egan's work.

However I did not have these resources in 2017, and found very little published information to help me connect the dots between Egan's novels.<sup>6</sup> This lack of critical work created my desire to fill this void in scholarship and write my own project analysing the entirety of Egan's fiction. When I began writing this thesis it was the first single-authored research project I knew of that would discuss all of Egan's fiction in one piece of work. It remains one of the first, and is the only that I know of to tackle Egan's work thematically without taking each book in turn.<sup>7</sup> A core tenet of my project is the fact that Egan's novels speak to each other and share interests, images, and connected ideas, which demands that I compare her works within my analysis and do not limit each of my chapters to only one novel. Further, since Moran's book was published before the release of *The Candy House* and does not include any thoughts on this novel, my thesis will be the first to include critical analysis of this text, providing the most up to date comprehensive study of Egan's fiction. While not a central part of my argument,

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<sup>6</sup> At this time, the criticism available included numerous analyses of *Goon Squad* (largely focusing upon nostalgia, music, and temporality), some responses to 'Black Box' (including Amelia Precup's discussion of the posthuman body (Precup 2015: 172-188)), and very few articles on Egan's earlier work (Adam Kelly's analysis of *Look at Me* (Kelly 2011: 391-423)). *Manhattan Beach* was published in this year, and critics eagerly awaited Egan's first novel since *Goon Squad*.

<sup>7</sup> While Moran's book utilises authenticity as an overarching thread, each chapter is devoted to a singular novel.

given its very recent publication, I was able to include some thoughts on Egan's latest book before concluding my thesis.

In this project, I consider how contemporary American fiction depicts the onset of technology and the transition into a digitally dominated society. Focusing on Jennifer Egan's fiction, my research seeks to analyse the methods Egan uses to capture and critique digital life. The majority of Egan's work contains a focus on different aspects of digital culture and its infiltration into American life. This interest is most prominent in her publications between 2001 and 2012: *Look at Me* (2001), *The Keep*, *Goon Squad*, and 'Black Box' (2012), though there are seeds revealing the origins of her interests in her earlier works *Emerald City and other stories* (1993) and *The Invisible Circus* (1995), and there are connections within historical novel *Manhattan Beach* (2017) relating to the industrial, wartime origins of many technologies. Her 2022 novel, *The Candy House*, returns to these interests with full force with its focus upon the ability to digitally upload memories.

From using the digitisation of the music industry as the basis for *Goon Squad*, to utilising social media in the distribution of 2012 story 'Black Box'—which was tweeted in 140-character segments—Egan has experimented extensively with the digital technologies available to 21st-century writers. As a result, her work goes further than mere documentation of the presence and status of such media, but exists as precedent for the relationship between technology and contemporary fiction. Her writing covers a significant period of time of development within digital culture, which is reflected within her fiction in accurate reflections upon current and past technologies, as well as imagined projections of the future and the potential advancement of digitisation. Thus, Egan's work is a particularly interesting case study for investigating the adaptive nature of contemporary fiction.

Scholarly engagement with this topic and with Egan specifically focuses predominantly on each of her novels individually and does not turn to the dialogue sustained throughout and between each text. As mentioned, much of the work on Egan focuses on *Goon Squad*, which perhaps contains the most explicit treatment of digital culture of Egan's books, and as a result does not observe the more subtle and understated ways Egan incorporates digital living

into the structures and characters of her other texts. Therefore, my research will address this gap in attention and provide a sustained analysis of Egan's work. Further, the existing scholarship on Egan's treatment of digitisation, technology, and contemporary life does not engage with the concept of embodiment within these topics. While Moran's book proposes authenticity as a central concept within Egan's work, arguing that 'experiences of authenticity, for both characters and the reader, are a unifying concern across her writing' (2021: 6), he does not apply this concept to the idea of embodiment or the relationship between bodies and technologies.

Each of Egan's texts contain examples of these many methods of augmenting identity. From plastic surgery to social media, Egan's characters experiment with how they present themselves to the world by turning to external tools and digital platforms as modes of transformation. Her texts also discuss the interaction between these tools and cognitive performance: Howard in *The Keep* seeks to create a location void of technological noise in order to allow the human brain to flourish, and Bix in *The Candy House* fills technological products with cognitive noise in an effort to digitise memory. Both instances reveal a belief that the relationship between humans and technology contributes both to embodied experience and cognitive ability. To foreground this fact, I use digital and cognitive theory in my analysis of Egan's work to uncover the consistent interactions between technology and cognition and embodiment. Utilising the ideas of bodily mutation and cognitive development from theorists such as N. Katherine Hayles, Andy Clark, and Donna Haraway allows me to demonstrate how theorists believe technology can be integrated into the human form and alter the classification and experience of the human identity. Applying these processes to the characters and situations in Egan's fiction illustrates the manner in which these new languages and habits of digital self-expression are reflected and embedded in literature.

Finally, Egan not only utilises these concepts as plot points, but reflects the changing structures of contemporary identity through her experimental writing and narrative styles. Her characters reflect the absorption of technological processes into every aspect of their lives, not limiting discussion of media to their usage of devices and software. Language habits, perceptions of space, and ideas of temporality all change in response to the spread of network culture.

These transformations are reflected in Egan's experimentation with narrative style and the format of fiction itself. This thesis considers Egan's body of work as an ongoing process of learning how to depict and incorporate digitality into fiction, paralleling the process in which the body itself comes to integrate technological tools. This thus provides an additional level to my analysis in which I consider the materiality of fiction and ask how this mode of embodiment is also impacted by digital processes.

## Thesis Outline

This thesis takes a thematic approach to Jennifer Egan's fiction, dividing its chapters into different categories of embodiment relating to the impact that digitisation has upon the human body as well as the textual body. All of Egan's published fiction is discussed throughout the course of the thesis, but key texts are specifically utilised in each chapter to foreground the origins of ideas and their most significant developments.

I begin in chapter 1 with 'The Human Body', in which I establish the importance of the human body in Egan's fiction and draw out examples of when the authenticity of embodied experiences are questioned and scrutinised. This chapter lays out the significance of the human body within Egan's work, highlighting it as a priority in her earlier novels in order to ensure that the importance of alterations to or losses of embodiment studied later in the thesis are acknowledged. *Look at Me* and *The Keep* are central in this first chapter, positioning embodiment as a key concern within Egan's early novels and enabling commentary in later chapters about how this central concern is continued and adapted in her other work. My readings in this chapter are framed by theories of embodiment and cognition, relying on N. Katherine Hayles's account of non-conscious cognition (*Unthought*, 2017) to highlight the valuable relationship between brain, body, and world that causes me to uphold the contributions of embodiment within Egan's fiction.

In chapter 2, 'The Extended Body' I maintain my focus upon embodiment and the human form, but bring in the question of technological extension. This chapter depends upon Andy Clark's idea of cognitive extension (*Supersizing the Mind*, 2011), a process in which brains are able to claim technological abilities as

their own, essentially upgrading the body by adding the abilities of external tools to the cognitive toolkit. I use Clark's theory in order to map the relationship between human bodies and technological tools within Egan's fiction, analysing the process of integration and questioning whether Egan depicts these technologies as having a neutral, positive, or negative impact upon the human body. Again I turn attention to Egan's *The Keep*, revisiting some of the same events and descriptions examined in chapter 1 from a different point of view. I also bring in *Goon Squad* and 'Black Box' in order to examine Egan's creation of technologically advanced futures and bodies.

I then consider a different form of embodiment in chapter 3, 'The Textual Body', asking if books are similarly affected by technology in Egan's work. Here I discuss Egan's experimentation with the textual body in narrative and publication modes, and the technologisation of fiction and reading practices both in material paper books and electronic literature. *Goon Squad* and 'Black Box' are central in this chapter, given their formally innovative and experimental aspects. This chapter is framed by the threat of fiction losing its material body, as outlined by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). This chapter also situates Egan's experimentation with narrative form within literary history and specifically the American short story tradition. I include an analysis of Donald Barthelme's 'The Explanation' (1968) alongside my reading of 'Black Box' as part of this contextualisation, uncovering how American fiction has adapted along with every new technological development.

In chapter 4, 'The Virtual Body', I consider depictions of identity where physicality is entirely erased from the picture. This chapter analyses instances in Egan's work where physical bodies are separated from manifestations of identity, such as social media profiles where identity is curated by arranging digital mementos and other virtual re-enactments of personality. Central to my discussion here are thoughts about consumer capitalism and surveillance society, which prioritise image culture and create a virtual database of human activity. *Look at Me* is a central example throughout this chapter, and I again turn to Egan's depictions of the future in *Goon Squad* and 'Black Box', which amplify the disconnect between physical bodies and virtual identities. This chapter is informed by the concept of dematerialisation, the loss of material experiences, which Ivan Kreilkamp foregrounds in his analysis in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

*REREAD* (2021). I apply this concept to Egan's other works and consider it primarily in conjunction with virtuality.

Before fully concluding my thesis, I take a moment to reflect upon Egan's very recently published *The Candy House*, a novel which was only released at the end of my period of research, and thus is not commented on elsewhere in my thesis. Studying the anticipation surrounding this novel, and its continuation of Egan's past works, this short chapter notes how the multiplicity inherent within contemporary digital culture is absorbed into both the novel's content and its treatment as a commercial product.

## About Jennifer Egan

Jennifer Egan is an American novelist, short-story writer, and journalist. Born in 1962 in Chicago, Egan grew up mostly in San Francisco; she studied English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, and later completed an MA at St John's College, Cambridge. Egan now lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two sons, where she continues to work on her fiction and journalism.

Jennifer Egan has, as of 2023, published six novels, one book of short stories, and one Twitter fiction. Below is a chronological list of Egan's work.

*Emerald City and Other Stories* (1993)

*The Invisible Circus* (1995)

*Look at Me* (2001)

*The Keep* (2006)

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010)

'Black Box' (2012)

*Manhattan Beach* (2017)

*The Candy House* (2022)

Her first published book, *Emerald City and Other Stories* is a collection of eleven individual short stories, some of which were published elsewhere beforehand, such as an early version of 'The Stylist' appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1989. The stories range in setting and theme, but their characters are united by a common longing for fulfilment and desire for new experiences. *The Invisible*



*Circus* is Egan's first novel, a story about the political tensions of the 1960s which depicts a young woman retracing the final journey taken by her dead sister. *Look at Me* (2001) tells the story of a fashion model who has suffered a face-altering car crash, and who needs to rebuild her career and life as a result. *The Keep* (2006) is a gothic metanarrative depicting two estranged cousins reuniting to renovate a medieval castle into a wellness retreat; a parallel narrative sees an inmate at a prison-based creative writing class submit the cousins' tale to his teacher, a recovering addict who becomes intrigued by her student's story. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is Egan's best known novel, a chronologically innovative project which takes thirteen interrelating chapters, each one focusing on a different character, and jumbles the timeline, leaving the reader to put together the pieces. Egan continued to think about *Goon Squad* after its publication, and she wrote a short story about one of its characters Lulu. This short story is 'Black Box' (2012), and was published on Twitter in an experimental collaboration with *The New Yorker*. Divided into 140 character tweets, the publication style aligns with the futuristic plot featuring a spy whose body has been augmented with surveillance technologies. In 2017 Egan produced her first work of historical fiction: *Manhattan Beach*, a novel based in the Brooklyn Naval yards of the 1940s, which tracks the journey of protagonist Anna as she seeks to become the first female diver in the yard. Finally, Egan's most recent novel is *The Candy House* (2022), another continuation of the world of *Goon Squad*, which takes some of these characters into the year 2034, where memories can be purchased, downloaded and shared on social media. Egan worked on *The Candy House* while also writing *Manhattan Beach*,<sup>8</sup> writing two very different works of fiction concurrently.

### Other Work

An underdiscussed portion of Egan's career as a writer is her non-fiction. Writing consistently for *The New York Times*, among other periodicals, Egan's journalism is a major component of her work, and quite a successful one. Her 2002 cover story on homeless children received the Carroll Kowal Journalism Award, and her

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<sup>8</sup> The press announcement for *The Candy House* quotes Egan's editor Nan Graham: "For a couple of years, Egan worked on *Manhattan Beach* in the morning and *The Candy House* in the afternoon" ('Jennifer Egan to Publish' 2021: n.p.).

article ‘The Bipolar Kid’<sup>9</sup> received a 2009 NAMI Outstanding Media Award for Science and Health Reporting from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Egan’s journalistic depictions are as human-centred as her fiction, she commits to her interview subjects in order to tell their stories as they develop over months or even years. Shared interests appear between Egan’s fiction and journalism, including the impact of technology on contemporary life and depictions of mental and physical health issues such as addiction, self-harm, and eating disorders. Egan has noted that the intense research process for her journalism prepared her for writing historical novel *Manhattan Beach*,<sup>10</sup> for which she interviewed subjects, read history books, and trawled through archives.

In 2019, Egan took a role as Artist-in-Residence at the University of Pennsylvania, and taught a class on ‘Self, Image, and Community: Studies in Modern Fiction’. She is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction, and a Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Fellowship at the New York Public Library. She also recently completed a term as President of PEN America.

### Common Themes and Approach to Fiction

Egan’s approach to fiction is defined by a continuous desire for experimentation. She refuses to write a book the same way twice, thus seeking new ideas for each publication, whether that be a new genre, mode of writing, or plot device. In an interview for the *Contemporary Women’s Writing* special issue on Jennifer Egan, Egan stated:

my personal goal is always to do something I’ve never done before. If I can’t meet that goal, I will likely move away from fiction. So in order to keep going, I will need to keep finding ways to be formally inventive.

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<sup>9</sup> This article is retitled ‘The Bipolar Puzzle’ on Egan’s website and current versions online, but the original print article used the title ‘The Bipolar Kid’.

<sup>10</sup> Egan speaks about the relationship between fiction and journalism in an interview with Rachel Cooke: ‘Fiction is my deepest love, but I love journalism, too. It keeps me thinking vigorously, and it reminds me that there is a world out there. It has taught me how to distil enormous quantities of information, and I wouldn’t have been able to write *Manhattan Beach* without that because I have never scuba dived. Actually, I’ve barely been on a ship’ (Cooke 2017: n.p.).

(In Rouverol and O’Riordan 2021: n.p.)

More often than not, this goal to do something new every time manifests in Egan’s work in formal innovation: such as the use of metanarrative (*The Keep*), fractured temporalities (*Goon Squad*), or utilising technology as a means for displaying fictional text (*Goon Squad*’s PowerPoint chapter and publishing ‘Black Box’ on Twitter). She also ventures into different genres and fictional categories, from the gothic to historical fiction. When writing, Egan names her conscious goals as ‘to entertain; to encompass; to transport; to delight. That is really all I’m trying to do’ (Rouverol and O’Riordan 2021: n.p.).

While no two novels take the same experimental form, themes, interests and techniques do, of course, repeat across Egan’s work. The most consistent idea she plays with is that of time. Egan has said that the inspirations for her depictions of time range from Proust to *The Sopranos* (Churchwell 2011)<sup>11</sup>— finding influence in the modernist and contemporary alike. Her novels enable reconnection with the past (in *The Invisible Circus*, *The Keep*, and *Manhattan Beach*), distort the reader’s understanding through a fractured chronology (in *Look at Me* and *Goon Squad*), and even access the future (in *Goon Squad*, ‘Black Box’, and *The Candy House*). Egan’s attention to depictions of time passing is one constant in her wide range of subject matters and genres and is frequently spotlighted in criticism and summaries of Egan’s work. Other repeated interests often noted in criticism include music, technology and cultural digitisation. Present but less frequently noted themes are terrorism and war, nostalgia, and precarious familial relationships.<sup>12</sup> The body and varying forms of embodiment is

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<sup>11</sup> Egan says that when conceptualising *Goon Squad*: ‘I thought about it more as a novel about time, and I did think carefully about who else has done that and what they did, Proust being Number One. I thought about other literary novels about time and I wanted to be a part of that conversation’ (Michod 2010: n.p.). At the Birkbeck symposium, ‘Egan mentioned how she borrowed from [*The Sopranos*] its idea of pushing character and narrative to extremes’ (Clarke ND: n.p.). She has also acknowledged a ‘great debt’ to *Pulp Fiction* for the way *Goon Squad* plays with chronology and narrative (La Force 2011: n.p.).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Ivan Kreilkamp’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad REREAD* (2022) contains a core focus upon Egan’s representation of the passage of time, a theme also highlighted in essays from Melissa J. Strong (2018) and Martin Moling (2016). Moling (2016) and Danica van de Velde (2014) both tackle themes of music production, digitisation, and nostalgia in *Goon Squad*, and technology remains in focus in analyses of ‘Black Box’ from Amelia Precup (2015) and Jennifer Gutman (2020). The 2020 *PMLA* volume partially dedicated to *Manhattan Beach* repeatedly highlights themes of wartime and sibling relationships within Egan’s historical fiction.

a central thread that has rarely, if at all, been noted by critics, and is the focal thread which I use in this thesis to unite my study of Egan's fiction.

Certain recurring themes pull in critical concepts and categories which many have attempted to attach to Egan's work. Most prominent is postmodernism, which is evoked in Egan's work through her depictions of image culture and spectacle in which media coverage or retelling surpasses the real event, as in the postmodern idea of the simulacrum (Baudrillard) or pseudo-events (Daniel J. Boorstin). Neoliberalism is another topic that many critics note in Egan's work, though Egan herself tends to resist consciously acknowledging the presence of these concepts in her writing, calling them 'forbidding' (Rouverol and O'Riordan 2021: n.p.) to the sense of fun with which she engages in her fiction.

### Critical Reception and Literary Peers

Egan is best known by readers for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which propelled her into the public eye after it won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics' Circle Award, and the *LA Times* Book Prize in 2011. However, this was Egan's fifth fictional publication, and while her four previous texts did not garner as much attention as *Goon Squad* did, they did receive some accolades. *Look at Me* was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award in fiction, and *The Keep* was cited by *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* as a 'Notable Book' and listed by *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *Rocky Mountain News* as 'Best Book of the Year'. *The Invisible Circus* attracted a different type of attention when the book was made into a movie starring Cameron Diaz in 2001. Post-*Goon Squad*, Egan remains a focus of the American literary scene: *Manhattan Beach* was awarded the 2018 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, and the world excitedly awaited her newest novel *The Candy House*, with teaser snippets and online campaigns fuelling the anticipation before publication in April 2022.

It is notable that Egan is often compared to male authors, common comparisons include Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace. Franzen especially is linked with Egan for the perceived competition between a number of their books: *Look at Me* lost the 2001 National Book Award to Franzen's *The Corrections*, but in 2011 Franzen's *Freedom* lost the National Book Critics Circle Award to Egan. Even when Egan's book won, *The L.A. Times* 'chose to highlight

the fact that Jonathan Franzen did not win the award. Not only did the story focus on his loss, but the main photo used was of Franzen himself, rather than Egan, the winner' (Melville House 2011: n.p.). Egan is cognisant of these comparisons, stating that 'coming of age as a female writer in that era had its frustrations, so it, of course, was thrilling to break into that white male club, to the extent that I did' (Rouverol and O'Riordan 2021: n.p.). And yet Egan more than anything emphasises her gratefulness that the default position in contemporary fiction is no longer a 'white male aesthetic' (In Rouverol and O'Riordan 2021: n.p.), as it was often perceived to be in her early career. Further, Egan is quick to point out that 'the cadre was never as dominant as it appeared; many female writers now in their fifties were doing superlative work in those same years and getting acclaim for it' (In Rouverol and O'Riordan 2021: n.p.), listing Jhumpa Lahiri, Sigrid Nunez, Elizabeth Strout, Susan Choi, Meg Wolitzer, Gish Jen, and others.

### **Existing Work on Jennifer Egan**

Despite her consistent presence in the American literary scene since the 1990s, Jennifer Egan has been largely bypassed in scholarship until quite recently. The sheer volume of fiction and journalism she has produced, alongside the formal and thematic complexity of her writing, creates an impressive portfolio that seems difficult to overlook. I have briefly mentioned the group of male authors Egan is most often compared with, and these are the same names which often dominated critical discussions at her expense. Further than award headlines prioritising Franzen's loss over Egan's win, this imbalance of attention continued into scholarship in the early 2000s where critical analysis of contemporary fiction, particularly of experimental and formally innovative literature, prioritised male authors. Valerie O'Riordan and Alicia J Rouverol note that as a woman writer 'Egan's literary contribution is downplayed in contrast to the attention paid, for instance, to Ali Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Kathy Acker', and that 'critical discussion of contemporary fiction, particularly with regard to ideas around experiment, innovation, and politics, continues to center on her male contemporaries' (O'Riordan and Rouverol 2021: n.p.). It is this categorisation of male and female writers that is, in part, responsible for Egan being overlooked: her formal innovation and sharp critique of the American political landscape aligning more with the interests of her male contemporaries

tended to remove her from discussions of female authors, and yet in conversations about these male authors she was again overlooked. Further, key aspects of her texts are not acknowledged because they do not keep in tone with the male authors she is discussed alongside: such as the prominence of maternal and sororal relationships, and the sexualisation and domination of female bodies. This has resulted in not only a lack of critical work on Egan's writing, but in conceptually incomplete readings where they do occur.

### ***Goon Squad's* Dominance**

The limelight from multiple awards very quickly brought *Goon Squad* into the centre of literary discussions, with primary analyses of the novel focusing upon its formal innovation and its relationship with postmodernism. Varying approaches have included an emphasis on how time is constructed and managed, with Melissa J. Strong seeing Paul Tillich's theory of kairos time as offering 'opportunities for wholeness and healing' (2018: 471) in the text, and Arnaud Schmitt analysing Egan's use of PowerPoint as a meta-chapter which enables readers to 'comprehend the fragmented narrative that [her] novel in its entirety unfolds' (2014: 75). Martin Moling links the novel's chronological fragmentation to its core themes of music production and nostalgia, using Iggy Pop's song "The Passenger" (1977) to argue that 'Egan's attempt to bridge the past and the future, or modernism and postmodernism, resembles Iggy Pop's aspiration to coalesce punk's initial raw authenticity with the shallow glare of a postmodern Berlin sky in 1977' (2016: 53). David Cowart examines the chronology of *Goon Squad* in order to trace Egan's second-generation postmodernism, suggesting that there are 'multiple, contingent realities' (2015: 243) within the novel. Other early critics emphasised the book's cultural context, such as the post-9/11 era depicted in *Goon Squad*, which John Masterson considers as 'dominated, and sometimes skewed, by visual culture' (2016: n.p.). Investigating gender constructions under the lens of authenticity and memory, Danica van de Velde follows the central theme of punk music in the novel as a signifier for nostalgia, 'which Egan interestingly ties to representations of gender, whereby nostalgia is not a universal emotion of loss, but one that is articulated and understood through constructions of masculinity and femininity' (2014: 124).

Interest in *Goon Squad* has not faded over the twelve years since its publication, articles and conference presentations on Egan's 2010 book still abound, offering

new perspectives yet tending to repeat similar topics as above: time, nostalgia, music and technology. Heather Humann reads the text through the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, a “mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution” of traumatic meaning to earlier events’ (2017: 94,89), which enables a dual reading process characterised by primary confusion and belated understanding. Bradley Reina argues that Egan’s text enhances narrative with techniques that ‘have tended to move a novel away from narrative development and closure’, such as ‘shifting narrators, techno/medial remediation, and a narrative that shifts back and forth through time’ (2019: 83) and uses the new possibilities of digital type for narrative ends: presenting chapter 9 as a gossip column by setting it in a smaller font size with a bold title and by-line, and formatting chapter 12 as a slide journal. Reina argues that these ‘visually striking remediated typographical elements’ contribute to the novel’s ‘strong narrative drive’ (2019:81). In 2021 Ivan Keilkamp published the first book-length analysis of Egan’s work, a commentary on *Goon Squad* which considers Egan’s use of the novel form as interacting with music and other art forms to depict temporality.

### Major Publications

Curiously, the boom in attention towards Egan’s 2010 novel did not quickly result in a renewed interest in her previous works. The first major event was in March 2014, when Birkbeck College hosted a conference called ‘Invisible Circus’, ‘the world’s first academic conference dedicated to the writing of Jennifer Egan’ (‘Invisible Circus’ 2014: n.p.) and which emphasised her entire body of work. Many speakers at this conference have remained core voices within work on Egan, and many of these scholars have since published work on Egan since this conference,<sup>13</sup> characterising it as a key event sparking the future of Egan studies. Some key names include Stephen Burn (keynote speaker), Rachel McLennan, Mark West, David Hering, Martin Paul Eve, and Valerie O’Riordan.

While not much work was published on Egan’s earlier fiction before the release of *Goon Squad* and the attention that came from awards and scholarship, retroactive attention has been paid to these earlier novels—such as Adam Kelly’s

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<sup>13</sup> Many of these names contributed to the 2021 Special Issue of *Contemporary Women’s Writing*: Valerie O’Riordan, Adam Kelly, Alicia J. Rouverol, Rachael McLennan, and Mark West.

2011 analysis of *Look at Me*. Kelly argues that few ‘writers have more directly addressed the task of responding to postmodernism and postmodernity than Jennifer Egan’, and considers *Look at Me* as a ‘case study of postmodern inheritance’ (2011: 393, 94). Mark West’s contribution to *21<sup>st</sup> Century US Historical Fiction* (2020) includes a discussion of *The Invisible Circus*, considering how the novel ‘thematically incorporates the historicization of the sixties’ (West 2020: 215). Martin Paul Eve produced the first critical article on Egan’s short story collection *Emerald City and other Stories* in 2020, analysing the differences between the UK and US editions of the collection. Post *Goon Squad* also saw more instant attention to Egan’s later publications as they were released. Published two years after *Goon Squad*, and developing one of its characters, ‘Black Box’ attracted a lot of critical attention, with much of this work focusing on the embedded digital technology in the story as an example of posthumanism, a subject that had exploded in scholarship in the years previous.

Key essays on ‘Black Box’ include Amelia Precup’s exploration of the cyborg figure, which ‘interrogates the implication of the fusion of flesh and technology and the re-conceptualization of the body as information’ (2015: 171). Jennifer Gutman discusses how the Twitter fiction facilitates a ‘reflexive relationship’ (2020: 276) between the reader and their personal mode of engagement with technology. Scholarship on ‘Black Box’ also revolves around the novelty of Twitter Fiction and the use of social media to publish short stories; Tore Rye Andersen uses Egan and David Mitchell’s experimental short stories to ask ‘how the micro-serialization of Twitter fiction both differs from and draws on the pre-digital tradition of serial fiction’ (2012: 1). Again looking to place Egan within a form of literary heritage, Nie Bao-Yu categorizes the story as a key example of “‘digimodernism”: the textual, cultural, and artistic practices prompted by new digital technologies’ (2015: 821).

*Manhattan Beach* received instant critical attention upon its publication. Being Egan’s first novel since her break-out *Goon Squad*, critics were primed to react promptly to her next book. *PMLA* dedicated a large section of their Volume 134 to Egan’s new book, including an essay from Egan herself about her writing process. The very different narrative approach and thematic concerns of this novel resulted in a wide range of critical responses, including George Hutchinson’s assessment of the historical novel, and ‘the epic ambition to show



historical transformation' from Allan Hepburn (2019: n.p.). Some articles did expand on existing scholarship on Egan, for instance, Rachel Adams explores the limitations of genre in *Manhattan Beach* through the themes of sibling relationships and disability, which highlights the same kind of formal innovation studied in Egan's past work, especially *The Keep* and gothic literature.

Since *Manhattan Beach*, work on Egan has slowly moved towards a more comprehensive analysis of her writing. It may be that the perceived difference of *Manhattan Beach* encouraged scholars to think about the defining aspects of Egan's previous works, and why her earlier texts are, to some, of a different cloth than this historical fiction. Kasia Boddy's 'Making it Long: Men, Women, and the Great American Novel Now' (2018) includes Egan in discussions of contemporary American authorship, and the 'coded male' concept of the great American novel. The year 2021 saw a boom in work on Egan, producing two book length studies of her work and a special journal issue from *Contemporary Women's Writing (CWW)*. The first of these was *A Visit from the Goon Squad REREAD*, by Ivan Kreilkamp, which develops analysis of temporality in Egan's novel and interrogates the aspect of dematerialisation inherent within nostalgia and digitisation. The second and third 2021 publications offered analysis of Egan's entire body of work, an extremely welcome intervention in the pattern of *Goon Squad* focused, or simply one-novel focused, analyses. The *CWW* issue discussed Egan's work with reference to 'Contemporaneity, the Digital, and the Experimental', utilising a thematic approach, though each article in turn did tend to select one individual novel as a focus. Lastly in 2021 was Alexander Moran's *Understanding Jennifer Egan*, the first book to analyse all of Egan's novels (though the publication of *The Candy House* in 2022 quickly altered this claim). Dedicating one chapter to each of Egan's books, Moran unites his analysis with a focus on authenticity, arguing that all of Egan's works depict the self-conscious effort to stage authentic experiences.

Even with the remarkable volume of production in 2021, there is a sense of unfinishedness in all scholarship on Egan. This is partly due to the nature of studying contemporary fiction, an ever-changing landscape. Egan's newest book certainly contributes to this—published in March 2022, *The Candy House* has loomed over the publication of every book, series, and paper in 2021, with the potential to develop each argument put forth. Especially as it is branded as the

sibling to *Goon Squad*, this novel brings extra weight with it, given that the vast majority of Egan scholarship turns attention to this formally innovative novel.

### Interviews

As Egan's presence in contemporary American Fiction has endured, more and more interviews have been conducted with the author about her writing process, influence, and future plans. Typically interviews always took place ahead of new publications, but in recent years critics have become much more interested in understanding Jennifer Egan as an author and a knowledgeable voice within contemporary literature. Part of this active engagement stems from the inability of academics to agree upon a specific genre or style that unites Egan's work, thus leading to a desire to ask the author herself what it is that drives her. Notable examples include Egan's reflections upon the concept of terrorism in her fiction, particularly after the publication of *Look at Me* coinciding with the dreadful events of 9/11. Both special journal issues from *PMLA* and *CWW* include an article by or interview with the author, interrogating the concepts that inspired their series. In the first Egan addresses the process of writing *Manhattan Beach* and its status as an 'object of scholarly rigour' (Egan 2019: 416), while the latter allows Egan to reflect upon her journey as an author and how she views her position in contemporary American fiction. The upcoming *Conversations with Jennifer Egan* from Alexander Moran, the same author as *Understanding Jennifer Egan*, promises to deliver an extended publication interviewing the author about her fiction. Calling herself an 'academic wannabe' (Egan, in Rouverol and O'Riordan 2021: n.p.) perhaps explains Egan's willingness to contribute to these publications and join academic scholars in critical discussion of her work and creative process.

# Embodiment, Cognition, and Postmodernism

This thesis posits that Jennifer Egan's fiction conducts a consistent conversation about embodied human identity, the introduction of technology into bodies, and the place of fiction in depicting *and* undergoing digitisation. Within this argument, central theories utilised concern embodiment and cognition. A secondary thread to this thesis is Egan's literary heritage, specifically her relationship with postmodernism and the development of her novels' postmodern style. The trajectory of fiction and the abilities of the novel form are altered by technology, taking this literary heritage into new, virtual, locations. Below I give an overview of these concepts that are at the core of this thesis. Both establishing the shape of the field and arguing for their relevance to my project, I lay out the critics, texts, and ideological developments that have been central to forming my argument.

## Embodiment

Embodiment can be destroyed but it cannot be replicated.

(Hayles 1999: 49)

The relationship between body and identity relies heavily upon the value placed upon embodiment. When aligning identity with a material form, there is an acceptance that the material form contributes to the abilities and limits of the inhabiting consciousness, and thus that any changes to physical form will result in significant impact upon the lived experience of identity.

The concept of separating body and mind originates with René Descartes's thesis of mind-body dualism. In the cartesian model, mind is 'a thinking, non-extended thing', whereas body is 'an extended, non-thinking thing' (Descartes 1984: 54), entirely distinct and thus able to exist without the other. Initially, scientific research assumed that this extraction of cognitive identity from a material base was a probable future ability, with many scientists theorising about prolonging cognition indefinitely through digital brains that would continue to think and

communicate long after the individual's flesh body had passed away.<sup>14</sup> Alongside these assumptions came the opinion that technology itself could become cognisant and indistinguishable from a human brain if it had all the same abilities and took the same form. In the 1950s, Alan Turing's Turing Test popularised this opinion that form is incidental to intelligence by stating that, 'if you cannot tell the intelligent machine from the intelligent human, your failure proves [...] that machines can think' (Hayles 1999: xi).

Posthumanism has a particular place in this discussion, in responding to humanist and transhumanist conceptions of the body and in envisioning productive futures for human-machine relationships. Often erroneously understood as the end of the human, posthumanism instead seeks to dethrone humanism's idea of a unified, historical conception of the human—which invites discrimination in its belief in 'an ideal of bodily perfection' (Braidotti in Leitch 2018: 2331). Posthumanism also stands at odds with transhumanism, which promotes human enhancement in search of surpassing embodiment, enacting an '*intensification* of humanism' (Wolfe xv) by continuing to promote the superiority and perfectibility of the human. Many theorists have attempted to define and clarify posthumanism as a term, given its perceived nebulousness and complexity. Agreements between definitions and 'strands' of posthumanism (such as Braidotti's 'reactive', 'technological', and 'critical' posthumanism (in Leitch 2018: 2343)) rest upon opposing the assumed superiority of the human and endorsing multiplicity in conceptions of the posthuman subject. Rosi Braidotti writes that 'the posthuman provokes elation but also anxiety about the possibility of a serious de-centring of 'Man', the former measure of all things' (Braidotti in Leitch 2018: 2329), and Cary Wolfe states that 'posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore' (xv). Both critics emphasise the

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<sup>14</sup> Hayles lists Hans Moravec as an example of this scientific assumption in her introduction to *How We Became Posthuman*. In *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988), Moravec 'argues it will soon be possible to download human consciousness into a computer. To illustrate, he invents a fantasy scenario in which a robot surgeon purees the human brain in a kind of cranial liposuction, reading the information in each molecular layer as it is stripped away and transferring the information into a computer. At the end of the operation, the cranial cavity is empty, and the patient, now inhabiting the metallic body of the computer, awakens to find his consciousness exactly the same as it was before' (Hayles 1999: 1).

reconfiguration of the human, rather than the eradication of it, as central to posthumanism. Woolfe's awareness of the networks contributing to this redefinition is key to my use of posthuman theories in this thesis, as my analysis centres on the intersection of technologies and bodies. Braidotti's thoughts in *The Posthuman* further explain that:

there is a posthuman agreement that contemporary science and biotechnologies affect the very fibre and structure of the living and have altered dramatically our understanding of what counts as the basic frame of reference for the human today. Technological intervention upon all living matter creates a negative unity and mutual dependence among humans and other species.

(Braidotti in Leitch 2018: 2346)

The impact of technological advancements is a key component of posthumanism, leading to new and multiple conceptions of the form and understanding of the human, as well as a reassertion of hierarchy between human and non-human species.

As this thesis is interested in the intersection of bodies and technologies, ideas of posthumanism and cognition which consider the limits of the human—in form and ability—are most relevant to my analysis. N. Katherine Hayles and Andy Clark are important voices in this discussion, arguing for the value of embodiment in posthuman conceptions of both present and future. Emphasising posthuman embodiment, Hayles argues that 'human mind without human body is not human mind' (Hayles 1999: 246): warning against 'dematerialized definitions of information and corporeality, which she condemns as ill-advised philosophical extensions of the Cartesian separation of mind and body' (Leitch 2018: 2032). In her 1999 text, *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles primarily seeks to dispel the theory that posthumanism is a future product of the disembodiment of cognition, and instead argues that we already are posthuman in many ways, whilst still being embodied. While Turing's test relied upon and propagated the idea that human cognition is an informational pattern 'distinct from the substrates carrying it' (Hayles 1999: xi), Hayles argues that it is not the final product of disembodied cognition that achieves posthumanism, but that the participant becomes posthuman by putting themselves in a position of powerlessness before the Turing Test's cybernetic circuit that 'splices [their]

will, desire, and perception' (Hayles 1999: xiv). This argument pushes against a binary human/machine divide and provides space for coexistence and the presence of partially technologised bodies.

This brings up the intersection of embodiment and technology and prosthesis, asking how technology and embodiment shape and characterise the posthuman experience. Clark's book *Supersizing the Mind* (2011) contributes to this discussion, analysing the ability of the human body and brain to incorporate technologies into their own processes. Clark argues that the human mind is not limited to the material borders of the brain, but that 'cognition leaks out into body and world' (Clark 2011: xxviii), making use of bodily and external technologies as part of the internal cognitive process (for instance, the way the way people use paper and pen to work out a maths problem, or rely on a smart phone to recall telephone numbers). His text introduces the language of 'brainbound' versus 'extended': brainbound being the view that 'all human cognition depends directly on neural activity alone' whereas extended sees the world and body as part of a larger cognitive process (Clark 2011: xxviii). Endorsing this extended ideology, Clark argues that the human mind is dependent on the human body, reliant upon its form and related methods of sensing and interacting with the wider world.

In endorsing embodiment as a contributor to cognition, Clark also warns against lines of thought that dismiss the contributions of embodiment and opposes fantasies of disembodied cognition. Further, Clark does not limit cognition to within the boundaries of either body or brain—suggesting instead that the world and technological tools also participate in cognitive processes. This fact leads to the creation of 'new systemic wholes' (Clark 2011: 39): when abilities of external props become absorbed by the brain and perceived as part of the cognitive toolbox. Thus, Clark promotes an understanding of the human body and mind as porous and negotiable, describing 'surprisingly plastic minds of profoundly embodied agents' (Clark 2011: 43) in which the boundaries and components are forever renegotiable. This theory of extension furthers Hayles's project of destroying the human/machine binary and embraces technology as a valuable contribution to the human body. This view prioritises embodiment as valuable within cognition while also engaging with the potential of new

technologies, suggesting that the human body and brain are not fixed entities with set limits but are adaptable and able to incorporate new equipment into their thinking, acting, and being. As Hayles writes, ‘human functionality expands because the parameters of the cognitive system it inhabits expands’ (Hayles 1999: 291).

The remaining value of the human body within cognition calls for the protection of flesh, and highlights the danger of erasing embodiment altogether.<sup>15</sup> Clark and Hayles, amongst others, take up this cause, both rejecting scientific assumptions that view the body as incidental and disposable. Opposing transhumanist fantasies of surpassing embodiment in search of disembodied intellect, Hayles calls Hans Moravec’s fantasy of downloading consciousness into a computer ‘a roboticist’s dream that struck me as a nightmare’ and she asks ‘how could anyone think that consciousness in an entirely different medium would remain unchanged, as if it had no connection with embodiment?’ (Hayles 1999: 1).

This nightmare details the dangerous path that posthumanism could follow if left unchallenged: of overlooking and erasing embodiment from humanity, which would lead to ‘a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being’ (Hayles 1999: 5). Viewing the body as a companion or accessory to cognitive identity is here illustrated as damaging to our perception of humanity because it equates intelligence only to cognitive performance that can be extracted from materiality. In contrast, Hayles argues that ‘the body is the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history and it is naive to think that this history does not affect human behaviours at every level of thought and action’ (Hayles 1999: 284). Hayles insists that the bodies that have adapted and grown not only throughout each individual’s life but also throughout the history of humankind

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<sup>15</sup> There is a danger in this privileging of the capacities of the human body to uphold a normative conception of the able-bodied human, highlighting criticism from a disabilities studies perspective to be aware of. Within this upholding of the contributions of flesh I highlight from Hayles, Clark, and others—it is not a uniform human body (as in the humanist image of the Vitruvian man), but the particular capacities, preferences, and contributions of each individual body that interacts uniquely with its mind and world which creates this positive incarnation of extended embodiment. Donna Haraway’s notion of the cyborg—considered within this thesis—makes clear the way that marginalised and persecuted bodies are vital and powerful within depictions of such technological extension.

are essential components of our humanity and she urges scientists to realise the co-dependency of body and brain.

Computer Scientist Jaron Lanier is a proponent of digital humanism. In *You Are Not A Gadget* (2010), Lanier insists on preserving a level of difference between person and machine in a world that is increasingly catering towards computers.<sup>16</sup> He does so through relying on a definition of intelligence that prioritises the human. Lanier claims that the human experience validates intelligence and uses examples of technological breakthrough and software development to demonstrate the potentially permanent effects of creating a computer-centric world, emphasising that action needs to be taken now in order to avoid a continual devaluing of the human. This mode of approach acknowledges the productive potential of technologies, but opposes a reassertion of the hierarchy between human and non-human, specifically human and machine. While also promoting the value of embodiment, this line of thought rests upon the superiority of the human at the heart of humanism.

In a different turn, feminist scholar Donna Haraway ‘argues that far from being antithetical to the human organism, technology is a material and symbolic apparatus that is already deeply involved in what it means to be human’ (Leitch 2018: 2041). In ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1985), Haraway considers the figure of the cyborg as ‘a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century’ (Haraway 1990: 149). Arguing for ‘*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction’ (1990: 150), Haraway’s work outlines the many categories affected and absorbed by the notion of the cyborg: such as the opposition between nature and culture, self and world, human and machine, and more. Rejecting rigid boundaries and embracing hybridity instead, Haraway uses the figure of the cyborg to urge feminists to move beyond the limitations of current conceptions of gender, family, body, and politics. In this focus on hybridity, Haraway’s work enables a study of the cyborg as a posthuman figure tied to physical expression,

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<sup>16</sup> Egan read this book just before publishing *A Visit from the Goon Squad* – she stated she was reading Lanier’s book in an interview for *The Ithacan* in February 2010 (Egan 2010b).



highlighting the alterations made to the organic human form and the cultural forces at work in defining and approving these forms.

The common interest in embodiment amongst the theorists and frameworks summarised indicates its crucial role in defining and reassessing human experience. The cautionary parables and measured predictions these theorists offer are useful in my analysis of the relationship between humans and technology within Egan's fiction. The position of posthumanism in responding to other critical frameworks is key as humanist, transhuman, and posthuman conceptions of the body can all be observed or utilised at various points within Egan's fiction. My main project in this thesis is not to evaluate these critical theories—but to observe how Egan depicts the promotion of certain bodily modes as a method of control. Humanist conceptions of the body where they appear in Egan's work frequently include the domination of the body through setting specific requirements for bodies that many fail or demonstrate anxiety in attempting to meet. Transhumanism in Egan's texts similarly tends to involve domination in prioritising the technological advancement of the body for corporate interests and ignoring the embodied experience of the individual. Posthumanism then appears in and can be applied to Egan's work as a mode of critiquing these dominating attitudes, and in instances of human-machine cooperation and flourishing. I engage with posthuman theories in my analysis from this position of critical reflection upon the domination and transformation of bodies within Egan's fiction. I take the contributions of embodiment highlighted by some of the researchers I have mentioned as my first point of study for this thesis, examining Egan's depictions of bodies and sensory experience before moving on to forms of extension and virtual identity.

### **Embodiment and Fiction**

Fiction is uniquely equipped to explore the particular contributions of embodiment to human identity and to theorise about the implications of technological extension. When Manuela Rossini writes about bodies and fiction, she says that 'literature, and Science fiction in particular, is an important cultural resource for dealing with advances in medicine, biotechnologies, and informatics' (Rossini 2017: 64). While humans are still limited in their use of such technologies, fiction demonstrates the potential results and can offer

ethical guidance and caution against misuse and corruption of technological power. Of course, one of the earliest and most famous examples of this is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a text that takes the then recent discovery of galvanisation and cautions against scientists playing God with their newfound abilities.

Shelley's focus on the physical body in this text reminds us that at the centre of this discussion about science and power, what is at stake is the traditional concept of human embodiment and the creation and storage of consciousness. The text is so unsettling partly because of its reconfiguration of the cycle of life; by reanimating a corpse Shelley removes the finality of death, a core human concept that has motivated and ordered society since the beginning of time. Shelley's text remains a cultural touchstone, and is still a metaphor used to signpost scientific experimentation gone too far. *Frankenstein's* legacy shows the lasting authority of fiction, as 'these new meanings (produced in texts and images) will influence [...] our handling of technologies' (Rossini 2017: 64).

Further than a moral code and system of predicting technological advance, fiction shares the anxiety over the loss of physicality that human bodies face in posthumanism. Hayles highlights the shared stakes of humans and texts, stating that 'because they have bodies, books and humans have something to lose if they are regarded solely as informational patterns' (Hayles 1999: 24). Much like cognitive identity, fiction is intimately tied to its physical form: it is a system built on sensory experience and materiality. The changing processes in publishing and reading practices that move towards digitality and screen reading therefore will not occur without a change in the nature of fiction itself.

Another shared concept between the changes happening in textual and human bodies is their focus on contemporaneity. In this period, established modes of materiality are confronted, and often surpassed, by digital innovations. For instance, the perceived death of the print novel due to the rise of audiobooks

and ebooks<sup>17</sup>—provoking a sense of uncertainty about the future of fiction that is comparable to the debate over the human form within posthumanism. Clark proposes that this current era of ‘wearable computing and ubiquitous information’ acts particularly as a catalyst for cognitive extension (Clark 2011: 41) and Hayles notes that the changes in the materiality of fiction create a chasm between past and future methods of writing, reading, and teaching (Hayles 2012). The parallel trajectories of humans and books creates a particularly interesting and difficult task for contemporary fiction: of tackling the changing relationship between bodies and technology while also adapting itself to new forms of publication and reception through the digitisation of print.

Further significance comes from the male-centric past that is taken into the hands of female writers in both these literary and theoretical works. For example, both Egan and Hayles bring new life and perspective to typically male-dominated fields; Egan with postmodernism and Hayles with cognitive and digital theory.<sup>18</sup> In Hayles’s writings, ‘a *computationally enabled feminism* exists as the basic condition of possibility of her thought’ (Kroker 2012: 79), a concept missing from the foundations of previous work in this field. This merging of ‘two powerful streams of thought—one scientific, the other feminist’ enabled a revolutionary rethinking of computation and embodiment—such as noting the overlooked notion of gender within the Turing test<sup>19</sup>—‘culminating not in a familiar vision of science or feminism as we have known it but in a co-evolution and co-emergence of both terms’ (Kroker 2012: 79). An example I frequently refer to in this thesis, which comes at the beginning of Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman*, is her ridicule of Hans Moravec’s brain-in-a-box: the idea that a human could live infinitely as a computer upload (Hayles 1999: 1). Above I have

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<sup>17</sup> The ‘death of print’ has been an often-reported headline in the past two decades, with the closure of major bookstores (e.g. Borders) seemingly signalling this fact. However, recent years have seen a decline in the sale of ebooks, showing a returning favour for the print book. In 2021, US ebook sales declined by 3.7% (Cerézo 2022: n.p.), and in the UK were at the ‘lowest point since 2012’ (Holifield 2022: n.p.). The *New York Times* reports that ebook adopters are ‘returning to print, or becoming hybrid readers, who juggle devices and paper’ (Alter 2015: n.p.), indicating a future of co-existence for modes of reading.

