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Towards the end of Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad,* Bennie Salazar, the record executive at the novel's core*,* explains to a young sound artist how he knows for sure that the young man will agree to work for him. Bennie's certainty in the future derives from "'A feeling,'" he insists, "'That [they] have some history together that hasn't happened yet.'" In her earlier novel *Look at Me*, published in 2001, Egan interweaves the narratives of injured model Charlotte Swenson, manic professor Moose Metcalf, teenager Charlotte Hauser, and disguised terrorist Z (or "Michael West"), tracing their personal histories across country and time, to join them with an undeniable feeling of a history not yet come to pass. As *Goon Squad* would draw us into the inner machinations of the music business nearly a decade later, *Look At Me* compels us to contrast the New York fashion scene at the turn of the millennium with the petrified vestiges of the Golden Age of Industry in Rockford, Illinois—to question not only an unfolding future but a still unfolding past.

While doing so, the relationships Egan draws in these disparate spheres of a distinctively capitalist, American epoch reveal larger concerns embedded in many of Egan's works. In its 545 pages, *Look At Me* provides a critical lens through which Egan interrogates a model of self-creation (and destruction) heavily influenced by capitalism's ravages on the distinctions between space and time. It reveals the authorial voice, born from and in its difference from the image-commodity, as an illustrative model of how the present becomes immanent in the past and the self becomes immanent in the body in an immaterial age of images and information.

Egan's lengthy second novel begins sometime in the summer of the mid-seventies when sixteen year-old Charlotte Swenson jumps hungrily at the opportunity to leave her rusty hometown of Rockford, Illinois and enter New York City's elite modeling scene. Twenty years after this departure, a catastrophic car accident in Rockford wrecks her body, mutilates her face, and muddies her memory, leaving Charlotte clueless as to why she drove from her apartment in Manhattan, where for the past two decades she worked as an "almost-almost-famous" commercial model, back to the Midwest of her past. In the aftermath of the crash, several skilled surgeons successfully and fully reconstruct the face upon which Charlotte has built her career, and after a difficult recovery, she heads back to New York to resume her life.

When she returns to "life as normal," however, Charlotte finds that something is … *off*. Acquaintances and friends alike repeatedly fail to recognize her. Despite the admirable work of her team of surgeons, Charlotte's accident has left her inexplicably unrecognizable; her reconstructed face, though virtually identical to the one upon which she had leveraged a modeling career, renders her a different person in the eyes of the world. With the unsettling realization that her signature face can no longer support her—financially *or* socially—Charlotte descends into heavy drinking and despair.

Meanwhile, in Rockford, professor Moose Metcalf begins tutoring his niece Charlotte Hauser, hoping to impart to her his own zealot's passion for Rockford's industrial history. Both Moose and Charlotte languish in their hometown, as Moose's ruined career remains mired in his obsession with the past and Charlotte's fierce, first love affair with Michael West (or Z) consumes her adolescent ambivalence. While Moose clings to the same past that haunts

Charlotte Swenson, Charlotte Hauser, the daughter of Swenson's childhood best friend, reincarnates the unrealized potential that Charlotte Swenson once also possessed.

Back in New York, after a period of indulgent self-pity, the potential for a personal and financial comeback spurs Charlotte Swenson to action. A young businessman named Thomas Keane, the CEO of tech startup Ordinary People, approaches Charlotte with a lucrative opportunity. He explains that his yet-to-be-launched Ordinary People website will function as a revolutionary network between everyday persons, allowing them to log on and voyeuristically observe the life of another "ordinary person" in real time. A harbinger for the exhibitionist social media sites that would come to define the first decade of the 21st century, the website induces all of its "ordinary people" to open themselves wholly to the service, to write blog posts and post vlogs of their day-to-day lives, as well as to submit themselves to the constant surveillance of cameras installed in their private homes.

Thomas recruits Charlotte, as the model with the re-made face, for a special section of the website for "Extraordinary People," populated by those with lives of particular interest to others. With the promise of handsome compensation and with the condition her profile will be ghostwritten by Irene Maitlock, a mousy academic-cum-journalist, the major deal moves forward. In his first major business move, Keane directs Charlotte back to Rockford in order to film a re-enactment of her fiery car crash—a move he insists will lend necessary credibility and draw to her Extraordinary Person profile.