<sup>18</sup> The theories that Hayles revisits in her work are overwhelmingly male-authored, such as the experiments and theories of Alan Turing and Hans Moravec, and the semiotics and ideas of pattern from Jacques Derrida.

<sup>19</sup> While Hodges calls the gender component of the Turing Test a ‘red herring’, Hayles counters that it is an important inclusion that has been unfortunately overlooked. Hayles notes that this parallel example included by Turing upholds the specific details of embodiment as essential (Hayles 1999: xiii).

examined the implications of embodiment and cognitive ability within this example, yet the gender implications of a female theorist's rejection of a male-authored hypothesis has further significance. Donna Haraway equally ridicules such claims:

*Donna Haraway:* I can't believe the blissed-out technoidiocy of people who talk about downloading human consciousness onto a chip.

*Nicholas Gane (Interviewer):* You mean Hans Moravec?

*Donna Haraway:* Yes, I mean these guys actually talk about this - and they are guys. It's a kind of techno-masculinism of a self-caricaturing kind.

(Gane 2006: 146)

Haraway's terms of technoidiocy and techno-masculinism speak to a male arrogance in these concepts in which these scientists assumed they could force technology into being a willing carrier of humanity; there is a sense of intellectual assault in this use of force and assumed entitlement, further communicating the embedded patriarchal arrogance. In the more complementary approach taken by Haraway and Hayles, both human and machine bend in order to incorporate the other. This arrogance reflects the history of the body that used to exist—one shaped and policed by male scientists, theorists, and authors. The female voices that dismantled this universal history brought an alternative perspective that eased these strict binds. Arthur Kroker names N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler as the key theorists of Body Drift (Kroker 2012: 5), the concept that 'there is no longer, if there ever was, a single, binding, universal history of the body, nor is it possible to speak today of the body as a cohesive singularity' (Kroker 2012: 2). Kroker observes that these women's writings create a feminist reclaiming of many facets of theory that were originally dominated by male thinkers:

While Heidegger, Marx, and Nietzsche may have first anticipated a *human* future that would soon be dominated by the will to technology, it is my sense that it is the specific contribution of Butler, Hayles, and Haraway to have identified body drift as the fateful talisman to the *posthuman* future [...]

Here the *postmodernism* of Judith Butler, the *posthumanism* of Katherine Hayles, and the *companionism* of Donna Haraway represent possible pathways to the posthuman future.

(Kroker 2012: 19)

Kroker details how these women have taken hold of these concepts and offer real potential pathways and futures to previously uncertain and mainly theoretical ideas. The focus on post-, whether postmodern or posthuman, reflects this lineage and heritage and also this concept of redefining the field and challenging established thought. Kroker's argument shows the posthuman vision achieving realisation in the work of these three women, in which posthumanism is no longer the futuristic and alien concept of cognisant machines, but instead a radical reconceiving of the human that has already begun.

Another important point of critical development relating to fiction and bodies is the so called 'cognitive turn', which marks a notable wave of critical interest in applying cognitive approaches to fiction. According to Lisa Zunshine, the best definition of cognitive literary studies belongs to Alan Richardson: 'the work of literary critics and theorists vitally interested in cognitive science [...] and therefore with a good deal to say to one another, whatever their differences' (in Zunshine 2015: 1). Such approaches are 'interested in the processes of thought, feeling and imagination evoked and developed by literature' (Kukkonen, Kuzmičová, Christiansen, and Polvinen 2019: 1)—such as overlaying findings about how memory works onto the presence of narrative gaps and differing perspectives in fictional texts, and 'us[ing] concepts from cognitive linguistics to analyze how writers and readers can meet on the ground of metaphor' (Starr 2018: 411). This cognitive turn produced many readings of postmodernist fiction<sup>20</sup>—I take this discussion further in my analysis of Egan and contemporary female authorship as an inheritor of some postmodern interests, again

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<sup>20</sup> Work on this topic includes Stephen Burn's research on the neuronovel and cognitive mappings of postmodern fiction: involving readings of DeLillo, Wallace and Powers in multiple research outputs (notably 'The Neuronovel' in Smith 2018 and 'Mapping the Syndrome Novel' in Lustig and Peacock 2013), and his course 'The Mind of the Contemporary American Novel' taught at the University of Glasgow. Other examples of this field include Joseph Tabbi's *Cognitive Fictions* (2002), the Cognitive Fictions cluster in the *American Book Review* (Tabbi 2011), Wes Chapman's 'The Cognitive Literary Theory of Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*' (2015) and Jamie Redgate's 2017 thesis 'Wallace and I: Cognition, consciousness and dualism in David Foster Wallace's fiction'.

highlighting a point of critical handover to and by women. My analyses of cognition and embodiment are intertwined—within Egan’s fiction bodies and physical senses play a large role in alerting characters to both danger and pleasure: this inverts the notion that the brain is solely responsible for creating these alerts and attributes autonomy to the body, in an ability to seemingly bypass cognitive awareness. In analysing the cognitive activity depicted by Jennifer Egan’s characters I consider the part played by the brain within the relationship between brains, bodies, and external technologies in order to comment upon the increasing inter-dependency of these three agents, and the implications of altering this relationship.

Fiction is tasked with capturing the most significant cultural discoveries and changes, much like the legacy of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. While it is impossible to determine what texts will have this lasting impact before time has passed, those who produce material that consistently engages with these matters are of central importance to the current discussion. The following chapters discuss Jennifer Egan’s place in this ability of literature as she depicts characters and environments where physical and cognitive identities are both broken and mended by various technologies, and whose own writing practices experiment with the changing opportunities and demands upon twenty-first century writers.

## **Egan and Postmodernism**

Egan’s relationship with postmodernism is not an entirely new subject of study; reviews and critical articles written about her novels have often touched upon her literary heritage and tied notions within her texts to the postmodernists. More than any other author, Egan is often linked to Don DeLillo, with many academics noting her similar interest in consumer culture and American aesthetics, alongside the growing influence of technology.<sup>21</sup> Egan does not merely repeat these interests but extends such concepts to new levels and in new ways. My investigation of technologisation within Egan’s fiction shows the

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<sup>21</sup> For instance: Pankaj Mishra considers Moose in *Look at Me* as ‘Following in the American line of solitary prophets - both real, like the Unabomber, and those invented by DeLillo’ (2011: 29). David Cowart focuses on temporality and the manner in which Egan, like DeLillo, ‘perceives temporality and sentience as inseparable from the language games in which they figure’ (2015: 243). Another example is Kasia Boddy, who traces the influence of Don DeLillo on contemporary fiction, emphasising his importance for women writers—including Egan (2018).

development of this postmodern concept of a heavily digitised society into depictions of the digitisation of human bodies.

This adaption or reworking of postmodern interests is particularly significant within female-authored fiction, as the legacy of postmodernism exists not only in its literary trademarks of satire and lengthy footnotes, but in the names—and shared gender—of the authors who dominated the field. Thomas Pynchon, DeLillo, Franzen, Wallace, these names dominate discussions of postmodernism, and still today new scholarship on postmodern literature amplifies these names again and again.<sup>22</sup> Patricia Waugh's *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989) excellently investigates this lack of female postmodern authorship in fiction still predating many of these names, writing that '*postmodernist* authors are, actually or necessarily, male' (1989: 5), a fact partly due to postmodernism rejecting notions of 'unified selfhood' just as feminist authors begin to establish their own 'cultural identity' (1989: 6). Waugh explains that 'as male writers lament its demise, female writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world' (1989: 6). This realisation is essential in considering the response of female authorship to postmodernism, and in thinking about authors such as Egan who retrospectively utilise postmodern tropes and concepts. Therefore, Egan's work adds not only a contemporary perspective to postmodernism but confronts this stereotype of male authorship and male voices in fiction. While of course not all postmodern literature is male-authored or features only male protagonists, this is however the case for an overwhelming majority. Egan's presentation of female bodies and identities within her texts therefore becomes extremely significant, as she puts women in the position of responding to these postmodern interests: such as consumerism and technologisation.

Egan's consistent adaption of postmodern concepts within her fiction highlights the under-served voices of women within postmodernism, and reveals the potential of postmodernism to serve as its own critic, utilising its trademarks in

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<sup>22</sup> This is evident within major accounts of postmodern literature, such as: *The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook* (MacGowan 2011b), *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (McHale 2015), *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millenium* (Green 2005).

order to freshly ironise ideas and images that, over the past few decades, may have become a little stale. The significant body of work that Egan has contributed—in which she continually pulls from these postmodern tropes—injects her own name into this postmodern legacy. Egan’s consistent involvement in literary discussions of contemporary culture, embodiment, and the legacy of postmodernism makes her impossible to ignore.

It is especially significant that the writer that I, and other critics,<sup>23</sup> often link to Egan’s echoes of postmodernism is Don DeLillo himself. I make specific reference to DeLillo’s *White Noise* within this thesis, ‘the book that brought him a National Book Award and recognition as a major novelist’ (MacGowan 2011a: 279), and one which ‘still informs our definition of postmodern culture and literary trends’ (Torkamaneh and Lalbakhsh 2017: 1). This novel’s reflections upon consumer culture and the power of the media have a clear legacy within Egan’s work, as elucidated further within my thesis. Further than these stylistic choices or thematic connections, in the article ‘Making it Long: Men, Women, and the Great American Novel Now’, Kasia Boddy makes links between characters in each author’s writings, highlighting the figure of Uncle Moose from *Look at Me*:

a historian with a ‘beige metal file cabinet’ containing ‘the makings of his multivolumed history of Rockford, Illinois, a work that would be unprecedented in scale and ambition [...] These hopeful if shambolic authors are themselves descendants of DeLillo’s ubiquitous men in small rooms: Jack Gladney, from *White Noise*, a ‘harmless, ageing, indistinct’ guy who finds Hitler a ‘fine, solid, dependable’ object of study.

(Boddy 2018: 330)

How interesting that the central character in DeLillo’s *White Noise* symbolically becomes a side-character, an eccentric relative (in this case literally the weird uncle) to our main characters in *Look at Me*. Here Egan acknowledges the relevance and heritage of postmodernism within her work, but uses this to inform and frame her narratives rather than as the central content. Uncle Moose’s position within *Look at Me* is a reminder of the social and cultural context, the history of Rockford and the Hauser family, and he is certainly an

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<sup>23</sup> This link is made often in articles and reviews of Egan’s work, highlighted in above footnote re: Mishra (2011), Cowart (2015) and Boddy (2018).



important educational influence upon Charlotte. Yet, he is a teacher that Charlotte grows to challenge and abandon, as she loses her desire to follow his curriculum and other figures begin to inform her interests and worldviews.

Boddy's insight that highlights Moose and other ubiquitous men as descendants of DeLillo's characters leads me to see this relationship in *Look at Me* as indicative of the conversation and lineage between earlier postmodern and current contemporary writers. Perhaps in Moose and Charlotte we can see a slight nod to DeLillo and Egan themselves, as central postmodern concerns and tropes appear in Egan's work as echoes and in new perspectives. Known for his quirky, eccentric brand of intelligence, Moose represents this older generation's challenging of centralised truth sources and criticism of a heavily mediated society, paralleling the postmodern diversion from the modernist belief in a 'legitimizing centre' (Edwards and Usher 1994: 10) in his off-centre interests. Yet his instability and tendency to go a little too far—such as the 'thought experiment' he set his university class which resulted in a very real bomb threat (Egan 2001: 68-70)—paints him in broader strokes as an ironic caricature and creates a distance between him and other characters, and the reality of the world as Charlotte sees it.

Another important aspect of this relationship is the male-female nature of the generational handover between Moose and Charlotte. This again parallels DeLillo and Egan, again generating reflection on a female re-working of a predominantly male subject. *Look at Me* as a novel focuses mainly on the two central female characters, with the men such as Moose, Michael West (or Z) and Anthony Halliday playing more minor roles that each contribute a small share to the central narrative. This again inverts the tendency of many postmodern works. If we turn again to *White Noise* and Jack Gladney as in Boddy's example, Jack is the central focus of the novel, but his wife Babette has a side-narrative that informs and plays alongside this main plot. Of course, this inversion is not true for all of Egan's, or DeLillo's, fiction: *The Keep* focuses mostly on male characters—although the split narrative depicting Holly and her creative writing class does also feature, and the end of the novel points to Holly as a co-author—and DeLillo's novella *The Body Artist* (2001) depicts a woman in grief after her husband's death. However, the majority of Egan's writings concentrate upon female characters, female-driven plots, and narratives told from a female

perspective, and so Egan plays with the 'ubiquitous men' trope that Boddy speaks of. These male characters are not excluded, but the narrative perspective is twisted and these men are no longer centralised but live in the periphery as informing side narratives within the text. Similarly, postmodernism is a structure that informs and guides some of Egan's writing and techniques (such as an obsession with image culture, experimentation with fragmented narrative, and a tendency toward metafictional reflection), which she adapts for new purposes.

Other male authors that we might bring into this conversation are, for instance, Jonathan Franzen. Stephen Burn's text *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008) highlights Franzen's important position in the transition out of the end of postmodernism and over the landmark of the millennium. Franzen does continue the legacy of postmodernism into the contemporary literary context, maintaining ironic commentary upon an information-heavy society while moving over time to introduce more story-based narrative and an increased focus on character. Particularly in Franzen's later work, such as *The Corrections*, we find 'a retreat from postmodern complexity' (Burn 2008: 86) in accordance with Jeremy Green's assertion that this novel moves into the realist lineage (Green 2005: 106). I see Franzen as a more useful comparison point to Egan than, say, Wallace or Powers, who both share Franzen's origins in postmodernism and similarly question the future of the American novel. Yet, both are more information-heavy, often intensely technical writers who do not share the same progression into 'ostensibly transparent prose' (Burn 2008: 10) that may have contributed to an over-looking of the complexities or references embedded within Franzen's prose. It is important to recognise here Egan's similar position in the postmodern legacy, while writing at and around the time of some of the later publications of these other names, but not directly working with the immediate transfer out of postmodernism. Egan is thus not only a descendent of the postmodernists but also a relative of these in-between writers, who inhabit a period termed 'post-postmodernism' by Burn.

Similar to the history of cognitive studies and posthumanism discussed above, the origins of postmodernism are defined by the trademark traits of a few central male authors. Again similarly, these trademarks are adapted and twisted for new purposes in the hands of contemporary female writers. As this thesis

focuses upon the collective writings of Egan, a point not fully made in this analysis is the discussion of the community of female authors working in a similar vein to Egan. It is certainly also the case with fiction that many female authors are adapting and rewriting these established patterns, challenging the assumptions made in the past and turning these on their head in new works. Patricia Waugh's *Feminine Fictions* offers a list of contemporary women writers she sees to be challenging postmodern aesthetics in the early 1990s, and thus claiming a stake in the development of the genre. Amongst those named are Fay Weldon as an example of the contemporary feminist gothic, Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter in fragmenting and dispersing the feminine subject, and Doris Lessing's abandonment of realism. A more up-to-date list of names should note the subversive technological fiction of Dana Spiotta, Rachel Kushner's chaotic explorations of American identity and the construction of nationhood, and Ruth Ozeki's fusing of global issues and personal narratives, to name a few. Together, this collection of voices creates a new ownership overtaking the male-dominated heritage of contemporary fiction.

This repaving of the postmodern legacy is perhaps particularly relevant work for female authors as it involves querying literary boundaries and tropes and a thoughtful reshaping of expectations. This is familiar work for female authors—as touched upon in my mention of Waugh's 1989 book, feminism reshaped female authors' expectations of their own authorial presence, striving to overcome the 'multiple and complex [...] economic, social, psychological, political and aesthetic factors' that resulted in an absence of women writers (Waugh [1989] 2012: 6). This continued habit of fighting for presence manifests still in a tendency to continue the questioning of all established patterns and boundaries that enforce power and hierarchy. This thesis pays attention to Egan's own interest in re-thinking boundaries concerning the human body and technology, an interest which extends to her depictions of women and the particular experience of the female body, and also to her re-thinking the boundaries and shape of fiction: a topic covered in chapter 3 of this thesis. This reclaiming of postmodern heritage therefore impacts not only the depiction of women within fiction but the construction and perception of fiction itself, as female authors move to take up more space and insert themselves into this legacy. Boddy shares this line of thought and focuses upon the notion of the 'Great American Novel',

a masculinised term rarely used by or about female writers—its gendered nature is ‘constitutive of the genre’ (Boddy 2018: 322). Boddy again highlights DeLillo’s influence here, noting that when DeLillo stated ‘he’d “prefer not to be labelled. I’m a novelist, period. An American novelist”. [He] made it acceptable for twenty-first century women writers to identify themselves in the same way’ (Boddy 2018: 324). This fact is perhaps partially responsible for the number of female ‘heirs’ to DeLillo, authors who not only nod to DeLillo’s writing style within their own but who openly highlight his influence upon their work:

Dana Spiotta’s first novel, *Lightning Field* (2001) featured a DeLillo blurb on its jacket, while Christian Lorenz described her second, *Eat the Document* (2006), along with Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* (2013) and Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* (2001) and *Welcome(sic) to the Goon Squad* (2010), as written ‘under the spell of Underworld’. All three writers have appeared on stage with DeLillo and eagerly acknowledge his importance for their own development.

(Boddy 2018: 323,24)

There is a paradox within this reliance upon a male author to provide a sense of freedom for female authors. DeLillo’s ability to reject established terminology is enabled by his authority within American fiction—comprised in part by his position as a male author. De-throning ‘Great American Novel’ and its gendered assumptions enables female-authored fiction to break out of the same ‘single, binding, universal history of the body’ that Kroker talks about, removing some of the gendered expectations of such terms. Yet, the process is messily implicated with many of the issues it seeks to overcome.

Viewing the history of the human and the textual body together shows a shared journey in breaking out of this mould and a shared tendency to reinvigorate and transform the ideas and tropes that previously reigned. The specific significance of Egan’s work lies in her reclaiming and repaving of both postmodernism in her echoes of DeLillo and twisting of literary tropes, and also digital and cognitive theories in her representations of the digital structures embedded within contemporary society. This thesis will uncover how Egan takes ideas about the body, technology, and fiction further than her literary predecessors, and will enact an active extension of the critical field, via a study of the transformation of embodiment in her fiction.

## Chapter 1: The Human Body

‘After such a trauma, Charlotte,’ he warned, ‘restoration will always fall short of perfection.’

‘I was never perfect,’ I said. ‘In fact, I’m expecting some improvements on the original.’

(Egan 2001: 36)

In this brief extract from Egan’s *Look at Me*, the novel’s main character Charlotte Swenson reveals her attitude towards her appearance after a car crash that caused severe injury to her face and body. In the exchange between Charlotte and her plastic surgeon, Egan depicts opposing assumptions about the human body and its significance. On the one hand the body is perfect in its original form, and the surgeon’s intention is to repair it as closely as possible to this standard, while assuming this goal is impossible. On the other hand, Charlotte views the body as a flawed starting place, ready to be improved by all available resources. This contradiction exemplifies the way Egan interrogates the variable relationships between humans and their bodies, pointing to the significance of each character’s own idea of bodily perfection and to diverse contemporary public discourses on this topic to which these humans are subject.

The human body is a central concern at the heart of Egan’s fiction. Her first publication *Emerald City and Other Stories* features eleven short stories, which mainly depict narratives of consumer culture and the aestheticization of female bodies. A common thread in these narratives is the centralising of the body, particularly the female body, as a product with fluctuating value. From Bernadette in ‘The Stylist’, whose ‘own body comes as a surprise’ because she spends her days dressing slim models, to Catherine Black in ‘Passing the Hat’: ‘a tanned, buxom woman in her late twenties (the authenticity of whose breasts [are] immediately questioned)’ (Egan 1993: 60, 100), the bodies in these stories are continually drawn attention to and displayed as if for appraisal. Egan depicts the body as a space of intersection where conceptions of self meet social judgement and external expectation. This remains true across all of Egan’s subsequent fiction: bodies are examined as social products, technological partners, personal histories, and records of trauma.

This chapter discusses depictions of the human body within two of Egan's earlier novels—*Look at Me* and *The Keep*. This is a crucial starting point for my thesis as the shared centring of the embodied human experience in these novels cements the value of the body in Egan's fiction and begins a trajectory of experimenting with flesh that continues into her later work. Before I discuss Egan's inclusion of digital and technologised identities, determining the value of the unextended human form in these texts reveals the stakes that are at play later when the body becomes altered by technology. Through analysing the important role of the body within the human experience, the consequences of removing or ignoring embodiment will become more evident. This awareness will contribute to readings of Egan's later work and to charting the overarching journey of the human body and identity within her fiction.

In order to fully communicate the value placed upon bodies in Egan's work, this chapter utilises cognitive and posthuman theories regarding embodiment and sensory experience in its analysis. Using these models not only in the examination of technologically augmented bodies but in the study of unextended bodies allows me to establish that Egan's writing places particular importance upon sensory experience, aligning with critical perspectives which endorse the body as an active participant in the experience and performance of identity. My analysis applies these theories in close readings of Egan's fiction in order to argue that Egan's texts similarly depict the body's key role within her character's experiences and development.

N. Katherine Hayles consistently asserts that the experience of the human body contributes to the definition of the human, emphasising these important contributions of embodiment in order to warn against the potential 'erasure of embodiment' (Hayles 2012: 4) within some conceptions of posthumanism, and most prominently in the distinction of transhumanism from posthumanism as 'a belief in human enhancement through technoscience that dreams of transcending embodiment' (Leitch 2018: 2325).<sup>24</sup> Hayles repeatedly emphasises this fact in her work in order to highlight the dangers of not valuing embodiment when considering the technological future of humanity. I include this facet of

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<sup>24</sup> Hayles's own conception of posthumanism embraces the contributions of embodiment, but she points to the common dangers in other ideations of the posthuman—such as an 'uploaded consciousness' that does not inhabit a body.

Hayles's work in this chapter to emphasise the contributions of embodiment within Egan's fiction, showing that Egan highlights the impact of bodily form within her characters' experiences. Further, my analysis explores how Egan depicts the body as a contributor to cognition—a concept endorsed by Andy Clark in his extension of cognition to bodily senses and external action. Clark's theory of extension ultimately claims that the brain can adopt technological abilities, but this is reached first through a unification of brain, body, and environment—viewing body and mind as co-dependent rather than distinct and separable (as in a cartesian model). I more fully unpack Clark's idea of technological extension in chapter 2, but first wish to establish an extended view of cognition which includes body and world as participants in cognitive processes. Clark endorses the 'Embodied Mind Thesis' (EMT), which insists that 'minds profoundly reflect the bodies in which they are contained' (2012: 1999). This highlights the body as formative to cognitive processes, opposing 'Body Neutrality', which states that the characteristics of bodies make no difference to mental activity and is associated with the idea that the mind is a program that exists in abstraction from the body. Lawrence Shapiro similarly endorses EMT, suggesting that 'embodied cognition is simply the recognition that such larger systems exist, that is, that the areas of circles that circumscribe cognitive systems include regions outside the brain' (2019a: 5). In this chapter I focus on the body's place in this larger system, pointing to how Egan's characters reflect Clark's assertion that the 'body is the point at which willed action first impacts the wider world' (2012: 206).

Hayles's *Unthought* (2017) also speaks to this argument, a book which outlines the unconscious communication between body and conscious mind in which bodily action exists before or outside of mental processing, creating 'a kind of sensory or nonverbal narrative' (Hayles 2017: 20). In *Unthought*, Hayles seeks to dispel 'the perception that consciousness and advanced thinking necessarily go together' (2017: 9): a perception with 'millennia of tradition behind it' (2017: 9) and which is 'rooted in anthropocentric projection' (2017: 9). Instead, Hayles argues that there is a level of cognition that operates beneath alert thought and which performs 'functions essential to consciousness' (Hayles 2017: 10). Calling this 'nonconscious cognition', the role of this mode is to determine sensory priorities so that the conscious system will tend to the most significant inputs

first, and to filter out non-essential sensory information ‘to keep consciousness, with its slow uptake and limited processing ability, from being overwhelmed with the floods of interior and exterior information streaming into the brain every millisecond’ (Hayles 2017: 10). Essentially, this mode of cognition maps its environment and prepares sensory information before consciousness comes online, in order to enable consciousness to operate efficiently. I argue that this mode of cognition, defined by Hayles in 2017, can be seen in Egan’s 2001 and 2006 novels where individuals seem to be informed by sensory pattern before they cognitively process their situations. I pull out the emphasis on embodiment underlining these theorists’ larger arguments in order to argue that the state of the fleshy body is a foundational concern within Egan’s fiction and that the bodies of her characters represent and contribute to their mental states.

This chapter queries the authenticity of Egan’s depictions of embodiment and body-mind co-dependency—this question is complicated by the manufactured nature of constructing ideas and experiences of authentic bodies. Egan’s characters often interact with their bodies and with sensory experience in a detached manner in order to fabricate authenticity: such as Charlotte in *Look at Me* falsely describing the details of the car crash that she cannot remember. In *Understanding Jennifer Egan* (2021), Alexander Moran takes Dean MacCannell’s concept of ‘staged authenticity’, used by MacCannell to analyse the curation of tourist experiences, and applies it to the characters in Egan’s fiction.<sup>25</sup> Moran argues that ‘Egan’s fiction is full of characters trying to experience something real, something authentic, and then never being quite sure when or if they have reached what they were looking for’ (2021: 7), pointing to the distorting lens of technology disconnecting images of authenticity from authentic experience. Moran’s insightful adaptation of this phrase summarises the contradiction of curation within Egan’s texts: the fact that planning and managing authenticity immediately renders the experience inauthentic. Moran’s argument connects one of the major influences on Egan’s work, Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image: A*

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<sup>25</sup> Moran traces Egan’s concern with staged authenticity from the figure of the tourist to the effects of digital technology on contemporary life (*Understanding Jennifer Egan*, 2021).



*Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961),<sup>26</sup> to this reproduction of authentic experience through technological means—viewing technology as a natural magnifier of these events ‘planned for the purposes of being reproduced’ (1991: 11). I expand this idea of ‘staged authenticity’ in my analysis of the bodies in Egan’s work, which contain a similar contradictory desire to be viewed as authentic through synthetic processes. Egan’s characters’ reactions to injury and bodily failure mimic this process of staging authenticity and often prioritise external perceptions of bodies: such as photographer Spiro cutting his models in order to display real blood, and the virtual copy of Charlotte Swenson’s body that viewers believe to be real.

In this chapter I firstly unpack the part that the physical, sensory body plays in these novels in order to demonstrate that embodiment is a central interest of Egan’s fiction, and is key within her characters’ experiences and development. *Look at Me* and *The Keep* both value sensory engagement with the world as a method of meaning-making and of self-preservation, showing a reliance on bodily ability not just as secondary information but as a partner to cognitive action. Hayles’s work is particularly important in this assessment, not only in her early notions that the body is an essential component in the definition of the human, but in her recent work on nonconscious cognition, ‘the cognitive capacity that exists beyond consciousness’ (2017: 9). While published after these novels by Egan, Hayles’s concept is eerily present in certain scenes of physical and cognitive interaction, particularly within *Look at Me*, and enables an especially body-centric reading of cognitive processes.

The second and third sections of this chapter address authentic and broken bodies in turn, asking how this essential requirement of sensory ability affects compromised and underperforming bodies within each text. The anxiety over physicality that this requirement creates reveals definitions of bodily authenticity which challenge bodies to somehow prove themselves—again epitomised in Spiro cutting the faces of his models rather than using fake blood.

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<sup>26</sup> Egan has said that her interest in Boorstin ‘arises from [his] usefulness for interpreting image culture - a fixation of mine, and a topic I doubt I will ever exhaust in my work, since it continues to evolve and proliferate with every year’ (in Rouverol and O’Riordan 2021: n.p.). Boorstin’s influence contributes to many postmodern readings of Egan’s work in this separation of the image from the real—in line with Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 1991).

Establishing these requirements placed upon bodies in this first chapter again contributes to later analysis of technologised and upgraded bodies within Egan's fiction.

While divided into these subcategories of sensory, authentic, and broken bodies, an overarching thread uniting this chapter is the idea of ageing. Progressing from adolescence, through adulthood, and finally to elderly and dying bodies, Egan depicts the body as a dynamic form, not a fixed state. This adds another layer to the assessment of the body's contributions to identity, aligning bodily development with the emotional and mental maturity that is associated with ageing. Through presenting us with characters who are in vulnerable physical states—such as puberty, illness, and injury—Egan uses the body as an access point to foundational, character-building life moments. My chapter loosely follows this process of ageing and changes to physicality, using significant timeline moments as access points through which to assess the condition of identity alongside the condition of the body.

### **Sensory Bodies: Building Humanity**

In *Look at Me* and *The Keep*, Egan depicts a dependence upon the physical, sensory body in order to create and sustain identity, aligning with theories of cognition that undermine the idea that a 'humanlike mind' could exist without a 'humanlike body' (Clark 2011: 200). Within these novels, Egan details how the body is crucial to human experience by paying attention to the layers of sensory action that the body uses to engage with its environment, as well as the process of computing that sensory experience into cognitive pattern. Through prioritising the body as the threshold for communication between mind and world, these novels uphold the value of physicality by depicting the lived experience of the human body that is so central to the characters of both *Look at Me* and *The Keep*. Egan's prioritisation of physicality paints the human body as an active participant within cognition: enabling, processing, and storing the individual's experience of their environment.

Scenes of physicality and the lived experience of the human body in these texts act as personal histories of sorts, detailing bodily reactions to environments and events and giving the body an authority to narrate individual experience. This

bodily account is especially important in *Look at Me*'s depictions of adolescence and early sexual experience, which Egan foregrounds as important periods of identity formation.<sup>27</sup> As Kenneth Millard points out in *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, 'adolescents are important because of the ways in which they are at the forefront of social change, even while they are simultaneously the products of an adult social culture that shapes their development' (2007: 1). Millard's observation highlights the significance of depictions of adolescence in fiction, which especially in the bildungsroman model typically involve tales of boys becoming men.<sup>28</sup> Egan's focus in this novel upon girls entering adulthood amplifies the ways women shape and are shaped by their social culture. The specific involvement of the body in these personal experiences prioritises the level of physical experience in foundational moments of identity development and maturity. While Egan's novel focuses on two central characters, both named Charlotte, this notion is particularly resonant in scenes where Charlotte Swenson remembers her youth and the experiences shared alongside best friend Ellen Metcalf (Charlotte Hauser's mother). *Look at Me* describes both characters' early encounters with sexuality and reveals the way that the girls' bodies admit desires and inhibitions that were not consciously realised beforehand.

Charlotte and Ellen bond over situations in which the common thread is their bodies' unexpected responses to physical encounters. After the sexual advances she makes towards Mr Lafant prove successful, Charlotte comments that 'a wave of revulsion roiled through' her when he 'seized the back of [her] head and shoved [her] towards his groin' (Egan 2001: 20). This wave of revulsion prompts

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<sup>27</sup> Adolescence is also a central concern of Egan's first novel *The Invisible Circus*, where ideas of coming-of-age and female sexual awakening are again important to the narrative. The way that this novel reflects on the 1960s is further significant as Millard notes that 'The 1960s is typically characterised as a period when the radical challenges of the 'counterculture' were made to the social institutions of the United States', and that that fictional depictions of adolescence in the 60s thus 'suggest ways in which the contemporary United States was coming of age as a nation in the 1960s' (2007: Chapter Two, 2).

<sup>28</sup> Millard explains that: 'Since its inception in Germany in the eighteenth century, the bildungsroman has traditionally been understood as a male genre. From *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) to *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Dale Peck's *What We Lost* (2003), coming of age has been associated with the story of how boys become men. As a result, Barbara White believes that critics 'have tended to ignore female experience and universalise the experience of boys' (White 1985: 15), and Elizabeth Abel argues that 'while male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to realise their expectations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever' (Abel et al. 1983: 7)' (in Millard 2007: Chapter Five, 1).

her to express a change of heart and quickly escape the scene, shouting ‘No, no!’ and causing Mr Lafant to rush her out of the car and swiftly depart. Ellen later reveals that she was cajoled into performing the same act that caused Charlotte’s revulsion and was so internally disgusted that ‘[she] threw up. All over him and on the bed’ (Egan 2001: 21). Ellen could not control her instinctual physical response to the situation, and her body expressed her true distaste and reluctance. In both scenarios, physical reactions act as warning signals and escape routes and play an active role in provoking awareness. This sense of pre-consciousness brings to mind Hayles’s idea of non-conscious cognition, a term explored in *Unthought: the Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (2017),<sup>29</sup> published sixteen years after Egan’s novel. Hayles claims that ‘most human cognition happens outside of consciousness/unconsciousness’ (Hayles 2017: 5) and that ‘nonconscious cognition operates at a level of neuronal processing inaccessible to the modes of awareness’ (Hayles 2017: 5, 10). Here she confirms the idea that there is a type of cognition which Hayles terms nonconscious cognition that operates without conscious awareness, in which the individual may interact with the world in a way that informs cognition before the brain is consciously aware of the exact details of the interaction and their contributions to cognitive activity. As mentioned in my earlier summary of nonconscious cognition, one of its primary roles is to synthesise relevant sensory information; there is an element of protection in this role, and this is the central parallel within Egan’s novel where a cognitive response before/beneath advanced thinking operates in order to alert and protect these individuals.

Of particular relevance to *Look at Me* is Hayles’s assertion that ‘the cognitive nonconscious [...] can create a kind of sensory or non-verbal narrative’ (Hayles 2017: 10). In Charlotte and Ellen’s experiences we see an absence of a conscious narrative; instead there is a sensory narrative that exists before the girls are consciously aware of their desires and physical reactions. This reflects the idea that nonconscious cognition ‘comes online much faster than consciousness and processes information too dense, subtle, and noisy for consciousness to comprehend’ (Hayles 2017: 28). The girls are alerted to their discomfort through these involuntary bodily responses, sharing gut reactions of distaste, physical

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<sup>29</sup> Hayles first addressed this concept in a 2014 paper ‘Cognition Everywhere: The rise of the Cognitive Nonconscious and the Costs of Consciousness’.

recoil, and dissatisfaction. In this way, the body creates a narrative through direct sensory experience that has not yet been consciously collected and processed by the brain. Egan's focus on the place of physicality in emotional responses and the realisation of desire centres the body in the process of identity formation, showing the ties between physical and mental processes. Embodiment as the mind leaking out into the body and world (Clark 2011: xxv), is quite clear here, as unnoticed hesitations manifest in physical responses towards events occurring to, and outside of, the body in this act of unthought. In a demonstration of Clark's observation that 'environmental engineering becomes self-engineering' (Clark 2011: xxviii), Egan depicts a process in which neural activity depends directly upon the body's engagement with external sensory information in order to create mental awareness, which bypasses online consciousness and allows action to take place seemingly before the brain can process this stimuli.

Quite a different result occurs in an unexpected moment of connection between Ellen and Charlotte:

Ellen floated on her back, water pooling around her breasts, and no one had ever looked more beautiful to me. I reached for her. It was as if she had known I would, as if she'd reached for me, too. We stood in the water and kissed. Every sensation of desire I had ever known now amassed within me and fought, demanding release. I touched her underwater. She felt both familiar and strange—someone else, but like me.

(Egan 2001: 24,25)

Opening with the sense of sight, 'no one had ever *looked* more beautiful to me', this passage echoes Donna Haraway's desire to 'insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere' (1990: 188). Vision in this passage is the stimulus for the following action and use of other senses (touch), thus positioning it as an authority within this depiction of

embodiment. In her reflections upon the figure of the cyborg,<sup>30</sup> Haraway explores how vision has come to signify the ‘unmarked positions of Man and White’ (1990: 188), seeking to reinstate an embodied, feminist objectivity toward the senses. Egan’s prioritising of vision as the introductory sense in this passage enables just such a reclaiming of this conquering gaze. Instead of revulsion and nausea warning the girls of their internal distaste for the situation, as in previous episodes, in this scenario physical desire confirms their enjoyment. Again, the body reveals consciously unrealised desires, but this time in a positive sense. The ending focus on touch, and Ellen feeling ‘both familiar and strange’ reflects the position of physicality not only as a companion to personality, but an active component in realising and enacting desire. Feeling, which is at once both a tactile sense and an emotional experience, is the perfect word to reflect this overlap between body and mind. Hayles’s work on posthumanism discusses feelings as ‘murmurs from the body’, in which she refers to Antonio Damasio’s statement that ‘feelings constitute a window through which the mind looks into the body’ (Hayles 1999: 245). This statement plays on the duality of physical and mental experience and suggests that feelings play a unique role in allowing the mind to engage with and understand the workings of the body. From this position the body in the scene above ‘murmurs’ and, when necessary, it shouts to the mind in order to reach cognitive clarity—Charlotte’s desires ‘[demand] release’, alerting to the desire through vision and responding with touch. This again creates a nonconscious sensory narrative, demonstrating the subliminal cognitive dependence on bodily modes of awareness.

Through displaying the active part that the body plays in expressing dissatisfaction and pleasure, Egan highlights the developing harmony between body and mind as part of the personal development that occurs during adolescence and thus centralises this balance as a part of a maturing identity. This period of adolescence is particularly valuable to observing the part embodiment plays in identity. Niva Piran’s sociological study, which charts the experience of feminine embodiment from early childhood through to adulthood,

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<sup>30</sup> Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* is a study of ‘odd boundary creatures - simians, cyborgs, and women - all of which have had a destabilizing place in the great Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives’, which asks how ‘our ‘natural’ bodies [can] be reimagined - and relived - in ways that transform the relations of same and different, self and other, inner and outer, recognition and misrecognition’ (1990: 2).

claims that ‘late adolescence comprises a time where embodied journeys may diverge’ (Piran 2017: 148). At this crossroads, the details of embodiment are magnified as the choices that adolescents make impact their relationship with their bodies as they move into adulthood. Piran’s study goes on to claim:

Important differences exist between experiences of embodiment in early and late adolescence. [...] In addition, there are increased fears associated with the body, related to sexual violations and to concerns regarding social exclusion, based on one's appearance or sexual behaviour.

Most women engage in body journeys that aim to shift, and even counteract, adverse body-anchored experiences in the physical, mental, and social power domain.

(Piran 2017: 148)

The focus upon embodiment as embedded within fear and power increases its centrality in the adolescent process. Charlotte and Ellen are not only awakened to unrealised desire, but to the value of their own bodies, learning to trust their sensory instincts and to use their physicality to read and navigate within new environments. The two girls thus begin to engage in this ‘body journey’ to reclaim power and authority, using physicality to express desire and autonomy rather than adhere to social expectations. This reinforces the way that Millard writes about fictional depictions of adolescence as dually enacting social change while being products of existing adult culture. The focus on adolescence and early experiences in this realisation speaks to the process of progress, foregrounding embodiment as an essential part of not only being human but becoming human, reminding the reader that bodies are ever-evolving ‘expression[s] of genetic information and physical structure’ (Hayles 1999: 29).

In highlighting the centrality of these sensory experiences to the individual, Egan foregrounds the interactions between body and world as priorities for her characters. There is a reassertion of traditional hierarchy in this, as rather than the human form dominating the wider world, the world contributes to the formation of experience, cognition, and identity.<sup>31</sup> This concept is most evident

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<sup>31</sup> This reassertion of hierarchy reflects the deprioritisation of the human endorsed by posthumanism in response to humanism’s ‘faith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers’ of the human (Braidotti in Leitch 2018: 2331).

when a disruption to the senses is depicted as a hindrance to identity, a block that limits human experience and cognitive processing—indicating that the human form is not a closed and independent landscape. *The Keep* opens with a scene depicting this kind of sensory disruption: ‘The castle was falling apart, but at 2 a.m. under a useless moon, Danny couldn’t see this’ (Egan 2006: 3). Here we have another example of Egan undermining the primacy of the male gaze, by restricting the dominance of Danny’s vision.<sup>32</sup> Reducing the capability of the male body through the restriction of vision is an inversion of the power given to the female body through vision in the excerpt of *Look at Me* examined above. While Charlotte’s desire for Ellen is realised through vision, Danny’s desire is obstructed by a lack of vision—his first journey to and view of the castle is disrupted by the darkness that hides the visual details of the building and the path to points of entry to the property. This darkness therefore prevents a full awareness of his surroundings and removes Danny’s control over his environment. In this case, the world fails to play its part in embodiment; the moon is useless because it does not provide an adequate amount of light for Danny’s eyes to view his surroundings and realise the reality of the derelict castle. Body, mind, and world are prevented from working together and embodiment cannot fully perform as a partner to cognition. Without sight, Danny’s other senses are used as substitutes, this passage focuses specifically on using sound—the crunching of the leaves under Danny’s feet, and the flapping and scuttling amid the trees—as well as smell—‘a smell Danny didn’t like: the smell of a cave’ (Egan 2006: 10)—to make his way through the dark landscape. Yet, without this primary visual data, Danny is ‘moving blind’ (Egan 2006: 4), working with an incomplete sensory narrative which impacts on his safety in his search for the right path to the keep: stumbling and falling as he makes his way through the unreadable landscape.

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<sup>32</sup> Furthering the alignment of vision with female desire and power, the moon (blamed here for the poor light restricting Danny’s vision) is often treated as symbolically female. This symbolism of the moon as feminine has a long history in literature and culture. ‘The moon is usually thought of as “female,” primarily because of its passivity, but also because of the similarity of the lunar month and the menstrual cycle’ (Biedermann 1989: 224). Some literary examples include Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* (1888), ‘The moon’s an arrant thief, / And her pale fire she snatches from the sun’ (Act IV scene 3, lines 2150-2151), and Richard Aldington’s 1915 poem ‘London’ which likens the moon to ‘a pregnant woman’ who is walking ‘cautiously over the slippery heavens’ (in Ford 2012: 523). In her poem ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ (1961), Sylvia Plath refers to the moon in the sky as her mother.



This example elucidates the interaction of body and world within cognitive operations that persuades me to read Egan's characters as representative of embodied cognition. Lawrence Shapiro outlines how this embodied approach differs from other ideas about cognitive contributions:

Most cognitive scientists view cognition as the product (in some sense) of the brain. And although many philosophers agree with Putnam (1975) and Burge (1979, 1986) that among the determinants of mental contents are features of the world outside a subject's brain, they continue to believe that the cognitive processes that operate on these mental contents remain fixed between two ears. But what if this last assumption is wrong? What if the brain constitutes only part of the apparatus from which cognition emerges? What if the body, brain, and world act as components in a larger mechanism in service of creating cognition?

(Shapiro 2019b: 4)<sup>33</sup>

Egan's novel reflects this view of the brain as only one player in the cognitive process, and understanding of the body and world as equally valuable contributors. *The Keep* continues to pay attention to the conditions of all contributors to embodiment, expressing direct links between sensory and cognitive abilities. There is a particular focus on the sense of smell within this novel; Egan writes that 'Danny always paid attention to smells because they told the truth even when people were lying' (Egan 2006: 36). Here sensory ability is defined as a process of superior meaning making, of testing and making sense of the wider world. This interaction between the human and the sensory world relies on a working, intact human body able to engage with all senses perfectly and translate these findings into cognitive facts. This assumption draws particular attention to Howie's statement: 'I have a lousy sense of smell. Sometimes I think it's a blessing' (Egan 2006: 41). Not only is Howie unable to literally detect lies, but he sees this as an advantage, preferring to remain unaware of deception. Although Howie does not himself make the connection between his lousy sense of smell and obliviousness to falsity, Danny's prioritisation of smell as a method of forging reliable meaning highlights this incapacity by pointing to a diminished component within the creation of

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<sup>33</sup> This quotation comes from a response to aspects of Andy Clark's theories of cognition. Shapiro's entry in *Andy Clark and His Critics* does not oppose all, or really any, of Clark's ideas, his primary point of difference is seeing the Special Contribution Story (SC) as more compelling than the Larger Mechanism Story (LMS).

embodied cognition. Furthermore, the revelation later in the novel that Howie has been deceived by his wife and close friend,<sup>34</sup> adds to this connection between smell and truth, as Howie, without a trustworthy sense of smell, remains in blissful ignorance of any deception. Howie's comfort with his sensory incompetence reflects the conflict between these two characters as their sensory abilities reveal their very different priorities and methods of navigating the world. These scenarios of sensory disruption demonstrate the reliance of human cognition on a participatory human body and a world willing to cooperate. The limitations placed on Egan's characters show their abilities are compromised without such a body and world and create animosity between individuals with different relationships toward their bodies. Egan's characters therefore rely on their embodied abilities to engage with the world, emphasising an 'intuitive understanding of the body as the common and persisting locus of sensing and action' (Clark 2011: 207), in which the body guides and protects through its sensory abilities.

Egan embeds this relationship between identity and physicality in not only the present moment and the new experiences of her characters, but she reveals the part that sensory experience plays in the creation and storage of memory, and the continuity of identity that is created through accessing memories as a form of engagement with the past self. Memories themselves become sensory experiences in Egan's texts, not just reminding the individual of past senses but actually activating certain parts of the body and engaging with them in the replaying of the past. Hayles describes the process of memory creation as 'the transfer of informational patterns from the environment to the brain' (Hayles 1999: 104). This focus upon environmental experience in building memory relies upon an experiential body to interact with its physical environment and communicate these interactions to the brain where they are received and stored as informational patterns.

In *Look at Me*, memories are described as deeply physical experiences, 'like being hit, or kissed, unexpectedly' (Egan 2001: 9). The body is intimately involved in both the original creation and the reliving of a memory, as sensory

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<sup>34</sup> Danny discovers that Howie's wife Ann and close friend Mick are having an affair, while Howie has 'no idea he'd been fucked over by his wife and best friend' (Egan 2006: 110).

actions act as both a stimulator for activating the memory and are also important in the details of the memory itself. Charlotte's description of her hometown draws heavily on such sensory details:

In moments I found myself drenched in early childhood impressions of Rockford: a lush, sensuous world of sticky green lawns and violent thunderstorms, mountains of glittering snow in winter.

(Egan 2001: 11)

Charlotte's childhood memories are made vibrant and affecting through the many layers of sensory experience. The memory is characterised as a 'sensuous' experience that Charlotte is 'drenched' in, this sense of immersion is amplified by invoking numerous senses simultaneously: touch ('sticky green lawns'), sound ('violent thunderstorms'), and sight ('glittering snow'). The mind is overloaded with informational pattern, charged with processing multiple strands of abstracted sensory experience that alone are not so overwhelming, but which create this resultant sense of stimulation and awe when they are re-experienced all at once.

As well as being an integral part of experiencing memory, embodiment proves to be an important tool in theorising memory and processing unknown events.