Keane stages the re-enactment to represent the pivotal moment of Charlotte's story, though Charlotte herself lacks any memory of it. On location in Rockford to witness the spectacle, Charlotte Hauser agrees to play the role of a fictional Good Samaritan that pulls the

other Charlotte from the wreckage, saving her life in the process. With cameras rolling, Charlotte Swenson "plays" herself, running blindly from the site of her accident, tugged forward by the teenage girl—and, in that moment, Charlotte Swenson unwittingly begins to scream. She screams and screams, without consciousness or control, and seemingly nothing can stop her. On the hill overlooking the film crew, distraught by his niece's stinging rejection, Moose Metcalf howls blindly into the wind and rain in concert.

In an abrupt shift, the novel's brief final chapter serves as epilogue to the life of Charlotte Swenson in the wake of that night's revelatory re-enactment. After the wildly successful launch of Ordinary People, Charlotte's unique story grants her instant celebrity, as millions of people sign up to watch her cook, practice yoga, do her laundry, and even sleep. Irene Maitlock's ghostwritten autobiography becomes a smash hit, garnering wealth and status for Irene as well as Charlotte. In the year that follows, Charlotte lands a reality show, an extensive list of product and fashion endorsements, honorary chairs on academic committees, and a fictional sitcom based on her life. Cameras photograph and film her performance of life at every angle and with every thought; every one of her feelings becomes "cannibalized" with capitalist hunger into fame and profit. Finally, Charlotte possesses the fame and fortune of which she always dreamed both in Rockford and in her mediocre modeling career.

Through a novel obsessed with the machinations of self-creation and destruction in a high-stakes sector of the economy, Egan establishes a process by which her characters grapple with their present by in some way re-rendering their past. At the novel's climax, Charlotte is alienated from her photographed image as a model, from her former physical face, and from a past that she can neither access nor alter. However, what emerges at the novel's conclusion

reveals the completion of a process set in motion by Egan from the outset. The re-enactment of Charlotte's crash occurs and subsumes the original accident subsequently justifying Charlotte's new existence, her new face, and her new identity. While the original crash causes a rupture from Charlotte's lived past, in re-producing the timeline of events to which she herself lacks access, the present actually produces the past for her. In the same way that Charlotte's new face, though identical, re-fashions her "natural" face, Charlotte's new, corporate-funded life colonizes her previous history.

Fittingly, the same could be said about what Egan accomplishes herself with *Look At Me.* Formerly an academic-cum-essayist much like her character, Irene Maitlock, Egan here attempts to leverage herself from the genre of "chick-lit" to which she had previously been relegated into the realm of the literary elite, which she would eventually achieve with the publication of *Goon Squad.* In this earlier novel, Egan "ghostwrites" the story of Irene "ghostwriting" Charlotte's story, inserting herself into the same process that results, though not immediately, eventually in respect and renown not just for Charlotte, but for her author, Irene.

At the novel's conclusion, the part of her that Charlotte Swenson once called her "shadow self," the "real" person she once or had always been, feels trapped in the money-lined prison of her own making. Exhausted by the tension between dual selves, the public and the private, Charlotte dyes her hair, changes her name, and leaves her high-rise apartment. Exploiting a loop in her contract with Ordinary People, the woman-formerly-known-as-Charlotte slips away from the ubiquitous brand of "Charlotte Swenson" and begins a new life of quiet anonymity. Despite the actual woman's slip, the image of Charlotte Swenson™ lives on without her, however, through the work of a team of handsomely-compensated 3D animators and brand managers. The

virtual Charlotte continues to perform her role for public consumption ad infinitum, still going through the familiar motions of ordinary life, modeling a hollow but wildly profitable version of a popular human product.

Several things emerge from the book-long process for Charlotte— a new face, a new past, and a new self. After surgeons produce a surrogate face and cameras produce a re-enacted past, Charlotte's "shadow self" emerges as the necessary remainder that distances herself from both. From the production of her own novels, Egan acknowledges the production of herself as Jennifer Egan: an author, a public figure, and a brand. But she seems as well to reveal the necessity of stepping away from that figure she forges—of stepping away from the image-commodity of herself as author, so that only her authorial voice remains.