When Charlotte first describes her accident, she states that:

In my memory, the accident has acquired a harsh, dazzling beauty: white sunlight, a slow loop through space like being on the Tilt-A-Whirl (always a favourite of mine), feeling my body move faster than, and counter to, the vehicle containing it. Then a bright, splintering crack as I burst through the windshield into the open air, bloody and frightened and uncomprehending.

(Egan 2001: 3)

Yet, Charlotte quickly admits that 'The truth is that I don't remember anything. The accident happened at night [...] I hit the brakes and my face collided with the windshield, knocking me out instantly' (Egan 2001: 3). Like Danny's experience in the opening pages of *The Keep*, the darkness of night again restricts ability and awareness; even before becoming unconscious Charlotte's memory of the accident is limited by these visual conditions. This false memory allows Charlotte to mentally process the accident through constructing an image

of what could have happened to her body during this time, using existing sense memory such as the movement of the Tilt-A-Whirl to fill in the blanks. The focus on overpowering senses—harsh, bright lights and sudden jumps from slow to fast movement—erase the confusion of this period of time, filling in the darkness and stillness with light and movement. Adam Kelly’s assessment of Charlotte’s retelling of the accident as a ‘notably filmic representation’ (2011: 400) amplifies its constructed nature and the intentional purpose it holds in returning her autonomy of experience. While not being able to control what happened to her body is unfortunate, it is acceptable to Charlotte. Yet, having no knowledge of her physical conditions is not. The key here is that the link between the mind and body is disturbed, and therefore some knowledge of the sensory input, even if false, is reassuring. This depicts an intentional cultivation of memory through a collage of specific sensory experience in order to maintain the inter-dependency between mind and body.

In *The Keep*, Egan again depicts the manipulation of physicality to evoke a particular effect. The end of the novel shows Holly visiting the castle she read about in Ray’s story, and she describes the materials sent to her by Howie’s hotel:

The hotel sent me a packet of stuff I haven’t had time to open in the rush of getting out. Or maybe I’m saving it. The envelope is really a flat shallow box made of creamy paper. When I break the seal I smell vanilla, spice. Inside the box are a few square cards printed with brown ink on that same creamy paper. The first one

**Anticipation: You are almost here. Which means you’re on the verge of an experience that will send you home a slightly different person that the one you are right now.**

(Egan 2006: 234)

The hotel’s gifts prioritise the sensory experience of opening the letter. Touch, sight and smell are particularly catered to in this process: the slender shape of the parcel, the materials used, and the carefully chosen scent that is added. We might note here the irony of the value placed upon scent, as Howie (owner of the hotel) has a self-professed lousy sense of smell and thus here curates a sensory experience that he himself cannot fully appreciate. This irony highlights the constructed nature of this manipulation of senses, which Howie can organise

while remaining himself unaffected, distancing himself from the consumer. This construction of senses encourages the emotion of anticipation, the idea of change and waiting for an uncertain realisation. The change that is supposed to occur is within the individual, a change in self-perspective and personal identity.

Instead of constructing a false memory, this careful curation of sensory experience encourages the individual to consider a future in which they return home a 'slightly different person'. The method used to induce this change is through altering the individual's relationship with the sensory world, removing their usual sensory distractions and focusing solely on their own body:

The keep is an electronics- and telecommunications-free environment. Close your eyes, breathe deeply: you can do it.

Forget about getting dressed. We've provided loose, comfortable clothing that looks the same rain or shine, day or night, no matter who wears it, so you can look at other things.

Remember- you're here to talk to yourself, not each other. There is no need for greetings or even eye contact. You have the rest of your life for that.

(Egan 2006: 234, 36, 37)

Staying at the keep is a sustained meditation on the lived experience of the human body, a 'detox' from external distractions and a reminder of the significance of the human form. Senses are again used to create a version of the past, but this time it is not an individual scenario that is revisited or recreated, but a relationship between mind and body that has been overwhelmed and distorted. The keep claims to meet a need for self-realisation and reconnection, and takes this quite literally by encouraging its guests to reintroduce their mental and physical identities, placing the blame of identity crisis on the separation of the two. This idealises the fleshy human form as the source of humanity, proposing that an extended period of abstinence from social and technological interaction will recalibrate the individual's sense of self and remind them of the fulfilment that comes from interactions between mind, body and world. Focusing on reclaiming the original purpose of the body as the place where identity occurs in the experience of mind meeting world recalls Clark's image of the body as a Heideggerian Theatre of sorts, 'the place where it all

comes together' (Clark 2011: 217), combining the physical input of world with the processes of the brain. In *The Keep*, all senses are able to come together when external distractions are removed, allowing the body to become a landscape on which physical ability and cognitive processing are brought together.

Physical bodies also take on this role of unifying components of selfhood in *Look at Me*, which prioritises the aesthetic form of the body as the basis for defining and communicating identity. This obsession with visibility is evident in the novel's very title: a command demanding attention to individual appearance. This seemingly straightforward demand, 'look at me', is complicated by Charlotte's questioning of self within the novel and her multiple visual forms: her physical body, the airbrushed photographs, and the virtual recreation of her body. This multiplicity undermines the primacy of vision as the defining marker of identity—which image *is* Charlotte? The opening lines of the novel show Charlotte considering her own visual status in the world:

After the accident, I became less visible. I don't mean in the obvious sense that I went to fewer parties and retreated from general view. Or not just that. I mean that after the accident, I became more difficult to see.

(Egan 2001: 3)

Through altering her appearance, Charlotte's accident disturbs the visual place she occupies in the world and creates a barrier of recognition between herself and the wider world—a review of the novel observes that 'she tries to claw her way back into the glossy Manhattan fashion circle, but finds her new face no longer passes muster' (O'Grady 2011: n.p.). The shattering of this aesthetic casing means that the threads of Charlotte's identity have lost their anchor; to return to Clark's image, there is no place (or, multiple places) for 'it all' to come together. Appearance is displayed here as an unreliable goal of identity maintenance, yet one promoted within the world of *Look at Me*, established as a verifier in a very similar manner to the sense of smell in *The Keep* being tied to truth. The inherent inauthenticity of linking appearance and identity is realised when Charlotte's looks change and she as an individual becomes more difficult

to identify. Yet, Charlotte learns that her relationship with her appearance was broken even before the accident:

I still didn't know what I looked like. I'd spent as long as an hour staring through the ring of chalky light around my bathroom mirror; I'd held up old pictures of myself beside my reflection and tried to compare them. But my sole discover was that in addition to not knowing what I looked like now, I had never known. The old pictures were no help; like all good pictures, they hid the truth. I had never kept a bad one [...]

Now I'd made a new discovery: bad pictures were the only ones that could show you what you actually looked like. I would have killed for one.

(Egan 2001: 40, 41)

Charlotte is desperately seeking to discover a sense of self through an understanding of her appearance, attempting to find proof of her original body and claim it as an expression of her identity. Her inability to do this because of her practice of discarding bad photographs means she only has access to the manicured, edited version of herself that she used to present to the world and does not actually know what she looked like. This makes trying to find remnants of her old face in her new, altered one fruitless, widening the disconnection she feels between her internal personality and her external form. Through this image of trying to match identity to an authentic host body, Egan continues her work of stitching mind and body together to produce human identity. This rip in the seam of humanity exposes the fundamental part that embodiment plays in creating and sustaining the human experience. Without a reliable physical form with which to associate herself, Charlotte's identity experience is fractured, and she cannot reconcile the past and present versions of herself.

Charlotte's photographs and the packet of gifts in *The Keep* both depict an intentional effort to recreate the conditions of embodiment. Both acts acknowledge the contributions of bodily input, 'tying human thought and reason to the details of human bodily form' (Clark 2011: 204) and attempting to correct a failure within this relationship between thought and form. The anxiety over physicality and sensory health shared between these novels reflects the stability of identity within each character, pointing out barriers to embodiment and problems in mental identification with their own form. Through detailing the

tools and processes of the body which inform the concept of selfhood, Egan prioritises an unobstructed body as the place where humanity is created at a physical, experiential level, yet barriers to accessing all bodily abilities often complicate this. Centrally, Egan foregrounds the body's role in contributing to cognition, rather than merely enacting mental will, noting the interactions between body and world as a unique cognitive conversation which then leads to self-awareness and identity building.

### **Authentic Bodies: Proving Humanity**

The important role that physicality plays in these novels leads to a hyper-attention towards the flesh and the anatomical details of the human form. Bodies that manipulate the composition of the flesh or admit deficits are consequently scrutinised, such as Howie's lousy sense of smell indicating a flaw in his character, and Charlotte feeling unable to return to her old lifestyle and career because of her altered body. Arthur Kroker's work on body drift is useful when considering expectations placed upon bodies. Body drift is the idea that 'we no longer inhabit a body in any meaningful sense of the term but rather occupy a multiplicity of bodies' (2012: 2), such as bodies that experiment with gender performance, labouring and protesting bodies which challenge ideas of class and power, and technologically augmented bodies. Kroker explains that this drift has the power to cause political issues within conceptions of the body, such as how 'the rise of religious fundamentalism is itself challenged in turn by the new body politics of gay, lesbian, [...] and transgendered persons' (2012: 1). In this example Kroker identifies the issue arising when attempting to apply one fixed definition or conception of the body, precisely because this no longer exists. This issue becomes evident within Egan's texts: where bodies that have changed (drifted) are governed by strict codes that do not allow for such instability. Published in advance of Kroker's *Body Drift* (2012), Egan's novels similarly reveal the social and political issues relating to conceptions of the body through depictions of bodies undergoing and resisting 'drift'. Within *Look at Me* and *The Keep*, Egan's fictional worlds consider such deviations from the governing codes as illicit or inauthentic; this scrutiny of false bodies leads to a focus on seeking out examples of intact flesh, and a fetishising of the vulnerability of the human form. This scrutiny of bodies reflects the humanist expectation of a universal and natural image of the human form and enacts



critical reflection on this viewpoint as a method of control and discrimination. As Braidotti writes, ‘humanism’s restricted notion of what counts as the human is one of the keys to understand how we got to a post-human turn at all’ (in Leitch 2018: 2332).<sup>35</sup> Egan’s fiction reveals characters suffering from enforced guidelines on how bodies should look, feel, and act, which erase the truths of individual experience and bodily difference. Both *Look at Me* and *The Keep* share the objective of cultivating authentic human bodies and experiences by setting their own requirements for proving bodily purity. Bodies in each novel are asked to measure up to these custom demands and are framed as inauthentic or corrupt if they fail in this task.

*Look at Me* upholds blood and flesh as signifiers of bodily purity, the text’s focus upon aesthetic changes and physical trauma places quite a high status upon the vulnerability of human flesh and upholds the visibility of this fragility as a signpost of authenticity. Explicit descriptions of bodily pain and injury are therefore centralised for their verification of this authenticity, marking the human experience as one defined by an awareness of the weaknesses of one’s own form. Charlotte is made painfully aware of her own weakness through the severe injuries sustained in her accident, and the arduous process of recovery that follows. The loss of her original appearance is not only a loss of aesthetic identification, but also a loss of an intact body, which is replaced by a form that has proof of its weakness permanently embedded in its new features. Charlotte is constantly aware of the reconstructed nature of her face, seeing falsity in the hidden adjustments and ‘imagining [she] could feel the sharp little screws under [her] skin’ (Egan 2001: 162). Yet, while Charlotte sees falsity in her altered face, others see truth. Photographer Spiro counters Charlotte’s anxiety over her new face, saying: ‘No, but see, it’s real now, you know?’ [...] ‘It’s like all that prettiness has burned off and you’re left with something deeper. Just the very bare essentials’ (Egan 2001: 175). Spiro claims that Charlotte’s injured face is more real because it admits the inner workings and weaknesses of her body, shattering the ‘smooth surfaces concealing darker processes of decay’ (Kelly 2011: 394). Charlotte’s visage then reveals the potential harm that all human

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<sup>35</sup> Further explaining the result of humanism’s viewpoint, Braidotti says that ‘in so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as ‘others’. These are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies’ (in Leitch 2018: 2332).

beings are constantly at risk of, disarming the false security of their own unbroken skin and unharmed bodies.

This act of visual discomfort becomes especially interesting in *Look at Me's* society of aesthetic awareness and commodification, wherein this action of exposing the vulnerability of flesh becomes a performance in itself. Keen to exploit the violence embedded in Charlotte's skin, Spiro attempts to include her in a photo shoot that involves cutting the skin of his models' faces. Unaware that Spiro has become known for this new trend of drawing and displaying blood, Charlotte is reluctant when she is expected to let him add more injuries to her face. Begging to use fake blood instead, 'the word 'fake' induced a collective flinch, as if [she'd] used a racial slur. 'Fake is fake,' Spiro said' (Egan 2001: 179). This objection to falsifying the blood frames authenticity as the key to the idea as a whole, underlined by Spiro's plea: 'I'm trying to get at some kind of truth here, in this phony, sick, ludicrous world. Something pure. Releasing blood is a sacrifice. It's the most real thing there is' (Egan 2001: 179).

Spiro believes that the distractions of the modern world have made authentic experience rare and is looking for a way to regain this purity. He concludes that cutting into the flesh is the only way to attain this authenticity, slicing through the layers of products and editing and revealing the messy, vulnerable, real flesh that lies beneath. Falsifying this act with fake blood goes against this integral goal of upholding reality in an industry accustomed to artificiality. Yet Charlotte views Spiro's obsession with blood as making the exploitation of models particularly literal and concrete, pointing out the twisted nature of intentionally harming a body:

'It's too bad Oscar didn't call you when my face was mashed to a pulp last August,' I heard myself say. 'Every bone was crushed, you would have loved it.'

Spiro released my arms. 'She doesn't get it,'

(Egan 2001: 180)

Having experienced real bodily trauma, this staged version is perverse to Charlotte for its unnecessary mutilation of a healthy body. Epitomised in her words 'this face has already been through so much' (Egan 2001: 180), Charlotte

insists that flesh is not a plaything to be manoeuvred for performative effect, and that doing so is an act of irreverence against the sacredness of flesh. This again echoes the fears that Kroker highlights in body drift, where those who hold onto one conception of the body fear the destruction of meaning alongside the destruction of bodies.

Charlotte's refusal to participate in Spiro's shoot forces a replacement into the role. The act of cutting this girl's face is described in detail:

Gently, Ellis lifted the blade to the girl's brown cheek, then dipped one corner under her skin like a swimmer testing the water with a toe, The girl flinched, but didn't make a sound. With delicacy and swiftness, Ellis pulled the blade through her skin, [...] Blood dropped from the wound, and at the same time, tears rose in the girl's eyes and spilled at the corners. 'Lily!' Spiro said. 'Get those tears.'

Lily darted over and dabbed at the girl's eyes with a tissue.

(Egan 2001: 181)

Like Charlotte's false memory of her accident, this description is almost filmic in its attention to detail and for the staged nature of each action. The moment of crossing the boundary of skin is highlighted in particular by the image of testing the water, which focuses upon this transgression between levels: entering into the realm of flesh by crossing the shoreline of skin. Most significant in this extract is the removal of the girl's tears, as through this action Spiro blots out the body's natural reaction to injury and makes the act of bleeding a purely aesthetic form. Tears as a reaction to pain signify physically the instant non-conscious reaction to bodily harm; the text again unknowingly enacts Hayles—revealing the awareness of pain and bodily experience which bypasses conscious will and the girl's efforts to remain emotionless. Therefore, Spiro's erasure of tears promotes a view of the body as purely physical, removing this symbol of cognitive interaction and interpretation of this world-body-brain conversation.

The patriarchal implications in this control over the female body, including inflicting intentional harm to it, enacts Haraway's notion of the binaries of domination in which white capitalist patriarchy is the root of what Haraway

terms ‘the informatics of domination’.<sup>36</sup> Among the many dualisms Haraway proposes are mind/body, male/female, and active/passive. *Look at Me’s* scenario draws clear division between these dualisms, putting authority in the hands of the active male mind over the passive female body in this aestheticizing of pain. Further power binaries are incorporated in the use of the Korean model (who everyone calls Kim as her name is too complicated) when Charlotte is unwilling to enact Spiro’s vision, emphasising race as another informatic of domination and positioning the brown female body as more manipulatable, with less power to refuse.

The precision planning and management of the amount of blood and the way in which it falls perfectly reveals the concept of staged authenticity brought to the fore in Moran’s *Understanding Jennifer Egan*. Moran notes that the perpetual quest for authentic experiences in Egan’s fiction goes hand in hand with the technologies that seek to meet this demand (2021: 7). This scenario, however, reveals a form of staged authenticity within human action and flesh which presents itself as not reliant on technologies—refusing to use props or photoshop to create the bleeding effect (while ironically depending on technology as the recorder and distributor of the images, and embracing photo editing for the use of beautification). The notion of the human body as a commodifiable object fuels expectations of authenticity and allows flesh to be controlled in this manner. Further, the chasm between the desire for raw, authentic pain and its curated depiction exemplifies David Shield’s definition of reality hunger as desire for the ‘seemingly unprocessed’ (2010: 3)<sup>37</sup> as Spiro’s image is intended to provoke a feeling of spontaneous reality in the viewer while its creation is steeped in artifice. Far from removing the layers of falsification, Spiro extends the commodification of the body to the internal flesh by framing it as purely aesthetic and easily manoeuvrable. Blood becomes yet another beauty product,

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<sup>36</sup> From Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*: ‘certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals - in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/ made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man’ (1990: 177).

<sup>37</sup> Shield’s 2010 text *Reality Hunger* argues that contemporary culture is obsessed with ‘reality’ precisely because we experience hardly any, and urgently calls for new forms that embody and convey the fractured nature of contemporary experience.

signalling further external control over the body rather than an exposure of humanity through bodily vulnerability.

In *The Keep*, a pure body means removing the flesh form from the distractions and pollution of technology. As mentioned in my discussion on building the human experience, Howie's keep claims to provide self-realisation through a technological detox. Brain and body are reintroduced through removing the barriers of technology that interrupt the unity of embodiment by directing attention to digital matters instead of physicality. This therefore paints technology as a corruptor of embodiment, framing the integration of digitality into everyday life as a pandemic threatening the human form and experience.

Howie views his project as an opportunity to return to a time where technology was not such a distraction, claiming that past generations experienced the world in a more vivid and engaged manner:

Think about medieval times, Danny, like when this castle was built. People were constantly seeing ghosts, having visions—they thought Christ was sitting with them at the dinner table, they thought angels and devils were flying around. We don't see those things anymore. Why? Was all that stuff happening before and then it stopped? Unlikely. Was everyone nuts in medieval times? Doubtful. But their imaginations were more active. Their inner lives were rich and weird.

(Egan 2006: 44)

Howie's theory is that imagination has become restricted and diluted by the distractions and devices of the modern world. By outsourcing imagination, technology has replaced the creative responsibilities of the brain and humans have become less independently creative. Howie's version of the keep is an antidote to this issue, a return to the conditions of the past that allowed imagination to flourish. A primary concern in his vision for the project is therefore the removal of digital distractions:

Danny: You want the hotel to be about silence?

In a way, yes. No TVs—that's a given. And more and more I'm thinking no phones.

*Ever?*

If I can make it work.

(Egan 2006: 44)

This construction of a space void of digital noise creates a vacuum that the guests alone must fill, encouraging them to engage with forgotten imaginative abilities and thus recreate the ‘rich and weird’ inner lives that Howie claims have been lost. This exchange between Howie and Danny also highlights the ubiquity of technology through the implied challenge of removing it; Danny’s shock at the idea of a ban on TVs and phones, and Howie’s uncertainty that he can ‘make it work’ indicates the deep level to which technology is ingrained into the daily lives of most individuals.<sup>38</sup>

The aversion to technological dependence in *The Keep* leads to a fixation with bodies that are free from this addiction. Howie’s opinion that past generations benefited from their lack of technology produces a fascination with bodies that represent this past, and the lost imaginative skill that Howie mourns. Just as Spiro claims that he is recreating authenticity in his photography, so is Howie attempting to create a sense of truth in a phony, distracted world. Returning to this state is the goal of the keep and is a process that begins before the hotel is open for patrons. Through being forced to live without the technology that he is used to, Danny begins to experience some of this digital detox, and mirrors what Howie describes in the vivid imaginations of medieval times. Danny’s visions are concerned with the Baroness, the only living member of the von Ausblinker family who originally inhabited the grounds and the only remaining link to this history.

Focusing on her physical form, Danny’s encounter with the Baroness describes her appearance as fluid and changing upon approach:

She stood in one of the pointy windows, and she was gorgeous the way any blonde is if you look at her from far enough back.

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<sup>38</sup> This challenge of removing television and technology from daily life also evokes the ingrained nature of technology within contemporary fiction, stemming from the legacy of postmodern works such as DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984) which chronicled the invasion of television into American life and fiction.

That was the baroness at fifty feet.

Closer in, Danny realised the girl was no girl: she was a woman [...] her arms were long and white and a little soft toward the shoulders, and her blond hair swayed down from her head in a way that seemed styled. And she was waving, that was the best part. Inviting him in.

That was the baroness at thirty feet.

Another door was straight ahead, heavy and thick like it was left over from centuries ago. [...] Danny could tell she was older than he'd thought—some of what he'd taken to be her features turned out to be makeup arranged in the shapes her features should have had and maybe did have once [...]

That was the baroness at fifteen feet.

With every step Danny took, the lady aged—her blonde hair whitened out and her skin kind of liquefied and the dress launched and drooped like a time-lapse picture of a flower dying.

(Egan 2006: 79, 80)

This scene shows the baroness's body admitting its true age as Danny walks deeper into the keep. The correlation between the ageing body and Danny's position within the building proves important as he journeys from the window, which borders the outside world, to deep within the keep itself, passing through doorways 'left over from centuries ago'. Danny's vision connects the baroness's physical body to the history of the keep, realising that it is not merely a place of death and decay but that 'the body has a history'<sup>39</sup> (Rossini 2017: 154) and is a landscape that has seen generations of life and change.

The condition of Danny's own body as it detoxes from technology allows him to experience this rich and weird sight, seeming to prove Howie's hypothesis that the creative abilities of the human have been stifled by technology. However, the question of authenticity is again central, is Danny's vision reliable or delusional? The vision of the youthful Baroness is entirely comprised of

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<sup>39</sup> In this statement Rossini points to 'the discursive construction of bodies, addressing not only the histories and practices of the disciplining of unruly bodily behavior but also the potential for resisting and undoing negative images as well as for the making of more positive and (self-) empowering constructions of diverse forms of the body', noting Simone de Beauvoir's and Michel Foucault's work on gender and sexuality as forming cultural histories of the body ('The Corporeal and Material Turns', Rossini 2017: 154-57).

experiences of sight, with no inclusion of smell (the denotation of truth in this world). The baroness's true form is only revealed after Danny walks up the stairs of the keep, which 'smelled of dust and standing water' (2006: 80), signifying age, decay, and a stagnancy. Other senses are then incorporated, notably the 'feel of her hand [...] twigs and wire floating around in the softest pouch of skin he'd ever touched' (2006: 80). This contrasts the sense of youth and vibrancy that characterise Danny's visual encounter, and suggests an inauthenticity within Howie's attempt to replicate conditions of the past. It is particularly relevant that Danny, perhaps Howie's biggest critic, becomes obsessed with the baroness: a character Howie dismisses and attempts to get rid of—overlooking the one authentic link to the keep's past in favour of his commercial project to sell an imitation of this history. Danny's prior ambivalence about the historic grounds and the difference between medieval and modern lives ends here when he views the embodied expression of this history performed by the baroness's body. The baroness paints herself as this vessel of history, stating that the blood of all eighty generations of von Ausblinkers runs in her veins (Egan 2006: 83). She explains:

Now their bodies are dust- they're part of the soil and the trees and even the air we're breathing this very minute, and I am all of those people. They're inside me. They are me. There is no separation between us.

(Egan 2006: 83,84)

The baroness claims to have retained the link to the historic, creative past that Howie believes most of the world has lost, embodying Hayles's statement that the body is 'the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history' (Hayles 1999: 284). Hayles's addition that ignoring the significance of this history is naïve then points to the importance of Danny's realisation that the baroness is a physical representative of this history. The focus on being an embodied representative of past lives again centralises the physicality of identity, implying that the historic line lives on as long as the baroness remains alive to represent them. The keep, and she who resides there, is a pocket of the world that has been untouched by technology's grip and therefore holds the last trace of authentic humanity and untarnished cognitive ability.



Sharing a hyper-attention towards bodily form and systems determining the purity of bodies, *The Keep* and *Look at Me* centralise their verifications upon the materiality of human form, focusing upon the details of skin, flesh, and blood. Both these novels, therefore, react with shock and fear to fleshless bodies, regarding the replacement or lack of flesh to signal an absence of human identity. In *Look at Me*, this view centres on the modelling industry and the perfection of aesthetic form. It is epitomised in Abby's perspective of Los Angeles:

The people out there have no souls. They're not really people - they've got plastic in their faces, their legs, their breasts. Even the men, they put it in their calves to give their legs a better shape. I mean, these are not human beings in the traditional sense.

(Egan 2001: 376, 77)

Her appraisal of 'fake' bodies is entirely based around the cultivated opinion that bodies are defined by their flesh, the imperfections and vulnerabilities an innate part of the human experience. This attention to image associated with LA again highlights the filmic approach to bodies within this text, focusing upon the marketisation and visual perfection of the external layer of the body, rather than the condition of the interior flesh. These bodily recreations mirror Hayles's nightmare of a posthuman world where bodies are regarded as fashion accessories; limbs becoming replaceable appendages in order to keep up with trends rather than functional expressions of human ability and identity (Hayles 1999: 5). In this perspective, methods of improving or updating the body are cheats that undermine the purity of the flesh and go against the definition of humanity, thus rendering them 'not really people'. Just as Spiro's bloody photo shoot violates the sacredness of flesh, the self-construction and perfection of flesh allows the body to become increasingly commodified and framed as a purely aesthetic form.

Similarly, while an excess of flesh in *The Keep* is admired, like a 'thick gorgeous robe' (Egan 2006: 172), the absence of flesh is incomprehensible, a horror that the characters are forced to confront in their exploration of the passageways below the keep:

skeletons, lots of them—on the floor, piled against the walls, some with bits of stuff around them that might have been clothing. They lay in the positions they'd died in, arms stretched out, yellow skulls angled up toward the bars as if they were still hoping someone would show up and let them out. Their eye sockets were huge, like flies' eyes, and their grimacing jaws were jammed with teeth. Danny knew what a skeleton looked like, but that was no preparation. His mind went numb, not believing it. It had to be fake. He wanted it to be fake.

(Egan 2006: 190)

This confrontation with the remnants of bodies forces Danny to realise the reality of death and the inevitable end to embodiment. The skeletons' bare bones are only a reminder of the missing flesh that should be there, filling the hollowed sockets that eyes would conceal, and supporting the garments that have turned to indistinguishable rags. Danny's disbelief and desire for this scene to be fake indicates the discomfort that comes from encountering the true vulnerability and transient nature of the human form. Realising that the flesh that he relies upon to carry him through the world will one day rot and disintegrate is incomprehensible and leads him to confront his own mortality.

We might read Danny's reaction here as a mourning for the body, which is indicated in his instant turn to denial: the first stage of grief. This insistence that 'it had to be fake' reflects his instant inability to accept the scene before him: the bare bones do not offer a hospitable host for consciousness and therefore indicate the end to human life. This grief paints the absence of flesh as the end of humanity, explaining the obsession in both novels with finding and verifying authentic bodies to avoid the loss of the traditional human form and experience. Here, the ancient skeletons represent this end literally and irrefutably through the absence of flesh which demonstrates the lack of life left within each skeletal form. The obsession within these novels of proving bodily authenticity corresponds to this notion that consciousness cannot inhabit a fleshless body, upholding embodiment as the only landscape for the continuation of the human experience through embodied cognition.

## Broken Bodies: Failing Humanity

These idealised concepts of pure and authentic bodies create standards that are ultimately unattainable: ‘bodies suffer damage, grow tired, age, become aroused. All of these bodily conditions influence cognitive operations, diminishing, facilitating, or initiating them’ (Shapiro 2019a: 3). *Look at Me* and *The Keep* reflect upon these bodies that do not work in the expected manner, that fail to meet these expectations and that ultimately break down, consequently altering the relationship between body and mind. The flesh human is celebrated in these novels, and centralised as necessary, yet its failings are equally important in signalling anxieties over incompetent, incomplete, and inauthentic forms of embodiment. While embodiment creates and sustains the human experience, Egan also highlights it as innately weak, flawed, and subject to malfunction. Her depictions of characters encountering the failings of this form that carries them through the world touches upon ageing, illness, and injury, all of which reveal the inevitable end to the human journey in death. The relationship between bodily and cognitive health that Lawrence Shapiro highlights in the above quote is reflected in Egan’s focus upon the tying of self-identification to self-image and the inner conflict that physical injury and failure causes her characters. Between these two novels there is a difference of approach to the inevitable nature of this failure, a transition from attempts to mask weakness and imitate immortality to an acknowledgement of death as an inevitability.

*Look at Me* takes this first approach: masking and repainting bodily failure. The image-focused world of aesthetic perfection that Charlotte resides in certainly plays a part in these efforts; it relies entirely upon her intact body to sustain her career and social status. Her accident and the changes to her form therefore exclude her from this world that she has embedded herself within—one in which the keycard to entry is the face that magazines paid to photograph and print. The injuries that she sustains therefore represent more than a physical danger, but a social exclusion, as her body becomes entirely incompatible with the requirements of her community. The aesthetic perfection of this world then amplifies the failure of Charlotte’s injured body to comply, which is evident in her own descriptions:

My right leg and left arm were sheathed in plastic. My face was just entering the 'angry healing phase': black bruises extending down to my chest, the whites of my eyes a monstrous red; a swollen, basketball-sized head with stitches across the crown.

(Egan 2001: 5, 6)

Charlotte's body takes on its own identity, an angry, monstrous form that defies the limits it previously adhered to. She becomes entirely characterised by the changes that occur in the colour of her flesh from bruising and blood, the swelling which alters the size and shape of her body, and the additions in the form of plastic casts and stitches that cover and distort her features. This, along with the doctor's description of her injuries, such as 'grotesque swelling', and 'gross asymmetry' (Egan 2001: 4), others Charlotte—marking her as alien and other.

The idea of the grotesque, which is a 'structure of estrangement' (Harpham 1976: 462) specifically contributes to this othering, as the distortion of bodily form plays upon the process in which Charlotte's recognisable, familiar image is made unfamiliar through this exaggeration of features. This uncontrollable expansion and distortion of flesh is in complete opposition to the tools of the modelling world, where all is posed and planned; even its ventures into pain and unconventional aesthetics (such as Spiro's bloody portraits) are cultivated and controlled. Geoffrey Harpham writes that 'each age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity' (1976: 463), and Peter Fingesten states that the grotesque 'expresses psychic currents from below the surface of life, such as nameless fears, complexes, nightmares' (1984: 419). These two claims imply a manifestation of core fears and desires within grotesque images. Read in this light, Charlotte's grotesque form does not merely cause her anxiety over her image but reveals the underlying cultural obsession with aesthetic perfection and physical stability. The ultimate threat to humanity that Harpham speaks of is any admission of bodily weakness or failure which would destabilise this.

Mikhail Bakhtin notes that 'exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style' (1984: 303). While Charlotte's body is exaggerated through swelling and bruising, the sense

of excess specifically is also represented in the *additions* to Charlotte's body—the prominent stitches and plastic casts—creating a material excess in the technologies of repair that add texture, bulk, and weight to her body. These denote the conscious and external acknowledgement of injury as contributing to the concept of the grotesque, as much as the physical reaction to injury. Bakhtin's focus on the grotesque exceeding bodily limits, disrupting 'the confines between the body and the world' (1984: 315), is thus expressed through these self-conscious acts of repair which mark Charlotte's body as injured and weak through their attempt to repair and strengthen.

Responses to Charlotte's grotesque, unfamiliar form therefore are to mask the damage and remove any sign of injury and alteration. The beginning of the novel reveals these efforts: 'although I broke virtually every bone in my face, I have almost no visible scars' (Egan 2001: 4). This paradox of retaining no visual signifier of the extreme aesthetic injury that Charlotte endured consistently features within the novel, and it reinforces the concept that the aesthetic packaging is the priority repair. Her doctors and plastic surgeons become her saviours, she describes them as 'surgeons of reality' (Egan 2001: 241)—a heavily ironic phrase that points to a definition of reality which is literally skin-deep beauty—as they re-plaster her outer walls and disguise the signs of both injury and repair.

Yet the reality of the injury remains, it is a constant presence in Charlotte's fixation with hiding the physical proof, and in the unaddressed trauma that the accident brought. This hidden pain reveals itself at times in the novel, such as in this exchange between Charlotte and Oscar:

That old ad! Griffin's Shears.' [...] It's like a ghost [...] A glimpse of New York's shadow face. 'I have eighty titanium screws inside my head,' I said, still watching the sign.

'Don't say such things,' Oscar murmured.

'The bones were all crushed.'

(Egan 2001: 48)

Like the shadow face of New York, still visible in signs from long ago, Charlotte's brokenness and bodily injury exist just beyond the surface of the body she presents to the world. Below her smooth, repaired skin lie technologies of repair that cannot be passed off as natural. These eighty titanium screws that hold together and replace crushed bones are literally holding Charlotte's body together, yet it is the layer of flesh and skin that hides the screws that she most depends upon. Being reminded of this internal reality brings a discomfort, a sense of the uncanny just like the ghost of New York's history that still haunts corners of the city. While one ghostly face brings a memory of the past, both in the time it represents and in the aged materiality of the street sign, Charlotte's face brings some future projection into the present—provoking questions about the future of her own precarious body and of the collective human form. Oscar dislikes Charlotte's reminder that she is not as put-together as she appears, recoiling from this insight and asking her to stop. Even this plea is murmured, as though saying it too loudly would implicate him in the reality of her brokenness. Instead, brokenness is masked, covered up in order to continue to grant authority in this society of perfected surface aesthetics.

To return briefly to the concept of the grotesque, Harpham introduces 'another kind of grotesque character [...] the product of a reductive vision which produces what E. M. Forster calls flatness' (1976: 465). This form of the grotesque perfectly combines with Adam Kelly's reading of this advertisement as the 'postmodern image par excellence, usually connoting for Jameson and others, a free-floating, intensifying, seductive quality' (2011: 408). These combined analyses create a form of postmodern grotesque in their shared concentration upon depthlessness and alienation. Charlotte's skin becomes this reductive, flat, free-floating signifier; abstracted from her inner form because of its artificial, re-created nature. As in 'Baudrillard's celebrated analysis, the endlessly circulating sign is always a copy of a copy, a simulacrum, so that reality morphs into hyperreality' (Kelly 2011: 408), so too is Charlotte's skin a simulacrum perpetuating the cultural refusal to acknowledge bodily depth and weakness and a morphing into hyperreality through its rewriting of her aesthetic form and disguising of her internal state. The contradiction inherent within staged authenticity again comes to the fore within representations of embodiment,

admitting the ever present shadow face through the management and construction of a shiny new reality.

‘Postmodern grotesque’, suggested above, is not a widely established term, though it is used by Brian Crews (2010) in an analysis of Martin Amis’s work. Crews proposes that postmodern grotesque, ‘rather than alluding to an absent normality, has become accepted as the norm itself’ (2010: 641) and offers a ‘new aesthetic of the grotesque, of hybrids which contest earlier conventions and traditions’ (2010: 644). These definitions complement my own use of the term above which highlights the maintenance of a synthetic appearance, prioritising the faux-reality over the absent normality. Crews’s mention of hybrids speaks to the interest in the machine-human relationship throughout this thesis, underlining the meeting of flesh and hardware in Charlotte’s body as material for producing the postmodern grotesque. There is, however, a disconnect between my and Crews’s employment of the term. In Crews’s analysis of Amis, the effect of postmodern grotesque comes from caricature being accepted as commonplace, thus his claim that ‘we now accept the distorted image as the real’ (2010: 648) is represented within satire. The distortion within Egan’s work is not satirical caricature, though it is equally accepted—or perhaps, demanded—as ‘the real’. Charlotte is caught up in a cycle of healing, disguising, and mourning her injured body—it is the process of constructing and maintaining an accepted distortion of reality that creates the postmodern grotesque in Egan’s work.

It is not only in this consumer-driven New York setting that Egan’s novel shows bodily failure being masked and covered up. Back in Rockford, we see the same desire to hide injury as a defence mechanism against judgement. The novel touches upon Ricky, brother to the other Charlotte, and his journey through leukaemia, treatment, and recovery. Ricky is described by his sister as ‘bald and sick and petrified’ (Egan 2001: 66), entirely vulnerable and visually ill. While there is no plastic surgery to hide Ricky’s illness, he relies upon his image and facial expressions to protect himself from judgement.

Ricky beamed back his secret weapon, a face devoid of emotion. He’d learned this trick from Charlotte back when he was going to school with no hair, half his eyebrow gone, a baseball cap over his head and so scared all the time it was like trying to carry a live hen in his arms.

Charlotte told him, ‘No one knows what you feel - no one can see behind your face.’ In the bathroom mirror, they practiced [...] ‘You can hide behind your face,’ she told him, and that’s what he did. That’s what got him through all of it.

(Egan 2001: 270)

In this period of vulnerability, which is particularly signified by the physical difference of hair loss, Ricky controls his place in the world by removing all traces of illness from the parts of his appearance that he can control: his expression. Through presenting a visage devoid of emotion, Ricky removes anyone else’s ability to see how the illness is affecting him internally. It is this barrier to the internal reality—‘no one can see behind your face’—that imitates Charlotte Swenson’s desire to disguise her inner pain and injury. Through constructing these façades of strength, both characters feel able to act as if they are unaffected by their bodily failures.

In *The Keep*, bodily failure is not fully embraced, but it is viewed as uncontrollable and inevitable. Instead of masking injury, as in *Look at Me*, the details of bodily failure are highlighted as an unwelcome reality, always reminding individuals of the eventual permanent bodily failure of death. This is evident in Martha’s description of her own body:

I’m forty-five. My tits are sagging - I own cats, for God’s sake! And now it turns out in vitro doesn’t work for women my age, it’s all egg donor, if that, which means I’ll never have kids or at least not my own kids, and men - young men, especially - basically want to spread their seed. You can’t argue with that, Danny, it’s a biological fact.

(Egan 2006: 68)

Martha sees herself and Danny to be fundamentally incompatible because of the biological difference between them, their ages reveal different abilities and priorities. Her body speaks of its experience and capabilities, there is no suggestion that she might be able to rewrite the aesthetics of her body; even the technologies of physical improvement (such as in vitro) are no match for the destructive power of time: ‘it’s a biological fact’. This shows a clear difference of approach than *Look at Me*, which seeks to cover and reupholster bodies in order to maintain perfection. While Martha expresses disappointment in her bodily state, mourning what will never be, she accepts the condition of her flesh



as it is and customises her life choices to fit the abilities of her body, rather than vice versa, like Charlotte customising her body to fit her desired lifestyle. Here, Egan shows a clear difference in bodily perspective in this novel because, if the characters' bodily states are uneditable, then there are much higher stakes attached to experiencing injury and illness.

These stakes become evident in the reactions to injury within the *The Keep*. Danny's encounter with the Baroness ends in him falling from the window of the keep, resulting in severe injury and a period of extreme tension and fear. Howard and Norah explain the situation to Danny after the accident:

[The Doctor]'s given you some injections to keep your brain from swelling up, which I guess is important for the first twenty-four hours. And meanwhile we've been waking you every thirty minutes to keep you from slipping into something called a 'gripping sleep' or a 'grabbing sleep'—there may be a translation issue there, but I'm ninety percent sure he's not talking about a coma, just some kind of deep sleep that's hard to get out of.

(Egan 2006: 120, 21)

Howard's assurance that the terminology of 'gripping' or 'grabbing' sleep is merely a translation issue acts as a distancing technique, replacing a biological issue with a linguistic one, thus allowing him to ignore the severity of the situation and reassure Danny that he is not as at risk as it sounds. Yet the reality of these terms positions the sleep as the authoritative figure, able to grip and grab Danny and pull him into the realm of unconsciousness. This is another compelling representation of embodied cognition within Egan's work: inverting the brain-body dynamic within sleep and attaching physical abilities of grabbing to this process.<sup>40</sup>

The typically immaterial nature of sleep emphasises that threats to embodiment do not only manifest within physical injuries and limitations. In a reversal of Hayles's writings on how information lost its body in *How We Became*

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<sup>40</sup> It is the brain that controls the body during sleep and which determines the transition between wake and sleep. The brain stem, at the base of the brain, communicates with the hypothalamus to control these transitions; the brain stem also sends signals to the body to relax muscles during REM sleep, temporarily paralyzing the limbs in order to prevent the body from acting out dreams ('Brain Basics: Understanding Sleep' ND: n.p.).

*Posthuman*,<sup>41</sup> the danger here is the body losing its information—threatening to leave a body intact but lifeless. This analysis draws upon Clark’s likening of the body to the corpus callosum,<sup>42</sup> ‘a bridging instrument’ (Clark 2011: 207), because when the body is offline then there is no method of interaction between world and mind. Danny can do nothing to stop this happening; he is individually powerless and can only rely on Howie and Nora’s attempts to periodically wake him and keep him from falling into this grip.

Yet these characters are not completely in control either but are merely hoping for success and healing by chance. The moment when Danny passes out of extreme danger and into safety is marked by surprised celebration:

Howard: Norah, what’s the time?

Nora: One fifty-four.

Howard: Wait—what? He turned to look at her.

Nora: More than two hours. Almost two and a half.

Howard let out a shout: Yes, yes! Danny, you did it! You did it, buddy!

He half fell on top of Danny and embraced him—the warmest envelope of a hug Danny could remember in his life. Howard’s torso covered all of his and the heat from it sank between Danny’s ribs and pulled in around his heart.

(Egan 2006: 132)

The exhilaration and amazement that Howie expresses only indicates the helplessness he felt against Danny’s condition. While Howie exclaims ‘Danny, you did it!’, Danny held no control in this period of waiting for the gripping sleep to claim him as its own. Here, it is evident that death and injury are out of the realm of human control, the immaterial nature of sleep emphasising the lack of physical authority that Danny holds over his fate. This extract is also marked by an unusual method of narration—presented almost like a play script with the list

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<sup>41</sup> Hayles emphasises the need for an embodied virtuality rather than a view of posthumanism that erases the body, stating that ‘when information loses its body, equating humans and computers is especially easy’ (Toward Embodied Virtuality 1999: 2).

<sup>42</sup> Clark justifies this comparison, explaining that the body ‘acts as the mobile bridge that allows us to exploit the external world’ and is thus the ‘go-between that links these two different (internal and external) sets of key information-processing resources’. Thus, he likens the body to the corpus callosum because ‘both are key physical structures whose cognitive role is in part to allow distinctive sets of resources to engage in highly integrated forms of problem solving activity’ (Clark 2011: 207).

of character names and dialogue. This amplifies the paratextual nature of the narrative, as this story is written down by Ray in his prison creative writing class, querying whether this text *is* the same manuscript Holly receives in a big brown envelope and buries in her garden. This narrative mode provides a layer of staged distance complicating the spontaneity of the moment, showing Egan again undermining authenticity at every turn.

The chapter featuring Danny's eventual death is described in ten phases, echoing the different phases of viewing the Baroness from decreasing distances. The eighth stage highlights the moment in which Danny transitions from life to death:

Danny fell backward (Phase Eight), arms spread out like he was trying to catch something huge falling out of the sky. He fell into the black pool and it folded up around him. Howard jumped in too, groping for Danny in the thick water. But dead things are heavier than anything above, and Danny sank.

(Egan 2006: 209)

The phrase 'dead things are heavier than anything above' provides the first indication that Danny is dead. This use of a factual statement to reflect Danny's life status reflects the inarguable nature of death and the fruitlessness of Howie's attempt to reach him. Much like Martha's unalterable bodily state, Danny's death is a biological fact. Yet, Egan does not stop at stage eight; she includes two further stages after the moment of transition from life to death. Stages nine and ten link Danny's story to the writing of Ray's manuscript: in stage ten the two literally meet in an image of the two men seeing each other through a window. Stage nine shows the journey from the moment of death to this meeting, in which Egan utilises images of stairs and doors to highlight this continuing journey and distance traversed:

It was dark and thick and he was falling, sinking, but then he felt something under his feet and realised there were steps beginning at the inside edge of the pool and leading down [...] The stairs went on and on. The water pushed its way into Danny's ears, his eyes, his lungs. But finally, near the earth's molten core, the stairs ran out. When Danny looked up, the top of the pool was the size of a dime, a dime of blue sky. And then Danny saw a door (Phase Nine) and opened it.

(Egan 2006: 209, 10)

Again, Danny's death here parallels his encounter with the Baroness in the keep. Much like how the movement from the window, through the doors, to deep within the building in that scene indicated the historicity of the keep and the Baroness's embodiment of past lives—here the opening of a door in Danny's journey through death allows his narrative to continue after the biological fact of physical death. The understanding of the finality of death and the inarguable nature of bodily failing is still relevant here, as Danny must understand the inability to move backwards and reclaim his embodied existence. Equally, if Danny had not moved forwards, he would have remained stagnant in a place of isolation. Only through accepting his lack of control over the reality of his death is he able to then embark on a new kind of existence. Danny is then granted a form of immortality through Ray telling his story, much like the Baroness representing her entire family history and therefore sustaining their legacy.

In both novels, bodies are a priority for Egan's characters. And yet, Egan constantly confronts her characters with the reality of injury and imperfection and the weaknesses of the human form. Instead of flesh being the dependable expression of human identity, it appears that failures of flesh, which create conflicts of identity, are the only constant of the human embodied experience within Egan's novels. Definitions of authentic bodies vary between Egan's texts, but there is a shared process of verification enforced upon bodies by individuals and groups, creating cultural expectations of bodies that are difficult to meet. Ultimately, as signified in Danny's encounter with skeletons and his journey through death, humans are not superior or infallible but are subject to eventual death and disintegration. Egan's texts point out the exclusions and harm created by a universal conception of the body: which would rather see a synthetic approximation of the celebrated standard than an honest expression of injury or difference. The façade of bodily perfection presented by many characters—especially Charlotte Swenson—extends the metaphor of staged authenticity to Egan's depictions of embodiment, staging acceptable presentations of bodily form to satisfy expectations. However, satisfaction rarely comes from these staged façades—instead fulfilment comes from embracing the connectivity between brain, body, and world, and the transience of embodiment: such as

Charlotte and Ellen's romantic connection, and Danny's acceptance of his own death.