After the settling of debts and the termination of contracts with Ordinary People, the woman formerly known as Charlotte revisits the past from a position of studied distance. She thinks back to her former self and her previous desire for recognition, concluding,

> Life can't be sustained under the pressure of so many eyes. Even as we try to reveal the mystery of ourselves, to catch it unawares, expose its pulse and flinch and peristalsis, the truth has slipped away, burrowed further inside a dark, cold privacy that replenishes itself like blood. It cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it is touched by light. (528)

Existing invisible, untenable in light, and endlessly generated, the private, slippery truth of which Charlotte speaks can in fact be found in a voice—specifically Egan's own authorial voice. The "pulse and flinch and peristalsis," in the machine-like production of "the mystery of ourselves," escapes the conditions of its own material creation, just as the written work of the author escapes the person who might have created it.

In her final scene, Charlotte admits to calling her old voicemail, the one left in the apartment sacrificed with the life that she forsook, to hear the voice recorded on the machine. "Once or twice a year," Charlotte tells us, "I still call my old voice mail, 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.'" Here, it remains unclear if the voice on the machine belongs to someone else—if it is "her" voice, or that other Charlotte's. The Charlotte making the call leaves a message, responding in turn, "'Hello,' I say. 'It's me." At once, the distance between the two is re-established but further muddied (528). The voice on the machine sounds not like the voice of a ghost come back to haunt her; rather, the question remains as to whether the voice belongs to someone else entirely.

In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar proposes "the intimate kernel of subjectivity" that we attribute to the voice provides the basis for our social structure (13). Dolar writes, "The signifier needs the voice as its support, just as the Matrix needs the poor subjects and their fantasies, but it has no materiality in itself, it just uses the voice to constitute our common 'virtual reality.'" The voice succeeds as a vehicle for meaning by binding us in a mutually agreed-upon reality, or providing the intangible field upon which the signifying game unfolds. Dolar continues, "But the problem is that this operation always produces a remainder which cannot be made a signifier or disappear in meaning; the remainder that doesn't make sense, a leftover, a castoff—shall we say an excrement of the signifier? The matrix silences the voice but not quite" (Dolar 20). This surplus of voice remains as a site of potential rupture from the shackling processes of abstraction or from the confining materiality of the image-commodity.

In reenacting her crash, enveloped and undone by her screams, Charlotte becomes a new, separate person from that image of herself. Ultimately, the last and only connection between Charlotte Swenson and the woman formerly known as Charlotte Swenson becomes the phone calls the latter makes to reaffirm or rediscover some deeper, fuller communion with that other, previous self. Dolar poses the question, "...if the voice is the first manifestation of life, is not hearing oneself, and recognizing one's own voice, thus an experience that precedes self-recognition in a mirror?" (39). A better question might be, rather, what happens when such recognition fails? What happens when the voice is not your own? As she teases these issues, Egan compels us to listen to her voice, the authorial voice of a visible literary figure that she also in a way both escapes from and needs.

As Thomas Keane attempts to woo Charlotte to join Ordinary People, he cues up a video of an African tribesman whose speech translates into text below him. The African serves as one of the site's so-called "Ordinary Persons." As Charlotte gazes on, she notes with awe,

> The text lagged behind the warrior himself, who had already burst into song: a series of guttural, atonal sounds gouged from someplace well below his diaphragm. The sounds, like the visuals, had a heightened precision that made me feel not merely in the warrior's presence, but inside his throat.

If "the truth has slipped away," from the mirrored world of modeling and the surveilled Manhattan apartment and "burrowed further inside a dark, cold privacy that replenishes itself like blood," can Charlotte have thought it to go anywhere else than in such a voice? Crucially, the film clip's text and voice fall out of sync. Here—as she does, not unproblematically, elsewhere—Egan turns to the voice of a black man, a particularly othered figure, to illustrate the

apex of intangible, guttural contact, an attempt at demonstrating the disconnect she sees between the voice and the physical self.

But, furthermore, Dolar questions, "…what is the texture of this voice, this immaterial string, and what is the nature of the subject implied in it?" (Dolar 23). Posing an analogous question, Eric Lott applies this pivotal provocation to the voice of blues singer Howlin' Wolf in order to propose the process of "subject formation through sound" (Lott 698). The voice of Howlin' Wolf, he argues, physically testifies to the socioeconomic production of the "Howlin' Wolf" that appears in a "hesitation between tenses" of "an older industrial order and an oncoming postindustrial 'urban crisis.'" Lott proposes that the abstract, intangible social relations and economic conditions integral to subject formation manifest *physically* in the sound of the voice— for Howlin' Wolf, the traumatic experience of blackness in the South sounds like a growling, gritty bass. Lott writes, "Manifold registers of experience and expressiveness thus cluster around the site of beaten skin; not for nothing is Howlin' Wolf's back door man 'shot full of holes,' pores become wounds made over through violent sound, 'soul' saved through singing as howling, howling a near-sublimation of screaming that does not tame its disruptive—or seductive—force" (Lott 705). Here, physicality and temporality entwine to bear the mark of trauma. Howlin' Wolf's blackness, like the blackness of Egan's African tribesman, provides a convenient model for Egan's understanding of an indestructible "truth" that somehow emerges between the meeting of physicality and time. In her screaming, Charlotte Swenson's voice bears witness to the trauma of both her accident and her re-making. For Egan, the process becomes even more self-conscious. Her voice—her authorial voice—bears witness to a similar autobiographical truth, but one that ultimately threatens to expose her. In order to curate these

acts of authorship, to self-author, Egan works to extract that voice from the conditions of its production.

Authorship, specifically the complications of self-authorship, structures the core of *Look At Me.* Working closely with Thomas Keane, ghostwriter Irene Maitlock fashions Charlotte's character for the re-enactment, Irene's own creative writing workshop habits occasionally slipping into her scripts. As an academic "playing" journalist, Irene—a woman made nearly invisible by her uncrafted, frumpy appearance—stands in as the authorial figure for Egan in the novel, herself a journalist and essayist earlier in her career. Before she signs on with Ordinary People, Irene, in a pitch to interview her for the *Post*, tells Charlotte, "[The story is] about identity…the relationships between interior and exterior…how the world's perceptions of women affect our perceptions of ourselves," echoing some of Egan's self-identified motives for writing *Look At Me*[1]. Irene continues, "A model whose appearance has changed drastically is a perfect vehicle," —stopping short of acknowledging herself as a vehicle for the author— "for examining the relationship as a purely physical object—a media object, if you will… just a more exaggerated version of everyone's position in a visually based, media-driven culture… a perfect lens for looking at some of the larger—." At this point, Charlotte cuts Irene off. Per Irene's suggestion, the "vehicle" — either the model or her crashed car — serves as a "lens" to clarify and more broadly apply Egan's own concerns with self-authorship, which orbit a mediated relationship between interior and exterior, or voice and image-commodity.

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[1] In an appearance on the radio book club, the Leonard Lopate Show, Egan responds to a question about her inspiration for writing *Look At Me,* identifying as her starting point a fascination with "the question of whether image culture has impacted identity," especially "in a culture in which we're obsessed with image and we've become so adept at creating ourselves from the outside in."

Charlotte Swenson gains agency through Irene's "self"-authorship following contemporary branding practices, with Irene acting as manager as much as Egan does at large. Brand managers cultivate brands like the one into which Charlotte transforms to appear timeless, authorless, and paradoxically constitutive and independent of their products, working to continually re-establish a history that suits the brand's current market presence. The similarly looping recursive narrative of the novel ultimately allows for the subsumption of the "author," either Charlotte-via Irene or Egan herself, into the impersonal structure of a media-constructed history. By writing and staging the history of a branded personality, Egan (through Irene) imparts to Charlotte the ability and opportunity to then retreat from that commodified personality, as Egan herself attempts to do.

Now, it is important now to further elucidate how physicality plays a role in such authorship. As Irene notes, there persists the question of interiority's relationship to its material exteriority, a question which Charlotte's constructed face brilliantly represents. Old photographs from Charlotte's modeling days that she revisits post-surgery exist as material objects that engender a time travel of sorts. Charlotte's face, perhaps most importantly, embodies within it the span of Charlotte's history. Whereas the re-enactment of the crash obviously attempts to re-cast a particular moment in time, it also attempts to re-materialize the actual physical space in which the accident first occurred. As the physical manifestation of some vague, slippery notion of subjectivity, the face (particularly Charlotte's) produces an almost poetic expression of the same confusion between change in time and change in space.