This chapter has thus explored the idea that in both *Look at Me* and *The Keep*, 'the lived body remains the ground not only of individual subjectivity but also of interaction and connection with the world and with others' (Rossini 2017: 155). It has analysed the importance of the body in building identity and examined the need articulated in both texts to prove authentic humanity and the fears surrounding the inevitable failures of the body. Through first establishing the active role that the body plays in provoking and sustaining cognition, these subsequent analyses of authentic and broken bodies are embedded with an added significance. The ultimate conclusion however that bodies are innately subject to changes and injury points out a consistent search for methods of preserving or recreating these healthy bodies. A significant difference was noted between these novels in their reactions towards bodily failure and cognitive crisis: while *Look at Me* welcomes efforts to cover up injury and rebrands the synthetic as authentic, *The Keep* promotes digital abstinence as the cure for restoring embodied ability and views injury and death as an inevitable, terrifying, fact. Having touched upon some methods of repairing and restoring the body in this first chapter, the following chapter will consider technology's place in this search and examine how technology steps in when the body fails.

## Chapter 2: The Extended Body

The camera implanted in your left eye is operated by pressing your left tear duct.

In poor light, a flash may be activated by pressing the outside tip of your left eyebrow.

When using the flash, always cover your non-camera eye to shield it from temporary blindness occasioned by the flash.

(Egan 2012: Section 25, lines 26-31)

Jennifer Egan's short story 'Black Box' does more than extend the narrative world of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*; it proposes a potential extension of the human body by implanting technologies into the flesh of its protagonist. Lulu, a marketing agent in *Goon Squad* who is characterised as being 'clean': no piercings, tattoos, or scarifications', (Egan 2010a: 325) becomes in 'Black Box' a citizen agent with surveillance technology embedded within her body, tasked with using this upgraded body to complete her mission and keep herself alive. The augmenting tools in the text are notable not only for their expansion of bodily abilities, but their integration with the details of the human form and their dependence upon anatomical design: using tear ducts and eyebrows as buttons accessing the hidden tech. Egan's fiction reveals Clark's assertion that 'well-fitted transparent technologies have the potential to impact what we feel capable of doing' (2003: 34), communicating a sense of ownership over technological abilities. The tools, such as audio and visual recording equipment, data storage, and defence mechanisms, are not exterior additions to the human body—coating it in a new façade—but internal implants, fusing with the flesh in an integrated but messy manner. This 2012 Twitter fiction displays a potential future of the human body, a glimpse into a futuristic world. The path to this future body is traced in Egan's other fiction—her novels detail an increasing reliance upon technologies to complete mental and bodily desires, depicting the integration of technological abilities into ideas about human capability. The drastic end point displayed in 'Black Box' is enabled through an increasing acceptance of technological props within everyday life.

Having devoted chapter 1 to an investigation of the contributions of the human body, this chapter develops this discussion to consider the integration of technologies within bodies in Egan's fiction. While I have made it quite clear that Egan's characters invest heavily in their physical forms and obtain much of their identity from maintaining them, it is not true that these characters are completely averse to bodily alteration or improvement. I began to touch upon this concept in my analysis of cosmetic surgery and prosthetics, aids which in *Look at Me* help to maintain an image of perfect, untouched flesh. Yet, Egan's fiction does not merely use technology to manually cover up injury or failures of the flesh, it also engages in something called technological extension, in which mind, body, and external tools work together to extend the abilities of the flesh form.

Andy Clark offers a concept of extension which considers the proposed limits of the human brain and body and asks where consciousness really ends and to what extent external tools can participate in cognitive activities. While traditional wisdom says that the mind cannot exist outside of the head (Colombo, Irvine, and Stapleton 2019: 2), Clark argues in his Extended Mind Thesis (EMT) that cognitive processes and mental states can be partly constituted by external entities (Chalmers 2019: 13). In chapter 1, we have already seen an observation of brain and body interacting in an example of extended consciousness and even the cognitive nonconscious (Hayles 2017). In my analysis of *Look at Me* and *The Keep* I noted the function of the body in contributing to cognitive awareness. Yet Clark proposes that not only brain and body, but external worldly tools can become part of this activity. Examples of extension range from analogue activities such as handwriting—where the act of writing on the page becomes part of the thought process informing what is written—to highly technical processes such as amplifying bodily senses or physical strength through prosthetics. Arguing that humans are in fact 'Natural Born Cyborgs' (the title of his 2003 book), Clark promotes the view that the elastic quality of the human mind means that external props become 'less like tools and more like part of the mental apparatus of the person' (Clark 2003: 7). This perspective blurs the line between biological self and technological world<sup>43</sup> and suggests that integrated

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<sup>43</sup> A line which Clark argues in *Natural Born Cyborgs* 'was, in fact, never very firm' (Clark 2003: 8).

abilities become like brain functions, meaning that the brain takes ownership of an ability, considering it not an external function but part of the mental package. In this sense, technological extension actually extends the limits of human ability, as the boundary of what is defined as human is no longer ‘restricted by the biological skinbag’ (Clark 2003: 4), but instead activity is brought under the umbrella of human cognition through fluency of use (Clark 2011: 37).

This concept of extension intersects with approaches to the human outlined earlier in this thesis: in humanism, transhumanism, and posthumanism. Specifically, technological extension of the human can produce images of transhumanism or posthumanism as both schools of thought embrace the intersection of human and machine. However, while transhumanism promotes human enhancement in continuation of the ‘ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment’ (Wolfe 2009: xiii), posthumanism reconfigures the traditional hierarchy of human and non-human: ‘moving away from beliefs that the human marks a privileged position in the world, posthumanism seeks to demonstrate humans’ continuity with both the biological and the technological domains’ (Leitch 2018: 2325). Thus, a posthuman vision of technological extension opposes utilising technology in order to increase the dominating position of not just the human but the idealised human.<sup>44</sup> Instead, technological partnership should oppose discrimination and enact paths towards equality: such as in Haraway’s vision of the cyborg as a ‘political myth for socialist feminism’ (in Leitch 2018: 2051).

This next chapter will investigate Clark’s theoretical perspective within the bodies, minds, and technologies of Egan’s texts. My primary interest is in uncovering where Clark’s assertion that technology can become transparently integrated into human cognitive activity is present in the technology-soaked societies that Egan constructs. My second task is to consider depictions of failed extension and instances where Egan depicts characters to be at odds with technology. As in chapter one where prescriptive ideas of bodies were restrictive

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<sup>44</sup> This ideal and the discriminations it invites is emblemised in the Vitruvian Man: this ‘abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he. Moreover, he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied’ (Braidotti in Leitch 2018: 2335).



to individual experience, Egan's fiction also shows the risk of technological extension becoming an image of control rather than of the 'socially and technologically embedded' nature of cognition (Clark 2011: 217).

My analysis in this chapter will touch upon four of Egan's works of fiction- *Look at Me* (2001), *The Keep* (2006), *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), and 'Black Box' (2012). This chronology is central to my analysis because, while in her earlier novels Egan was merely satirically speculating about technologies that did not yet exist, by the time she wrote 'Black Box' this technologisation was no longer a joking thought: it had become a social reality. Egan wrote *Look at Me* 'in the 1990s, before Internet use was pervasive. [She] had never been online when [she] imagined a lot of that novel, and [she] was projecting forward into what [she] thought was extreme, goofy satire' (Egan and Saunders 2015: 74). Touching upon each of these novels in the order of their publication reveals the jumps in time and technology and reflects Egan's own developing relationship with ideas of extension and technological embodiment. In this arc I will trace from 2001 to 2012, I argue that Egan's fiction uniquely maps the potential path of embodied technology, each novel representing phases of extension that correspond remarkably closely to Clark's theory. Further, Egan's fiction displays the warning signs of 'bad borgs'—to use Andy Clark's phrase (Clark 2003: 167)—her venture into the future within 'Black Box' detailing the potential terror that may come through using technology as a method of domination. The aim of this chapter is to join the dots between Egan's work, providing a sustained and comprehensive account of her interest in extended embodiment across her fiction by placing these texts side-by-side in my analysis.

Alongside this conversation about cognitive extension and the posthuman form, Egan's fiction traces the legacy of postmodernism and continues to echo and build upon some major concepts of the genre. The question of reality and materiality is specifically relevant to my analysis in this chapter. As Jonathan Beever notes with reference to Jean Baudrillard: 'with the rise of the simulated real, seductive semiotic relationships between signs replace the traditional ontological significance of the signified real' (Beever 2013: 82). This postmodern obsession with simulacra and the inverted relationship between the copy and the real resurfaces in Egan's fiction within this act of technological extension—where the synthetic becomes organic. Investigating the human body through this

postmodern lens also extends chapter 1's investigation of the category of the real, authentic, or worthy human body. Throughout this chapter, then, the chronological consideration of Egan's fiction will also map the disappearance of the real alongside the disappearance of the human, linking Egan's musings on the future of the human form to her place in the future of fiction and as an author after postmodernism. This undercurrent to my chapter only highlights the value of considering Egan's work collectively and of paying attention to the deliberate, sustained development of such themes within her under-discussed fiction.

## Extending the Human

While thoughts of human extension might call to mind extreme abilities such as flight, telepathic communication, or teleportation—such examples paint Clark's theory as a fantastical dream of the far-away future when humans are already experiencing this extension of ability. Much like Hayles' claim that we are already posthuman,<sup>45</sup> Clark details in his work the many ways that humans have already undergone cognitive and physical extension. Clark gives an introductory example of cognitive extension which we might call memory banking, where an individual outsources cognitive responsibilities, locating facts and important information that would usually be stored by the brain in an external physical source. Clark's specific example describes a man named Otto, who suffers from Alzheimer's, and who uses a notebook to store essential information that his brain cannot reliably recall: 'For Otto, his notebook plays the role usually played by a biological memory' (Clark 2011: 227).<sup>46</sup> Here Clark argues that, in cases where cognitive abilities have been compromised, these external sources actually become incorporated into cognitive structures as the brain relies on and expects the tool to operate. The brain does not view the external source any differently than information sources within the flesh; 'it just happens that this

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<sup>45</sup> Hayles makes this claim repeatedly in her work, it is particularly evident in her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) which in its very title explicitly points out that the transition into posthumanism has already occurred.

<sup>46</sup> This case of Otto and his notebook is first used in a paper co-authored by Andy Clark and David Chalmers ('The Extended Mind', 1998), which formed much of the basis for Clark's subsequent thoughts in *Supersizing the Mind* (2011) in particular (the paper is attached as an appendix to the 2011 text).

information lies beyond the skin' (Clark 2011: 227). The parameters of what the brain considers to be its own territory thus expand to include this external tool.

David Chalmers gives another example of cognitive extension in his foreword to *Supersizing the Mind*, one that is perhaps more familiar to the contemporary, tech-savvy individual. Chalmers observes that: 'the iPhone has already taken over some of the central functions of my brain. It has replaced part of my memory, storing phone numbers and addresses that I once would have taxed my brain with' (Clark 2011: ix). Much like Otto, Chalmers uses an external site to relieve cognitive responsibility. While the information is not inside Chalmers's brain, he feels ownership over it because the path of access is practised, reliable, and smooth. Clark observes that we often claim to 'have' the time before actually knowing it because we know that we could access this information almost immediately when required (Clark 2003: 39). Chalmers's iPhone similarly becomes absorbed as his own ability. Retrieving phone numbers and addresses from his iPhone feels much the same as taking a brief pause to recall this information from the depths of his biological brain.

Clark's theory of cognitive extension, therefore, highlights that such props can amplify the existing abilities of the body by tapping into innate human desires and patterns. Because the brain already has the desire to complete the intended outcome, it will instinctively welcome the aid in the process. The prop is therefore not seen as alien, and in this way is brought into the mental process; indeed the brain will subsequently come to expect the use of this aid as it would the use of any nerve signal or limb. These examples highlight the specific definition of Clark's research as a theory of extension, a stretching of the boundaries of human activity and a development of memory capacity. In light of these examples and claims, it is in the more mundane and subtle human abilities that we find examples of Clark's extended mind theory as it exists now—in daily tasks that have been outsourced to technology, or abilities that we have forgotten our bodies cannot complete on their own. We can find these more subtle examples in fiction like Egan's, which offers a kind of 'science fiction realism' (Hollinger 2006: 460)<sup>47</sup> focused on present relationships with

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<sup>47</sup> Veronica Hollinger uses this term to discuss a change in science fiction where technological advances are not as drastic or shocking, representing 'the present as a kind of future at which we've inadvertently arrived, one of the many futures imagined by science fiction' (2006: 452).

technology, rather than the explicitly dystopian or fantastical works that might originally seem more relevant to this theory of human extension.

Clark's example of memory banking is in fact strikingly similar to the moment in Egan's *Look at Me* when Charlotte confesses that she cannot remember her original face without accurate photographs (Egan 2001: 40). In this example, Charlotte relies upon a memory bank that, although inaccurate because it is full of curated images, stores identifying information outside of her flesh body. Prior to her accident, these images merely existed to cultivate the image Charlotte wished to maintain—adjusted to fit the perfected aesthetics of the modelling world. Yet after her accident, with an affected memory and incomplete cognitive data, Charlotte realises her reliance on this physical prop as her self-identification is halted by this unknown factor. If Charlotte had kept the so-called 'bad' photographs of herself, perhaps she would have been more able to come to terms with her new appearance, having this external source of information to complete her knowledge of her past body.

Upon first reading, Charlotte's perfect photographs bring to mind the postmodern idea that the image displaces the real. The sheer volume of airbrushed portraits disseminate a certain image of Charlotte to the world which then becomes the truth as they outweigh the comparably unseen reality of the individual. Labelled one of the 'oddly few successors' of authors like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo (Mishra 2011: 27), Egan brings the ghost or legacy of postmodernism into the new millennium. But she takes this postmodern concept of simulacrum in a new direction: focusing on Charlotte's own construction of self rather than leaving her helpless to the demands of consumerism. Whereas in *White Noise* there is a sense of absurdity in America's most photographed barn, where the focus is on the cameras which obscure and erase the original object, here the many photocopies of Charlotte's face do not erase the notion of an original object, but complicate and contribute to redefining identity. The entire novel is a search for the original object, 'me', and a questioning of whether this truly exists. Charlotte's many incarnations point to the new reality not as technological obscurity but a technologically enabled multiplicity featuring both digital and physical manifestations of self. Egan refocuses on the relationship between the object and individual in this cognitive reliance and external identification of self. This layered example begins to show Egan's characters 'as

a shifting matrix of biological and nonbiological parts' (Clark 2003: 198), their identities and cognitive activities not entirely sealed within the boundaries of their skin.

Egan includes a more critical view of this reliance on external props within her 2006 novel *The Keep*, where a central premise of the novel—Howie's exclusive hotel—is predicated on the very idea that society has integrated with technology to the extent that a technology-free environment is an unusual experience that needs to be engineered within a specific and monitored space. Revisiting the opening passage I analysed in chapter 1 under this lens reveals that this technological saturation is present from the first pages of *The Keep*. It is not just organic or original sensory functions that are limited in this scenario; the text provides evidence of technological extension through other restricted abilities. In this scene, Danny's Samsonite suitcase and satellite dish are unmissable companions on his journey through the woods to the keep:

Then he'd started to walk, hauling his Samsonite and satellite dish a couple of miles up this hill, the Samsonite's puny wheels catching on boulders.

He left his Samsonite and satellite dish by the gate and circled the left tower [...] A wall curved away from the tower into the trees, and Danny followed that wall until woods closed in around him. He was moving blind.

Danny wished he'd brought his satellite dish to the top of this wall. He itched to make some calls - the need felt primal, like an urge to laugh or sneeze or eat. It got so distracting that he slithered back down off the wall and backtracked.

(Egan 2006: 3, 4, 6)

Here, Danny's possessions are depicted as clumsy appendages that accompany him uselessly, more of a hinderance than a help as they weigh him down and trip him up as he walks. Yet the constant presence of the satellite becomes increasingly significant, culminating in the most significant point of its absence—where Danny is unable to remain away from the satellite. It is particularly significant that the moment Danny is described as 'moving blind' comes directly after leaving his satellite dish at the wall—aligning his sensory incompetence with the growing distance between himself and the object. This creates a bond

between external physical tools and cognitive action that further underlines Clark's argument about cognitive extension: that the brain is able to claim external props as its own.

In my first reading of this extract I focused on Danny's visual incompetence. While obstructed by darkness, Danny's eyes remain a notable and alert part of the neural system, and the same is true for these extended technologies. Despite being unable to put his satellite to use due to the inhospitable environment, Danny's primal attachment to the device illustrates that he has brought this piece of technology under the ownership of his own identity and ability. In fact, this frustration over the inability to use a function that his body and brain are used to and turn to like other bodily urges—laughing, sneezing, eating—only serves to highlight the similarity between the disrupted functions in this passage. According to Clark, the defining marker of an extended mind is transparency: the point at which the brain ceases to notice the process of using an extended function and begins to view the action as a product of its own ability. Clark refers to Heidegger's definition of 'transparent equipment' in which the user 'sees through' the equipment (Clark 2011: 10), no longer noticing the boundaries between flesh and external prop. In this passage transparency is achieved, as the text compares Danny's device 'like part of [his] mental apparatus' (Clark 2003: 7) to other organic bodily urges and abilities.

The sense of incompleteness highlighted in Danny's anxiety over being parted from the satellite, of having this natural urge suppressed and disallowed, links back to the concept of a whole and complete body that was seen to be a focus of bodily identification in both *The Keep* and *Look at Me*. The example of memory banking in Clark's argument is also based on this drive to be complete and fully functioning; here cognitive extension steps in as a crutch to aid a brain that cannot adequately store information on its own. This indicates a particular purpose or draw of cognitive extension that is especially significant to my reading of the bodies within Egan's fiction and the mass anxiety about authenticity they depict, one which produces a desperate desire to prove bodily worth and ability. Just as Charlotte turns to aesthetic reconstruction to hide her injuries and present a worthy face to the world, these external props can similarly be read as an effort to perfect the extended embodied experience. *Look at Me*, the text which deals most explicitly with injured bodies and the

process of recovery, utilises extension in an effort to recover lost abilities, to return to the place of bodily competence and authenticity—such as Charlotte’s efforts to recreate her lost face, embedding literal tools such as screws within her very bones. Yet in this text there is a reluctance to increase beyond this original state and incorporate more explicit and fleshless tools, as the focus on bodily purity prioritises the soft flesh and boundaries of skin as the landscape for all embodied action to take place.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, extension in *The Keep* reflects more the technologically saturated world of the characters and the extended abilities that have come to be seen as natural and expected as a result. Specific types of technology are more explicit than in *Look at Me*, with open reliance on these visible, external tools.

Danny’s main attachment is to his phone, and to the satellite which overcomes geographical distance and borders to allow him to contact his New York life while isolated in a small European town.<sup>49</sup> The extent to which Danny has absorbed this tool into his cognitive database is made so explicit in *The Keep* because he is forced into a period of technological abstinence. When finally able to reconnect, he describes why and how this technology is such an integral part of his existence:

The pool stink didn’t bother him now, maybe because he was about to get on the phone. How could a satellite phone affect Danny’s sense of smell? Someone’s probably asking. Well, he’d lived a lot of places since moving to New York: nice ones (when it was someone else’s place), and shitty ones (when it was his place), but none of them had ever felt like home. For a long time this bothered Danny, until one day two summers ago he was crossing Washington Square talking on his cell phone to his friend Zach, who was in Machu Picchu in the middle of a snowstorm, and it hit him - wham - that he was at home *right at that instant*. [...] All he needed was a cell phone, or I-access, or both at once, or even just a plan to leave wherever he was and go someplace else really really soon. Being in one place and *thinking* about another place could make him feel at home, which was why

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<sup>48</sup> Of course, *Look at Me* includes a fascinating look at artificial intelligence and virtual bodies at the very end of the novel—which I will turn attention to in chapter four in the context of disembodied identities. Yet, it is worth noting here that this virtual body is presented as an image of real flesh—again showing that *Look at Me* resists a public acceptance of such technologies.

<sup>49</sup> Egan writes that Howie’s hotel is situated somewhere in ‘Austria, Germany, or the Czech Republic’ (Egan 2006: 4).

knowing he was about to get on that phone made the pool smell seem faint, a thing he'd already left behind.

[...] he started in on the programming, backing up after each dead end: wrong country codes, foreign operators, recordings in languages he didn't know. It didn't matter. He was hearing *something*, he was connected to *someone*, and the joy of that after almost seventy-two hours of total isolation got Danny through the snags with a smile.

An hour later he was punching in the password to his New York voice mail. [...] Danny programmed [it] to route his calls straight into the new phone. Then he set up his new voice mail and started dialling: Zach, Tammy, Koos, Hifi, Donald, Noon, Camilla, Wally. Mostly he left messages—the point was to shoot his new number into as many phones as possible, and getting that done let off a pressure that had been building in Danny for the many hours he'd been out of touch.

(Egan 2006: 63-65)

Immediately notable in this extract is the manner in which technology is linked to Danny's sensory engagement with the surrounding environment—distracting him from the off-putting smell of the pool. As smell particularly is so valued in *The Keep*, anything which would overtake this sense is instantly significant. Smell which, as established in chapter 1, Danny links to truth, becomes diluted and less present when the opportunity for technological connection is available. Danny's primary sense instead becomes this extended ability for connection with the wider world; the truth he is most concerned with is his true extended sensory potential. This connection also evokes the manner in which this extract characterises the technology-soaked society of the novel, as the device is used to maintain community within a global, technologised world. Natural abilities of speech and the baseline human need for community and interaction are extended through this technology which connects across long distances and enables speech to operate in an amplified manner, stretching the already natural human instincts to fit the demands of the contemporary world. As technology meets and extends human needs, Egan's writings also detail the ways that humans adapt to incorporate technology, which is seen here as Danny deftly puts together the machine—human language barriers overcome by an instinctual ability to navigate this technology. The unified language of the age is technology.



The moment which most significantly details the culture of extension within this novel comes in Danny's epiphany that his idea of home constitutes a dual existence—of being in one space while connecting to another. Here it is made evident that Danny's sense of home would not have been possible in any other time period. No past era of society allows for instantaneous technological connection and the ability for some part of the self to exist in two places at once: Danny's voice speaks simultaneously in New York and Peru. It also indicates the need for some form of mediating technology to record and store proof of existence, creating a kind of technological trail through life. It is on this point that the extract ends, on Danny desperately inserting a trace of himself into as many devices as possible: 'the point was to shoot his new number into as many phones as possible', a description that evokes the biological urge of reproduction in a technological spreading of seed. It is not until this moment that Danny is able to relieve the internal pressure he had been carrying around. This admission underlines that technology is not merely an optional, delete-able addition, but has become an essential component within his identity, an essential extension of ability and senses without which Danny is no longer whole.

This first 72-hour period of the novel sees Danny trying to return to a complete state, much like Charlotte trying to recover her past self, with both characters striving to attain what they consider to be full embodiment. Instead of embodiment just referring to the physical space of the human body, however, the ability to extend bodily and sensory experience consequentially stretches the parameters of embodiment to include these extended abilities once they have become transparent and thus claimed by the body, even if they are not organically human. Technological extension thus reveals itself as a fully integrated ability in this fundamental need Danny feels to exist as an electronic voice within the devices of others, fulfilling the potential of his extended body by depositing his voice across the globe. This extract particularly illustrates Clark's thesis that, when extended, our 'sense of our own bodily limits and bodily presence is not fixed and immovable' (Clark 2003: 59). Danny's sense of his own bodily limits is expanded by this integrated technology, enabling him to project his bodily presence outwith boundaries of skin and space, existing in multiple through this redrawing of self, depositing certain expressions of self across locations, tracked and recorded by these mediating devices. This

redefines what makes a body whole and complete, creating new sensory abilities and priorities and reconceptualising embodiment itself. In Danny, Egan utilises an image of extension to represent digital culture and the expectations arising from having instant access to communication and information technologies. Through reconceptualising technological abilities as bodily urges, Egan highlights the absorption of technological abilities into cognitive identity.

## Overtaking the Human

This representation of digital culture through extension is amplified when Egan's characters encounter issues with technologies and in depictions of human-machine partnerships which are destructive rather than productive. For instance, Danny's gut-level connection to his satellite dish dually reflects the integration of this technology into his cognitive toolbox, and also the extent to which he is now dependent on this tool, feeling incapacitated when it is inaccessible. The many descriptions which can be used to illustrate Danny's cognitive and physical absorption of the technology can also be read as an addiction. Until Danny sets up his satellite, he feels a distracting, uncomfortable urge 'that after a while starts to blot out everything else' (Egan 2006: 36)—which signifies that this additional, extended component of his identity has become his ultimate priority. Danny's particular technological addiction reveals the ways that he has utilised extended abilities to construct his own version of reality; his sense of home is dependent upon mediating devices to project his senses across the globe and to facilitate communication at a moment's notice.

It is this redefining of reality that the character Howie contests and attempts to combat, blaming technology for a loss of physical reality:

What's real, Danny? Is reality TV real? Are confessions you read on the Internet real? The words are real, *someone* wrote them, but beyond that the question doesn't even make sense. Who are you talking to on your cell phone? In the end you have no fucking idea. We're living in a supernatural world, Danny. We're surrounded by ghosts.

Speak for yourself.

I'm speaking for both of us. Old-fashioned 'reality' is a thing of the past. It's gone, finito—all that technology you're so in love with has wiped it out. And I say, good riddance.

(Egan 2006: 130)

Howie's criticisms of technology are based on the grounds that they have caused humanity to forget their own abilities and prioritise the talents of computers over that of their own brains. This disappearance of old-fashioned 'reality' in which 'it is the function of the virtual to proscribe the actual reality' (Baudrillard 1997: 453) underlines the postmodern disappearance of the real and echoes my analysis of images in *Look at Me*. Here, Egan seems to take Baudrillard as a starting point, continuing this critical analysis 'of the postmodern condition, [where] real objects - lose [their] connection in postmodernity and become simulacra, signs without real referents' (Beever 2013: 83). Yet Egan combines this idea of simulacra with the 'heavily mediated information society' that this younger generation of writers inherited from the postmodernists who tracked 'its emergent phase' (Kelly 2011: 395). In *The Keep* the truth lost or obscured in postmodernism becomes the real ability and strength of the human brain. As Howie points out: 'The words are real, *someone* wrote them, but beyond that the question doesn't even make sense' as human authorship has been lost to digital dissemination. Crucially, rather than simply repeating observations of 'heavily mediated societies', Egan uses the idea of simulacra to create an ironic image of a man obsessed with eradicating digital disseminations: an inversion of the postmodern trope in which technology is blindly followed. Howie, rather, blindly believes in the power of the human brain:

I've got more faith in your brain than I do in that machine [...] screw the machines. Throw them away. Put some faith in that brain of yours.

My brain can't make a phone call.

Sure it can. You can talk to anyone you want.

Was this guy for real?

(Egan 2006: 128)

Howie is representative of a line of thought that Clark highlights as particularly restrictive: Clark explains that 'what blinds us to our own increasingly cyborg nature is an ancient western prejudice - the tendency to think of the mind as so

deeply special as to be distinct from the rest of the natural order' (Clark 2003: 26). Howie is essentially a caricature of an anti-digitisation salesman who serves to poke fun at this position that the human brain is innately superior to any and all technological innovations. As Clark points out, this point of view clouds the ability to see and participate in productive partnerships with machines: indeed, Howie's influence breaks down established modes of extension within the text.

After a period of technological abstinence forced upon him by Howie's rules, Danny's extended relationship with his devices is compromised:

He was holding out something Danny recognized, but the news of what it was seemed to take a while to reach him. He gaped at the hunk of precious metal in Mick's hand. A cell phone. [...]

It seemed alien, unfamiliar. [...]

Danny couldn't believe it was Martha [...] it seemed too easy, an impossible wish. You thought of someone and then there they were, talking right into your ear? He said, Tell me something that'll prove it's you [...]

Danny just listened. The voice was familiar, no question. But it wasn't Martha. Martha was far away, back in New York.

(Egan 2006: 166-68).

The instinctual affinity with the device and its potential has gone, there is no tangible physical response or sense of connection with the 'hunk of precious metal'. Where once this device created a home for Danny, it is now a source of confusion, seemingly alien. While the phone used to offer an instant extension, it is now reduced to its simple material status, its physical boundaries clear and impassable: a strong contrast to the transparent extension Danny previously experienced. While Howie promised this detox would free Danny and erase the distractions limiting his imagination, instead it compromises the relationships and abilities that relied on this partnership with technology. He expresses paranoia and is unable to be comforted by Martha because he no longer trusts in the technology that enables him to reach her. This ability to disengage (especially if unwilling) from technology does highlight a danger with extended abilities—as the more an extended ability becomes part of an individual's

identity, the more they will be affected by its absence, ultimately incapacitated if the ability were destroyed.

The effect of disappearing technology forms a central part of Egan's 2010 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which is set within the movement from analogue to digital standards in the music industry. In this novel, Egan illustrates the power that technology has to set and alter human expectations and experiences. Bennie Salazar, the music executive we meet at the beginning of Egan's novel, mourns the loss of the old technologies, alongside which he has lost his personal memories and experience of music:

He listened for muddiness, the sense of actual musicians playing actual instruments in an actual room [...] The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was *digitization*, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead. *An aesthetic holocaust!*

(Egan 2010a: 23,24)

Bennie's fruitless striving to find 'muddiness' and echoes of physical reality within this music track creates an uneasiness or uncanniness; the familiar act of analysing a piece of music, which has been his job for decades, is somehow not quite the same anymore. Just as Howie claims that the web has distorted Danny's sense of reality, so too has digitisation removed the markers of reality from this experience, the smoothing out of imperfections erasing all individuality. The relationship with technology that Bennie had perfected and was a core part of his identity, and his income, suddenly changes. While Bennie himself states that in the music business 'Five years is five *hundred* years' (Egan 2010a: 35), referring to the way that trends and preferences change daily, this statement also echoes the way that the advancing technologies work on a different time scale to human expectations and abilities. Humans and technology do not evolve at the same rates, and therefore cannot constantly live in sync with each other. At some point a rupture will come, and humans will be required to recalibrate their relationship with technology. In Bennie, Egan illustrates Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's argument that technologies exist in 'cycles of obsolescence and renewal' (2011: xi). Chun observes that crisis is 'new media's critical difference' (2016: 74), interacting with habit to produce updates that

mark this cycle of simultaneous expiration and advancement.<sup>50</sup> Bennie's position transferring from analogue to digital in a sense marks the beginning of this cycle's amplification, as it is in digital media networks that Chun's cycle proliferates. This moment highlights the information lost between these technologies, as while digital media relies on 'the resuscitability or the undead of information' (Chun 2008: 171), promising the user that their data is endlessly retrievable, the point of digital media's introduction for Bennie incurred perceivable loss. Bennie's position thus symbolises a particular point of crisis produced by this cycle of technological obsolescence and renewal.

Katherine D. Johnston observes that 'critics have noted that September 11, 2001, is at the chronological center of *Goon Squad*, but then so is the launch of the iPod' (Johnston 2017: 166). Linking technological and cultural touchstones, Johnston indicates that both events signify important changes within culture. 9/11 holds a particular place in living memory as the event many see as the marker of change within the political, cultural, and social climate. By aligning this event with the iPod launch, Johnston indicates that technological change holds the same kind of power within Egan's novel. 2001 is also part of the transition out of postmodernism, as the 1990s to many signalled a countdown to its end and the millennium the last nail in its coffin: 'a time when numerous writers struggled through what they seemed to believe were the last days of postmodernism' (Burn 2008: 1). *Look at Me* was published in 2001, but written mostly in the 1990s, so it has a particular place in this transition through the end of postmodernism, and Egan's return to this date at the centre of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* provides a telling return to these issues of cultural, technological, and literary transformation.

Gerard Moorey's observation that, 'like so many others of his generation, Bennie fetishizes the alleged authenticity of pre-digital recordings' (Moorey 2012: 78) ties Bennie's technological preferences to his age and generation. This concept continues throughout Egan's novel; she ties central characters within her separate chapters to their own specific devices and technologies. Chapter 12 of the novel, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses' is written entirely as a PowerPoint presentation, in which twelve-year-old Alison Blake documents her daily life in a

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<sup>50</sup> This relationship is represented in Chun's formula 'Habit + Crisis = Update' (2016: 3).

kind of diary entry. The presentation is focalised through Alison's experience, linking this technology to a twelve-year-old girl's perception of herself, her family, and the world around her. Later on, at the end of the novel, we are introduced to a communication style called T-ing: 'an abbreviated texting code that seeks to free communication from ambiguity' (Moling 2016: 66). 'Can I just T you?', Lulu asks Alex, as she finds this communication easier, and less energy draining: 'It's pure—no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgements' (Egan 2010a: 328, 29). While Bennie finds unedited audio recordings to be the definition of what is pure,<sup>51</sup> Lulu attributes purity to simplified text, sent inaudibly between individual devices. Egan's observation about the technological divide that exists between co-existing generations shows the speeding up of technological advancement, to the point where each generation is characterised by a preferred technological language. In these 'thirteen intricately related chapters [...] Jennifer Egan stages and restages the doomed battle of youth with time, the "goon" of her title' (Coward 2015: 241), marking the generational passage not only by physical ageing and human experience, but by digital time which characterises each generation by their technologies and the gulf that exists between each of these. As Lanier states, extensions to being such as phones and other technologies can 'become the structures by which you connect to the world' (2010: 5,6), a concept which is problematised when the world is divided into different extensions and communication structures due to the rapid rates of technological advancement, with which humans struggle to keep pace.

Again, Egan's texts enact Chun's thoughts on obsolescence: if 'new media exist at the bleeding edge of obsolescence' (Chun 2016: 1), then every next big thing is also the next big bubble (if it's anything at all). To call something new, after all, is to guarantee its obsolescence' (Chun 2011: xii). Similarly, each generation in Egan's text calls attention to the eventual expiration of 'newness', by de-throning the reigning version that came before. Further, Zara Dinnen observes how a disruption in digital standards 'produce[s] the potential for affective novelty to disturb, but this is always a transient potential, which ends through the inculcation of a new normal' (2018: 18). Dinnen's observation that a new

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<sup>51</sup> In the later half of the novel Bennie hears a track that stands out to him, it is rough and unedited, Bennie's response is: 'He's absolutely pure,' he said. 'Untouched.' (Egan 2010a: 321).

normal quickly supersedes the awe of the 'new' is represented in Egan's text through the co-existence of these generations with their own digital preferences. The ruptures are amplified when different preferences meet but are unnoticed by the characters who use each method as default, such as the following misunderstanding: 'nyc, Lulu wrote, which confused Alex at first; the sarcasm seemed unlike her. Then he realized that she wasn't saying 'nice.' She was saying New York City' (Egan 2010: 335). This mistranslation 'mak[es] visible the digital banal, the mode by which we don't see the digital conditions of everyday life' (Dinnen 2018: 18), by shining light on the brief moment of encountering a 'new' structure. The 'guarantee [of] obsolescence' (Chun 2011: xii) is quickly fulfilled within this example as Alex soon sends and receives Ts with ease, even thinking in its shorthand '*Im invsbl*, he thought' (Egan 2010: 340). Other characters in *Goon Squad* adapt less successfully to the new structures they encounter, like Bennie's frustration with digital recording, but all advancements require a reassessment of the established norm, creating moments of 'crisis'—in Chun's usage of the word, where habit is disturbed by some form of an update.

In this examination of the manner in which Egan's characters lives are impacted by the removal or alteration of technologies, it has become clear that technology is influential in the worlds of the texts. The advanced opportunities and abilities have become so ingrained into the fabric of society that Egan's characters are forced to adapt to make room for new technological potential. This idea is pushed to new extremes in Egan's 2012 text 'Black Box', a fiction which was published as a series of tweets through *The New Yorker's* Twitter account over the course of ten days. In this text, technology overtakes not only the social and corporate landscape but the landscape of the protagonist's own body: she is a military spy who has been loaded with surveillance technology within her very flesh. Playing the part of a beautiful, harmless date, she cannot use any external, visible equipment in order to covertly collect information: 'since beauties carry neither pocketbooks nor timepieces, [she] cannot credibly transport recording devices' (Egan 2012: Section 13, line 5).

The agent is forced instead to 'fluidly incorporate new bodily and sensory kit' (Clark 2011: 37), including microphones, cameras, data storage, and tracking chips (Egan 2012: Sections 13-15). These technologies are predominantly



mentioned in the context of instructional information, emphasising the distinct purpose of the equipment and the specific occasions of use:

Your Field Instructions, stored in a chip beneath your hairline, will serve as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work.

Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed) against your left middle fingertip begins recording.

For clearest results, mentally speak the thought, as if talking to yourself.

Always filter your observations and experience through the lens of their didactic value.

(Egan 2012: Section 15, lines 36-42)

This set of instructions defines the agent as essentially a technological tool with a specific goal. Her Field Instructions, significantly located just above her skull, underline that the instructions for her body no longer come from her brain and her own cognitive, embodied experience, but from this embedded chip co-opting her system to disseminate its own signals. Unconscious activities become conscious: mere thoughts become intentional signals that must be appropriately relevant and clear. The agent no longer owns her physical or cognitive abilities, even her sensory experiences are only considered relevant if they provide ‘didactic value’ for future agents. The third command (‘mentally speak the thought’) is particularly significant because it confirms the relevance of the text’s title, which twists the behaviourist concept of the mind as an impenetrable black box. Egan flips this concept and centralises activity within the brain as the core of her text—a wholly mental experience communicating only unspoken thoughts. No external input or response actually occurs (a precise inversion of behaviourism). As well as providing an ironic commentary on this school of thought, Egan’s inversion which prioritises the black box brain then highlights the significance of it being hi-jacked and rewritten.

Amelia Precup observes that in Egan’s fiction ‘the body is central to the narrative; it is the tool for which the instructions for use have been designed’ (Precup 2015: 173), these instructions indicating how to manipulate the body in specific ways in order to activate the wiring hidden beneath the surface. It is

notable that, while the tech is neatly packaged into the body, it is not entirely part of the body because it is not directly connected to the brain—but requires manual activation by other body parts. For example:

A microphone has been implanted just beyond the first turn of your right ear canal.

Activate the microphone by pressing the triangle of cartilage across your ear opening. [...]

Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed) against your left middle fingertip begins recording.

(Egan 2012: Sections 13, lines 7-10, and 15, lines 38-39)

These instructions create an interesting process of using the body to use the body, an entirely flesh-based focus that questions how fluidly the bodily and sensory kit of Egan's character is really incorporated, as the usage of these implanted abilities appears quite complex and manual. While this emphasis on the body is contrary to frameworks in which the brain is identified as the main locus of activity, which both Clark and Hayles oppose,<sup>52</sup> this image does not align with a vision of humans as 'profoundly embodied' and 'technologically embedded' beings (Clark 2011: 43, 217). Where Howie's brain-centric approach in *The Keep* was critiqued through caricature, here a body-centric approach is equally revealed as insufficient. The lack of connection between the agent's brain, body, and the implanted technologies creates an opposition between human and machine, rather than a partnership.

As mentioned in my discussion of Danny's extended abilities in *The Keep*, transparency and fluidity of use are defined as the marker of true cognitive and physical extension. 'A transparent technology is a technology that is so well fitted to, and integrated with, our own lives, biological capacities, and projects as to become [...] almost invisible in use' (Clark 2003: 37). The fact that, in

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<sup>52</sup> Hayles's prologue in *How We Became Posthuman* outlines the tendency to situate all determining activity within the brain, consequentially ignoring the contributions of embodiment, and the impact this has had on common scientific assumptions (e.g. Alan Turing's Turing Test).

In Clark's terminology, this centring of the brain would be called brainbound: the opposite of the extended mind wherein all cognitive behaviour happens within the confines of the flesh brain.

these cases, the technologies are highly visible and require reference to an instruction manual (the Field Instructions), implies that these abilities are not fluidly integrated into the agent's cognitive patterns. Instead they are 'opaque technologies' (Clark 2003) because the details of use are highly visible and the manual mechanics of operation are clearly separate from the individual's mental processes.

David Kirsh, in his personal response to Clark's EMT, also emphasises that 'the physical structures that enable us to enact or co-embody our cognition must be transparent to us at the moment of use' (Kirsh 2019: 132), otherwise extension does not occur. These requirements lead me to argue that here 'Black Box' represents more of the terror of posthumanism that Hayles speaks of, rather than being a positive example of the physical and cognitive extension of a posthuman form. The text evokes this terror by playing with the thin line between thrill and horror, encouraging the reader to 'imagin[e] all those wires, chips, and transmitters grafted onto pulsing organic matter' (Clark 2003: 21). While brains are not separated from bodies, as in Hans Moravec's dream of solely cognitive beings,<sup>53</sup> there is a separation between the body and the technology it contains. This division particularly opposes Wolfe's conception of posthumanism, which emphasises 'the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms' (Wolfe 2009: xv). While the body's abilities are extended, this extension is an artificial addition rather than a cognitively adapted progression or a 'coevolution' between human and tool. The brain is not in sync with the technological capabilities, thus rendering it impossible to be considered, in Clark's terms, an extension.

Finally, while the preservation of the human body and the emphasis on visually unaltered flesh might seem to aesthetically preserve individuality and personality, this is opposed by the technology that seeks to capture only objective information. Any personal reflection or emotional response is ignored by the embedded equipment—'Your pounding heartbeat will not be recorded'—

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<sup>53</sup> This is the example which Hayles states is her nightmare version of posthumanism (Hayles 1999: 1).

or discouraged as input—‘Where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them’ (Egan 2012: Sections 14, line 4, and 15, line 46).

Characterising personal thoughts as an intrusion within the individual’s own body then foregrounds the technology and frames the spy’s body as a storage device rather than a corporeal expression of individuality. Hayles’s pattern versus presence concept is an important reference point for understanding how this extract defines information and the prioritisation of the technology over the human. In *How We Became Posthuman* Hayles writes that pattern refers to information abstract from a material base, with no dimensions or materiality (Hayles 1999: 18). In Egan’s writing, information is depicted as something that can be carried and transported by a material base (the agent’s body) but which does not rely on a specific form: embodiment is entirely incidental. This exemplifies the fact that the human body in ‘Black Box’ is treated as an object for the furthering of the goals and potentials of technology; it does not provide the transparent qualities of extension and in fact actively diminishes the human experience. Egan here uses ideas of technological extension and the posthuman body in critical reflection, depicting the forcefully upgraded body as a method of control which serves the controlling force rather than the individual inhabiting the body.

## Ending the Human

This process of prioritising technological action over human experience in ‘Black Box’ eventually crosses the line from inhibiting embodiment to actively reducing and rewriting the agent’s own identity. In this process, essential components of humanity and the traditional concept of the life cycle are removed and altered, causing ruptures in defining human experience. Not only are the agent’s thoughts, feelings, and observations excluded where they are not relevant to the task, but as the data collected begins to demand more and more storage space within her body, it starts to utilise her own mental space and energy to import information. This depletes the agent’s own resources, rewriting her neural structures to better support these requirements:

You will feel the surge as the data flood your body.

The surge may contain feeling, memory, heat, cold, longing, pain, even joy.

Although the data are alien, the memories dislodged will be your own:

Peeling an orange for your husband in bed on a Sunday, sunlight  
splashing the sheets;

The smoky earthen smell of the fur of your childhood cat;

The flavour of the peppermints your mother kept for you inside her  
desk.

(Egan 2012: Section 35, lines 11-18)

Absorbing this data dislodges personal memories, the technology moves from a detached addition to the agent's body to an active editor, rearranging and deleting components where it sees fit. Further cognitive control is lost because now the technology is not just a separate function operating outside the cognitive loop, but has forced its way in to the structures of the agent's mind and has asserted its authority over these structures.

This data surge is described as a sensory experience, containing 'feeling, memory, heat, cold, longing, pain, even joy', yet it removes important sense memories from the agent's own mind. The moments listed convey the mundane but essential sensory attachments that create a personal history—from weekly routines with a spouse to early sense memories of childhood. These, and likely many more in between, are eradicated, simply lost as a sacrifice in exchange for incoming data. In chapter 1, the analysis of Charlotte's self-constructed memory elicited the power of memory to sustain identity and a sense of self amid trauma. This analysis indicated that, for Egan, memory is an essential part of the embodied human experience, providing a connection to past experiences and past versions of self. Without such memories, without these sensory echoes of who she was before she was overtaken by this job and this technology, the future of the agent's body and self becomes increasingly precarious. Statements made at the very beginning of this text are made manifest: 'We cannot promise that your lives will be exactly the same when you go back to them' (Egan 2012: Section 5, line 16). Surely, the agent cannot remain the same, and cannot live the same life when or if she returns home. This invasion of technology and sacrifice of personal history shows the destruction of cognitive experience,

manipulating both the agent's past and future in this re-writing of mental structures.

Human futures are further addressed within 'Black Box', as the technologisation of the agent's body results in a new understanding of death and the afterlife. Death, typically the only guarantee in life, is rewritten—it is no longer the end of all existence, as the collected data remains:

Remember that, should you die, your Field Instructions will provide a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow.

Remember that, should you die, you will have triumphed merely by delivering your physical person into our hands.

(Egan 2012: Section 43, lines 7-10)

Death is re-framed as a success story, reminding the agent that her body and consciousness are of secondary importance to the data that she must collect on their mission. Bodies are literally disposable, to be delivered into the hands of superiors so that they might be torn apart to salvage the wires and chips hidden within flesh.

Even beyond death, this digitisation extends to a new kind of afterlife. To escape the pain of returning to their bodies, Egan writes, 'Some citizen agents have chosen not to return. / They have left their bodies behind, and now they shimmer sublimely in the heavens' (Egan 2012: Section 45, lines 5-7). This statement describes the ultimate transition from human flesh to disembodied cognition,<sup>54</sup> made possible through the agents' unique physicality. It also completely disrupts the typical human chronology as living forever as a technological signifier provides eternal permanence in a way the human body cannot sustain. Egan writes, 'You may imagine Heaven as a vast screen crowded with their dots of life' (Egan 2012: Section 45, line 12). The collective 'their' refers to all other agents who have given their lives over to technology for the sake of this mission. Using the technology that is the cause of the agents' death to memorialise them reinforces the sacrificial nature of the role undertaken,

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<sup>54</sup> Existence which does not depend upon a material form, usually conceived as living as a computer. See: Hans Moravec's proposed downloading of human consciousness (Hayles 1999: Prologue).

again making explicit that information trumps humanity: ‘Your physical person is our Black Box; without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission’ (Egan 2012: Section 38, lines 10-11). The body is necessary only as a container of information, nothing to do with the human life that once inhabited it. In Hayles’s terms, the human body is merely the vehicle carrying the information pattern. This explains the appeal of an afterlife as a blinking light on a screen—it is a symbol of sacrifice representing the abstraction of identity from bodily form.