Charlotte's face simultaneously serves as a mask and a "window to the soul," at once obscuring, revealing, and then again obscuring the "soul" or self behind it. A potential bridge (or

chasm) between the features of the face and the soul (or what constitutes the voice in this understanding) forged in a culture saturated in images could here provide a further foundation from which to articulate a certain model of self-authorship. In his book *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Michael Taussig explicates something like this, the result of which he refers to as a "public secret"—that which is revealed whose revelation eludes voicing[2].

For Taussig, the face serves as both the veil and the expression of subjectivity, the crucial point of contact between interiority and exteriority—a window that reveals and yet contains. The face, he argues, under photographic scrutiny (especially at the level applied to Charlotte) becomes a fetish in the spiritual sense, imbued with some sort of magical ability to transform the intangible into the tangible. Of course, Charlotte's face arguably also becomes a fetish in the commodity sense. In *Look At Me*, the shattering of Charlotte's original face and its subsequent replacement with one constructed by human labor invites an interrogation of the significance of either face in their function as mediator between one point in time and another, as well as one self and another self; the new face occludes and contains the old, and both faces conceal and contain the voice.

The 'natural' face, as perhaps we might describe both Charlotte's face pre-accident and the unaltered faces of those whom she encounters, at once obscures and reveals the secret of subjective identity, the "shadow self" that Charlotte attempts to uncover in every person she meets. In Charlotte's conception of it, a "shadow self" hides under the projected and easily

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[2] "The reconfiguration of repression in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth, I call the public secret, which, in another version, can be defined as that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated…" Taussig 5

visible mask of personality, existing secretly and intangibly like a veiled reflection or a ghost shorn of its physical body. "When all else failed," Charlotte explains, "I found [the shadow self] by looking at people when they thought they couldn't be seen—when they hadn't arranged themselves for anyone" (53-54). The shadow self that Charlotte claims haunts every person, then, makes visible some self that predates or outlives the act of self-authorship. In a way, the shadow self is a subjectivity that transcends the structured temporality of production, though at once is tethered to and withdrawn from the physical body.

In the traumatic accident eventually illuminated as an intentional suicidal attempt at self-destruction, Charlotte becomes unmasked. The mask shatters, leaving her faceless, when the crash breaks nearly every bone in her face. By virtue of the unbreakable glass windshield into which her face smashes, the integrity of her face's border dissolves, liberating all else to violently assume a new configuration. In the novel's opening pages, Charlotte narrates,

> After twelve hours of surgery, during which eighty titanium screws were implanted in the crushed bones of my face to connect and hold them together; after I'd been sliced from ear to ear over the crown of my head so Dr. Fabermann could peel down the skin from my forehead and reattach my cheekbones to my upper skill; after incisions were made inside my mouth so that he could connect my lower and upper jaws…I was discharged from the hospital. 5

Charlotte's face had to make brutal contact with the car's windshield to allow for her money-given face to be fashioned. The glass provides the crucial point of contact, the liminal space that ultimately rejects her. In this moment of abjection and trauma, caught between two faces, one past and one future, Charlotte occupies a point of potential—a negative space, a potential outside of time—for radical transformation and power. Revealingly, this moment renders literal the

shearing of selves compelled by photography, the very source of Charlotte's would-be "self," as it perpetually demands we attempt to sew time together.

Taussig continues:

> …being 'faceless' in this way is not so much being without a face as it is a reorganization of faciality creating a new type of face, collective and mysterious, wherein body and face coalesce. This type of face reconfigures the masquerade of history that is the public secret—that which is known but cannot be stated, of the face as both mask and window to the soul—such that there is a type of 'release' of the fetish powers of the face in a proliferation of fantasy and of identities, no less than of the very notion of identity itself, a discharge of the powers of representation. (Taussig 256)

Thus, in becoming faceless, the potential arises to reveal and re-fashion the "masquerade of history" as represented and presented—the potential to forge a bridge between temporalities that could support the perpetuity of a new condition or, in other words, a different understanding of time and self. Taussig's proposed result, the "'release' of the fetish powers of the face in a proliferation of fantasy and identities, no less than of the very notion of identity itself, a discharge of the powers of representation," denotes Egan's overarching intent for her characters and for the potential accomplishments of the book. She aspires to radically unfetter herself from her interior voice in order to re-establish the image-commodity of authorship, which she then can manage at a distance.