The framing of this digital, screen afterlife as desirable and a form of memorialisation calls to mind other descriptions of death in Egan’s fiction. In *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Bosco plans a suicide tour, deciding that he wants to leave the earth in a very specific manner:

‘It’s a Suicide Tour’ [...] ‘I’m done,’ he said. ‘I’m old, I’m sad - that’s on a good day. I want out of this mess. But 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 2010a: 136)

Bosco’s ideal exit from existence is a sensory experience, an audio spectacle that utilises the raw, unfiltered sound that the novel fears might be lost to digitisation. ‘Black Box’ is presented as a kind of sequel to *A Visit From the Goon Squad*; Egan has stated that the agent is actually a future version of the character Lulu.<sup>55</sup> Comparing these two imagined deaths (as neither occur within the texts, and Lulu’s story continues in *The Candy House*) then becomes particularly significant as they exist in the same fictional world, albeit in different generations. As I argued earlier in this chapter, each generation in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* comes to represent a different technological language or preference—an observation that we can easily extend to ‘Black Box’, where the agent literally embodies the advanced level of technology her generation has achieved. This extended timeline thus demonstrates the eventual progression of technology and realises Bosco’s fears of an inescapably digitised world. In this

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<sup>55</sup> One review writes that: ‘“Black Box” propels a character from Jennifer Egan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Visit From the Goon Squad* into the 2030s and a world of citizen espionage’ (Gee 2012: n.p.). This fact is confirmed in Egan’s 2022 novel *The Candy House*, which develops many storylines and characters from *Goon Squad*, including Lulu.

progression, the postmodern disappearance of the real is taken to new extremes—death characterises reality, gives meaning to life and creates the defining borders of human existence. The erasure of the finality of death completely alters the way in which meaning is understood; the disappearance of the human body no longer necessitates the disappearance of neural data if this can be uploaded to immortal technology. This shaking of the defining boundaries of the human experience adds a hardened reality to the postmodern unfixing of meaning and truth.

The endpoint of this chapter demonstrates a drastically different viewpoint of embodied technology than the beginning, where Danny's attachment to his satellite began to indicate cognitive reliance upon and pairing with external devices. Yet, this is not to say that Egan's work builds towards this drastic end to reveal this scenario as an inevitable and inescapable horror, rather that Egan's fiction draws many depictions of human-machine relationships with varying outcomes. Where partnership and coevolution of human and technology occur, productive extension can take place. However, when the two are at odds or when machines are used as a mode of control, individual experience is restricted rather than expanded. Haraway's idea of the cyborg body is helpful in differentiating these examples: 'The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are *they*' (in Leitch 2018: 2064). Egan points out the failure of positions that seek to separate human from machine—Howie's allegiance to the human brain—and that dominate or threaten each other—the body of the agent in 'Black Box'. Further, the instances of animosity between humans and machines emphasise that Clark's vision of the embodied mind cannot be realised in a 'merely superficial sense of combining flesh and wires, but in the more profound sense of being human-technology symbionts: thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological brain and nonbiological circuitry' (Clark 2003: 3). This difference is made clear in Egan's fiction, where the forced insertion of technology without acceptance by and partnership with body and mind can only be detrimental to individual experience. Using Clark's theory of extension in analysis of Egan's fiction makes it clear that, in many ways, humans and machines are inseparable in Egan's work; individuals and groups are defined by



certain technologies and by the pleasures and problems that mark these relationships.

## Chapter 3: The Textual Body



Figure 1 (Tweet from @NYerFiction: May 25, 2012.)<sup>56</sup>

The image above displays the first of 606 tweets which together make up Jennifer Egan's Twitter fiction 'Black Box'. These fourteen words form one tweet, an isolated thought published on the internet for all to see, yet this is also part of a larger narrative carefully planned out by Egan and posted in full over the course of 10 days. The most prominent impression created in this image is the idea that the fictional text can be split, separated into small fragments and exist both as one small part and a larger collective narrative simultaneously. While an experienced short story writer, 'Black Box' is Egan's first Twitter Fiction, and through it she experiments with a new form through publication on this social media website.

This experiment with social media is one example of the way that Egan's fiction not only considers the impact of technology upon human embodiment but also considers the importance of the textual body and the changes that digital processes bring to the materiality of books. Within her novels and short stories, Egan engages and experiments with the technologies available to the contemporary author and in this process brings up questions about what we consider to be 'literary'. By inserting digital materials into her fiction, Egan begins to distort the traditional body of the book and introduces new kinds of materiality and reading styles. Egan represents these materials within her fiction as being used by characters and present in the world of the text, but she also

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<sup>56</sup> This first tweet was published on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2012 (EST) however it appears as May 25<sup>th</sup> to a GMT user.

uses technology as the structure or vehicle for producing fiction, as is the case with Twitter Fiction 'Black Box', and her representation of PowerPoint slides within *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. This kind of disruption creates the opportunity to question literary norms and to envisage how fiction might adapt to a digital landscape. Egan's experimentation with fictional form in a manner recalls the technological extension of the human body analysed in the previous chapter by slowly stretching the body of the text to accommodate and utilise these new technologies. Following on from my analysis of Egan's depictions of the human-technology relationship in chapter 2, this chapter will ask whether technology poses a threat to the body of the text or whether it can be a useful extension or addition to the traditional material book. Documenting Egan's engagement with technologies—both digital and analogue—I argue that Egan's work demonstrates the ever-flexible borders of fiction in its incorporation and representation of technology.

N. Katherine Hayles establishes this point of comparison between human and books in her 1999 text *How We Became Posthuman*, commenting that, 'because they have bodies, books and humans have something to lose if they are regarded solely as informational patterns' (1999: 29). In this statement, Hayles applies her argument that we must hold onto the contribution of embodiment in envisioning a future for the human body, to the future of the book body. I have relied heavily on Hayles's argument in my first two chapters, looking at the contribution of embodiment to identity in Egan's work—and the ways in which technology can augment or endanger this contribution. This chapter will continue to engage with Hayles and apply this idea of embodiment to the digitisation of books and reading practices, building on this foundation to consider the specific interplay between human and book bodies in Egan's work. Thinking further about Hayles's link between humans and books on basis of materiality, my argument considers how fiction represents digital technology in a material, analogue format—in addition to the use of technology to craft and produce texts.

Discussion of digitisation in fiction is complicated by a necessary distinction between digitised print literature, or literature that contains elements of digitisation, and fiction written for a digital environment. According to David Ciccoricco, 'Digital fiction is fiction written for and read on a computer screen',

which ‘would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium’ (2012: 256). Hayles talks instead about ‘electronic literature’, which she says is ‘generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, [and] is by contrast “digital born,” a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer’ (2008: 3). The distinction shared in these definitions is that this kind of literature is made for screen reading, it cannot exist in print without losing some integral aspect: whether this be aesthetic form, narrative structure, or reader interaction. As I will outline, print books are in many ways already digital—and for this reason I prefer Hayles’s term ‘electronic literature’ to more clearly signal the distinct nature of this ‘digital born’ literature.

This anxiety about the body—book or human—being regarded solely as an informational pattern stems from a view that the digital erases materiality. Hayles further explains in *My Mother was a Computer* that there is a ‘current tendency to regard the computer as the ultimate solvent that is dissolving all other media into itself’. She continues by explaining that ‘since sound, image, text, and their associated media (such as phonography, cinema, and books) can all be converted into digital code, many commentators [...] have claimed that there is now only one medium, the digital computer’ (2005: 31).<sup>57</sup> This perception of the digital as removing the individuality of material or analogue forms comprises one of the main oppositions to the digitisation of literature.<sup>58</sup> Yet, Hayles points out that digitisation has an impact even on print literature, and makes the case that readers may come to value the ‘media-specific effects of books’ more when ‘they no longer take them for granted and have many other media experiences with which to compare them’ (2005: 32). In other words, when digitisation is the default option, materiality becomes an intentional choice and is thus more distinct and interesting.

Recent scholarship has touched upon this idea of intentional materiality, discussing how the definition of the book has, rather than writing out materiality altogether, expanded to encompass the increased options available for writers.

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<sup>57</sup> Hayles notes Lev Manovich and Friedrich Kittler as examples of such commentators.

<sup>58</sup> Hayles continues to address this in her introduction to *Electronic Literature* where she summarises assumptions of electronic fiction as ‘inferior to the print canon’ (2008: 2).

For example, the recent collection of responses on ‘What is a Book?’, was born out of a desire to ‘approach the book as a contested term and celebrate its ambiguity, seeking a meeting place between print and digital reading’ (Borsuk 2020: 3).<sup>59</sup> Another example is Jessica Pressman’s work on ‘bookishness’, a term which signals the value attached to the material object of the book. Pressman argues that the print page can draw attention to ‘the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies’ (2009: n.p.), and that bookishness is not merely a nostalgia for print in an increasingly paperless world, but a ‘serious reflection on the book [...] through experimentation with the media-specific properties of print’ (Pressman 2009: n.p.).<sup>60</sup> The turn towards digital technologies as a textual tool emphasises the imprint of digitisation upon print, as well as the potential for the print page to represent and demonstrate technological interests.

Hayles’s understanding that digitisation has an impact on print literature confirms that digitisation has crept into publishing practices without diminishing the materiality of print books. This view is shared by Bradley Reina, who makes the point that digitisation has been part of publishing for a long time, and that this advancement did not lead to a revolution in publishing standards or the form of novels, but was actually used to enhance traditional narratives and publishing processes (2019: 76). Similarly, Reina then observes that digital literature is in a sense a natural extension of visually experimental print literature; one that does not break away from literary tradition and in fact continues the modernist interest in playing with literary aesthetics through print and typeface.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, Reina posits that digital technology can be, and is, used to enhance traditional narrative and narrative meaning, as well as offering the potential to disrupt literary norms through experimental visuality. Reina analyses Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, with insights about Egan’s specific use of digital

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<sup>59</sup> ‘What is a Book?: 101 Responses’ is a list of responses to the prompt *What is the/a book?* in 150 words or less.

<sup>60</sup> Since this cited article, Pressman has published a book on ‘bookishness’ with Columbia University Press: *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (2020).

<sup>61</sup> Notable examples of this visual experimentation include Blake’s influential image-texts, Sterne’s experiments with typography within *Tristram Shandy*, and modernist interests in combining literary and artistic interests—exemplified in the short-lived magazine *Blast*.

print in relation to her unique narrative, which I will refer to later in this chapter.

Egan crosses this boundary into electronic literature with ‘Black Box’: a text crafted for screen reading, and specifically for the constraints of the social media site Twitter. Twitter fiction is amongst the most common kinds of electronic literature;<sup>62</sup> it even had its own Twitter Fiction Festival—with the slogan ‘Twitter is where the world tells its stories all day, every day’.<sup>63</sup> Embracing this new form of publication, Egan is one of a group of established print authors who have utilised the style and constraints of Twitter to produce a different kind of text.<sup>64</sup> Egan’s progression from more traditional print books, to gradually incorporating digital styles and images, before producing fully electronic fiction, shows a progressive experimentation with the fictional body that parallels her examination and progressive digitisation of the human body within her works. As discussed in my chapter on extended bodies, this analysis of the digitisation of the book body will follow Egan’s journey into increasingly digital modes of narrative. Focusing primarily on *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and ‘Black Box’, my analysis will examine how Egan uses digital technologies to augment her narratives and to complement the ongoing concerns of her texts. Furthermore, I will speak to implications for the future of fiction, thinking specifically about the American short story and the way that Egan’s writing twists both the styles and the interests of her literary predecessors, adapting these to contemporary digital landscapes.

### **Extending the Narrative Body in *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

Egan’s digitisation of her texts begins with her playing with narrative structure, distorting linearity, and questioning what constitutes ‘text’ by including shapes,

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<sup>62</sup> Other platforms used for short electronic fiction include Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. Instagram is most popularly used for a style of poetry called instapoetry, popularised by users such as Rupi Kaur.

<sup>63</sup> The Twitter Fiction Festival was founded in 2012, coincidentally the same year as Egan’s *Black Box* was published.

<sup>64</sup> Other notable examples are Canadian author Arjun Basu, who calls his Twitter stories ‘twisters’, and British author David Mitchell whose 2014 Twitter fiction ‘The Right Sort’ paved the way for his next novel, *Slade House* (2015). Stuart Purcell’s 2022 thesis considers Twitter as a potential future of the novel by studying works from authors Teju Cole, Jennifer Egan, David Mitchell, and Tao Lin.

images and other media in her fiction. Egan's very early works, her short story collection *Emerald City* and first novel *The Invisible Circus*, maintain linear narratives and a singular narrative perspective. Her subsequent texts *Look at Me* and *The Keep* begin to play around with linearity by incorporating multiple perspectives and voices. Both texts include a dual narrative that splits the reader's attention between two different, but interrelating storylines. Then, in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan adopts a much more experimental form of narrative, scattering her chapters across characters and timelines. The book is like a puzzle, each chapter a piece which must be examined and assessed with reference to the rest; Heather Humann writes that 'the unconventional and complicated narrative structure of the novel also presents a problem for readers to solve. Indeed, to understand the narrative, readers must reassemble the diverse events which make up the novel' (2017: 86). She highlights the work this text requires from the reader, to retrospectively piece together a coherent linear timeline from this puzzle. The narrative style of 'Black Box' is experimental in quite a different manner, as Egan abandons her previous interest in multiple narrative voices and maintains a mostly linear narrative with just one perspective: the undercover agent. Yet, this text is far from conventional, by publishing on Twitter it must be divided into hundreds of small segments, each one constrained by the 140-character Twitter limit.

This incorporation of disrupted and fragmented narratives corresponds to Egan's increasing interest in digitality, as the most formally experimental narratives contain the most explicit investigations of technology. As discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, Egan's interest in technology and in the technologisation of the human body builds up through the progress of her works. She shows early signs of interest in cultural digitisation and the body in *Emerald City*, and then more sustained and specific examination of technological forms in *The Keep* and *Look at Me*. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* brings digital images into the actual text, as well as a direct discussion of the impact digitisation has upon chronology. Then, in 'Black Box', Egan fully adopts digitisation as both the subject matter and the language of her text. This increasing interest in the digital thus informs and shapes Egan's increasingly experimental and unconventional narrative structures. Yet perhaps the best proof of this relationship between digitisation and narrative experimentation comes in

*Manhattan Beach*. Here, Egan returns to a very traditional manner of storytelling in an historical novel which makes very little reference to the contemporary issues of digitisation that are present in the preceding novels. Here Egan backs away from digital fiction and writes a material print book, with a quite straightforward narrative written in a linear fashion. Further emphasising materiality, the cover of *Manhattan Beach* is lined with a map of the New York harbour, showing the layout of the Brooklyn Naval Yard as it was in the 1940s. The reader then begins (and ends) their reading of the text by engaging with the materiality of these maps, becoming anchored in the physical setting of the novel and the physical experience of the novel, as well as a realist geography.<sup>65</sup> The novel is thus encased in this analogue materiality, in dramatic contrast to ‘Black Box’ which lacks any material casing because it was published online. The move away from her progression into increasingly fragmented and digitised narratives indicates that Egan’s experiments are calculated for each specific text, tuning narrative style and form to subject matter.

This summary of Egan’s textual experimentation focuses largely on materiality, thus in some ways positioning the text as synonymous with its form. Yet, as noted in this and later chapters, Egan’s texts take multiple forms and exist simultaneously in varying digital/material incarnations. Further, there is a level of difference between the platform as substrate and as a technology of access: all of Egan’s texts could be read on a digital screen, but only ‘Black Box’ is made for the specific environment of Twitter—an environment accessed through multiple potential devices (smartphone, tablet, computer screen). The complications of form create an important paradox of digitality and materiality that is central to Egan’s work, highlighting issues with technological integration and publication which, rather than limiting readings, enables a sense of multiplicity for reader and critic. My following analysis thus considers Egan’s formal experiments with technology and narrative form as complementary, using digital strategies to underscore inherent attributes of text such as narrative tension, intertextuality, and temporality.

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<sup>65</sup> Of course, maps are often used in novels, such as in travel or historical writings where maps serve to orient the reader, and fantasy texts where maps are a part of the world-building process. The established use of maps in novels thus again amplifies an engagement with the material history of fiction and a return to a more traditional novel.



In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan captured the attention of critics with her distorted, puzzling narrative structure; many critical responses attempted to tackle the relationship between her narrative style and the content of her novel. Articles such as David Cowart's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking: Jennifer Egan's *Goon Squad*' (2015), and Martin Moling's "'No Future": Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*' (2016) focus on the unique narrative structure of the text in relation to its central themes of music, technology, and the passing of youth. These three threads intertwine in a nostalgic reflection upon lost chances and forgotten hopes. As Cowart notes:

The novel offers no solution to the central mystery of time's arrow—or to the meaning of life in thrall to time. No "supreme fiction" of time and consciousness presents itself. Egan's characters merely struggle to remember the past—and to reconcile themselves to the disappearance of their youth.

(Cowart 2015: 249)

Egan's narrative amplifies this nostalgia by removing linear predictability and revealing the harsh reality of time passing by juxtaposing past and present in a much more concrete and dramatic manner than would be seen in a gradual linear progression. Cowart argues that Egan's fragmented narrative is intentionally unpredictable, refusing to neatly tie itself up and have all of life's questions solved by the end.

While Cowart sees Egan's narrative as seemingly aimless and random, other critics have pointed out her careful management of this timeline. For example, Heather Humann reads the text through the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, a 'psychoanalytic concept which means "afterwardsness," [and which] is a "mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution" of traumatic meaning to earlier events' (2017: 89). She explains that the novel offers a double kind of reading or understanding—an intentionally fragmented and confusing primary reading, and then a belated re-processing in this mode of 'afterwardsness'. By revealing narrative moments out of order and with interruptions, the text controls the meaning belatedly attached to the plot as it unfolds. This is most evident within the character of Sasha, who bookends the novel and appears frequently throughout its thirteen chapters. In chapter one we see Sasha attend counselling to try to mend her life; she hopes to tell 'a

story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances,' but fears that, 'in that direction lay only sorrow' (Egan 2010a: 9). In later chapters we see Sasha as a teenager running away from home, stealing, and using drugs, which is then understood as a reaction to childhood trauma when Sasha's uncle Ted reflects on her parent's unhappy marriage.<sup>66</sup> Rather than a linear explanation of Sasha's life, which would reveal the cause and effect of her trauma and recovery, Egan presents these events out of order, so that the reader belatedly attaches sympathy to this character when learning of her difficult childhood *after* seeing her as a petty thief in the first chapter. The later scenes add further understanding to the first chapter in a mode of belated understanding which increases the significance of both moments. The fragmentation of the novel thus offers connections and intensified meaning in the chance to tie together these threads between chapters.

Another example is tied to a point I made in chapter 2 about the generations in this text being marked by their technological preferences, ranging from the earliest point of analogue practices in the music industry to the furthest timeline with its own form of digital communication: 'T-ing', the abbreviated texting used by Lulu. Technological difference and the digital 'cycle of obsolescence and renewal' (Chun 2011: xi) is also amplified by Egan's narrative distortion as, by placing different decades side by side in her text, Egan enlarges the huge shifts in technological ability and their impact on culture, style, and communication. The issues of digitisation and technological disparity rely on narrative disruption—using a disassembled chronology amplifies the differences between each chapter. These technological preferences are not only explored in the text's narrative content but are also made evident in the structure of the text, which becomes visually evident within the incorporation of images in Chapter 12.

Chapter 12, 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', is written in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, with each page containing the image of one slide. The chapter comes as a complete surprise, interrupting the previously smooth process of reading. In order to read the chapter the book must be rotated 90 degrees to be

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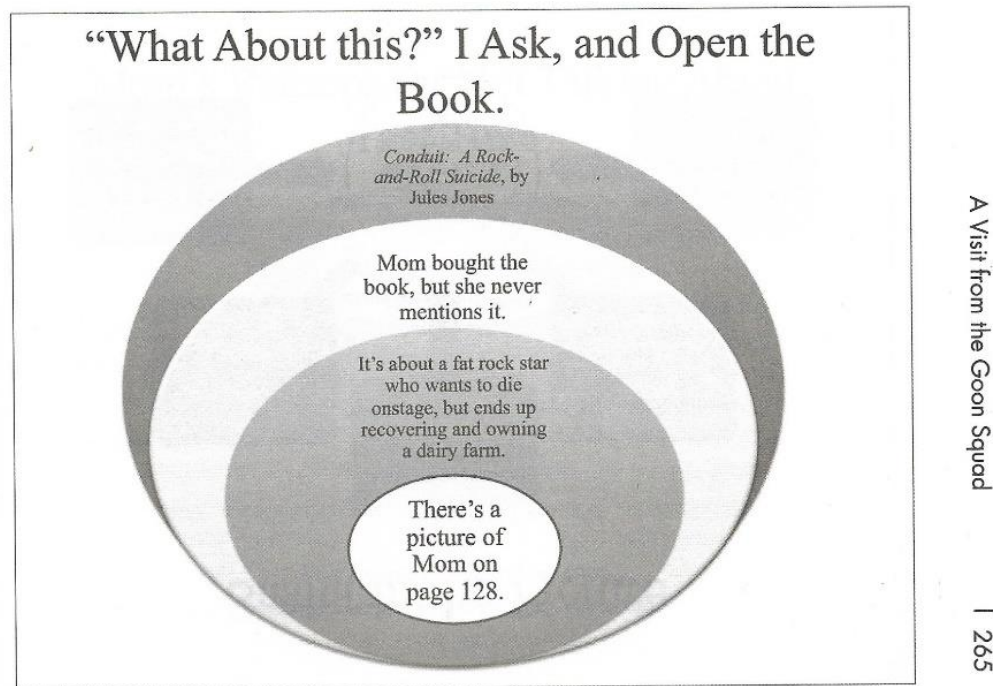
<sup>66</sup> Ted recalls that Sasha's father grew violent in arguments with her mother—dislocating her shoulder twice and breaking her collarbone (Egan 2010a: 226).

able to view the landscape slides properly, and the pages need to be flipped upward instead of sideways to progress through the chapter. This clearly signals an experiment which poses questions about the reader's relationship to the physical text. Thus, Egan not only disconnects plot but also reading style, unsettling the process of narrative engagement with this unexpected visual interruption. These necessary adjustments emphasise the materiality of the book, forcing the reader literally and interpretively to adjust their grasp of the text. This emphasis on materiality contrasts with the digital aspects of the images, as the media specific environment required for electronic fiction is absent. The incorporation of PowerPoint is itself an experiment because this chapter merely represents the technology on the printed page. Whereas the reader must manually turn the page to move from one slide to the next, on a computer screen these manual practices would be more intuitive and automatic.<sup>67</sup> Egan deploys technology in two distinct ways. Firstly, she adds materiality into the represented technology, creating a representation of electronic material within the printed text. But secondly, this creates a paradox wherein the digital is incorporated through analogue techniques, and the experience of reading this digital image is overwhelmingly physical—self-consciously so in the necessary interactions between the material bodies of text and reader.

While shape and image dominate the pages of 'Great Rock and Roll Pauses', 'even the least textual pages are emphatically concerned with narrative and character' (Reina 2019: 81). Reina's statement betrays an assumption that narrative is usually tied to text, and thus a corresponding assumption that decreasing the amount of text on a page will decrease the amount of narrative information built and communicated within that page. Yet in Egan's chapter text, shape, and empty space work together to create narrative meaning and character development. For example, in the image below Egan depicts one moment of interaction between mother and daughter in the title question "What About this?", then using a mixture of shape and text below to inform the interaction.

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<sup>67</sup> This is reminiscent of Clark's assertion that transparency is the goal when integrating new tools into cognitive ability.



**Figure 2** (Page from *Goon Squad*, Egan 2010a: 265)

In this slide the alternating grey and white circles are accompanied by brief statements, with no linking narrative or description. The title with the question and the act of Alison opening the book describes the only action within the narrative, the rest of the page informs this interaction. Within the concentric circles, the grey and white rings operate differently. The text on the grey backgrounds state facts about the book, its title and subject matter, while the text on the white background ties the book to the interaction between Alison and her mother by establishing Sasha’s involvement with the book: first that she bought it but never mentions it, and then that there is a photograph of her on page 128. This realisation in the final circle conveys the importance of Alison’s question to her mother—“What About this?”—explaining the ‘this’ that Sasha is being confronted with. Here, reducing the text on the page does not resist narrative but in fact enables additional characterization by putting events from earlier in the novel into Alison’s hands, encountering Lulu and Bosco from a new perspective. Egan thus creates a fuller account of Sasha’s life with this use of space and shape by interrogating her experience from new angles while also using shape to control and portion out the text.

In the novel this is a paper translation of PowerPoint technology, but the chapter has been uploaded separately on *The Guardian's* website, in their Children's Books segment (2011). In this version, the slides are multi-coloured and this slide in particular depicts yellow circles on a purple background. The circles are less clearly distinct from each other as they are different shades of yellow rather than white and grey. The visual emphasis then changes from differentiating the different levels within the circle, to grouping together these levels of thought in contrast to the differently coloured background and the heading of the question. Of course, that version should be viewed as separate from the novel: the image above is how Egan decided to represent the slides within the novel and therefore is the focus of my analysis.<sup>68</sup> Yet it is interesting to note that the chapter takes on a new aesthetic and with this a new meaning as the inclusion of colour changes the visual focus and draws the eye to different places. The black and white version creates a visual affinity between the three segments of black text on white backgrounds, and then between the two segments with black text on the grey background. The white background segments speak to the mother-daughter relationship, which is prioritised in this moment but informed by the shadow of Sasha's past, visually represented in the shadow-like grey segments.

The paradox of digitality and materiality is visually represented here through the ability to read this page from top down or bottom up. The shape invites a rereading, the long narrow format of the text underneath the heading tempts the eye to scan back up after reaching the final inner circle. This rereading is furthered by the visual shape of the image, as the circles are reminiscent of a bouncing ball in movement. This invites a focus on the repeated up-and-down movement, mirroring the eye scanning from top to bottom and back up. Thus, the eye bounces between the question and the sentence where Alison sees the photo of Sasha, with the three explanatory statements building levels of tension and understanding between the two. If read in this manner, attention starts and ends with the question, so it is positioned as the stimulus and the result of the process explored in the image. Both are true, again using technology to create a

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<sup>68</sup> This decision was likely a product of the limited potential of incorporating PowerPoint into the novel in any more advanced manner: the publishing costs of including colour, the inability to digitally display the slides in a paper book, etc..

kind of paradox within the visual image. Some slides in this chapter force a visual path through arrows and flow charts, yet some also enable a more playful ordering within reading. Egan's use of the technology then not only changes the reader's physical grasp and material engagement with the text, but also enables new visual pathways that connect textual information in new ways.

Egan's novel shows both the text and reader adapting to incorporate digital technology, beginning by inserting this one visually distinct chapter into the book where all others are written in standard prose, although these are experimental in their own way through the unusual chronology. Here I see a parallel to Hayles's work on materiality and embodiment: in which she makes conceptual links between humans and books, and in recent years has turned attention to the digitality of books.<sup>69</sup> Sherryl Vint writes that if *How We Became Posthuman* 'represented a materialist reconfiguration of the posthuman, *My Mother was a Computer* performs a similar reconfiguration of the text' (Vint 2008: 123). In my first two chapters I have analysed how Egan's novels show an interest in how technology begins to reconfigure the human in the incorporation of digital abilities into the human body. *Goon Squad* here shows, as Vint phrases it, 'a similar reconfiguration of the text', adapting the materiality of the book to incorporate the technological issues present in the lives of her characters. Egan's reconfiguration of the human is most explicit in 'Black Box', a text which will be discussed later in this chapter for its own technological format, but it is in *Goon Squad* that Egan begins to reconfigure the body of the book itself, altering not just the narrative but the physical form of the text.

Egan's use of PowerPoint does not reflect the typical use of this technology; she even admits in an interview that she had never used PowerPoint before creating this chapter (Patrick 2001). Despite her lack of experience, however, Egan's use of the technology in her novel was so well executed and received that critics claim her "'PowerPoint" chapter has become an instant reference to what can be done with digital print' (Reina 2019: 81), representing a creative adaptation of technology within narrative fiction. Indeed Egan's lack of experience with PowerPoint only serves her creative process, enabling her to come to this new

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<sup>69</sup> Hayles continues this interest past the date of Vint's comment, publishing *Electronic Literature* in 2008, which investigates the impact of digitisation on the materiality of books and changes in reading habits.

technology with no preconceptions about what it should look like, using it intuitively to best suit her project. This is much like how a child might approach a technology not made for them: using tools meant to convey budgets and marketing strategies and instead making it into a personal narrative that conveys meaning and human relationships in an unprecedented manner. This is, in fact, exactly what occurs in the text, this technology is moulded in the hands of a child who uses it to reflect the world as she sees it. The chapter is written as a kind of diary entry from 12-year-old Alison Blake, documenting her family life and the interests of her brother Lincoln. The technology is thus uniquely tied to its author, again emphasising the way that technology in this novel marks generational difference, as well as neurological diversity in this case. Reina makes the astute observation that this PowerPoint chapter comes as ‘the novel’s present moves past the 2010 publication date’ (2019: 81). It is interesting that the date in Alison’s opening slide is ‘202-’, it does not include the specific year. This generalisation of the 2020s emphasises the significance of crossing this decade boundary, of moving into an unknown new decade that will be undoubtedly marked by technology and by how the upcoming generation comes to approach and utilise these technologies.

This technological generational gap is enforced in the writing of the text, moving between more traditional written text to this innovative method of PowerPoint, thus requiring the reader to adjust expectations and reading styles. While this PowerPoint technology is used for only this one chapter, the text does not entirely revert to normal once the chapter ends, as the final chapter ‘Pure Language’ comes with another new style of reading: ‘T-ing’, the abbreviated texting language that Lulu uses. The reader is then unsettled by moving first from ‘normal’ text reading to PowerPoint slides, images and diagrams in chapter 12, and then back to print—but not the same kind of print. The novel ends with these two examples of technologised communication, never returning to a place where these new styles are not present. This emphasises the lasting and increasing presence of technology as the novel continues to pass the decade boundary of ‘202-’.

In chapter 12, Alison notes how her brother Lincoln uses technology to look at old songs in a new way, highlighting silences and their contributions to the track. This mirrors how the chapter itself uses technology to look at another old

practice: writing and reading. Melissa Strong views this novel as an attempt to ‘stop time within itself’ (2018: 477), not only referring to Lincoln’s hobby of tracking silence in music, but to the novel’s many efforts to pause and scrutinise specific moments in time, each chapter analysing the cultural and technological conditions surrounding each character. There is a shared interest here in renewing existing creative methods through technology, as both Lincoln’s project and the format of this chapter dissect their chosen modes of music and the novel through disruption, emphasising the silences which break up, and yet enhance, meaning and narrative through this fragmentation.

Lincoln’s place in this chapter holds further significance in the communication barrier between him and his family, particularly his father Drew. Drew finds it difficult to communicate well with his son, who is ‘mildly autistic’ (Egan 2010: 241);<sup>70</sup> in Alison’s documentation we see Drew express frustration and anger at not being able to understand him. The PowerPoint style allows the narrative to incorporate both words and shapes into this chapter, representing the clashing communication styles of Lincoln and Drew, but enabling them to coexist and indeed produce a point of productive understanding as the two styles meet. Kathleen Reilly observes the significance of the relationship between shape reading and meaning within this unique chapter:

While GRRP’s characters, storyline, and themes raise issues related to disability and enablement, so too does the story’s unconventional format. Comprised entirely of PowerPoint slides, GRRP positions readers to experience this text through an unfamiliar mode, requiring the use of different tools to make meaning.

(2017: 79)

Reilly notes that strong alphabetic readers tend to focus upon words, ignoring the significance of shapes and pattern (2017: 80). Thus, such readers have to work harder and learn a new kind of reading style in order to fully appreciate and follow the chapter. In doing so, ‘we share a part of Drew’s journey,

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<sup>70</sup> It is worth noting that the novel is not explicit about which of Sasha’s two children this term refers to when it is used, but it is generally tied to Lincoln due to his social and communication preferences as noted by his sister’s diary, and the reference to his therapy in this chapter also.



practicing and gaining awareness of different ways to understand and interface with our surroundings' (Reilly 2017: 80).

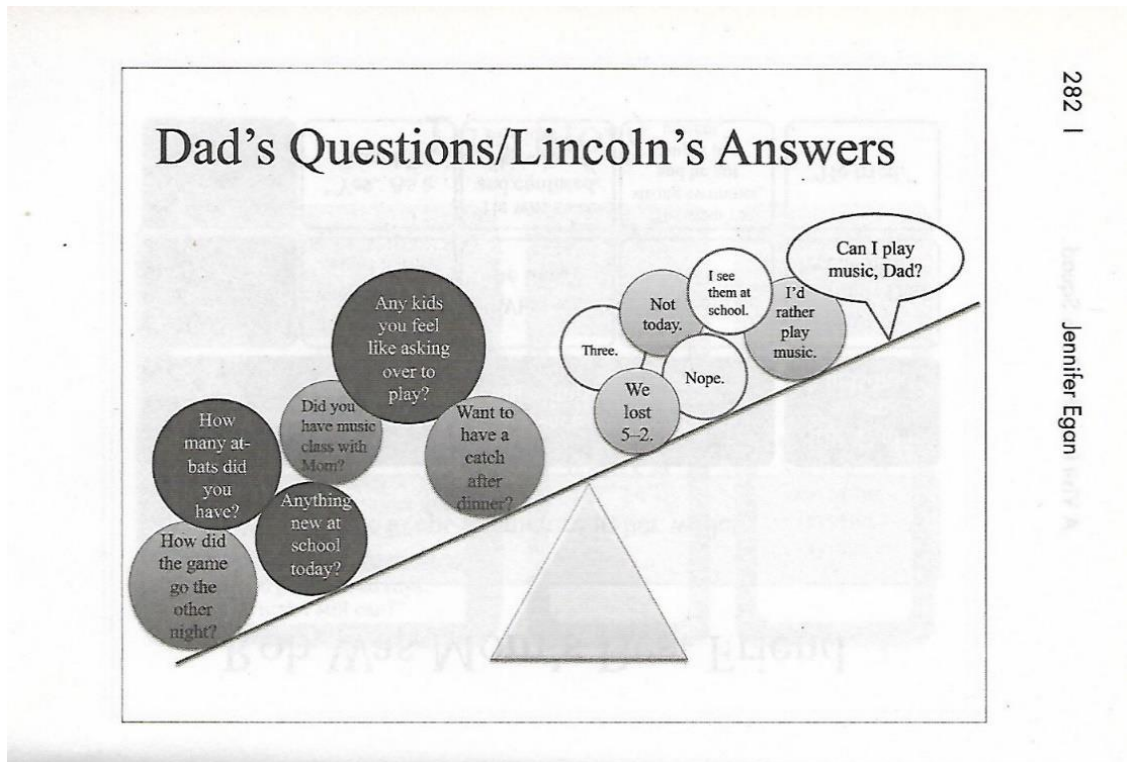


Figure 3 (Page from *Goon Squad*, Egan 2010a: 282)

For instance, the slide above presents a conversation between father and son in which both characters' attitudes towards the other are visually evident. The image of the scale or see-saw created using the triangle shape and the angled line replicates the weight of Drew's questions and expectations, and his perception that Lincoln's answers are not appropriately weighted in response. This is furthered by the darker colours used for Drew's circles—Drew's questions are dark, menacing and overwhelming, reflecting Lincoln's experience of this interaction as he does his best to reply to his father's questions. Again, the slide requires rereading and a back-and-forth reading style (much like the up-and-down movement of a seesaw), as the reader flits between the light and dark bubbles to connect each answer to one of Drew's questions. Thus, the image depicts both sides and experiences of the conversation—as mediated through the eyes of a third party. This reading style offers a pause in the physical act of reading, which itself is an act of 'stopping time within time' as the rereading requires a break from the continual turning of the book page or progress downwards through the text on the page, instead locking in on a horizontal scanning movement.

Drew asks Lincoln about everything *except* the things he loves to talk about—music and his project of mapping pauses within songs. On the far right we have a speech bubble from Lincoln, asking his dad if he can play some music. This contrasts with the circle shape of all the other questions and answers (in the colourful version this is a bright orange that stands out even more on the page). This question is not answered on this slide, leaving the conversation imbalanced and unfinished. Indeed, the shape is literally imbalanced, tipping towards the left and thus implying a heavier weight on this side. Interestingly, the side with the most text is Lincoln's; 6 answers and 1 question; contrasting with Drew's 6 questions and 0 answers. Yet Lincoln's side is depicted as lighter, not even meeting the weight of his father's questions. This visual depiction reveals how unimportant these questions are to Lincoln, in contrast with the weight that Drew places upon them as he attempts to enforce his expectations and priorities upon his son.

On the next page Drew does respond, saying “‘Sure, Linc,’ [...] ‘Let’s hear some music’”, on a slide titled ‘Signs that Dad isn’t Happy’ (Egan 2010: 283). The next few slides detail Drew attempting to engage with his son’s interests but becoming frustrated and soon upsetting Lincoln. It turns, however, into a moment of care and connection:

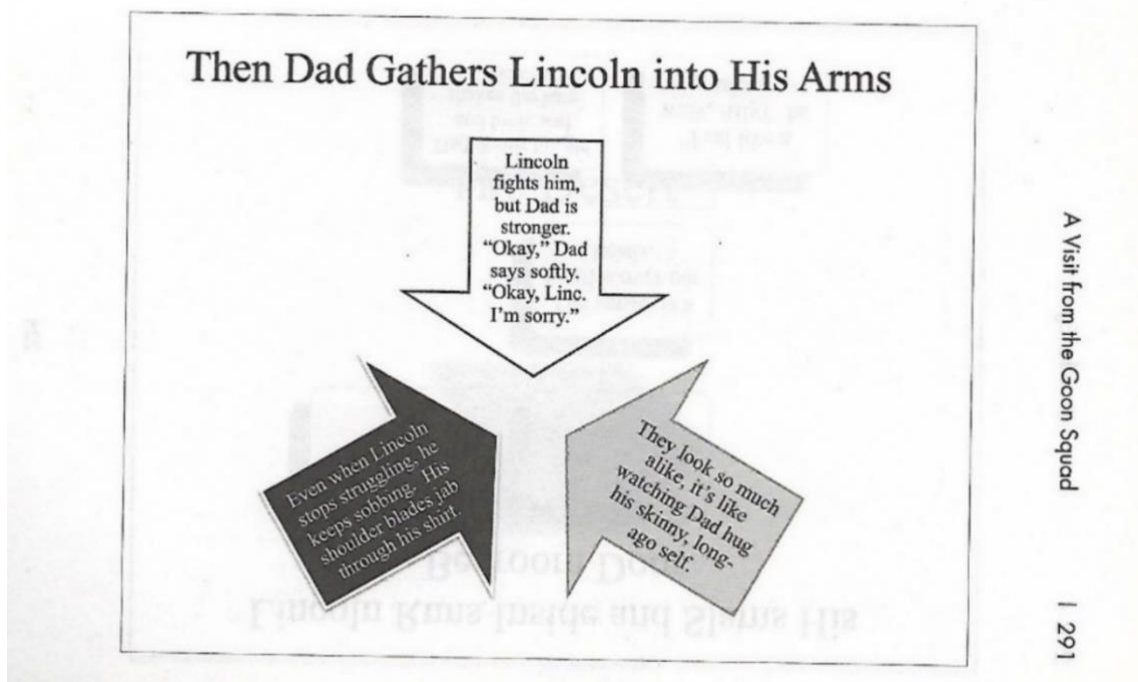


Figure 4 (Page from *Goon Squad*, Egan 2010: 291)

This moment of resolution comes after a mainly blank slide titled ‘A Pause While We Stand on the Deck’ (Egan 2010: 290), which is absent of any questions or answers, presenting only empty space and silence. The resolution slide literally points towards this empty space and silence as the solution, as the three arrows push the eye into the blank centre of the page. In this reading experience the page seems to not want to be read, instead wanting the eye to rest on the blank space. The spatial arrangement of the text within these large arrows is used, paradoxically, to push the eye away from the textual narrative and resist reading. Thus, the text replicates Lincoln’s aversion to his father’s demanding questioning, and emphasises the silence and time to pause he desired. Father and son resolve their anger through the act of embrace, ‘Then Dad Gathers Lincoln into His Arms’, illustrated in this page which emphasises materiality (physical touch) over textuality (the Q&A of the previous scene).

James P. Zappen describes this chapter as an example of affective identification, showing ‘how an everyday new-media technology such as PowerPoint slides can enable a father to identify affectively and thereby improve his relationship with his son’ (2016: 304). Pushing this concept further, I argue that the identification occurs not only between father and son but also between reader and text, as the process of becoming accustomed to shape reading produces an increased understanding. For example, instead of flipping past the slide that is just a black rectangle because it contains no text, the reader instead sits for a moment with the darkness and wordlessness of the slide and realises that this visual representation conveys the moment in a distinctly different manner than if Egan had simply written out the sentence ‘it was dark and they were silent’.<sup>71</sup> The reader is able to replicate the characters’ experiences in a manner: seeing a dark page and no words is a readerly re-enactment of a silent moment on a dark night.

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<sup>71</sup> This black slide is also reminiscent of other novels which include black or blank pages, such as Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759)—this connection is analysed in more detail on page 150.

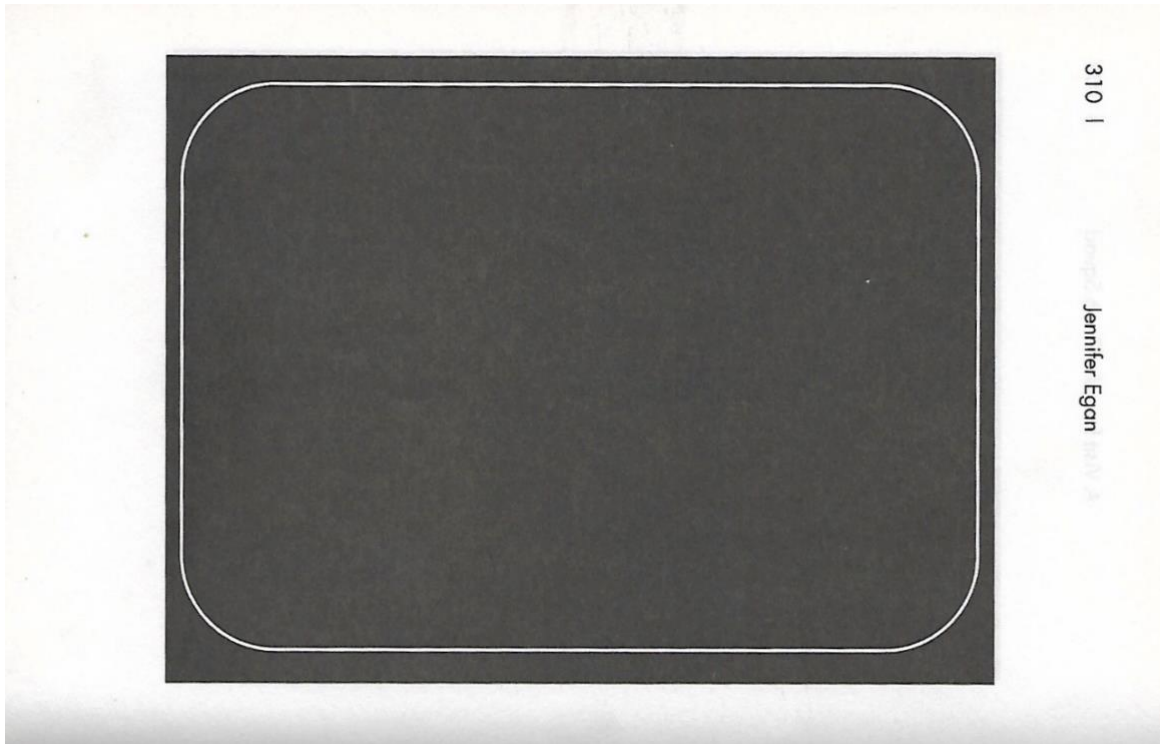
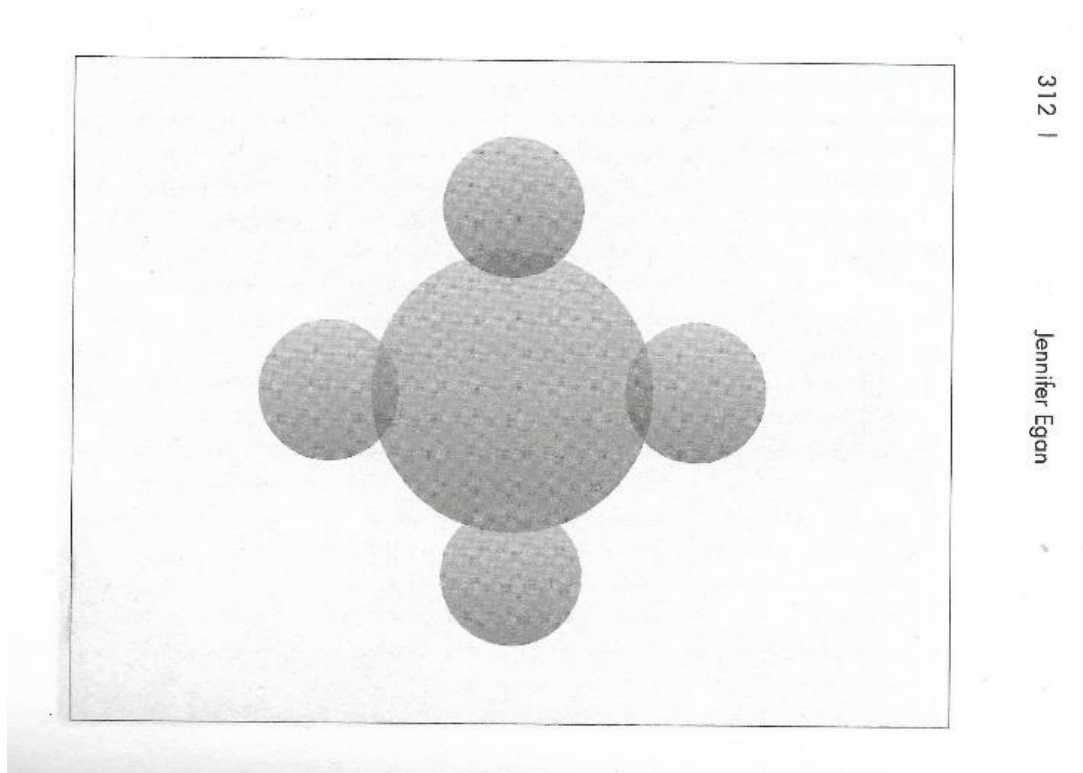
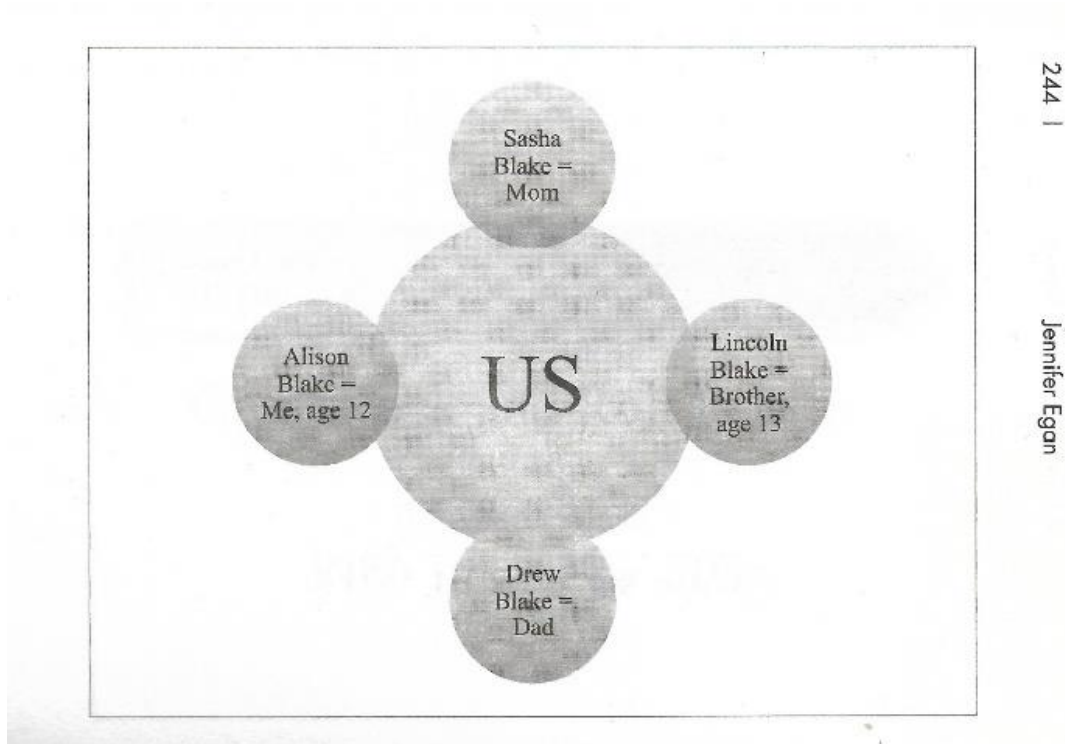


Figure 5 (Page from *Goon Squad*, Egan 2010: 310)

Another effective slide in *Goon Squad* showing the shape-reading learning process is simply five interlocking circles: one large circle in the centre with four smaller ones overlapping it at each side.





244 |

Jennifer Egan

Figures 6&7 (Pages from *Goon Squad*, Egan 2010a: 312, 244)

This ‘one wordless slide is informed by a slide that comes long before it’ (Reina 2019: 81), it (top) is a copy of the family tree slide Sasha includes at the start of the chapter (bottom), but with all words removed. This time, the reader is not distracted by learning names and titles of each character but focuses on this silent visual representation of family connection beyond language.

Through this use of shapes and images, Egan finds a way to represent silence visually within a novel while still creating meaning and inserting significant non-verbal references. Using digital structures to emphasise analogue features, she refocuses the reader’s attention through the spatial arrangement of the page, giving equal or higher value to shape and space over text. This is yet another example of how Egan’s disruption of the traditional body of the book through her narrative fragmentation and incorporation of technology in fact enhances the narrative experience and imbues her novel with increased meaning and emotional significance. Her creative use of a contemporary technology not only suits the cultural context of the novel, but is used to alter the reader’s engagement with the text in order to better convey conflict and character development. Egan’s PowerPoint chapter, therefore, supports Pressman’s assertion that ‘literature retains a central role in our emergent technoculture’ (2009). Its adaption of a technology for literary purposes—its intersection of

digital and analogue textualities—is a material response to the new digital environment.

### **Losing the Book Body in ‘Black Box’**

‘Because they have bodies, books and humans have something to lose if they are regarded solely as informational patterns’ (Hayles 1999: 29). Here Hayles unites humans and books through the shared impact technology can have on their materiality, and the shared danger of overlooking the vital contributions of that materiality. When we discuss digital fiction and Twitter fiction, in which the book is no longer a tangible, paper object, we must be aware of this risk of loss. While Hayles states that books have something to lose, this does not necessarily mean that they have all lost something; the risk comes when the informational pattern is prioritised over any potential contributions of embodiment. In terms of digital books, this brings into question whether electronic literature experiences a deficiency of textuality, whether the non-physical nature of the fiction has a detrimental effect upon the narrative or reading experience. Hayles herself asks this question in her 2008 book, *Electronic Literature*, in which she looks more closely at the structure and components of electronic fiction and reading:

Is electronic literature really literature at all? Will the dissemination mechanisms of the internet and the Web, by opening publication to everyone, result in a flood of worthless drivel? Is literary quality possible in digital media or is electronic literature demonstrably inferior to the print canon? What large-scale social and cultural changes are bound up with the spread of digital culture, and what do they portend for the future of writing?

(Hayles 2008: 2)

These questions outline common reactions to the concept of electronic literature shared by many readers, authors, and critics. Touching upon fears about a drop in quality and oversaturation through this open-market forum, these questions are rooted in a comparison of print and electronic literature. Hayles’s opening question indicates that print literature is considered real literature, but electronic literature is ‘inferior to the print canon’ in quality, prestige, and materiality—lacking the physical engagement with the printed

page that many view as an inherent component of the reading process.<sup>72</sup> Egan's production of both print and electronic literature provides an opportunity to consider the contributions of each format and the impact of removing the physical and material component of reading. Hayles's statement does not only highlight fears about *what* is published, but *who* is able to publish. By 'opening publication to everyone', the traditional gatekeeping qualities of publishing are removed. Thus, fears regarding quality are not only responding to a changing materiality, but to the removal of experts who approve what is or is not released to the world. Egan's production of electronic literature continues to engage with these conventional gatekeepers and thus retains this mark of expert approval, treading an interesting line between convention and experimentation.

Twitter fiction 'Black Box' was released over the course of 10 days, from May 24<sup>th</sup> to June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012. The text was published in short bursts via *The New Yorker's* Twitter account, @NYerFiction, with one tweet released every minute for a one-hour period each day. This is how the text was introduced to the world, in fragmented pieces that spread across accounts and readers through likes and retweets. However, this is not the only form of the text—after its Twitter dissemination the text was made available on *The New Yorker's* website, which readers can easily download as a PDF file. The only way to view the original tweets is to scroll back years through *The New Yorker's* Twitter feed, an arduous task that no casual reader would attempt. The Twitter publication is now, therefore, not a practical method of reading the text, and instead is mostly present through the structure that the format of the text is based on—separated into many short phrases that fit within the then 140-character Twitter limit. The presence of *The New Yorker* as the publisher of this text is unmissable in each method of accessing 'Black Box'. In fact, *The New Yorker* is prioritised over Egan as the author in the text's Twitter form: each fragment is attached to the @NYerFiction Twitter handle, characterising the text through this institution. This demonstrates how Egan's foray into electronic literature continues to value the support of conventional gatekeepers. This in part resists dismissal of electronic fiction based on 'the dissemination mechanisms of the internet'

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<sup>72</sup> Pressman's work on 'bookishness' notes that born-digital texts often adopt the image and style of paper in order to translate 'print-based reading practices onto the screen' (2009: n.p.), indicating an emotional and/or cognitive attachment to the physical experience of reading print books.

(Hayles 2008: 2), yet continues to endorse scepticism of electronic literature through promoting the need for an approving mediator between author and reader.

There are also material versions of the text that exist. First is Egan's draft of the text; Egan used a notebook that had eight squares drawn on each page to plan 'Black Box', using the physical parameters of the squares to limit her segments so that they would fit the Twitter character count.<sup>73</sup> Egan began writing this text in her usual method of handwriting on yellow legal pads, but 'wasn't pleased with the way those long, dangly lines looked' (Egan, quoted in Lamont 2012). A change in materiality was required to reflect the different platform the text was intended for, needing to replicate the restrictions of the Twitter format in the act of handwriting. The Muji brand notebook allowed Egan to handwrite her drafts, as is her preference, while always keeping the constraints of the platform in view. While Egan's material process of preparation contrasts with the entirely electronic nature of the text's publication, it had different requirements than drafting a print novel. Designing an electronic fiction demanded new engagement with the physical page, involving a rearrangement of its order and boundaries to reflect the intended space of publication.

Advance review copies of the text copied the visual format of Egan's notebook, replicating the squares that bordered and separated each segment. These physical versions were thus the original form of the text, a fact that invokes questioning over whether this text is actually 'digital born', as Hayles's definition of electronic literature insists. While the text was crafted and intended for its Twitter setting, it first came to life through a traditional pen-to-paper authorship process, a method that few contemporary authors use as the advent of computers has led many to digital drafting and editing. Thus there is an odd inversion of the norm in this originating in material form and then appearing officially online. The physical versions of 'Black Box' are the rarer versions, again upholding this inversion and pushing the digital form as the main or official format.

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<sup>73</sup> An image of this handwritten draft is available in the article 'Coming Soon: Jennifer Egan's Black Box' (*The New Yorker* 2012).



If it were not first published on Twitter but merely released as a PDF file, would we even consider ‘Black Box’ to be an example of electronic literature? Perhaps not, yet the text’s unique crafting to fit the restrictions of the social media platform, despite much of this planning itself not being digital, does constitute it as a notable electronic text. Hayles argues that the transformation of a print document into an electronic one is ‘a form of translation - “media translation” - which is inevitably also an act of interpretation’ (2008: 89). The significant difference here is that ‘Black Box’ is not exactly a paper book translated into a digital environment, it was designed for and launched into its technological format. Its unique fragmented structure is tied to the requirements of the platform, which does not make sense or have the same impact when removed from it. In fact, the PowerPoint chapter in *Goon Squad* is more of an act of translation than ‘Black Box’ as a Twitter fiction because in this case Egan takes a technology that is meant to exist and be viewed on a computer screen and prints it onto paper. While the layout of the image is identical to the onscreen version, the reader of the paper book loses out on the digital-specific environment that this technology was created in. This, as Ciccoricco points out in his definition of digital fiction, causes the digital image to ‘lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function [when] removed from that medium’ (2012: 256).

In contrast, Twitter fiction intentionally makes use of its digital environment and considers this part of the reading experience. Ritika Singh’s article, ‘Based on Brevity: Fiction in 140 Characters or Less’, outlines this unique relationship between Twitter fiction and its social media habitat:

Unlike an eBook that is downloaded and read by default in ‘full-screen’ mode to minimize distractions on the screen, a short-short story is injected into already noisy platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Various elements of the cluttered screen beg for the attention of the viewer. The contest between these components and a short-short story work posted on the same webpage is that the short-short story attempts to grasp the viewers’ attention by giving them an experience of having read a piece of literature. As the eye glances from one object of the digital screen to another, the success of a piece lies in how it delivers and presents itself to convert a viewer to a reader.

(Singh 2016: 3)

Singh shows how digital fiction must work harder than the print book to ‘grasp the viewers’ attention’ amidst all the other digital noise present while the fiction is being read. Singh speaks of the ‘short-short story’, an extremely short piece of fiction that is published on social media sites. ‘Black Box’ is comprised of many of these tiny fragments, which together form the entire story. In many ways this amplifies the limitations and distractions of the electronic reading experience, as the text must continue to engage the reader again and again. The entire body of the text is continually interrupted by digital noise: background elements of the website that surround and separate each 140-character segment. This amplifies the digital nature of the text as it draws attention to the social media skeleton that the fiction latches onto, and which is constantly present when viewing each short fragment. ‘Black Box’ is then not a piece of print fiction uploaded to Twitter, which stands out as special amongst all the other posts and advertisements on the platform, it is part of this platform—part of the digital noise itself.

‘Black Box’ utilises the freedoms and limitations of its Twitter publication alike, revealing the potential to inject fiction into this unlikely landscape. As Hayles remarks in *Electronic Literature*:

digital media have given us an opportunity we have not had for the last several hundred years: the chance to see print with new eyes, and with it, the possibility of understanding how deeply literary theory and criticism have been imbued with assumptions specific to print.

(Hayles 2008: 33)

In fact, in removing literature from its material body, we give it new life by removing limitations previously enforced by the necessity of print. Fiction becomes a new experience as the reader learns physical tools to manage the onscreen platform—much like the lesson in shape reading that ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’ provides. The reader must put aside expectations learned from print literature and engage quite differently when reading Twitter fiction. The short nature of each fragment requires closer attention to each phrase: rather than consuming an entire page in one glance, Twitter fiction is more condensed and requires close reading of each segment. Additionally, the reader cannot rely on surrounding text to shape the passage at hand, as many will appear on the home

feed without the prior and subsequent segment in view. For example, the phrase ‘If your limbs are sore and your forehead scraped and raw, don’t dwell on why’ (Egan 2012: Section 32, lines 3-4) contains references to a suppressed instance of sexual assault, willingly forgotten by the agent. Four tweets earlier, the agent refers to beginning a countdown, which is the process of dissociating she uses to manage this constant assault. The Dissociation Technique is explained in full much earlier in the text—which would have been days prior for the Twitter reader experiencing the live publication of the text. The reader thus experiences an increased distancing between segments of the text itself, inciting a corresponding need for increased attention and close reading. This distancing also signals a return to serialisation, which has become less common in fiction over the last century due to the changing media landscape (Andersen, 2017, p. 35). Kirtley argues that ‘Twitter fiction heralds a digital “return of serial fiction”’ (2012, as quoted in Andersen, 2017, p. 35), a concept evident in this fragmented structure which requires patient investment from the reader as they wait to receive the next instalment of the text each day. This appreciation for the specific reading experience in ‘Black Box’ reveals that this electronic fiction, like a physical book, also has something to lose if its distinct form is compromised.

In ‘Black Box’, Egan again disrupts the traditional book body for specific and intentional narrative effect. The fragmentation of the text is central to its relationship with the reader and to the creation of narrative tension. Separating the text out into hundreds of individual tweets and spreading out its dissemination over multiple days instead of posting it all at once amplifies the digital nature of the text because the reader is constantly confronted by the digital casing of each new segment. The text does not come together as one continuous stretch of narrative, it is always divided by these digital wrappings around each fragment. Because of this, the reader is also constantly interrupted, never able to settle into a continuous reading style on the Twitter platform because they have to sift out the advertisements, date marks, and Twitter handles that sit around and between each tweet. The image below shows the very first tweet of ‘Black Box’ and illustrates these many digital wrappings:



**Figure 8** (Screenshot @NYerFiction: May 25, 2012.)<sup>74</sup>

As well as this fragment of story, the reader also encounters the digital information and the options present to them: to Retweet, Quote Tweet, and Like. They are also able to see the engagement of other readers/Twitter users, viewing reactions to the text before it has been fully published. These reader responses are translated into the language of the host media, summarised in three numeric values; here 36, 2, 38; totalling 76 ‘interactions’<sup>75</sup> visible to the reader.

Here we see Egan stretching the boundaries and abilities of the book body even further, not just inserting technology as one of many narratives, as with ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’, but wrapping the technology around the whole text. The text latches on to the structure and visuality of the technology, as it carries these digital wrappings and adopts the style of its platform. These digital borders and casings also create gaps between and within the tweets, suspending the fragment of fiction within layers of technical information: the above image shows the fragment as taking up less than half of the space of the whole tweet. These gaps between and around the fragments of fiction not only bring reminders of digitality into every line of the text, but create brief pauses filled by the noise of the technology. These pauses might be informed by the tweets or advertisements that appear in between the fragments of the Twitter fiction, or

<sup>74</sup> This first tweet was published on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2012 (EST) however it appears as May 25<sup>th</sup> to a GMT user.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Interactions’ is the common term for calculating the amount of engagement with a social media post.

this might be a moment of emptiness in waiting for the next tweet to be published. In either case, this shows the fiction interacting with the reader and the platform in a very interesting and truly distinct manner, as the experience is interrupted by the contributions of each user's Twitter feed. The technological noise is thus embedded within the reading experience, indicating an interesting advancement of some dimensions of postmodernist fiction, where technology is often depicted as a constant presence infiltrating all aspects of life.<sup>76</sup> Notably, DeLillo's *White Noise* highlights this concept in title and in content, presenting television and radio noise as constant presences within the characters' lives, underlining significant events and mundane domestic moments alike.<sup>77</sup> Egan's text furthers this idea of technological noise underlying both the reading experience and daily life, as it literally becomes the background of the text, in a social media platform designed for individuals to share snippets of their own lives. The text adds to this digital noise, as well as being surrounded and interrupted by it.

While it is impossible now to experience the live unfolding of the text, we can see the structure, pace, and visual style of the tweets through websites such as *Paste Magazine*, which displays individual images of each tweet in 'Black Box'. These images are also date-stamped, which reveals where the publication ended on one day, and the readers were then left to wait until the account began tweeting the text again the next day. As displayed in the image below, these 23 hour gaps add another layer of emptiness within the text:

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<sup>76</sup> This is depicted to the extreme by theorists such as Baudrillard and Jameson, who speak of a technological apocalypse which indicates the end of meaning, as technology encapsulates all and nothing 'new' can be created, only endless simulacra.

David Porush notes that technology in postmodernist fiction occupies a paradoxical position between fascination and revulsion (1980: 93), identifying a common theme amongst major works to be 'men who behave like, [and] think like' machines (1980: 94).

<sup>77</sup> Susana S. Martins provides a thorough analysis of this concept in her article '*White Noise* and Everyday Technologies' (2005).

## Image 59 of 606

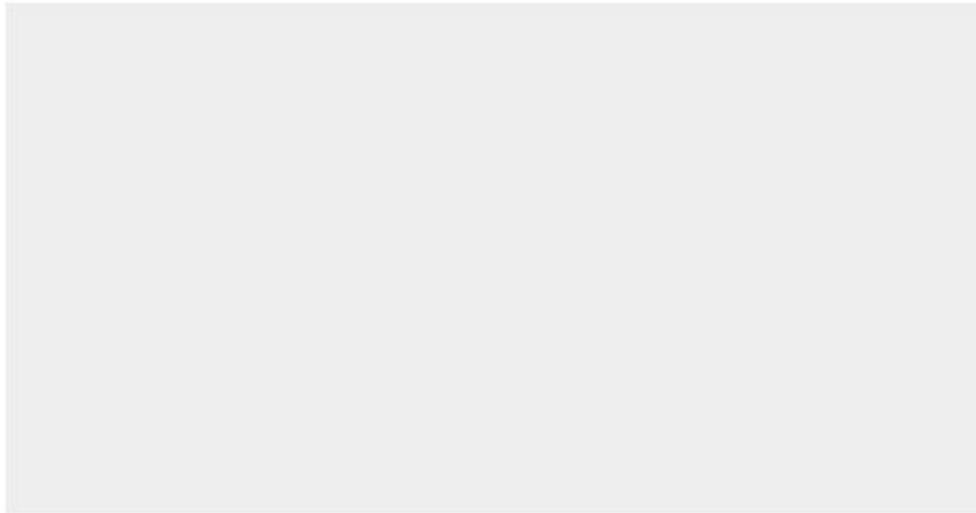


**New Yorker Fiction** @NYerFiction

24 May

With each number, imagine yourself rising out of your body and moving one step farther away from it.

Expand



## Image 60 of 606



**New Yorker Fiction** @NYerFiction

25 May

By eight, you should be hovering just outside your skin.

Expand

**Figure 9** (Screenshot of ‘Black Box’ Tweets, Orf 2012)<sup>78</sup>

This image shows the waiting period between day one and two of the text’s publication: within the grey square various advertisements appear on the *Paste Magazine* website, emphasising this gap between textual segments. The text pauses in the middle of the agent’s explanation of the Dissociation Technique, which she uses to endure the sexual assault she experiences in her role as a beauty. Breaking at this point leaves the text in a state of uncertainty about the agent’s safety for this period and pauses oddly in the middle of a description of the dissociation process, rather than ending at the conclusion to a thought. It is interesting to consider how these day-to-day gaps work in comparison to the timeline shifts between chapters in *Goon Squad*. In both cases the reader faces a period of uncertainty and questioning, yet in *Goon Squad* this is connected to the immediate presence of new, but disconnected information, whereas in ‘Black Box’ the uncertainty is tied to a ‘pause’ in the constant stream of narrative. ‘Black Box’ reliably continues from the point the previous day ended

<sup>78</sup> Image from *Paste Magazine* (Orf 2012). Grey square shows where advertisements appear on the website.

upon, whereas *Goon Squad* has no set pattern to its order. Thus, while both gaps fragment the narrative, they produce distinct effects. In *Goon Squad*, the reader has to chart the movement of characters across timelines and decipher implications which are not always narratively addressed. In 'Black Box' the gaps between instalments are not truly empty but are filled by the ever-changing digital noise of the social media platform, which amplifies the distance between segments of the text. Similarly, there is no overt narrative acknowledgement or explanation of these gaps.

Roland Barthes provides an account of readers who read with their own rhythm, skipping over some sections and pausing on others, 'imposing abrasions' upon the surface of the text (1975: 11-12). These narrative gaps and discontinuities emphasise the 'site of a loss, the seam, the cut', self-consciously breaking the narrative to increase desire (Barthes 1975: 7). The gaps within 'Black Box' similarly call attention to the fragmentation of the text and emphasise the state of uncertainty and desire that the reader is left in. Yet here it is the technology which imposes abrasions upon the text, emphasising the digital seams which stitch together technology and fiction. This stop-start method of publication thus increases narrative tension by exaggerating the barriers to knowledge and the reader's lack of control over how to read the text. These pauses and gaps engage with the reader's own thoughts and with the interruptions of digital noise, all contributing to the reading experience. Similarly, the narrative is enhanced by this fragmentation, building tension in a slow unfolding of the action within the text—what Barthes calls the 'gradual unveiling' (1975: 10). The layout of the text in *Paste Magazine*, as opposed to the *New Yorker* article, enables us to better notice these choices and periods of prolonged waiting for a conclusion.

Reading the text in this cut-and-paste fashion might actually be truer to the original Twitter publication style, as the easier option of reading the text on *The New Yorker's* website only replicates the pattern in which the text is divided, it does not carry the same visual markers as the tweets. The *Paste Magazine* version, however, exactly shows the image of the individual tweets and also inserts their own advertisements in between each one. While a frustrating reading experience, made two to three times longer because of the high advertisement-to-image ratio, this is probably more akin to the experience of

reading it on your Twitter home feed, with regular interruptions from other sources. *Paste Magazine*'s record of 'Black Box' also highlights the scheduled nature of the text in detailing its date marks, revealing the way in which it is not completely live, but programmed to send information at planned moments each day. While the daily burst is fragmented enough to feel random and certainly allows enough time to pass that the text newly interrupts the Twitter feed each day, it is important to note that there is nothing truly spontaneous or live about the text. Egan here plays with technology to create an atmosphere of interaction and spontaneity, which in reality is a structured and inflexible process with no room for adaptation. This is amplified by the material nature of the text's planning: as mentioned earlier, it was decided and recorded on paper before being programmed into a scheduling site and then sent out in its short bursts on Twitter. The text's live effect is countered by its predetermined nature, demonstrating a usage of the social media platform to create an impression of live dissemination through this fragmentation and scheduling.

Further complication of the text's 'liveness' comes from the fact that most readers will not read the tweets live but will read the website version instead. Even re-reading the Twitter page after the time of publication gives the impression of spontaneous thoughts, yet as mentioned at the start of this section on 'Black Box', it is very unlikely that a reader will now (or even past a few weeks of the original publication) read the text on Twitter. The *New Yorker* website version does not include any time or date stamps on the text, thus removing this aspect of fragmentation through publication time gaps. This in a way ensures that the text is not 'dated' and can seem continually live in a stream-of-conscious style uploading. Yet it removes the spontaneous nature of the live Tweets and the distancing between fragments that the live reader experienced at the time of publication, and which is evident in the timestamps present on Twitter and the *Paste Magazine* version.

The fragmented Twitter fiction style also distorts the representation of the text, as it enables hundreds of different access points to the story, linked through each individual tweet, each of which could give an entirely different first impression of the text. If a reader merely stumbled upon the text by seeing one solitary tweet on their Twitter feed, that 140 character segment alone would be their first impression of the fiction and the basis upon which they would decide



whether or not to read more. While some phrases are extremely reflective and philosophical, such as ‘Kindness feels good, even when it’s based on a false notion of your identity and purpose’, others throw the reader into an action sequence, such as ‘It is hard to safely navigate a clifftop promontory at high speed while blind’ (Egan 2012: Sections 2, lines 5-6, and 27, lines 13-14). These give two entirely different first impressions of the text and are a product of the text having lost its material unity, one in which all excess content is removed and only the text remains. There is a particular impact upon the first encounter between the reader and text because the cover is removed, providing direct access to the text with no introductory material guiding expectations. While we all know not to rely too heavily on cover art to judge a book, the absence of such paratexts do have an impact.<sup>79</sup> The lack of the usual blurb at the back of the book further removes insight into its plot and genre, things that are usually hinted at in cover art.

Stumbling upon one section of ‘Black Box’ on your social media feed is in some ways akin to finding a loose page from a book lying on the street, which might prompt a search for the complete book to situate the page in the correct context. For the most part, however, this idea of finding a loose page is theoretical, not a realistic or common scenario.<sup>80</sup> Yet Twitter fiction makes this not only probable but real, enabling not just single pages, but each 140-word fragment, to appear in isolation from the rest of the text. While the fragment may alert the reader to the Twitter fiction, it is not possible to enter the text from each of these points because the text was not tweeted as a ‘thread’ (in which all tweets would be grouped together in the correct order) and thus does not provide links to the prior and subsequent passages. Instead, the source of the text must be found and read in a linear fashion. The Twitter fiction is thus as rigid in its linearity as a bound print narrative, although it does offer multiple

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<sup>79</sup> For example, Tore Rye Anderson’s 2012 article ‘Judging by the Cover’ traces the influence of paratextual matters on the critical construction of literary works, through a close analysis of the dust jackets for David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973).

<sup>80</sup> Some experimental fiction has played with this idea of unbound fiction, such as B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (1969), which was presented as loose pages in a box designed to be read in any order (though with a specified first and last chapter).

‘first encounters’ because the first line read may be any of the 606 tweets making up the story.

Hayles’s observation that the materiality of the textual body is shaped by, and potentially at risk due to, digitisation is quite evident here; ‘Black Box’ sheds the literal paper skin of the novel, and many of the expectations that accompany it. My own observations, however, indicate that ‘Black Box’ is not in fact less structured, less engaging, or less literary than a print novel. In ‘Black Box’, reading processes are rethought and constantly questioned, as there are fewer set expectations of the text—given the multiple access points, the loss of paratexts, and the informing digital noise that differs between each reader’s engagement with the text and platform.

### Continuing the American Short Story

My observations lead me to a wider conversation about how this kind of electronic fiction changes the definition and dissemination of the American short story,<sup>81</sup> famously referred to by Frank O’Connor as a ‘national art form’ (in Boddy 2010: 2).<sup>82</sup> The decision to publish ‘Black Box’ through the *New Yorker* Twitter account (@NYerFiction), rather than Egan’s personal account (@EganGoonSquad), creates an added significance because this text is being endorsed by this institution. ‘Black Box’ is thereby associated with *The New Yorker*’s rich publishing history, again highlighting that Egan’s literary experimentation values and is supported by conventional gatekeepers of the industry.<sup>83</sup> As well as this literary association, the visual style of ‘Black Box’ as a Twitter fiction in many ways continues and develops the interest of American short story authors in experimenting with the form of fiction, incorporating the visuality of the text in its form.

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<sup>81</sup> The term ‘Short-story’ was first recorded in print in a 1885 article by the American critic Brander Matthews. ‘Matthews’s use of capitals and a hyphen to join his two terms was a deliberate attempt to distinguish short stories from stories which merely happened to be short’ (Boddy, 2010, 1).

<sup>82</sup> See: Boddy, ‘Introduction: A National Art Form’ in *The American Short Story since 1950* (2010: 2-6).

<sup>83</sup> Fiona Green discusses the status of *The New Yorker* in producing notable American short stories in *Writing for The New Yorker: Critical Essays on an American Periodical* (2015).

In particular, the experiments of postmodern writers such as William Burroughs's 'cut-up' technique can be compared to Twitter fiction's dispersal of fragments into an unpredictable and unconventional landscape, though Burroughs's approach is certainly more radical than most Twitter fictions. Burroughs's fragmentation is discernible in later postmodernist fiction, such as David Markson's *Reader's Block* (1996) which asks 'What is a novel in any case', 'Nonlinear? Discontinuous? Collage-like? An assemblage?' (Markson 1996: 13, 14).<sup>84</sup> Bronwen Thomas notes that Twitter is able to replicate such experimentation by 'teasing readers with fragments that hold out the promise of some kind of meaningful connection, but also challenging the very idea that meaning can be predicted or consciously controlled' (2016: 358). Thomas's observation relies on the contributions of fragmentation to an intentional narrative effect, which I have analysed thoroughly in the case of 'Black Box'. While in the work of Burroughs and other postmodernists, this withholding and controlling of meaning teases the reader or creates a collage effect, in Egan's work it increases narrative significance, showing a twisting of technique for a slightly different outcome. Comparing Egan's work to these earlier examples demonstrates her continuity with ongoing American literary experimentation, with elements of historic postmodernism, while also throwing into relief her distinctive practice of fragmentation through the deployment of contemporary technologies.

A particularly revealing point of comparison is Donald Barthelme's short story 'The Explanation', published in May 1968, also in *The New Yorker*, which addresses many parallel themes to 'Black Box'. Donald Barthelme, 'the American creator of a hilarious oeuvre of postmodernist shorts' ('Ultra Short Fiction - Flash Mob' 2015), is often mentioned in analysis of Egan's literary heritage and influence, alongside names such as Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and

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<sup>84</sup> Markson is often characterised as a 'highly experimental, "difficult" postmodern writer who write[s] writing" instead of stories' (one critic's assessment of *Reader's Block* as 'not a novel' inspired the title of *This Is Not a Novel* (2001)), though Laura Sims argues that he 'employs many familiar elements of the novel [...] in radically altered form' (Sims 2008: 59, 63).

The quoted description/questioning of a novel from *Reader's Block* is repeated in *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004), and *The Last Novel* (2007), all of which continue this interest in rebuilding and defamiliarising the novel.

Jonathan Franzen.<sup>85</sup> It is thus not unreasonable to think that Barthelme's work—including this specific short story—may have been a reference point for 'Black Box'. Even without conscious engagement with this text, Barthelme's widespread influence on American fiction, and especially the short story, makes him an important reference point for the contemporary short story and its electronic mutations.<sup>86</sup>

Written in an interview style made up of short statements labelled Q or A, the text is broken up by black dots which group the text into uneven sections. The text is further interrupted by solid black squares—literal black boxes—where a picture or advertisement might be expected in a normal newspaper or magazine interview. These squares are referred to in the text, often by the command 'look at it', and with statements that imply the pair are indeed looking at an object, but it is only represented in the text as this black box. For instance:

A: I don't know what it is. What does it do?

Q: Well, look at it.



A: It offers no clues.

Q: It has a certain . . . reticence.

A: I don't know what it does.

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(Barthelme 1968: 44)

David Porush's analysis of the short story notes that 'the mysterious monolithic box is complemented by the abstraction and ambiguity of the exchange between

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<sup>85</sup> Charles Finch speaks of the 'youthful allegiance to the postmodern influence of DeLillo and Barthelme, among them Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Colson Whitehead and George Saunders', though notes that the later work of these contemporary authors (Egan's *Manhattan Beach*) indicates a movement away from this postmodern influence (Finch 2017: n.p.).

<sup>86</sup> Larry McCaffery speaks of Barthelme's early impact: 'especially during the late 60's and early 70's Barthelme's work probably had more impact on American innovative fiction than that of any other writer' (1982: 990), and William Gass emphasises Barthelme's continuing influence, stating that he 'has permanently enlarged our perception of the possibilities open to short fiction' (1986: 46).

Q. and A.. Q. seems to be trying to lead A. into an appreciation of “the machine” as he refers to the black thing hovering over them on the page’ (Porush 1985: 200). This machine is the focus of the text, but at the same time it is not because we never discover what the machine actually is. Instead, the idea of the machine leads to discussions about the impact of technology upon all aspects of life, philosophical musings about reality and purity, and descriptions of an attractive woman undressing. The machine itself is completely absent from Barthelme’s story, but in ‘Black Box’ machines are not simply present within the fiction, they are the mechanism for delivery, the site of reading, the skeleton to which the flesh of the text is attached.

The physical black boxes in ‘The Explanation’ interrupt and separate the text in an intriguingly similar manner to the digital noise I analysed in ‘Black Box’ where the wrappings around each tweet and the advertisements or tweets from other users insert visual gaps between the fragments of fiction. Yet the difference again lies in the transparency of the interruptions: Barthelme’s are obtuse interruptions literally obscuring the reader’s view and hiding any knowledge of the machine. ‘Black Box’, however, is transparently inserted into Twitter, and the details of the technology are explicitly displayed, in fact the reader must have a prior knowledge of the technology to access and read the text. This mention of transparency recalls Clark’s assertion that, in the extended mind theory, transparency signals assimilation and the brain’s adoption of the technological ability as its own: it no longer sees the mechanisms of the technology as an obstacle or foreign object. This idea connects and distinguishes Barthelme’s and Egan’s texts: technology moves from an obstacle between reader and text (Barthelme) and becomes a method of reading itself (Egan). Fiction and technology continue to play against each other: both authors use representations or actual examples of machines to shape their text, but ambiguous theorising in Barthelme transforms into active engagement in Egan’s black boxes.

We can also think back to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, where Egan visually included solid black squares in her PowerPoint chapter, which I argued enable a non-verbal expression of silence. In *Goon Squad* these black boxes embrace an alternative perspective and incorporate neurodivergent communication strategies into fiction through technology, thus avoiding moments of confusion.

Egan's work continues this postmodern interest in playing with visibility through technological fragmentation, surprising the reader through her rearrangement of materiality and incorporation of technological images into the body of her text. Yet, instead of representing an unknown, Egan uses these black boxes to convey meaning rather than to create confusion. In a reversal of Barthelme's black boxes which represent readerly frustration and a distrust in the intersection between fiction and technology, Egan's text promotes a connection between reader and fiction through the incorporation of technology.

These black squares and slides are also reminiscent of other novels which include black or blank pages, such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759)—which uses a black page to represent death and mourning, while dually acting as a 'visual joke' (Mullan 2018).

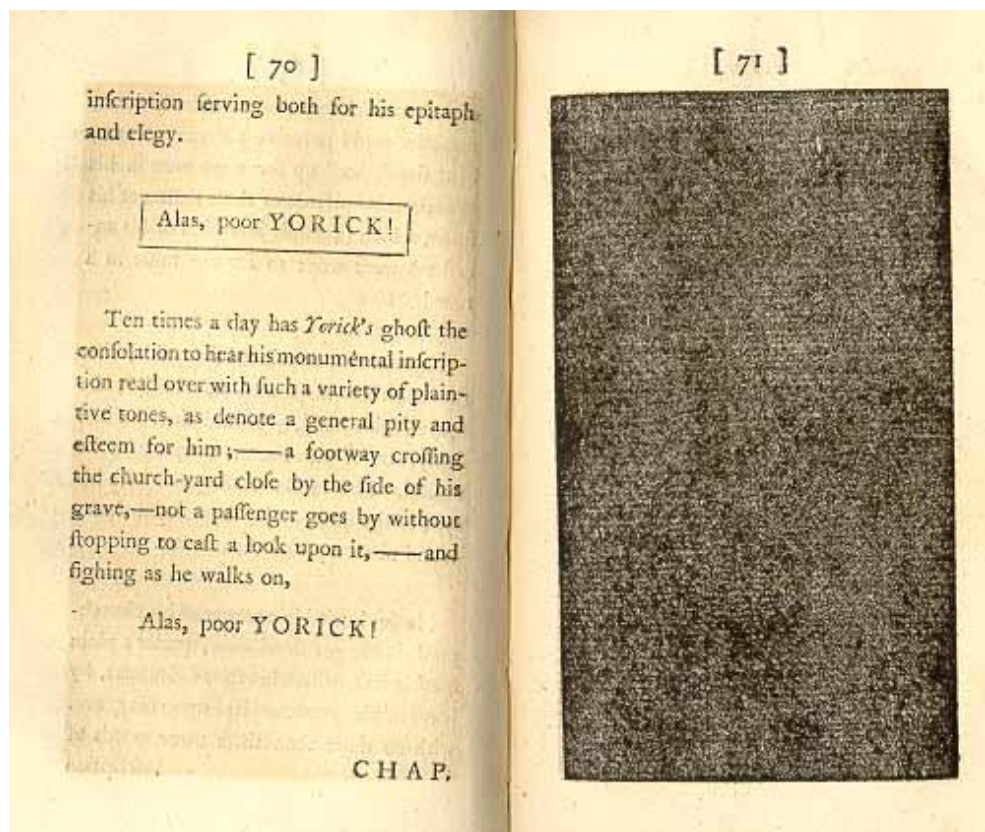


Figure 10 (Page from *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne 1769: 70, 71)

The connection to Sterne is particularly interesting because the many visual and typographic oddities within his text are used 'to foreground the artificiality of Sterne's chosen medium' (McDayter 2002). Egan's PowerPoint chapter also foregrounds artificiality by presenting a translation of digital media into an analogue format, highlighting the chasm between the represented image and its

material form. Further, this connection recalls Barthes's idea of seams and abrasions, as noted earlier in connection to 'Black Box', where the digital divisions and wrappings foreground the electronic nature of Egan's chosen medium by interrupting fictional fragments with digital noise. Sterne, Barthelme, and Egan in GRRP all use the same technique of printed black boxes, yet in separate centuries with different technological contexts. The examples from Barthelme and Egan thus nod to this earlier innovation from Sterne, drawing upon an extensive lineage of typographical innovation. This connection points to the legacy of fictional experimentation with the materiality of the novel as noted in my introduction to this chapter, reinforcing the idea that novels 'respond to their contemporary, digital moment' (Pressman 2009) through material experimentation and adaptation.

A most interesting point of comparison between Barthelme and Egan's short stories is this comment in *The Explanation* about the death of the novel:

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Q: Is the novel dead?  
 A: Oh yes. Very much so.  
 Q: What replaces it?  
 A: I should think that it is replaced  
 by what existed before it was invent-  
 ed.  
 Q: The same thing?  
 A: The same sort of thing.  
 Q: Is the bicycle dead?

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(Barthelme 1968: 44)

Porush asks, 'what does the mysterious black box and talk of machines have to do with this cocktail chat about the death of the novel?' (Porush 1985: 203). A implies that the novel was 'invented', and in the last remark from Q, novels and bicycles are linked together as inventions. Porush notes that the bicycle is a mechanical invention, and as this text focuses upon 'the machine', this prompts the question: 'Is the novel a machine?' (1985: 203). The text discusses the interface of the machine, the details of its materiality and asks what each part is used for, but no clarity is ever given. Answers like 'it's part of the process' (Barthelme 1968: 45) give as much clarity and detail as the black boxes reveal of the images to which they refer. It is significant that the black box in engineering

and psychiatry represents the unknown process—Egan’s text intentionally looks inside the black box, opening the usually unknowable processes of human thought by communicating the agent’s internal thoughts, recorded and made accessible by the implanted technology. Her revelations about these processes contrasts with Barthelme’s emphasis on the unknown impact of the machine, intentionally obscuring its particulars from the reader in both visual and narrative depiction.

Yet, black boxes are also the last survivor of trauma and destruction, providing a record of events in the case of no other sources of narrative. This is literally the case in Egan’s short story where in the event of the agent’s death her findings will be preserved and thus her mission can be achieved, even in death. By using this definition of a black box, both short stories point to the question of the death of the novel, one explicitly posed by Barthelme and continually present in discourse about postmodern and contemporary fiction.<sup>87</sup> The ongoing presence of this question underlines the American short story’s unique place in literature, often growing out of periods questioning the relevance of the novel or breaking down norms in established genres and literary conventions.<sup>88</sup> These examples from Barthelme and Egan show how technology might alter the body of the short story, and question whether the form can survive it, their own texts like the black boxes which must withstand this threat.

Egan’s experimentations in *Goon Squad* and ‘Black Box’ focus upon the relationship between fiction and machine in identifiably new ways from her postmodern literary predecessors. ‘Black Box’, her own *New Yorker* short story, published 44 years after Barthelme’s, reveals an intersection of technology and fiction that relies upon the specific visual properties of machines, properties which in Barthelme’s text are seen as convoluted and ultimately useless. Rather than killing off the novel, Egan’s work utilises other machines to draw new boundaries, incorporate new reading styles, and situate the American short story

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<sup>87</sup> In 1966 Louis D. Rubin wrote ‘One hears it all the time, and one gets tired of listening to it. The Novel is Dead’ (Rubin 1966: 306). This sentiment continues in contemporary discourse such as in the 2015 book *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (Vermeulen 2015), which considers the aftermath of the postmodern attitude summarised by Rubin.

<sup>88</sup> Boddy’s *The American Short Story since 1950* describes the short story as constantly in danger but always surviving, highlighting the adaptability of the form to the ‘fundamental concerns’ of great writers (2015: 1).



in this new digital landscape. This chapter has also demonstrated that Egan's texts engage with existing literary interests and build upon the work of predecessors through engaging with new technologies, rather than diminishing literary quality and prestige. Thus, Egan's work revitalises the act of readership and textual materiality through her digital interruptions of the novel and the short story, using these not to destroy but to augment the body of the text, and to provide new spaces and methods for fiction to thrive in a digital world.

## Chapter 4: The Virtual Body

Here was the bottom line: if we human beings are *information processing machines*, reading X's and O's and translating that information into what people oh so breathlessly call 'experience', and [...] if I had not only the information but also the artistry to *shape* that information [...] then, technically speaking, was I not having all the same experiences those other people were having?

(Egan 2010a: 102)

In this section of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Bennie questions whether 'experience' is not merely 'information' input in a certain order, and whether he couldn't craft an experience for himself by mastering this information. While Bennie is afraid of real computers—stating that 'if you can find Them, then They can find you, and I didn't want to be found' (Egan 2010a: 102)—his observation implies the possibility for a computer programme to formulate experience through the digital collection and arrangement of information. Bennie's queries point towards the fraught, competitive relationship between materiality and digitality within *Goon Squad*, as seen earlier in the novel where the digitisation of the music industry makes existing processes useless and removes proof of human engagement from artistic productions—'*an aesthetic holocaust*' (Egan 2010a: 24), as Bennie calls it. This chapter outlines the persistent dematerialisation that occurs across Egan's texts, and the virtual abilities that replace and rewrite material encounters—translating experience into Xs and Os.

Egan's fiction continually questions and wears thin the divide between the material and the digital: portraying the quest to replicate human activity and experience through virtual means. After considering the contributions of material embodiment and the meeting of technology and flesh in the first two chapters of this thesis, this chapter investigates the loss of materiality in virtual processes, spaces, and bodies within Egan's work. Following chapter 3's interrogation of fiction losing its material body, I now turn my attention to how social media and surveillance technologies enable individuals to curate their lives on a digital platform, without the contributions—or perhaps, the complications—of physical embodiment. This loss of materiality, and the paradox of depicting virtuality through analogue techniques, is well represented through the multiple versions and incarnations of Egan's texts. *A Visit from the Goon*

*Squad* is best known as a traditional paper book, but, like most fiction today, you could also read *Goon Squad* as an e-book: which would present a dizzying digital upload of a print translation of a PowerPoint presentation in chapter 12. As I briefly noted in chapter 3, ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’ exists online in its digital-born multicoloured PowerPoint form, marketed as a children’s fiction by *The Guardian*’s interactive website page (Egan 2011). Not yet mentioned is the fact that an app version of *Goon Squad* was briefly available, where chapters could be rearranged by the reader and read in any order.<sup>89</sup>

The now in-accessible nature of this app speaks to a wider point about the ephemerality of digital texts when platforms become obsolete, or when owners choose to delete their product. This is in stark contrast to the endurance of a physical product; if all virtual platforms ceased to exist, *Goon Squad* would have only one, physical, incarnation. Its multiplicity is thus tenuous, enabled only through the promise of digital storage. This speaks to Chun’s observation of the ‘blind belief in digital media as memory’ (2008: 169), and the fact that ‘digital media networks are not based on the regular obsolescence or disposability of information but rather on the resuscitability or the undead of information’ (2008: 171). Yet, the permanence of digital deletion complicates this resuscitability—*Goon Squad*’s short lived app form is dead information—revealing the fragility of digital memory. The belief in digital permanence is present in the lives of Egan’s characters: Lulu’s black box mission log is designed to survive the death of her body, and Charlotte Swenson’s virtual image replaces her physical form by purchasing her legal identity. The duality of materiality and digitality in the multiple versions of this novel then presents a comparison to lived experiences of contemporary digital culture, where individuals live two kinds of lives: virtual and physical. As I will outline, virtual lives are often given priority in Egan’s texts, perpetuating this belief in digital media as memory by upholding virtual identities over physical ones.

Furthermore, the authority given to the individual reader to decide the chronology of the novel through the app imitates the way that most social media platforms cater to the individual’s preferences and enable them to create a

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<sup>89</sup> I have been unable to access this app version personally, as it is not available for download anywhere. However it is well described in an article by *The Literary Platform* (‘A Visit from the *Goon Squad* app’ 2011).

curated timeline of real-life (non-virtual) events. Virtual spaces are not held to traditional linearity, instead presenting a ‘highlight-reel’ of life’s key events that can skip over mundane or unpleasant moments.<sup>90</sup> Ivan Kreilkamp’s recent book *A Visit from the Goon Squad REREAD* (2021) summarises *Goon Squad*’s experimentation with time as a dual compression and amplification of temporality, ‘shift[ing] in and out of “minimal” or maximal modes’ (20), observing this same resistance of a persistent linearity. Using the terms minimal and maximal positions Egan’s writing within American literary history; maximalism became prominent in American fiction in the 1970s,<sup>91</sup> taking a central role in postmodernism, most famously by authors such as Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace.<sup>92</sup> Minimalism, then, is often thought of in opposition to postmodernism, either in works preceding the postmodern such as Samuel Beckett and Ernest Hemingway, or in the encounter with postmodernism, like Raymond Carver’s short stories.<sup>93</sup> Egan’s shifting between these seemingly exclusive modes indicates another paradox, embracing the multiplicity of American fiction. The co-existence of material and electronic versions of Egan’s novel mimics the duality within contemporary digital culture of virtual and physical realities where as much attention can be paid to cultivating an online presence as to living in one’s physical reality.

In chapter 3 I paid attention to the distinction between electronic and digital fiction, noting the difference between ‘digital born’ fiction (Hayles 2008: 3), and fiction that merely happens to become digitised at some point in its publication. This distinction is interesting to consider in relation to my analysis here: in keeping with Reina’s observation that print books are in many ways already digital because of editing and publishing processes (2019: 76), our daily physical lives are in many way already augmented by digital technologies. This fact was central to my argument regarding the contributions of embodiment and the presence of technological extension in chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis, where I

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<sup>90</sup> Paradoxically, a 2014 study in psychological health suggests that this highlight reel culture induces social comparison and depressive symptoms (Steers, Wickham, and Acitelli).