"Hence unmasking leads" in Taussig's account, "to a certain refacement, but hardly the face we once knew. Something new has emerged. A mystery has been reinvigorated, not dissipated, and this new face has the properties of an allegorical emblem, complete with its recent history of death and shock, which gives it this strange property of 'opening out'" (Taussig 253). A new history emerges from the unmasking and the mystery "reinvigorated" remains a fiction of that history—Charlotte's history. Charlotte's "refacement" marks the beginning of a

process of self-authorship; it also marks "opening out" the appearance of the unbearable interiority of her life to the Facebook-esque startup, Ordinary People, as a monetized subjectivity. In the wake of her crash, Charlotte's literal refacement boldly re-casts not only her personal history, but a greater understanding of history. Moreover, unmooring past and present from self, and refiguring their relationships, necessarily prompts larger questions about how time and history in a cutting-edge, immaterial world unfold at all.

With the release of 2015's *Deja Vu and the End of History,* Paolo Virno attempts to distinguish a metahistory and mechanics of time in the immaterial present in which Egan and her works also reside. Drawing from Bergson, Nietzsche, and Marx, Virno first points usefully to the distinction between potential and act explored in Bergson's foundational "The Possible and the Real" in order to tease out how we might come to think the present and past. In his essay, the distinction that Bergson proposes rests upon the premise that potential, the faculty to act, becomes realized only in the instant that such act takes place. Potential does not precede the act but rather is itself historicized simultaneously with the occurrence of the act for which it allows. Virno explicates, "The virtual is contemporaneous to the actual, arises with and duplicates it. Nevertheless, in duplicating the real, the possible detaches itself into the past, and establishes itself there with a retroactive movement…" (Virno 16). With the appearance of the act, its corresponding potential (perhaps labor-power, or intellect, or language, as all potentials-cum-faculties Virno points out) loops backward in time to establish the conditions of the act's possibility and maintain the continuity of chronological history. While Virno's interest lies primarily with the functions of commodity production, his description of this temporal displacement will prove useful as well with the displaced temporalities of the financial era.

As *Look At Me* progresses, we expect as readers that eventually the "truth will out" about Charlotte's crash, assuming the existence, though hidden, of a "true" event since Egan shows us all that it catalyzes, not least of which is the re-enactment. Depicting the now of the present as pitted against that *other* present (the present of the past), Virno claims, "…The two 'nows', which are at first counterposed, overlap until they become just one." This uncomfortable and magnetic draw manifests in the novel in the tension of the accident's re-enactment, which through the labor of the film crew, the director, and the actors in the field, functionally comes to serve as the act itself. The process of its production increasingly pulls the two points closer and closer into relation until one eclipses the other— or one is "as good as" the other.

The re-enactment testifies to the society that demands it—a society engorged by the interminable circulation of images. In his description of spectacular society, Debord decries a culture crystallized in the present as a result of historical processes already past; it is "the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production" (Debord 8). The spectacle, famously defined as "capital accumulated to the point it becomes image," always-already justifies and then perpetuates its own existence, churning out the "memories of the present" that Virno relates to the experience of deja vu[3]. *Look At Me*, positioned at the crux of the spectacular images of the fashion world, inhabits a space between the present (New York) and past (Rockford, Illinois) and

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[3] "Far from only referring to the growing consumption of cultural commodities, the notion of the spectacle concerns, first and foremost, the post-historical inclination towards watching oneself live, To put it another way: the spectacle is the form that the deja vu takes, as soon as this becomes an exterior, public form beyond one's own person. The society of the spectacle offers people the 'world's fair' of their own capacity to do, to speak and to be -- but reduced to already-performed actions, already-spoken phrases and already-complete events." Virno 55

the pasts and presents of its characters, which increasingly overlap. Egan chooses well the world of fashion photography as the setting for her novel; she invokes its glossy, photographed images lacking context, divorced from the historical moment of their production and consumption. In this setting, the unique power of the surface and image of Charlotte's re-made face manifests in its ability to remake her own past. The re-rendering of Charlotte's face, just like the re-enactment of her crash, unsettles choices long since made, the consumption already embedded in production—instead, her new face creates the past that it requires.