<sup>91</sup> Though its origins can be traced back further, for instance to Melville’s *Moby-Dick* or Whitman’s poetry.

<sup>92</sup> For more on literary maximalism, see: *Maximalism in Contemporary American Literature: The Uses of Detail* (Levey 2016) and *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño’s 2666* (Ercolino 2014).

<sup>93</sup> For more on literary minimalism, see: *American Literary Minimalism* (Clark 2014).

highlighted the value of the flesh in these processes. Further, the word digital is intrinsically and etymologically linked to the physical body—i.e. fingers as digits of the hand—and so it would be erroneous to divide my analysis into ‘digital’ and ‘non-digital’ bodies. Therefore a similar distinction between full and partial digitality may be made in relation to the body, in connection with the loss of physical embodiment. I have chosen the term ‘virtual bodies’ and ‘virtual lives’ to signify the non-physical nature of these experiences, and to query the extent to which these virtual lives attempt or are able to supplant physical interactions.

To ask these questions, this chapter relies on scholarly observations made about the topographies of virtuality which enable my analysis of webpages and social media profiles as inhabited locations. Mark Nunes’s *Cyberspaces of Everyday Life* (2006), for instance, theorises cyberspace as a lived space, and states that “‘the network’” now serves as an organising concept for the spaces of everyday life’ (2006: xiv). Arguing that ‘space is a social product’ (2006: xxi), Nunes outlines the generational shift that saw the town common being replaced by the Web as ‘the focal point of daily life’ (2006: 65). I adapt this idea of cyberspace as a lived location to argue that virtual profiles can be theorised as lived identities, shifting the focus from material to virtual encounters. Nunes’s understanding that network culture has transformed how we view and arrange physical spaces aids me in tying claims about virtual identity to the patterns of both physical and virtual living in Egan’s novels. Ultimately, this chapter posits that Egan’s characters display a sense of ownership over ideas and things that reveals an integration of network culture and virtual strategies into everyday life.

My analysis in this chapter is broken into the issues of dematerialisation and virtual lives. Under the heading dematerialisation I consider the way Egan’s characters consistently engage with a loss of physical experience and a dissolving of analogue materiality, mourning and resisting this move, as seen in *Goon Squad*’s depiction of the transition from analogue to digital standards in the music industry and *The Keep*’s attempt to recover creativity lost to technology. Much existing work on Egan describes this trend as a nostalgic commentary on

ageing and technology;<sup>94</sup> I add another layer to these readings, arguing that the drastic loss of materiality in *Look at Me*, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and Twitter fiction ‘Black Box’ works to amplify the duality of materiality and virtuality as a new reality in contemporary digital culture. Regarding virtual lives, I consider the habits enabled by dematerialisation: outlining how Egan’s characters come to expect the use of virtual abilities in both virtual and physical locations. This involves a new understanding of temporality—I take Kreilkamp’s phrasing of the two extremes of compression and amplification into a new context to argue that virtual spaces, and the adaption of networks as an organising concept for social spaces, enables both a selective linearity (compression) and a hyper-linearity (amplification). This paradox of selective and extensive accounts is further present in virtual data: digital surveillance including data-mining allows computers to record any requested digital activity, resulting in the most minute of personal data and preferences becoming stored as identifying information: those with access are able to know more about groups and individuals than at any prior moment in time. Yet, social media and profile culture allows for a selective curation of self-image, from aesthetic editing to timeline curation where only the best moments in life make it to screen. Thus virtual culture presents another kind of tension: removing privacy from digital encounters while amplifying the kind of control users have in building their virtual identities.

These techniques and tensions of digital culture are applied at the end of this chapter to ideas of curation and re-enactment, examining how Egan’s characters manage their own lives and images as if they were virtual profiles. This point epitomises the sense of entitlement Egan’s texts display in deploying these virtual strategies: as material experience becomes fuel for virtual activity and individual lives are reconceived as data. This chapter thus addresses the steady removal of material experience in Egan’s texts, emphasising the duality of

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<sup>94</sup> Gerard Moorey (2012) and Martin Moling (2016) are key readings here, both drawing out Egan’s representation of the music industry and connecting this to the novel’s history of depicting the passage of time. Moorey asserts that *A Visit from the Goon Squad* asks ‘what happens to rock and roll itself once it has become “old”?’ (2012: 65), examining the end of the rock era and the nostalgic memories held by those who came of age during it. Moling studies the idea of punk-time in the novel, writing that ‘Egan’s attempt to bridge the past and the future, or modernism and postmodernism, resembles Iggy Pop’s aspiration to coalesce punk’s initial raw authenticity with the shallow glare of a postmodern Berlin sky’ (2016: 53), as depicted in 1977 song “The Passenger”.

material and virtual identities, and also the manner in which virtual strategies are deployed in various environments—demonstrating a sense of ownership over physical matters that mimics the easy access and editing of data in virtual settings.

## Dematerialisation

Art used to possess weight, presence, gravity. You could touch it, hold it in your hands, feel its presence near you. [...] books and records and film, writing and music, always took *some particular physical* form: paperbacks whose cover art conveyed coded signals and whose cuffs and marks were traces of previous owners; big, glossy vinyl LPs that could warp or scratch [...] These all were things in the (my, our) world: tangible, visible, present, vulnerable to accident, attached to specific locations in time and space; sensuous objects combining language, image, sound, touch in idiosyncratic ways; taken and marked up by audiences and consumers.

(Kreilkamp 2021: 1)

Ivan Kreilkamp begins his rereading of Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* with this reflection on the tangible, material nature of art that he (born in the 1960s) grew up with. Weight, texture, fragility, and other material components evoke sense memory and induce a nostalgia for a certain kind of reliable materiality that is no longer the standard. It is the absence of these material signifiers in the contemporary dissemination of art that makes the past reliability of art's weight, presence and gravity so notable. While materiality has not been entirely erased, there is no longer a '*particular physical form*' for each artistic creation, now that most can be purchased, carried, and experienced on a digital platform. Digitisation enables a mass dematerialisation of artistic products and their consumption, allowing multiple kinds of art to exist in a communal digital space without physical evidence of consumption.

A very prominent example, and one at the heart of *Goon Squad*, is how we make and listen to music. Multiple advances over the past half a century have seen repeated near-extinction of physical forms of listening to music.<sup>95</sup> With this came

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<sup>95</sup> To briefly summarise, the main musical formats in this period have been: vinyl records popularised in the 1950s, cassettes introduced in 1963, CDs in 1982, MP3 players in the late '90s, the iPod in 2001, and then digital streaming services starting in the mid noughts.

an upheaval for the consumer as home spaces were reconfigured: vinyl racks were replaced with cassette shelves, which were too narrow to fit CDs and thus ended up in garage sales and charity shops. This cycle reveals the material impact of technological advancement. However, with the advent of digital streaming there is no new physical product to replace the old one, creating a void in the now routine handover between technologies. Further, the lack of a physical ‘carcass’ in the death of digital forms—such as the deletion of the *Goon Squad* app—leaves no evidence of the media’s existence and consumption. The rise in branded merchandise is likely tied to this void, as consumer capitalism seeks to replace this lost materiality. Branded clothing and other products have long been part of music festivals, as a way for fans to show their commitment to their favourite band. However, the advent of online shopping combined with the lost appeal of CDs has led to a surge in the amount of branded products created and sold, becoming one of the biggest profit sources in the music industry.<sup>96</sup> Kreilkamp observes that, when the experience of art was always embodied in a material form, there was a consequential physical proof manifested in these objects. Collecting and displaying these tokens, such as piles of cassettes or movie tickets, enabled a kind of physical possession that signalled the consumption of a particular artistic product.

The desire to attach a significant moment to a physical object is evident within Sasha’s kleptomania in the opening chapter of *Goon Squad*, ‘Found Objects’, where physical tokens provide pleasure for Sasha and enable her to relive her moments of stealth. The items range from everyday items unlikely to be missed: pens, a pair of binoculars, bath salts, a screwdriver, to more personal things: house keys, a child’s scarf, a handwritten note taken from a date’s wallet. Egan writes that Sasha’s collection of stolen items ‘displayed years of her life compressed’ (Egan 2010a: 15), acting as physical markers for significant moments in her life, much like a photo album or diary might. Though these

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I say ‘near-extinction’ here because of the nostalgia-cycle in which some material products, like vinyl, have made a comeback in recent years.

Jaron Lanier points out the removal of materiality that also occurred within digitisation of music programming, such as the use of MIDI which translates musical notes onto a digital platform: a useful but limiting tool (2010: 3-23).

<sup>96</sup> A 2018 *Rolling Stone* article reports a growing increase in profits from music merchandise: citing manager for Panic! At the Disco’s statement that 30% of the band’s profit on its most recent tour was from sales of branded band merchandise (Browne 2018: n.p.).



items were stolen from other people, they are described as part of *her* life, significantly moving their ownership from those who purchased or created them, to the emotional value Sasha attaches to them. Later in this chapter I pay closer attention to the virtual encounters that have come to replace these material signifiers and collections, returning to this relationship Sasha has with her stolen objects as mimicking the curated and self-centred orientation of social media profiles. Yet for now I want to highlight this tendency toward material loss that is a consistent feature of *Goon Squad* specifically, and of Egan's fiction in general.

Sasha's longing for material expressions of relatively mundane encounters points towards the increasing digitisation of daily life. Sasha is fighting against this removal of material proof, this common experience of ending up 'with "nothing"' (Kreilkamp 2021: 23),<sup>97</sup> by forcefully taking physical souvenirs from her experiences out in the world and bringing them into her home as proof that she had a tangible presence in the world: proof that she cannot find elsewhere. Sasha's act of creating a physical legacy aligns with Dorothy Butchard's observation that 'Egan's works are filled with instances which reclaim the value of solid objects' (2019: 364). Indeed, Egan does not merely chart the process of dematerialisation, but depicts active protest against it. Sasha and many other characters in *Goon Squad* long for this tangible relationship with art which they have seen disappear within their lifetime, such as Bennie's nostalgia for the analogue aspects of music production, missing the 'muddiness' (Egan 2010a: 23) that digitisation has erased. Another example is the gold flakes Bennie puts in his coffee to increase his sexual potency, consuming a product in order to recover a lost sensory experience, just as Sasha steals things 'for the contraction it made her feel around her heart' (Egan 2010a: 6). Bennie's effort is fruitless and the reader sees he has been swindled into buying this ineffective remedy, lured into the purchase through his desperation and attachment to tangible remedies. Egan here depicts a cartoonish image of a man convinced by the power of literal shiny things, highlighting the value his generation places in materiality. This tendency towards loss leads me to read Sasha's stolen items as

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<sup>97</sup> This wording comes from *The Keep*, with Danny repeatedly claiming he has 'nothing'. Kreilkamp applies this notion to *Goon Squad*, arguing that it occurs to almost every character.

an attempt to retrieve the ‘weight, presence, gravity’ of art as evidence or a portal to memory, recovering some of the tactile materiality that has been lost.

This effort proves ultimately unsuccessful and the trend towards material loss is persistent throughout the novel. In particular, the final chapter of *Goon Squad* exemplifies this through its introduction of the new generation embodied by Lulu—assistant to Bennie. Lulu’s mode of employment as a ‘handset employee’ (White 2021: 6,7) is analysed in Carl White’s article ‘Deskless, commuterless, and theoretically omnipresent’ (2021), which explores concerns about contemporary capitalism in *Goon Squad*. White tracks the conflation of home and work spaces in Dolly’s ‘office/bedroom’ as a precursor to daughter Lulu’s omnipresent mode of working as described in ‘Pure Language’. The sustained loss of physical separation between home and work comes as part and parcel of the digitisation of everyday life, removing material signifiers and experiences in all aspects of life. Lulu is ‘a living embodiment of the new “handset employee”’: paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent’ (Egan 2010a: 325); she works entirely from her handheld device, through which she sends messages called Ts which use a simplified form of language in order to promote efficiency and clarity.

The comparison between Sasha and Lulu is especially significant as these characters bookend the novel and in these first and final chapters are both working as Bennie’s assistant: two young working women representing the new generation in each chapter.<sup>98</sup> This through line is extremely effective in demonstrating the technological transformation that occurs throughout the *Goon Squad*, with these two parallel characters anchoring either end of the novel. Sasha attempts to reclaim material experience amid a generational shift between technologies while Lulu is the champion of paperless existence and does not mourn material absence because she did not experience its removal.

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<sup>98</sup> There is some irony, or perhaps a lingering nostalgia for materiality converted into capitalism, in the fact that Lulu is employed to draw people to Scotty’s concert intended to recreate the physical experience of music.

### Dematerialising the Body in *Look at Me*

*Look at Me* most drastically presents the turn to virtual living, ending the novel with a jump forward in time where central character Charlotte has sold her likeness to a marketing website who now owns and manages this virtual character. Given my interest in embodiment throughout this thesis, this ‘transfer of identity’ (Egan 2001: 512) based on the ownership of purely virtual data is especially significant. In this example, Egan shows a prioritising of the virtual which adopts a human’s name and aesthetic form, disconnecting the inhabiting consciousness from this purchased data. The woman formerly known as Charlotte emphasises her sense of distance from her online persona.

That woman entertaining guests on her East River balcony in early summer, mixing rum drinks in such a way that the Bacardi and Coca-Cola labels blink at the viewer hap-hazardly in the dusty golden light - she isn’t me.

[...] the first woman in history to conceive and deliver a child on-line, before an international audience more than double the size of those assembled for the finales of *Cheers* and *Seinfeld* combined - she isn’t me.

I swear.

(Egan 2001: 509-10)

Here identity is still tied to embodiment for the individual, but for the rest of the world it makes no difference. The most widely disseminated image, and associated branding, remains the real in the public eye. After creating footage inside Charlotte’s veins and organs with ‘small, exploratory cameras [...] [Charlotte’s] heart, with its yawning, shaggy caverns, is more recognizable to a majority of Americans (according to one recent study) than their spouses’ hands’ (Egan 2001: 509), emphasising the priority of the virtual image over physical presence. The focus on hands plays on the dual meaning of ‘digital’ mentioned earlier in this chapter, emphasising the creation of a new reality through this virtual image which disrupts existing, material, priorities. In an echo of postmodernist fiction where reality is replaced by its representation, such as the airborne toxic event in *White Noise* (1984) or the Tristero conspiracy in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), here the most widely disseminated image replaces the real. Charlotte’s virtual reincarnation combines simulacra with dematerialisation

within the postmodern image—truly disseminating a false copy which is both received as fact and prioritised above truthful physical encounters.

Still, for the woman who is now *not* Charlotte Swenson, *her* body and *her* physical encounters are the real ones. She remains anonymous throughout the final chapter, referring to herself only as ‘myself’, ‘me’, and ‘I’. This is not a change of address, as Charlotte retrospectively refers to herself in this manner throughout her narration; what changes is that the reader is not given a new branding to attach these reflexive pronouns. The second difference is that Charlotte Swenson becomes ‘her’, rather than ‘me’, an active disowning of the name. This division between ‘Charlotte’ and ‘me’ is reminiscent of the chasm between the public and private self detailed in Jorge Luis Borges’s very short story ‘Borges and I’ (1960). A masterfully written parable about the duality of the self, ‘Borges and I’ refers to ‘the other one, the one called Borges’ (Borges 1960: 246), as ‘the one things happen to’ (Borges 1960: 246), and so the one who gets to own the name. Similarly in *Look at Me*, names remain associated with public personae, while the anonymous individuals are forced to sacrifice aspects of their own self both to support and to sever ties with this public version of self.<sup>99</sup> Cyberspace as the new celebrity domain amplifies this gulf between selves as Charlotte exists not only in the minds of fans but as an aesthetic virtual construction,<sup>100</sup> perceivable by the original Charlotte—now ‘me’. There is a comparable occurrence with writer Irene Maitlock: ‘she looks so different, thanks to her much chronicled makeover; without the name, I wouldn’t have recognized her’ (Egan 2001: 514). Like Charlotte Swenson, the name is the important and consistent branding. Whether the woman spotted on the arm of Richard Gere is the same Irene we met earlier in the text, post-makeover, or if she is an entirely different person does not matter as she inhabits the name and role.

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<sup>99</sup> ‘Borges and I’ describes the sacrifice inherent in supporting this public persona: ‘I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him [...] Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him’ (1960: 247).

<sup>100</sup> This is comparable to the description in ‘Borges and I’ of the Borges known by all: ‘I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary’ (1960: 246), communicating his everyday encounters with Borges as the public persona.

This chasm between embodied and virtual identity is only an exaggeration of the conflict between internal and public identity that Charlotte displayed throughout the novel. This is epitomised in the final page of the novel, where she reflects on her lost identity and her past obsession with image and fame.

I understand now that it's empty, filled with chimeras like Charlotte Swenson - the hard, beautiful seashells left behind long after the living creatures have struggled free and swum away. Or died.

(Egan 2001: 514)

Ivan Kreilkamp asserts that 'Egan's characters are often stunned by the passage of time, feeling taken unawares, unprepared for its effects' (2021: 17), which is absolutely the case in *Goon Squad's* mourning of youth and vitality, and in other works like *The Invisible Circus* and *The Keep* which attempt to recover or replicate the past. In this instance in *Look at Me*, however, Charlotte herself is not stunned, she is able to chart the slow widening of the breach between herself and her constructed media identity and pinpoint the period in which the split between the two women became irreparable.<sup>101</sup> She understands the divergence between self and image as a necessary process of survival, enabling the living creatures within these hard shells to find freedom and safety. The only thing she tells us about her life now is that 'When I breathe, the air feels good in my chest' (Egan 2001: 514), pairing her newfound freedom with this sense of ease with the material experience of existing in the world.

The novel ends with our now anonymous character listening to her old voicemail message: a relic from her old life, even before her accident and the downfall of her modelling career. This interaction with her digital, disembodied prior self underlines the consistent presence of this separation of self throughout the novel.

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<sup>101</sup> She describes that 'The breach between myself and Charlotte Swenson had its antecedents well before Ordinary People's now legendary debut', but that 'public life widened the fissures between us'. In the year following the debut 'a chasm developed within me, a sinkhole of massive proportions dividing me from Charlotte Swenson. I was someone else' (Egan 2001c: 510, 11).

Once or twice a year I still call my old voicemail, just to see if the outgoing message is the one I recorded myself. My hand shakes as I dial the phone, and I wonder who will answer.

‘Hi, it’s me,’ comes her childish, cigarette voice from the digital void. ‘Leave a message, but keep it short.’

‘Hello,’ I say. It’s me.’

(Egan 2001: 514)

The pronouns change from ‘my’ to ‘she’, highlighting the recording as a truly different person, an act, now belonging to the same realm as the on-screen Charlotte. That version of Charlotte Swenson was only ever accessible through digital media and technology, such as in the posed and edited photographs of her in magazines and on billboards. Similarly, the mediated communication of phone calls allowed a curated persona to exist; the staged, editable nature of the voicemail message is an intentional act of crafting the digital impression of oneself.

Other critics have noted the many doubles in this novel and across Egan’s work,<sup>102</sup> but here we see a doubling of embodied and virtual incarnations of the same character. The split between the material body and the virtual image is noticed only by the inhabitant of the body; the public does not mourn this loss of materiality, instead celebrating the increased access to the individual and the wide dissemination of their life as a mode of entertainment. A premonition of the rise of reality shows and curated social media profiles,<sup>103</sup> this virtual life in *Look at Me* shows the turn towards virtual culture as a lived location in which dematerialised identities can exist, dislocated from their physical counterparts.

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<sup>102</sup> Most obvious might be the parallel between Charlottes Swenson and Metcalf in *Look at Me*. Other examples include Egan’s repetition of occupations and arcs for her characters: such as models (*Emerald City*, *Look at Me*, and non-fiction piece ‘James is a Girl’ (1996)), and terrorists (Faith, Z, Lulu). Martin Paul Eve notes the repeated figure of the academic across Egan’s novels, which in some cases draws out pairings and doubles: such as the graduate students in *The Keep* running ‘exactly in parallel’ (2015: 9) to Moose in *Look at Me*.

<sup>103</sup> Egan addresses this actualisation of what she had written as a ‘wacky hypothetical’ in a conversation with George Saunders (Egan and Saunders 2015: n.p.).

## Virtual Lives

*Look at Me* details the slow dematerialisation of identity, leading to a splitting between physical self and virtual image to fully exploit the virtual image as a capitalist product. This exaggeration of the chasm between material and virtual experiences provides a commentary on the more subtle methods in which capitalism dominates virtual culture. The intense surveillance that Charlotte experiences, and which is the draw of her online persona, allows the public access to every minute of her life; as such it is an interesting representation of the digital surveillance that exists as part and parcel of contemporary life. The idea of technology as a passive presence has long been discarded, the immense profits of social media companies and search engines that do not charge users for membership leaves little room for doubt that our virtual habits are profited from in unseen ways. *The Guardian* reports that ‘the data broker industry alone generates around \$200bn in annual revenue - which cuts out the people that data is about’ (Sadowski 2016), showing mass profits from selling the data collected by these sites. Having covered the processes of dematerialisation in Egan’s fiction and the ways that her characters mourn the losses of physicality, I now turn to consider Egan’s representations of everyday virtual existence and the patterns and trends that exist because of this intense surveillance and collection of digital data.

The product placement and brand sponsorship in *Ordinary People*’s staging of the virtual Charlotte Swenson, seen in the ‘Bacardi and Coca-Cola labels blink[ing] at the viewer hap-hazardly in the dusty golden light’ (Egan 2001: 509, 10), displays this monetisation in a brazen and unironic manner. Elsewhere in Egan’s fiction, this data collection and targeted surveillance is less conspicuous and a little more ominous, depicting characters who are unaware of their actions being tracked and utilised for nefarious means. For instance, while *Goon Squad* was published nearly a decade after *Look at Me*, it depicts characters who are displaced by the passage of time and technological advancement, and who are not yet wise to the fact of surveillance capitalism.

In Egan’s fiction, this surveillance capitalist landscape is often manifested through the image of watching and being watched. Including a human representative of the act of technological surveillance within a situation

grounded in capitalist actions or desires acknowledges the infiltration of these patterns into the daily lives of individuals. Johnston highlights examples of this within the ‘Safari’ chapter in *Goon Squad*:

Most notably, two “elderly birdwatching ladies” occupy a readerly position of overhearing or overseeing the safari from the periphery (60). Analogously, the chapter’s title recalls the Apple “Safari” web browser, which casts users as explorers, while layers of hidden “trackers” inconspicuously monitor their movements across the web.

(2017: 157)

These birdwatchers sitting on the periphery communicate how we are tempted to conceive of digital surveillance: as impartial individuals merely observing trends and patterns for purely intellectual purposes. These overt representatives create a sense of ease and distract from the ‘layers of hidden trackers’ that use this data to manipulate user’s choices. Playing on the connotations of the word safari as both a wildlife experience and the Apple web browser lends greater significance to this idea of ‘users as explorers’, creating the impression that the individuals are exploring freely and autonomously, when in fact they are engaging with a platform expressly curated for them. Further, that the safari itself is a ‘new business venture of Lou’s old army buddy, Ramsey’ (Egan 2001: 63), situates these readings within an overtly capitalist landscape. The concept of safari as a business, historically catering to wealthy tourists and using indigenous wildlife, people, and traditions as entertainment further develops these readings of covert surveillance as centring the consumer. For instance, in *Goon Squad*’s Safari the Sambu warriors have only a background presence in their own land, entering the story primarily as proof of an authentic experience for the tourists. The entire enterprise is thus characterised by a faux-authenticity in which desires are predicted and presented to the consumer, creating a highly curated environment that poses as an authentic experience.

Johnston comments further on the relationship between these concepts of surveillance and capitalism relating to metafiction as ‘a form of surveillance itself, often preoccupied with watching itself watch’ (Johnston 2017: 156):

Of course, metafiction has long been interested in surveillance, but while Pynchon’s early fiction, for example, is steeped in Cold War paranoia and the possibility of some intrigue to be untangled, Egan’s



novel theorizes not only the ubiquity but also the disturbing banality of being watched. It's not conspiracy—it's capitalism. Goon Squad not only "draws attention to its status as an artifact," but it also highlights the consumer user's own status as an object by portraying the narrative and regulatory power of profiles to police people as divisible and searchable code.

(Johnston 2017: 157)

Of course postmodernist fiction also obsesses over these ideas of cultural surveillance, often presenting a distrust of media and news sources which infiltrate citizen's lives in a controlling manner, and repeating the figure of the voyeur as threatening.<sup>104</sup> Yet, as Johnston points out, in Egan's fiction acts of surveillance lose this sense of paranoia and uncanniness and become banal capitalist transactions, such as Charlotte Swenson's sale of identity and the targeted advertising used by Lulu to promote Scotty's concert. The most sobering truth in this observation may be that the underlying force in contemporary depictions of technological surveillance cannot be mere paranoia because it is now fact. In contemporary fiction, surveillance technologies have become part of the banal every day and are no longer infused with an uncanny unease or strangeness. This reveals a development even from late-postmodern or post-postmodern fictions such as Eggers's *The Circle* and Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, which depict an increasing capitalisation of surveillance technology but in a dystopian manner which continues the postmodern sense of paranoia.<sup>105</sup>

However, an uncanniness returns in Egan's 'Black Box', where surveillance has increased beyond a collection of digital habits to recording thoughts and emotions, even offering to memorialise the agent after death. The familiar technology has broken the barrier of physicality and now resides within the agent's body, it is no longer an exterior force that only acts when the individual engages with certain virtual spaces. The human representative of the surveillance technologies utilised elsewhere is removed and instead the

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<sup>104</sup> Most notably: the paranoia of Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*, and the infiltration of technology in DeLillo's *White Noise*. For more, see essays 'Watching Through Windows: Bret Easton Ellis and Urban Surveillance' and 'Participating in '1984': The Surveillance of Sousveillance from *White Noise* to Right Now' in *Spaces of Surveillance* (Flynn and Mackay 2017).

<sup>105</sup> See: 'Surveillance in Post-Postmodern American Fiction' in *Spaces of Surveillance* (Flynn and Mackay 2017).

surveillant force is disembodied and untraceable. Still, paranoia is not the dominant force in ‘Black Box’, as there is no doubt about the acts of surveillance or the risks that the agent takes—the instruction-manual style of delivery highlights the self-aware and calculated nature of her role. This reinforces the move into the everyday as the uncanniness that is present in ‘Black Box’ is less to do with the presence of surveillance and more to do with its inescapability and corporate ubiquity.

### Curation

A second dimension of this idea of collected data is the act of curation by the individual in customising their own virtual landscapes. In a reversal of the hierarchy between the user and the forces covertly collecting their data, the controlling of data has passed to the users—who can limit and edit the information they share in these spaces, such as social media sites, thus enabling a curated version of their own identity to exist. There is then a splitting between embodied and virtual identities, much like in *Look at Me*, except here the virtual image is still tied to and managed by the individuals themselves. In ‘A Little Like Reading’, Michael Cobb considers the fragmentation of text and the symbolisation of emotional sentiment in virtual platforms, focusing on social media sites like Facebook.<sup>106</sup> His argument moves from strictly addressing the idea of reading to the implications of expressing identity and opinion in a fragmented form:

Your Facebook profile as notebook. The analogy is not entirely apt, especially if we dwell with the unsociable qualities Sontag assigns to the aphorist. But stay with us; comparisons are never easy or identical (like, as we know, is never the same): the self-construction of the intensely impudent, the very-full-of-oneself, doesn't sound too far from the curated selves we manufacture for our lists of Facebook friends, who help us become more self-involved for worldly consumption.

(2013: 203)

When only able to jot down the main points, the highlights of our personalities, virtual expressions of identity become concentrated versions of the real.

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<sup>106</sup> Cobb considers how reactions, such as the ‘Like’ button, speed up and generalise emotional responses in virtual spaces.

Removing the mundane or filler aspects of socialisation (think small talk and moments of silence, the time taken up by getting ready and walking to the pub) pushes all the most notable aspects together to form a more intense experience. The image of the notebook also recalls Andy Clark's illustration of early cognitive extension, where for a memory-impaired person facts stored in a notebook can act as an external cognitive storage device (Clark 2011: 227). Associating this metaphor with the Facebook-as-notebook idea that Cobb presents indicates a form of identity stored in this virtual space, a condensed and curated summary of self.

The removal of these filler experiences also points to how time works differently in these virtual spaces; not only is temporality compressed into highlights, but moments can also be drawn out for longer than they occurred in reality, or timelines can be edited to add in information or new angles (literally). This reworking of temporal linearity again invokes Kriekamp's conception of compression and amplification, as depictions of chronology are cleared of these filler experiences, simultaneously compressing linear time while amplifying the depicted moments. I regard the main focus of Kriekamp's book, dematerialisation, as intrinsically connected to this view of virtual time. Susan Sontag, referenced in Cobb's research on digital fragmentation quoted above, argues in 'Against Interpretation' that 'content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny—very tiny content' (1966: 3). These fragmented, cut together flashes contrast with the fluid temporality associated with materiality. Discussing the relationship between materiality and time, Lupton observes that 'the pages of the book give materiality to the tick, tick, tick of modern life, with ... one minute following the next' (2018: 7). Removing material processes and physical routines allows temporality to become unbound as it is no longer held to the tangible reality of the embodied experience.

This investigation into the curation and fragmentation of profile culture has brought my argument back full circle to the topic of dematerialisation. I return to the example I included at the start of this chapter—revisiting Sasha's kleptomania in the opening of *Goon Squad*. In Sasha's habit of stealing and displaying items I see a representation of these traits of profile culture: the curation of self-image, the heightened concentration of experience, and the editing of temporality:

The pride she took in these objects, a tenderness that was only heightened by the shame of their acquisition. She'd risked everything, and here was the result: the raw, warped core of her life. (Egan 2010a: 16)

She and Coz had talked at length about why she kept the stolen objects separate from the rest of her life: because using them would imply greed or self-interest; because leaving them untouched made it seem as if she might one day give them back; because piling them in a heap kept their power from leaking away.

(Egan 2010a: 17)

The 'raw, warped core of her life', Sasha's collection depicts the dichotomy of pride and shame that comes from documenting her life in this way. She is aware of the manufactured and self-centred nature of her collection, yet the items simultaneously represent her most vulnerable and real moments. The curation of self-image thus also enacts a construction of morality—fearing being viewed as greedy and self-interested. The final line in the second extract expresses the concentration of energy that comes from removing the filler experiences, pressing core memories against each other and 'display[ing] years of her life compressed' (Egan 2010a: 15). Egan's 2022 novel *The Candy House*, discussed in a dedicated chapter of this thesis due to its recent publication, depicts a technology that allows characters to literally replay their memories. In this earlier text (the older sibling of the two related novels), Egan depicts the desire to re-experience feelings from past moments and the turn to virtual strategies of curation and temporal compression/amplification in order to satisfy this urge. The constant collection of these data points provides a hit of energy when Sasha looks at and handles the items, a 'tremor of excitement' (Egan 2010a: 17), much like the burst of dopamine that studies have found comes from social media engagement. For instance, Anna Lembke's *Dopamine Nation* (2021) explores how the prevalence of social media has led to a dopamine overload and addiction by cheapening the process of obtaining the chemical, thus causing humans to 'los[e] our capacity to delay gratification, solve problems and deal with frustration and pain in its many different forms' (Lembke in Waters 2021: n.p.). Sasha's dopamine pile parallels the ways in which social media has enabled instant access to this pleasure chemical without the process of working for the reward.

Kreilkamp sees this parallel as an impossible, circular effort in preservation:

Sasha can be seen to resemble a writer attempting to memorialize, to symbolize, and to represent her experience in some lasting form. Because the dopamine hit from her stolen objects always quickly fades, she is trapped in a compulsively repetitive series, documented in her collection, one that is difficult for outsiders to “read”.

(Kreilkamp 2021: 49)

This reading of Sasha as a writer is significant given the number of Egan’s characters who are writers, either in profession or through writing that is significant in the novels. Faith, for example, documents her final months through postcards in *The Invisible Circus*, creative writing teacher Holly and the inmates try their hand at fiction in *The Keep*, there are multiple journalists across novels including Irene in *Look at Me* and Jules in *Goon Squad* (Irene then becoming the writer for the virtual Charlotte) and even Alison Blake and her slideshow diary. All of these writers collect and display data in one form or another, just as Sasha does through her curation of physical objects.

### Re-enactment

In Tom McCarthy’s 2005 novel *Remainder*, the narrator suffers a severe head trauma and memory loss and goes on to pour all of his resources into recreating a series of ‘seamless, perfect’ (62) movements. The novel depicts the creation of a cognitive rewards system in which the physical world is ordered in a manner designed to provoke sensory pleasure:

I practiced the manoeuvre: striding, half-turning as I rose to my toes, letting my shirt brush against it - grazing it like a hovercraft does water - then turning square again as I came down [...] After the two days I had three separate bruises on my side - but it was worth it for the fluent, gliding feeling I got the few times it worked: the immersion, the contentedness.

(McCarthy 2005: 151)

Practice, precision, and repetition are relied upon to recover the atmosphere the narrator found so pleasing when he first experienced the original event. In *Unthought* (2017), Hayles analyses *Remainder*’s re-enactment in terms of cognition and her theory of non-conscious cognition where the body acts or processes before the brain, or when the brain cannot:

with connection to body and world rendered tenuous, the narrator's conscious compensates by seeking more and more control, to the point of obsession

[...]

When he succeeds in getting it “right”, he is rewarded with tingling along his spine and other somatic signals that make him feel, for that instant, as if he is an authentic living being.

(Hayles 2017: 88)

As the narrator's memories and cognitive functioning have been damaged, he creates a perfect pattern of physical events which stimulate a feeling of cognitive processing and satisfaction. The narrator's sensory reward when he gets it right delivers the same automation of dopamine described in my analysis of Sasha's collection of stolen items. Using collected data to re-enact past experiences and live in a continuous loop of dopamine boosts mirrors the way that profile culture, as examined earlier, can enable users to revisit and rewatch their lives. This can be taken further through considering Hayles's reading—this manufacturing of a sensory reward system as depicted in *Remainder* creates the impression of authenticity through synthetic means, replacing the natural, unplanned patterns of social encounters with strategic, dispensing networks.

The desire to preserve experience, especially dopamine-granting experience, is common across Egan's work and repeats itself in the form of recreating events and encounters. While Sasha's collection represents this desire, each item a signifier for the intense experience it was taken from, it does not actually recreate the experiences themselves. Other characters in Egan's fiction, however, do engage in intentional, material re-creations of experiences by using found data or information from memories to organise spaces into impressions of these past moments. This is first seen in *The Invisible Circus*, where Phoebe recreates Faith's journey across Europe, using the information within her postcards to retrace her steps. This personal, emotional journey is amplified into a commodified production marketed to an external audience in *Look at Me*, where Charlotte's body is created as a virtual object, and when her traumatic car crash is sold as a movie script. The obsession with returning to, or recreating, physical locations and events might appear contradictory to a discussion of virtuality, yet the ability to collect and organise data into accurate re-creations is a product of virtual culture and surveillance capitalism. As Mark

Nunes argues in *Cyberspaces of Everyday Life*, ‘spatiality, as with identity, marks a critical domain within network society’ (2006: 177), and ‘at its simplest, every Web site attempts to establish a sense of place - that you have arrived somewhere’ (2006: 48). The way that individuals in Egan’s fiction seek to recreate lived experiences parallels the way that cyberspace has become conceived as a lived space, with the network serving as an organising concept for the spaces of everyday life. This concept reveals itself within the transformation of physical locations and events into material for virtual enterprises, epitomised in the character of Charlotte Swenson and her multiple virtual afterlives.

I find further evidence for this absorption of virtual patterns in *Parables for the Virtual*, where Brian Massumi ‘views the body and media such as television, film, and the internet as cultural formations that operate on multiple registers of sensation’ (Publisher’s summary ND: Duke Press). In his chapter, ‘The Autonomy of Affect’, Massumi talks about virtuality and ‘the missing half second’<sup>107</sup> in comprehension and experience, arguing that affect is ‘*the virtual as point of view*’ (2002: 35) because it is a product of the senses working together to produce a narrative of experience:

Something that happens too quickly to have happened, actually, is *virtual*. The body is as immediately virtual as it is actual. The virtual, the pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies, is a realm of *potential*. [...] The virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt—albeit reduced and contained. For out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression *will* emerge and be registered consciously.

(Massumi 2002: 30,31)

Claiming that ‘all perception is rehearsed’ (2002: 66), Massumi’s parables for the virtual reveal how human experience of self and other is both cognitively rehearsed and belatedly processed, creating a gap between expectation and experience. Massumi’s attention to visual media highlights the re-enactment of

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<sup>107</sup> Massumi tells the story of an experiment where patients were given mild electric pulses. It was found that only pulses of over half a second in duration were perceived by the patients (2002: 28).

such sensations onscreen: the digital depiction of sensory experience that he calls ‘immediately virtual’.

Nunes and Massumi both uncover how virtual patterns of comprehending and navigating the world have become commonplace. I find Massumi’s interest in affect particularly relevant here—as examples of re-enactment in Egan’s fiction typically involve recovering sensory experiences associated with particular emotional significance. In *The Invisible Circus*, Phoebe retraces her sister Faith’s last months on earth using her postcards to follow her journey, hoping to feel closer to her deceased sister and uncover the mystery of how she died. In *The Keep* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, characters attempt to recreate the conditions for creative encounters; Howie’s castle and Scotty’s concert at the Footprint carve out physical locations designed to induce sensory experiences: heightened cognitive creativity and the palpable force of music. Even ‘Black Box’ depicts a sense of this in the Mission Log Lulu records exists for her successor to learn from, thus the text anticipates a re-enactment of sensory experience and physical action. I have briefly mentioned that in *The Candy House*—discussed in my next chapter—characters are able to download and replay their memories, furthering re-enactment into an actual re-experiencing of memory. The example of a staged re-enactment most associated with virtual immediacy and sensory affect, however, is in *Look at Me*, where actors recreate Charlotte’s car crash: the accident that launches the novel and begins Charlotte’s journey of rebuilding her identity and questioning the authenticity of her own life. Much like the sale of Charlotte’s identity at the end of the novel, Charlotte’s experience here is capitalised upon by others. Charlotte does not re-enact her own life to process the event, or to gain a feeling of pleasure like in Sasha’s interaction with her collection of stolen objects. Instead, in *Look at Me*, there is a division between the subject and those manipulating their experience.

The re-enactment is interspersed with extracts from the manuscript ghost-written by Irene. This only serves to highlight the artifice of the re-creation as Charlotte pivots from reading this ‘ventriloquism of Irene’s’ (Egan 2001: 456), to watching the words being brought to life in the set-up re-creation brimming with artificiality:



‘Tell me about the conspiracy,’ I said.  
 Z turned to look at me. In his eyes I saw something alive for the very first time. Pain.  
 ‘It’s a dream,’ he said.

My face dripping with gore, I borrowed little Charlotte’s umbrella and crept among the cornstalks toward the blue Grand Am I’d seen wobbling up the road a half-hour before. Halliday was there, leaning against the hood in faded jeans and a black T-shirt. He was taking in the scene with a look of some amusement.

He flinched at the sight of me: a broken, bloody figure emerging from the stalks. ‘Christ,’ he said.

‘Relax,’ I said. ‘It’s mostly peanut butter.’

(Egan 2001: 493)

The image of Charlotte’s ‘broken, bloody figure’ is undercut by her drawing attention to its falsity, the peanut butter-fake blood concoction imitating the real gore. This counters the bloody photo shoot earlier in the novel where photographer Spiro insisted on cutting his models to produce real blood. In this instance Charlotte is resigned to the blatant artificiality, when before she refused to participate in Spiro’s mutilation of flesh in the name of staged authenticity. Charlotte’s response ‘Relax [...] It’s mostly peanut butter’ mirrors Z’s, ‘It’s a dream’; both characters remove the stakes from the situation in question, revealing both cases to be only mirages. In a way this also mirrors the anticlimactic manner in which the manuscript reveals what happened between these two characters leading up to the crash. The questions that readers and characters had been asking from the beginning of the novel are only answered in extracts from this manuscript that Charlotte says are ‘not [her] words at all’, thus casting doubt on anything revealed there. These re-creations do not recover the truth of an original moment—they cannot recover the lost half-second of experience. This inability to find the truth echoes Massumi’s idea that ‘the half second is missed not because it is empty, but because it is overfull’ (1984: 29), assumptions and ascribed meanings making it impossible to recover the true events. What the re-creations *do* is try to make the *viewer* feel, in Nunes’s phrase, as if they have arrived somewhere. This physical re-creation is a precursor to Charlotte’s sale of identity, beginning this process of dividing Charlotte from her lived experience. There is a manufactured appearance of

authenticity and control catered toward the consumer, while the individual's experience is sacrificed for this cause. Charlotte's real pain and inability to fill in the gaps in her memory is ignored and replaced with falsified events to flesh out the narrative and create a convincing space.

The various re-enactments considered here all take control of a physical space, monitoring everything that occurs in these locations to ensure accuracy and that every movement provides the desired sensations: from the shock and gore of *Look at Me* to the somatic rewards of *Remainder* and *Goon Squad*. Returning to Nunes's thoughts about the cyberspaces of everyday life, this indicates an impression of control connected to the integration of virtuality:

the dominant topographies of a network society produce spaces of control - lived spaces in which the network interface marks a set of material and conceptual relations that place "a world of information" at a user's fingertips.

(2006: 160)

The obsession with controlling a physical space and perfecting it displays this sense of control and entitlement that Nunes describes as coming from network society. The access to a world of information, a result of surveillance capitalism collecting and selling data on every aspect of life, enables individuals to craft their preferred narratives by sorting through the 'pressing crowd' (Massumi 2002: 30) of potential and create a virtual point of view. Rather than provoking individual sensory reward (as in *Remainder*), however, Egan's texts reveal a turn to the network society in which consumers as a collective are prioritised as the beneficiary of this reconfiguration of space and matter through virtual pattern.

These fictional re-enactments display an impression of authority over information, space, and sensation that comes from an integration of network culture and virtual strategies into the everyday. The confidence in which Egan's characters feel able to move the world around them in order to meet their desires reflects the absorption of digital culture into everyday life, managing the physical world with the same techniques as the virtual. The journey towards virtuality in Egan's work is portrayed within the process of dematerialisation, the ubiquity of digital surveillance, and the rewriting of identity within profile culture, consistently highlighting the way that everyday contemporary life

adapts to integrate these virtual patterns. Egan's characters highlight the acts of curation inherent within virtual culture, editing self-image through a manipulation of memory and the paradoxical amplification and compression of temporality. These techniques are deployed in both physical and metaphorical manners, highlighting the absorption of virtual culture and the extent to which cognitive processing and reward have adapted to the dematerialisation of daily life.

# The Candy House

NEW YORK, July 1 2021—Scribner will publish Pulitzer Prize-winning and *New York Times*-bestselling author Jennifer Egan's new novel *The Candy House* on April 5, 2022.

(‘Jennifer Egan to Publish’ 2021: n.p.)

Hopes for a companion novel to Egan's extremely popular *A Visit from the Goon Squad* have been circulating since the novel was published. First revisiting the character of Lulu in 2012 Twitter fiction ‘Black Box’, Egan has been repeatedly drawn to the idea of creating additional narratives for this world she first introduced in her 2010 novel. In 2021, the title for this sequel was finally announced: *The Candy House*. Publisher Simon & Schuster's press announcement of the novel highlighted its continuation of characters and plots from *Goon Squad*, and the introduction of some kind of technology relating to externalising memory:

In these pages we meet a tech billionaire who ushers in a new age of enhanced digital sharing, the anthropologist who unwittingly enabled this new era, “eluders” who seek to retain privacy and discretion in the face of the onslaught and the “proxies” who impersonate them, plus record producers, aging rock stars and movie stars, spies, publicists, writers, academics, mothers, fathers, and children. Set in San Francisco, New York City, suburban country clubs, tech office cubicles, the desert, and the mysterious nation of X, with entwined characters and plot points that overlap with *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, this is a dazzling achievement.

(‘Jennifer Egan to Publish’ 2021: n.p.)

For the keen Egan fan, the return to the world of *Goon Squad* is an exciting prospect, a text with so many threads offers mass potential for expansion, with numerous interesting side characters who could star in their own narrative segment. This short blurb promises that *The Candy House* brings together many threads present in Egan's previous writing: at the fore are technology, the music industry, and nostalgia. The novel thus also promises to readers and critics a return to the interests that Egan had been best known for, which were turned away from a little in *Manhattan Beach*. The publisher's announcement emphasised this fact too, highlighting Egan's consistent involvement with *The Candy House* project since publishing *Goon Squad*:

“I had already begun to imagine my way beyond *A Visit from the Goon Squad* even before it was published,” said Jennifer Egan. “*The Candy House* follows a number of its peripheral characters into their own futures and pasts to create an independent work with a new set of preoccupations and center of gravity, but equal affinity for technology, humor, and structural freedom.”

[...] “For a couple of years, Egan worked on *Manhattan Beach* in the morning and *The Candy House* in the afternoon,” said Nan Graham, Jennifer Egan’s editor and Senior Vice President, Publisher of Scribner. “Then *Manhattan Beach* prevailed. Both novels evidence her stunning imagination and both celebrate the human capacity to adapt, to create, to love. *The Candy House* is a staggeringly prescient, funny and hopeful novel from one of our most spectacularly brilliant writers.”

(‘Jennifer Egan to Publish’ 2021: n.p.)

By emphasising this link between the writing of *The Candy House* and *Manhattan Beach*, the publishers push the connection between this novel and Egan’s best known text *Goon Squad*. The two most recent novels both came about in response to *Goon Squad*: while Egan has noted that *Manhattan Beach* was a search to depict the origin of the sense of American military superiority that was destroyed in *Goon Squad*’s depiction of a post-9/11 New York (Schwartz 2017: n.p.), *The Candy House* is a more obvious development of the novel, developing existing characters and themes from *Goon Squad*. Bix Bouton, briefly introduced in *Goon Squad*, has invented a method of externalising and sharing memories; children of *Goon Squad* main characters Bennie Salazar and Jules Hollander become central characters of their own narratives; and Lulu returns from her government mission and encounters new obstacles in her assimilation into domestic life. Fragmented in a similar style to *Goon Squad* with multiple narrators and jumps in time, but using electronic dance music rather than vinyl albums as an ordering structure,<sup>108</sup> *The Candy House* illustrates the ‘strange online experience of never losing touch with anyone’ (Wilson 2022: n.p.), evoking the sprawling nature of social media as it adds small pieces to an ever-expanding puzzle.

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<sup>108</sup> *The Candy House* is divided into sections of: BUILD - BREAK - DROP - BUILD, imitating the structure of EDM songs.

The idea of a novel that links not only to the concepts within *Goon Squad*, but which has been in the works since 2010, signals a welcome return to the innovative style that many readers loved and came to expect from Egan's writing. While *Manhattan Beach* garnered a lot of attention from some groups, it was not quite the follow up to *Goon Squad* that many expected—turning away from the formal innovation and attention to concerns of contemporary life that Egan had become known for: such as digitisation and image culture.<sup>109</sup> Thus for many Egan fans, this is the book they have been waiting for.

While this novel was only published at the tail end of my PhD project, I found the subject matter of Egan's new book too relevant to my writing to not include it in some way. While I cannot incorporate it into the analysis throughout the thesis, before concluding I would like to share some thoughts on the anticipation, reception, and content of this novel. I am grateful to Hayley Camis at Little Brown for sending me an advance review copy of *The Candy House* in order to give me more time to include analysis of the novel in this thesis.

### Anticipation and Publicity

As mentioned, *The Candy House* was marketed primarily as the follow-up to *Goon Squad*: '*The Candy House* is the long-rumored and hotly anticipated sibling novel to Egan's Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad*' ('Jennifer Egan to Publish' 2021: n.p.). Different sources have referred to Egan's 2022 novel as a 'sibling novel' (as above), a sequel, a 'companion novel' (Rankin 2021: n.p.), and a 'fraternal twin [...] [that] begs to be read alongside its more extroverted sibling' (Silcox 2022: n.p.). What this emphasis on continuity did was connect with an already established buzz around *Goon Squad*, interacting with a ready-made fanbase and hitting the ground running in terms of publicity. Publications were ready and waiting to sell and

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<sup>109</sup> One review summarises the difference in critical reaction to *Manhattan Beach*: 'As *Manhattan Beach* (2017) showed, Egan is perfectly capable of writing a satisfying traditional novel, but she really dazzles when she turns her formidable gifts to examining the changes to society and individuals wrought by the internet and social media' ('Review: *The Candy House*' 2022: n.p.).

discuss the novel, as seen in the list of outlets that named *The Candy House* one of their most anticipated books of 2022.<sup>110</sup>

Named a Most Anticipated Book of the Year by Time, Entertainment Weekly, Vogue, Good Housekeeping, Oprah Daily, Glamour, USA TODAY, Parade, Bustle, San Francisco Chronicle, The Seattle Times, The Boston Globe, Tampa Bay Times, BuzzFeed, Vulture, and many more!

(‘Jennifer Egan to Publish’ 2021: n.p.)

Because this novel had such an expectant audience, its promotion was well-funded and creatively managed, receiving treatment not allocated to Egan’s past work.<sup>111</sup> In the year running up to the release of *The Candy House*, the publishers rolled out an extensive marketing campaign that highlighted the novel’s development of characters and themes from *Goon Squad*, focusing especially on the advanced technology present in the novel. Marketing videos were released, which functioned similarly to teaser trailers for film and television releases: short video clips that tease an idea present within the novel. One video is an advertisement for the ‘Own Your Unconscious’ technology, while another is a recruitment for ‘Eluders’ (those wishing to live off-the-grid) that states ‘life is meant to be lived, not uploaded’ (‘Who Are the Eliders’ 2022): an ironic statement to be made in a video advertisement. A semi-dystopian atmosphere is created in the promotional description of ‘Own Your Unconscious’, with stock images that glitch ever so slightly, and a standard yet somewhat unnerving voiceover reciting the ad copy that urges the viewer, ‘Don’t let your unique story disappear. Upload today’ (‘Own Your Unconscious’ 2022). Egan herself commented on these book trailers when sharing them on Twitter, joking that the promotion of ‘Own Your Unconscious’ ‘tempts’ her (@EganGoonSquad 2022), alerting her online audience to the compelling but

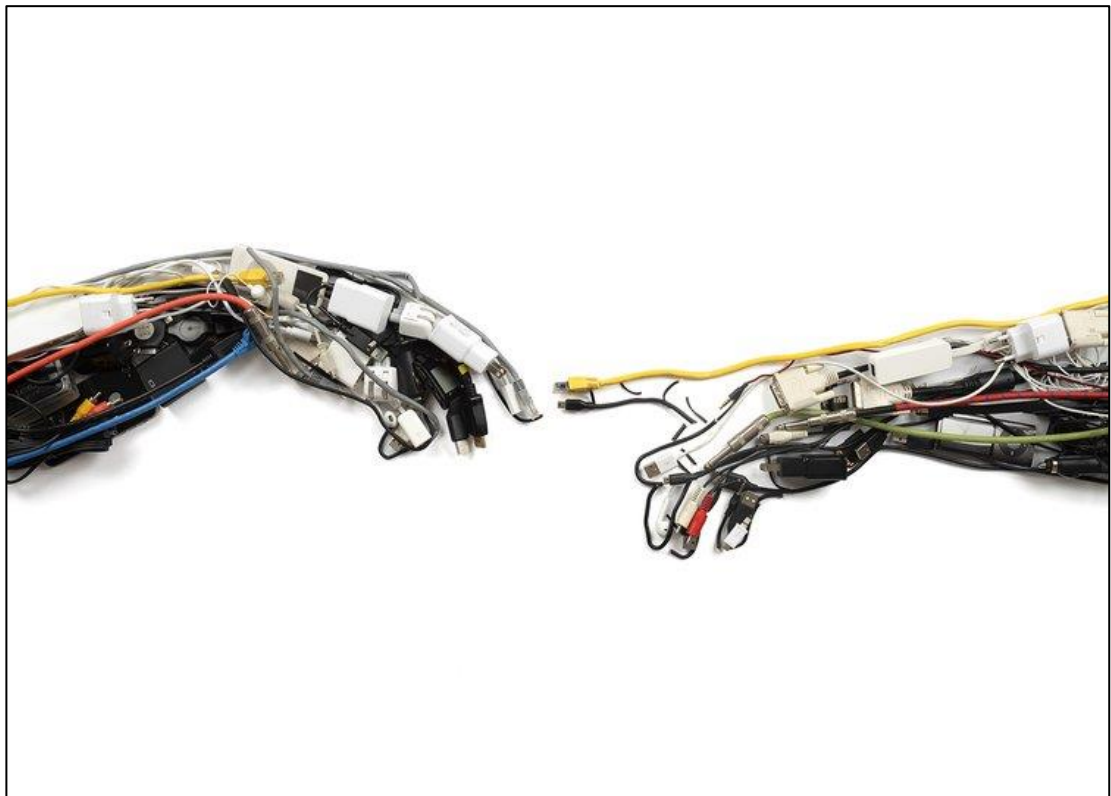
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<sup>110</sup> This indicates Egan’s growing name-recognition within American fiction, as well as the anticipation of *The Candy House* from fans of *Goon Squad*. The success of *Goon Squad* is the source of much of this attention, as Egan did not frequently appear on such lists before this novel found critical attention.

<sup>111</sup> This significantly contrasts the publication of *Goon Squad*, which was a ‘slow burn’ in reception and not allocated the same advanced publicity that other authors at the time received (notably Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*, ‘which had years’ worth of hype before it sold its first copy’ (Lee 2011: n.p.).

ultimately dangerous nature of this concept even before having the chance to read the book.

In another act of visual promotion, artist Noah Scanlin was commissioned to create a piece inspired by Egan’s novel, and Scribner launched a competition to win a print of Scanlin’s artwork.<sup>112</sup> As pictured below, Scanlin arranged technological paraphernalia—including various wires, chargers, earphones, an iPod, and more—into the shape of two hands reaching out to the other: replicating the image from Michelangelo’s ‘The Creation of Adam’. The image replaces human veins with wires, evoking the real flesh and veins of the human body while presenting this artificial technological copy. The artwork invites the idea of peeling back skin and screen to reveal the networks that feed and maintain the smooth exterior interfaces, commenting on the connection enabled by technology, and perhaps questioning the success of this connection through the image of the ‘near-miss’ touch.



**Figure 11** (‘The Candy House’ Scanlin 2022).

Permission to reproduce this image has been granted by Noah Scanlin.

<sup>112</sup> Tweet from @ScribnerBooks on April 25, 2022 at 7pm: ‘👉 There’s nothing like art inspiring art! We’re excited to share this piece made by @NoahScalin and inspired by @Egangoonsquad’s #TheCandyHouse! You can see the process here: <http://spr.ly/6016K7QK6> And enter for a chance to win a print of it here: <http://spr.ly/6017K7QKB> 👉’.



As well as the usual dissemination of Advanced Review Copies (which were in such high demand that an additional print run was ordered),<sup>113</sup> segments of the book were released early: the first of which was published by *Entertainment Weekly* on December 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, four months before the novel's official publication.<sup>114</sup> To introduce the extract, Seija Rankin writes: 'Jennifer Egan resurrects key characters from her 2010 modern classic for its sibling *The Candy House* (April 5), another multi-narrator masterpiece about searching for meaning in a crazy world. Here, an excerpt about Sasha' (Rankin 2021: n.p.). This extract was likely chosen as the first excerpt from the novel to be shared because it actively connects the dots between the events of *Goon Squad* and 'now' (the 2030s):

If anyone had required proof that life's outcomes are impossible to predict, this development would have supplied it. Sasha had been a f--up all the way into her thirties: a kleptomaniac who'd managed to pilfer countless items from countless people over countless years. How did I know? Because right before she married Drew, in 2008, she started returning things.

If anything can be said in defense of the person I was in 2008, the year Sasha made amends and Polly was born—the year I turned thirty—it can be only that I was least forgiving of myself.

(Egan, in Rankin 2021: n.p.)

The extract reminds the reader of the notable events in *Goon Squad*: Sasha's kleptomania in the very first chapter, and depiction of her relationship with husband Drew and children Allison and Lincoln in chapter 12. We see that lots has changed in the decades between the novels, with an emphasis on personal development: Sasha has made amends for her theft, and the narrator Miles (unnamed in this segment) is no longer a 'moralizing prig' (Egan 2022: 50). The extract highlights themes that were prominent in *Goon Squad*—depicting the

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<sup>113</sup> Tweet from @LBBookNews on January 27 2022 at 1:05pm: '🔍 NEW PROOFS 🔍 Due to incredibly popular demand, we are printing more proofs for @Egangoonsquad's forthcoming novel, #TheCandyHouse.UK and Ire booksellers, if you'd like one send your requests to emily.moran@littlebrown.co.uk. Fast! While stocks last 📦 Coming this April'.

<sup>114</sup> While it is not entirely unusual for works-in-progress to publish extracts in advance of publication, the release through *Entertainment Weekly* is notable, not sticking to the traditional literary outputs of *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, etc.

Another extract was later published by *The New Yorker* on December 27, 2021: from chapter 'What the Forest Remembers', with an audio track featuring Egan reading the segment (Egan 2021: n.p.).

delusion of youth, a sense of failure or incompetence in adulthood, and technology as an increasingly prominent method of communication and memorialisation.<sup>115</sup> As the first glimpse into *The Candy House*, this extract emphasises the act of reunion with known characters, and positions this novel as a continuum offering answers to the questions readers were left with at the end of *Goon Squad*. This development somewhat settles the narrative gaps that were intentional aspects of Egan's 2010 novel, interestingly changing perceptions of *Goon Squad* now that previously unknowable queries are addressed.

All of these promotional endeavours came together on the website page created for *The Candy House*, hosted on Egan's own website domain: jenniferegan.com. The home page of Egan's website is (currently) a poster for *The Candy House*, with an interactive background that reveals extracts from the text when the cursor is moved across the grid style background. The grid 'glitches' and colours burst out of the greyscale webpage, revealing a hidden layer lurking behind the drab exterior. The page features a button labelled 'Discover the book'—when selected the webpage is flooded with colour and you are taken to the page for *The Candy House*, containing a book summary, numerous reviews, and links to further content: interviews, more reviews, retailers, and events. Clicking 'Reading Guide' takes you to the publisher's website where you can watch the book trailers and video messages from Egan herself, as well as the reading group guide: 'an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club' ('The Candy House' 2022: 'Reading Group Guide' n.p.). Again, here the marketing anticipates the expectant audience ready to revisit characters from *Goon Squad* and actively shapes their reception of the novel; the final question in the reading guide asks 'what do you think about the way Egan moves the central protagonists from *Goon Squad* to the periphery in this novel, and gives minor characters (a couple of them not yet born in *Goon Squad*) major roles here?' ('The Candy House' 2022: 'Reading Group Guide' n.p.).

The digital display of these numerous creations acted as a digital scrapbook documenting the rollout of the marketing campaign and counting down to the

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<sup>115</sup> The extract begins with Miles describing how he found out about his cousin Sasha's art by looking at her daughter's Instagram profile, and ends with a memory of when he used to check his partner Trudy's Facebook and Instagram daily to remind himself that his family seems happy.

novel's publication. In a reflection of the networked nature of the book itself, here all forms of promotion come together in a web of incomplete but interrelating media creations. Egan's other novels have also been played with in some similar ways, hosting the material on different platforms (such as the webpage of 'Black Box' and the app version of *Goon Squad*), and I have mentioned earlier in this thesis that chapter 12 of *Goon Squad* was later published separately as a PowerPoint presentation marketed towards children. The difference I see in the marketing of *The Candy House* is that these promotional media are not catering towards a different audience, whether in demographic or reading style, instead they are another method of connection with the same readers. Rather than taking the material in a new direction with a different lens, the marketing of *The Candy House* amplifies the central themes of the novel in a concentrated digital environment. These many digital creations are not solely advertisements of Egan's book but interact with its content and speak to events, characters, and techniques within the pages of the novel.

This fact questions where the borderline between PR and a massive technological expansion of what Genette calls paratext might be located. Genette defines paratext as 'the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public', a *threshold* 'which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility of entering or turning back' (Genette 1991: 261). While these materials are technically 'outside the book' (Genette 1997: foreword), it is hard to decipher where *The Candy House* as a novel begin within this extensive bubble of digital wrappings. This sees Egan continuing to utilise digital technologies to experiment with the body and borders of the book—as I discussed in chapter 3. My observation from that chapter that 'Black Box' becomes 'part of [the] platform—part of the digital noise itself' (p. 138) is interesting to apply to these materials that overlap with the contents of the novel. For example, are the promotional 'book trailers' real advertisements that exist within the world of *The Candy House*, that its characters might watch? If so, these digital paratexts are interestingly employed by Egan to reveal the type of digital noise present within the world of the novel—without fully digitising the body of the book, as she has done in other projects. Further, these selected snapshots from the larger narrative being arranged and highlighted in different media is a representation of the network

culture central within the novel itself. Thus, the promotional processes used to market *The Candy House*, and the technological expansion of paratext, highlight the idea of a dual embodied and digital identity as expected, or even necessary, for functioning in this contemporary digital landscape.

## Own Your Unconscious

Much of Egan's fiction is about trying to recover memories of the past: whether individuals seeking to recover the authenticity of a life before celebrity (Charlotte in *Look at Me*), the sense of freedom and opportunity felt in youth (many characters in *Goon Squad*), or to recreate the atmosphere or exact details of a specific historical context (*The Keep's* attempt to recover the creativity of the past, the 're-enactment' of events in *The Invisible Circus* and *Look at Me*, and, in a different manner, *Manhattan Beach* as a work of historical fiction). In *The Candy House* this desire is made possible, no longer are characters left trying to emulate a certain feeling or moment that will never truly be recovered, Bix Bouton has created a software called Own Your Unconscious that allows users to upload their memories into a sleek cube and replay them at will.

Many of the characters in *The Candy House* use or refer to this technology, but one especially revealing description is of Roxy uploading her memories for the very first time:

As she plucks the sensors from her scalp, she feels a corresponding lightness, as if she's been relieved of some internal pressure. She saw a video once about a woman who fell headfirst from a third-story window. Doctors opened up her skull and removed her brain, placing it in a basin of brainy fluid so that it could swell freely without getting squashed against the inside of her skull. That's how Roxy feels: as if her brain has been released from a cell it outgrew.

[...] The Cube is *her*, in a way. It contains the entire contents of her mind: all the things she can and can't remember, every thought and feeling she has had. At last, she is the owner of her unconscious. She knows where everything can be found.

Everything, that is, until the chime. The twenty minutes since won't be saved to The Cube until she reapplies the sensors and updates her externalisation. For now, they exist only in her mind. And although Roxy has longed for a Consciousness Cube as a means of travelling backward, it is the diaphanous new present with its fresh-born minutes that captivates her.

(Egan 2022a: 156-58)

Roxy compares the ‘corresponding lightness’ she feels when removing the sensors to this story about the woman whose brain needed to be removed from her skull after an injury. The comparison of uploading memories to freeing a traumatised, swollen brain points to a moment of causation akin to falling headfirst from a third-story window—what has caused humans to need the technological equivalent of a vat of ‘brainy fluid’? Some fields of thought within evolution and transhumanism argue that humans have simply evolved cognitively beyond our flesh, and reached the breaking point where we now need technology to help us reach our full potential.<sup>116</sup> Thus, technologies are offered as a similarly ‘healing solution’ to this woman’s brain injury. Bix appears to align with these ideas, in his product *The Cube* is the brainy fluid in which the characters are able to offload their cognitive excess and live not only more comfortably (not straining their brains with tasks they cannot accomplish) but also to a higher standard (with abilities upgraded by the tech).

Roxy believes that ‘*The Cube* is *her*, in a way’, because it contains the information stored in her brain. Yet, the sentence ‘all the things she can and can’t remember’ brings up a curious question: do the things we have forgotten contribute to our cognitive identities? If this *Cube* remembers more than Roxy the person—able to recall in detail memories that she has lost the cognitive route to—is it truly an accurate representation of her self? Furthermore, if *The Cube* returns this excess information to Roxy, does she remain the same person that she was when she first attached the sensors? This questions whether identity is comprised by the gaps in our cognitive toolbox as well as the building blocks. Recalling the early example of cognitive extension in Andy Clark’s *Supersizing the Mind* (2011) utilised in chapter 2 of this thesis, a notebook is used to store information that the brain cannot hold.<sup>117</sup> Yet the embodied form is

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<sup>116</sup> Believing we have reached the point of cognitive closure, where evolution plateaus and no natural advancements occur, technology is offered as the path to advancing human abilities. While some schools of thought argue that ‘our brains are simply not equipped to solve certain problems’ (Boudry 2019: n.p.), others see ‘mind extension’ technologies as the solution to bypassing our current limitations (Boudry 2019: n.p.).

<sup>117</sup> This example is outlined and discussed on page 90 of this thesis: ‘Clark’s specific example describes a man named Otto, who suffers from Alzheimer’s, and who uses a notebook to store essential information that his brain cannot reliably recall: ‘For Otto, his notebook plays the role usually played by a biological memory’ (Clark 2011: 227)’.

the one in control of portioning out that information, the notebook does not know more than the source. Yet, once the information is forgotten by the brain, the notebook returns the memory of it in a similar manner to *The Cube*—the real difference is the fact that *The Cube* can recover data that the brain is incapable of consciously handing over. *The Cube* here advances my chapter 4 analysis of the way virtual identities coexist with, and begin to dominate, physical identities in Egan’s fiction. The sense of entitlement in using virtual strategies to organise everyday life is no longer metaphorical—as in Sasha’s stolen items as a ‘dopamine pile’ reflecting the way that social media provides instant cognitive gratification—but has become literal in the power that Egan’s *Candy House* characters have to control even their subconscious memories through these devices. These virtual strategies enable individuals to overpower the limits of cognitive memory and promise continued authority over this data through their transfer into digital memory.

The question of the power dynamic between the user and the technology is compounded by the upkeep demanded by *The Cube*. Roxy notes that she can access all of her mental data ‘until the chime’; after this point the memories she processes live only in her brain until she can next upload to *The Cube*. Living in the moments between back-ups is now the ‘diaphanous new present’, which is characterised by an element of risk due to the imbalance of data between *The Cube* and the brain. Roxy is now reliant on consistent interaction with *The Cube* in order to upkeep this resource of memory storage. This indicates that the use of Bix’s product is not a seamless or transparent process; terms which this thesis has highlighted as necessary components of successful cognitive extension.<sup>118</sup> Instead of seamlessly increasing human ability within the bounds of the flesh body, the Consciousness Cube creates a clear boundary between body and technology, facilitating meetings between the two but never a true partnership.

The cycle of upkeep also highlights a chasm between machine time and human time as Roxy’s life (and all those who ‘upload’) is now forever measured by the

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<sup>118</sup> This was highlighted in my analysis of Danny’s relationship with technology in *The Keep*: ‘According to Clark, the defining marker of an extended mind is transparency: the point in which the brain ceases to notice the process of using an extended function and begins to view the action as a result of its own cognitive ability. Clark refers to Heidegger’s definition of ‘transparent equipment’ in which the user ‘sees through’ the equipment (Clark 2011: 10), no longer noticing the boundaries between flesh and external prop.’ (p. 94).

gaps between upload sessions. The Cube remains frozen in the state she left it while she lives her daily life and collects new cognitive data. If The Cube is Roxy, ‘in a way,’ then this presents a splitting between versions of self that experience the passage of time differently. One version holds all past memories with equal weight but receives periodic data-dumps of new information, while the other experiences the world in real-time but cannot retain all memories. There is thus a tension and occasional opposition between the virtual and the biological identity. This echoes something from my analysis of *Goon Squad* as a depiction of generations being defined by their technological preferences,<sup>119</sup> highlighting that the pace at which technology evolves creates chasms between generations where the native technological language changes—characterised by the digital communication methods in chapters 12 and 13. Moving on from the abbreviated text speech in *Goon Squad*’s final chapter, characters in *The Candy House* are divided by technology not only between generations but between versions of self.

Perhaps most significant to my thesis argument is the clear extraction of cognitive material from the embodied human form within these consciousness cubes. These dual versions of self are clearly divided as organic versus synthetic, contrasting the soft flesh of the human body with the sharp form of The Cube. There is an issue with this extraction though as the data in The Cube can only be accessed by the organic form. The Cubes are not (yet) an independent network, instead a companion to the embodied human experience, used to advance memory capacity and lessen the cognitive load. This depiction in *The Candy House* furthers my thesis’s argument that Egan’s entire body of work presents an ongoing examination of the relationship between humans and technologies that is increasingly reflected in the relationship between the body of the book and technology, in which the human body is the crucial point of transgression. *Own Your Unconscious* is the epitome of this journey’s co-option by a capitalist

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<sup>119</sup> This is discussed in Chapter Two: ‘While Bennie himself states that in the music business ‘Five years is five hundred years’ (Egan 2010a: 35), referring to the way that trends and preferences change daily, this statement also echoes the way that the advancing technologies work on a different time scale to human expectations and abilities. In this backdrop to Egan’s text, it is revealed that ‘humans and technology do not evolve at the same rates, and therefore cannot constantly live in sync with each other’ (p. 101), and again in Chapter Three: ‘the generations in this text [are] marked by their technological preferences, ranging from the earliest point of analogue practices in the music industry to the furthest timeline with its own form of digital communication’ (p. 122).

marketing mentality. The cognitive experience is extracted from the act of embodiment and marketed as a consumer product, an act of technological extension that creates a problem to solve: externalising memory in order to store it.

Within this invented product, Egan continues her trademark project of experimenting with temporality by using technology to create different streams of cognitive experience. The duality of compression and amplification again comes into play as the Consciousness Cube presents the paradoxical action of reducing a lifetime of experience to a small material unit, through which the individual can pause and expand moments that were fleeting or forgotten. Conceptions of the self are transformed by this technology which not only allows individuals to recover lost memories but creates a new incarnation of identity, erasing the notion of physical embodiment defining the borders of 'self', and extending these borders to incorporate external props.

### **Lulu the Spy, 2032**

*The Candy House* does not merely develop events and themes from Egan's past fiction, it retells existing narratives; the entirety of Twitter Fiction 'Black Box' is replicated as a chapter in this new novel. This chapter, titled 'Lulu the Spy, 2032' is the tenth chapter of the novel, and is formatted similarly to the version of 'Black Box' found on the *New Yorker* web page. Instead of being made up of 606 tweets, the 140 character statements are grouped into larger thoughts and numbered from 1-53.<sup>120</sup> Egan's incorporation of this text into *The Candy House* solidifies its place in the *Goon Squad* universe. While it was widely known that the spy in 'Black Box' was Lulu, this link was not explicit in the Twitter fiction, and was only stated by Egan in articles and interviews. Thus, many readers could have read the Twitter fiction without linking it to *Goon Squad*. Inserting the story as a chapter of this new novel and titling it with Lulu's name thus concretely brings it into this world.

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<sup>120</sup> The *New Yorker Version* is similarly grouped, but into only 47 sections: *The Candy House* uses slightly different points in numbering the sections and inserts additional lines, making the text a little longer.



However, the chapter is not exactly the same as the Twitter fiction: light edits have been made which are only clearly noticeable when comparing the texts side by side. Some alterations are slight, seemingly insignificant. For instance, ‘The concerns of your Designated Mate are your concerns’ (Egan 2012: Section 12, line 6) in ‘Black Box’ becomes ‘The concerns of your Designated Mate are our concerns’ (Egan 2022a: 202) in *The Candy House*. Replacing ‘your’ with ‘our’ refocuses the sentence upon the controlling forces at work, highlighting the constant sense of surveillance Lulu experienced, where all her actions were dictated and observed. Other alterations are more clearly related to the new content introduced within the novel. Egan adds in the line, ‘Due to the classified nature of this work, you are strictly forbidden to upload or share any portion of your consciousness for the duration of your life’ (Egan 2022a: 205). This line clearly connects to the Consciousness Cubes and Bix Bouton’s online memory network. Here Egan does some patchworking to bridge the gap between ‘Black Box’ and *The Candy House*, inserting this technology that is central to the new novel and making the events of Lulu’s Mission Log clearly relate to the technological abilities of this world. Another addition is the term ‘weevil’, which replaces the term ‘chip’, referring to the chip implanted in Lulu’s brain that collects her Mission Log and other surveillance data.<sup>121</sup> This term becomes important in a later chapter, which I will highlight in a moment.

These alterations create a slight issue when attempting to reconcile the two versions of Lulu’s story. Should readers see ‘Black Box’ as a draft version of ‘Lulu the Spy, 2032’? An experiment with form that took on its final incarnation in the 2022 novel? In a way this downplays the esteem of experimental forms like Twitter fiction, taking away their value as a form in their own right. The informing digital noise that I analysed in chapter 3 as contributing to the reader’s experience of this text is entirely erased: is this version then a *different* text? This is a reduction of the surrounding digital paratexts, in an inversion of the potential expansion of the text material I considered in the promotion of *The Candy House*. Further, the *effect* of Twitter fiction in forcing

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<sup>121</sup> ‘Black Box’ reads: ‘Your Field Instructions, stored in a chip beneath your hairline, will serve as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work’ (Egan 2012: Section 15, lines 36-37). *The Candy House* reads: ‘Your Field Instructions, stored in a weevil inside your skull, will serve as both a record of your actions and a guide for your successors’ (Egan 2022a: 205).

the reader to parse the digital environment to distinguish and connect the fragments of fiction is entirely lost. Rather than losing the book body—the danger I discussed in my analysis of ‘Black Box’ in chapter 3—this transplantation erases the formal qualities of the Twitter fiction where technology is used as a skeleton for the flesh of the text to attach itself to.

However using Twitter to ‘test’ material is not an uncommon approach, seen in authors like David Mitchell whose 2014 Twitter fiction ‘The Right Sort’ paved the way for his 2015 novel *Slade House*. Further, the text of ‘Black Box’ is not simply regurgitated as an isolated narrative, as Lulu’s story does not end with this repetition of her mission log. In chapter 12, ‘See Below’, we see Lulu and her husband Joseph trying to find a solution to issues Lulu is experiencing as a result of her service. This chapter is comprised of many emails between multiple individuals with overlapping conversations, but it begins with Joseph reporting to his work after taking a period of absence:

1  
Joseph Kisarian → Henry Pomeranz  
CLASSIFIED

Dear Mr Pomeranz:

As I conclude my leave of absence, it is incumbent upon me to report my ongoing concern over the mental and physical health of my wife, Lulu Kisarian (Citizen Agent 3825), who completed her mission nearly two years ago.

Some of the difficulty arises from the several surgeries Lulu has undergone to repair damage from the gunshot wound to her right shoulder (she is right-handed), a hindrance to caring for our eight-month-old twins, whom she can lift only with difficulty. But my deeper worry is her mental state. She is convinced that spyware remains in her body, citing the following symptoms as evidence:

- A tendency to think aphoristically in the second person, as required for her mission’s Field Instructions [...]
- A persistent wish to return to her mission, despite its agonies, as if to a mythical land from a dream or book
- A conviction that she—and I—would have been “better off” had she perished at the end of her mission rather than returning

We have availed ourselves of every in-house resource in terms of therapy and body scans, but Lulu’s present distrust of our institution renders these assurances null.

(Egan 2022a: 251-52)

This first email succinctly informs the reader of the situation. Lulu has returned from her mission, she was alive when rescued (a fact left somewhat uncertain at the end of ‘Black Box’), she has returned home to her husband and achieved her dream of motherhood (shared in her Mission Log),<sup>122</sup> yet she is not entirely well. The most significant ‘symptom’ Lulu experiences is this ‘tendency to think aphoristically in the second person’, a habit leftover from the Mission Log she was required to record. This results in thoughts like: ‘Laundered socks will vanish despite your best efforts to track them’ (Egan 2022a: 251-52), implying an assumed audience within Lulu’s everyday domestic life. In this lingering tendency it is made clear that Lulu’s service and the embodied technology she interacted with on a daily basis have rewritten her unconscious habits. This echo highlights the manner in which these technologies connected Lulu to ‘the dazzling collective’ (Egan 2022a: 251-52), emphasising an awareness of and responsibility to the network of agents who all learn from the Mission Log. Lulu feels a remaining sense of this required duty, noted in Joseph’s statement that she feels a persistent wish to return to her mission and to give her life to the cause. This rerouting of cognitive habit and constant awareness of a collective network are tied to the remaining presence of surveillance technology within Lulu’s body.

The lingering impact of technology is also replicated in the form of this chapter. Egan again plays with digital fragmentation, yet rather than one continuous line of thought being fragmented by a digital platform (as in ‘Black Box’’s use of Twitter), this chapter uses the platform to piece together a cohesive series of events from multiple conversations and perspectives. We follow Lulu’s search to find peace through direct requests for help regarding the weevil, and through more convoluted schemes such as setting up a comeback plan for an ageing movie star in an effort to connect with her father.<sup>123</sup> Lulu’s journey is the central thread uniting the many email conversations compiled together in the chapter.

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<sup>122</sup> Lulu repeatedly states that she intends to have children after her service, and the thought of this motivates her in her mission: ‘your service had to be undertaken before you had children’, ‘Reflect on the many reasons you can’t yet die: / You need to see your husband / You need to have children’ (Egan 2022a: 204, 209).

<sup>123</sup> Lulu’s mission log reveals her father is a movie star who had a fling with his publicist (Lulu’s mother) and that telling him she is his daughter ‘is another reason [she] must make it home alive’ (Egan 2022a: 251-52). In chapter 12 Lulu puts this thought into action, connecting with actor Jazz Attenborough via his current publicists.

Thus, while removing the events of ‘Black Box’ from the technological landscape it was published in, the atmosphere of the form continues in this absorption of digital communication into the act of storytelling.

This lingering influence of technology within the novel’s form parallels Lulu’s fear that there is a surveillance device still implanted in her body, being used to keep an eye on herself and her husband, who holds a senior position in the National Security Agency (NSA). This device is called a ‘weevil’, which as mentioned was retroactively introduced in *The Candy House* version of Lulu’s Mission Log. While Joseph’s email lays out the symptoms he and Lulu believe are evidence of a weevil still present in Lulu’s body, another character describes how weevils cause disruption even when they are absent. Ames Hollander writes to Jules Jones, ‘Fear of weevils outweighs incidence by 5,000 to 1, which is why they are classified as a *Terrorist Weapon* rather than a *Surveillance Tool*’ (Egan 2022a: 251-52). It is not the act of surveillance that has the greatest potential to cause threat, but the fear of this violation: invading the privacy of an individual’s body and personal life. The paranoia stemming from fear of this violation is what creates an effective terrorist weapon. This explains the ongoing anxiety Lulu is experiencing, as even body scans indicating there is no weevil cannot eradicate her paranoia. Lulu then becomes the ‘human representative of the act of technological surveillance’ (referencing my own writing on p. 167) which in other texts was a role inhabited by periphery characters—the birdwatchers in *Goon Squad*. In the inability to find a weevil—a removable source—this text again advances concepts discussed earlier in this thesis, showing an advancement of surveillance capitalism by closing the gap between the individual and the representation of this surveillance. Ultimately, Lulu’s journey in *The Candy House* highlights the ongoing trauma within her body, stemming from her experience of ‘bodily upgrading’ which was aligned with the will of an exterior power and a collective project rather than the mental and bodily desires of the individual host. Lulu’s persistent paranoia displays the lasting effects of such an experience, with her body and brain displaying the permanent effects despite the removal of the physical enhancements. Both the subtle and overt edits Egan makes to Lulu’s Mission Log emphasise the control she has been under, control she then attempts to finally escape in the later chapter, seeking a confirmation of bodily purity from these surveillance devices.

It is evident that *The Candy House* carries on many of the interests and ambitions that I have observed throughout this thesis as uniting Egan's collective fiction. While most early reactions to *The Candy House* focus on it as a sequel or companion to *Goon Squad*, I see the text as most centrally a thematic continuation of 2001 novel *Look at Me*. *The Candy House* pays explicit attention to ideas of digital celebrity, restoring and reexperiencing memories, the externalisation of identity through technology and image culture, and the impact of terrorist threat on the bodies of citizens: all of which are central within *Look at Me*. Certainly, the novel is literally an expansion of the world within *Goon Squad*, yet when considering the motivating forces shaping the lives of the characters these connections to Egan's other work comes to the fore. *The Candy House* novel does also connect to *Look at Me*, name-dropping Charlotte Swenson as the one of the first to create an online identity: 'Lucrative "brand" identities are often sold (the first documented instance being a fashion model named Charlotte Swenson' (Egan 2022a: 79). A brief and easily missed link, this establishes *Look at Me* as the source material for this world of virtual incarnations of identity. Most prominent in this connection is the social network as a central focus of both societies: an invented possibility with unknown future implications in *Look at Me* that comes back as a transformed reality within the pages of *The Candy House* and the world of 2022 in which the text was published. This thematic link between *Look at Me* and *The Candy House* offers a deeper point of connection than the story-based links to *Goon Squad* prioritised by most other reviewers and publicists. The marketing of the novel capitalises on this reality of online identities as supplemental to everyday physical existence, as does the creation of an additional form of identity in the Consciousness Cubes, and even in the new duality of Lulu's story which is retold and continued in *The Candy House*. In this novel Egan displays the use of technologies to communicate, agitate, and resolve perspectives that differ between individuals, platforms, and moments in time, pointing to this multiplicity as an inherent truth underlying contemporary life.

## Conclusion

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—  
For—put them side by side—  
The one the other will contain  
With ease—and You—beside—

Emily Dickinson

Egan opens her 2022 novel *The Candy House* with the above quote from Dickinson's poetry.<sup>124</sup> The chosen stanza clearly relates to the novel's specific interest in expanding cognitive storage through Bix Bouton's Consciousness Cubes, yet Dickinson's sentiment also encompasses the wider interests of Egan's fiction which I have illustrated in this thesis. Firstly, this is evident in my application of the theory of cognitive extension, where the brain can assume the abilities of external props. Egan's fiction consistently considers the ways to expand the brain and incorporate more of the world into mental functions, thus embodying this sentiment of the one containing the other. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, this thesis has worked to show that Egan's fiction is a collective project and that studying her texts in isolation occludes the trajectory of her fiction. Thus, each of Egan's texts contain the other in a manner, in the development of themes and characters and in the consistent attention to ideas of cognition, embodiment, and digitisation.

I have depicted this phenomenon of Egan's texts 'containing the other' through pairing her texts in varied combinations: an approach otherwise not offered within current work on Egan's fiction. I began this thesis by establishing the importance of material embodiment within Egan's earlier fiction, and the value of her characters inhabiting a flesh body. Pairing *Look at Me* with *The Keep*, I observed the inherent inauthenticity within the characters' searches to present an 'acceptable' expression of embodiment. My analysis highlighted that the contributions of the human form are a central interest in these novels, wherein

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<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, Richard Powers uses the same quote as the epigraph to *Galatea 2.2* (1995): a novel about imbuing a machine with cognitive reasoning skills and teaching it to 'speak'. The use of Dickinson's quote in both texts again signals Egan's reflection on and development of postmodern concerns, taking this interest in cognition and technology into a new, virtual, future (another link here is that I also wrote on *Galatea 2.2* in my Master's thesis on 'Institutions of Knowledge and Late Postmodernism').

Egan foregrounds the body's role in contributing to cognition, rather than merely enacting mental will. The analogue, tangible technologies of bodily repair depicted in these novels are predecessors to the digitisation and virtual incarnations of identity of Egan's later novels. Similarly, this chapter laid out the significance of memory in these novels, which is tied to sensory experience and reliant upon the body as much as the mind to process and relive moments in time. Memory too returns in later chapters, appearing as a core participant in Egan's imagined virtual afterlives. First noting the necessity of embodiment for creating memory highlights the significance of these advances when memory becomes dematerialised and removed from the flesh. Through beginning my analysis by uniting these two novels, I emphasised that these central concerns of Egan's fictions are not *first, only, or even most prominently* found in her acclaimed *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. It is rare to find an analysis of Egan's work that does not turn to this novel as the primary source. While many of the ideas offered in my first chapter are very applicable to *Goon Squad*—due to the shared interests and developing trajectories I have outlined—through opening with an analysis of Egan's 2001 and 2006 novels I highlighted the foundation laid in these two earlier works of fiction in which the body is prioritised as a partner to cognition and a primary method of meaning-making and identity-maintenance for Egan's characters.

My second chapter drew out the process in which technologies are absorbed into the same efforts touched upon in the first chapter: outlining the developing and temperamental relationship between technology and flesh. Focusing on Clark's theory of technological extension, I examined points in Egan's fiction where external tools are incorporated into cognitive activity: arguing that Egan depicts the elastic quality of the human brain, able to claim external props as part of the cognitive toolkit. My wider range of source material in this chapter considered 'Black Box' as an imagined future 'enabled through an increasing acceptance of technological props' (p. 69) depicted within Egan's earlier fiction. Thus, in this chapter my analysis more precisely traces the trajectory within Egan's fiction in which technologies are absorbed into the cognitive identity of the user. There are multiple potential outcomes within this journey, both positive partnerships of technology and flesh as well as traumatic experiences of forced extension and instances where technologies are prioritised over the

human. These dangers are better understood because of the foundation laid in chapter one spelling out the value of embodiment. Again, this chapter encouraged an appreciation for the journey that Egan continues across her individual outputs: drawing connections between multiple texts and seeing ‘Black Box’ not *only* as an extension of the world of *Goon Squad*, but as a result of the advancements made across Egan’s entire body of work.

In my third chapter I argued that experimentations with materiality are also central to Egan’s use of technology in producing her texts. My analysis demonstrated that, in this process, the formal oddities of the technological landscapes become digital wrappings directing and informing the reader. Again, the trajectory of Egan’s work came to the fore in this chapter: highlighting the experimentation in Twitter fiction ‘Black Box’ as a natural progression from the technologies engaged with in *Goon Squad*. However, this chapter also highlighted the intentional choice of materiality as notable in its own right—circling *Manhattan Beach* as a diversion from the increasing incorporation of digital technologies within Egan’s work. Rather than dismissing ‘less formally innovative’ forms, I pointed out the specific contributions of materiality to Egan’s individual projects. Again, this awareness stems from the attention paid to the value of physical embodiment in my first chapter. Continuing my project of a collective analysis of Egan’s fiction, here I took a further step back to consider the legacy of the American Short Story developed by ‘Black Box’ and forms such as Twitter fiction. The self-referential nature of the literary canon reveals another link to Dickinson’s sentiment of the one encompassing the other: enabling me to find echoes of Sterne and Barthelme in Egan’s work.

Chapter four of this thesis reveals the culmination of all of these previous observations about the value of embodiment, the potential of technological extension, and the incorporation of digital platforms into fiction. Considering dematerialisation within Egan’s fiction, here I centred the loss of material experience brought on by the digitisation of everyday experiences: from purchases to social interactions. Outlining the chasm that this dematerialisation often creates, I noted the central manifestations of this pattern of digitisation tied to material loss: such as Sasha’s attempts to craft a material record for herself. This chapter perhaps most of all signals the losses inherent within the journey to augment the human experience. While many of these enterprises



promise to replicate embodiment exactly, such as Charlotte Swenson's virtual reincarnation, where the digital image is so precise that viewers come to recognise images of her heart better than their spouses' hands, there is always a casualty in the process—the original Charlotte Swenson is lost in purchase of this virtual counterpart. Unlike the expansive potential of the brain, virtual platforms cannot contain all 'with ease', always ultimately revealing their limitations and artifice. Again attempting to counter the default focus on *Goon Squad* in commentaries on Egan, this chapter argued that ideas of virtuality and dematerialisation are pushed furthest in *Look at Me*, in a sophisticated and prescient depiction of virtual identities and incorporation of network culture into material habits.

I am thankful for the fortuitous timing which enabled me to include a brief response to Egan's recent novel in this thesis. *The Candy House* pulls together so many threads from Egan's prior works of fiction, depicting many of the impulses I have charted in this thesis in their most overt incarnation. Not only does this novel then provide much more material for future analysis, but it supports the theories I have worked on these past four years and proves that these interests are a consistent and evolving project across Egan's work. *The Candy House* in many ways concretely spells out the underlying threads that I have argued unite her past works. The relationship between the body and brain in creating, storing, and replaying memory that was depicted as a messy, unreliable, but necessary process in *Look at Me* and *The Keep* returns as a streamlined technological product: removing the messiness and unreliability caused by human frailty and forgetfulness. The fear of implanted technologies—whether cosmetic or defensive—is amplified in Lulu's confrontation with weevils and the terrorist act of inciting paranoia. The incorporation of digital strategies into everyday life is no longer represented through analogue manifestations; Sasha's curated timeline of stolen objects; but is an integrated reality—the collective consciousness allowing individuals to cognitively reside in a technological product.

Some approaches might see this concrete depiction as a little excessive or even redundant, removing the subtlety of previous work—for instance critic Martin Paul Eve fears that the novel is an 'ill-advised re-outing for *Goon Squad*'s cast' (@martin\_eve 2022b)—yet the potential the novel offers for tracing the outcome

of Egan's persistent fictional interests and innovations remains evident. The lack of attention to these themes across Egan's wider body of work means that any complaint of their overt prominence irks me just a little,<sup>125</sup> while there is not yet a wide critical awareness of their origins. Yet, while, as I have stated, I am very glad to have been able to refer to *The Candy House* in the final pages of this thesis, I am also extremely thankful to have embarked on this research before the novel's publication and critical reception. To have clearly noted and traced the roots and growth of these themes in Egan's fiction before they manifested in such overt depictions adds esteem, I hope, to the critical analysis within my argument, where I paid attention to ideas which were not immediately evident. I have hope that future work on Egan will develop this collective approach to her fiction, but I do fear that much like *Goon Squad* currently dominates discussion of Egan in general, *The Candy House* will become the core focus for any of Egan's work on technology and cognition. My perspective that *The Candy House* is a direct thematic descendant of *Look at Me* encourages a dual awareness of source and result, and it is this approach that I hope comes to characterise critical work on Jennifer Egan: viewing her novels as a family tree that has deep roots and expansive potential, with traceable links between each new branch.

Further than work on Egan specifically, it is my hope that more contemporary female novelists are paid the attention they are due. Rather than being limited to a one-text study or a comparison to other authors (often male predecessors, as is the case with Egan and postmodernism), I hope this study has demonstrated the value of single-author studies which seek to discover the uniting features of an author's body of work. It is not unusual to see a single author study of

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<sup>125</sup> Though it must be noted that this is not a specific complaint against Martin Paul Eve, who has contributed significantly to critical work on Egan and has paid excellent attention to the significant themes in her earlier fiction, not sticking to the 'Goon Squad bias' I have often referred to. For instance, Eve has written about the textual history of Egan's first short story collection (Eve 2020), tracked her career in her entry in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twenty-First-Century American Novelists* (Eve 2018), and has plans for a chapter on epiphany in *The Invisible Circus* (@martin\_eve 2022a).

individual male authors, there are plenty for instance on Wallace and Pynchon,<sup>126</sup> and so my focused attention on Egan is an attempt to redress this balance. For one, this approach more accurately reveals the new directions contemporary female authors take existing concepts into: such as Egan developing postmodern commentaries on simulacrum and artificial copies into depictions of technological extension and the duplication of identity through virtual platforms. Further, to fully transform the default position in contemporary fiction from a ‘white male aesthetic’, as Egan noted was the perception in her early career, female authors *have* to be paid attention beyond single-text analyses. Devoting studies to authors’ full bodies of work pulls out the formal innovations that build across projects, creating distinct styles and contributing to new trends and literary movements. In the contemporary space, the most comparable American authors to the work I have offered on Jennifer Egan are names such as Dana Spiotta, Rachel Kushner, Ruth Ozeki, and Laila Lalami: whose works also include discussions of bodies, identity, and digital culture. I hope attention turns to encompass these and other contemporary female authors in the American literary scene: emulating the encouraging projects in this respect regarding Egan, such as the recent special issue from *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, and the first book projects on Egan published in the last year.

As Egan is a notably active author within the American literary scene, I found it disappointing that few critics have attempted to pinpoint her consistent interests, techniques, and influences across her many texts. Egan is most often characterised by her best known text, *Goon Squad*, rather than her core interests and style. This thesis has been an effort to correct this missed attention, uniting Egan’s fiction under the lens of digitisation and embodiment, proving that these concepts are consistently in conversation with each other throughout Egan’s published fiction—and that they develop alongside an experimentation with the form of fiction. Egan creates worlds of technological

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<sup>126</sup> Single-author studies on these names include *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (Boswell and Burn, eds. 2013), *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (Hering 2016), and the David Foster Wallace Studies series edited by Stephen J. Burn—which includes *Global Wallace* (Thomson 2016), *The Wallace Effect* (Boswell 2019), and *Wallace’s Dialects* (Shapiro 2020). Works on Pynchon include *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (Coward 2011), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale, eds. 2012), *Thomas Pynchon in Context* (Dalsgaard, ed. 2019), and *Thomas Pynchon and the Digital Humanities* (Ketzan 2021).

innovation and formal exploration, where brains, bodies, and books can absorb the abilities of external tools and appropriate digital strategies: worlds where 'The Brain—is wider than the Sky—'.

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## Media and Digital

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