To understand the extent to which the present and the past, housed distinctly in New York and in Rockford, weave together the personal histories of Egan's characters, *Look At Me's* Moose Metcalf deserves considerable attention. As the older brother of Charlotte Swenson's hometown best friend, the uncle of Charlotte Hauser, and a former East Coast professor turned Rockford community college instructor, Moose touches every corner of the temporal and geographic map of the novel. In his soggy basement office at a Rockford community college, with his monomaniacal fixation on glass and the Industrial Revolution, Moose channels Debord, insistent on revisiting the constructed, mechanical past and plagued by his fear of the intangible, trivial present—-an image-driven present exemplified by Charlotte's pervasive and prolific photographic ads. Moose's academic obsessions engulf his whole being. He ruminates on the state of the world, first pondering "Objects existing in time and space…" (reminding us, perhaps, of Irene Maitlock's proposal of the relationship between self and world "as a purely physical object—a media object…"). Moose expounds that "…information was the inversion of a thing; without shape or location or component parts. Without context. Not history but personal history." Moose singles out the slippery, evaporating information of the "Information Age" as the agent of

history's demise. He bemoans a space and time *outside* of space and time, where information floats unhindered by history, wherein the context to place such information no longer exists.

In a 2004 article in the *New Left Review* (directly addressing the spectacular images of September 11th, the terrorist attack that took place the same week that Egan published *Look At Me*), the Retort collective suggests, "…the key to [Debord's] hatred of the image-life… what [the image-life] threatened, ultimately, was the very existence of the complex, created, *two-way* temporality that for him constituted the essence of the human" (Retort). The "image-life," the spectacular society in which subjectivity emerges from the creation and circulation of images in the next stage of alienating capitalism, tears away at the reciprocal relationship society once fostered with space and time, in which space and time derived from society as much as society developed within space and time. Then, the mention of a fast-fading "two-way temporality" points to the disappearance of a clear distinction between past and present that would allow for self-orientation within a particular historical moment, as well as a recognition of historical past and future—a privilege denied to those of us caught in the perpetual present.

Egan's own obsession with a dissolving "two-way temporality" surfaces, in fact becomes corporeal, for Moose shortly after Charlotte Hauser rejects him and his fanatical teachings. In an unusual fit of unbounded energy, Moose drives out toward Chicago, a city that for Moose generates the closest imagining of his gauzy childhood past. In an oneiric scene set on shore of Lake Michigan, "Moose-the-man" walks hand-in-hand with "Moose-the-boy," a hallucinated image of the childhood self with whom Moose hopes to re-connect. At the scene's end, "Moose-the-boy" turns and stares beseechingly at "Moose-the-man." Though the latter remains painfully aware of the gaze of his expectant past self, he proves unable to return it.

Egan emphasizes the strangeness in the familiarity of Moose's surroundings, revealing, "All around him, in those glass apartment buildings overlooking the lake, lived a legion of strangers, people who didn't know, who couldn't see." Giving voice to Moose's reflections, she continues, "[He] was alone because his vision had divided him from these people—had altered him internally so that the child he'd once been, the little boy who had walked alongside him earlier today, by the lake, when the sun was out, no longer recognized him" (495). Surrounded by his imagined and literal reflections on the beachfront and in the skyscrapers, Moose becomes more alienated from himself than ever before. He desperately longs for communion with that former self in order to justify his present. However, the failure of recognition illuminates a version of Virno's past created by present—in his refusal to return the boy's gaze, Moose rejects the re-wiring and re-writing of the information-driven world and for this very reason, the boy rejects him.

Moose fails to forge the crucial link between his past and the present exactly because forged it must be. He possesses knowledge of the crucial link between past and present but, furthermore, the instability of that link in "a world remade by circuitry…a world without context or meaning." He visualizes the imaginary figure of his past self as a projection of his mind permitted by the reflections of culture that surround him but quickly, albeit unwillingly, he recognizes that this self proves both illusory and inaccessible to him. His few remaining connections between the past and present arrive in "bullets of memory," attacking with "foolish and unreliable nostalgia," that further alienate him (487). Egan draws Moose in the context of a radical, though mystifying, split between past and present, as he appears first in the narrative as

an idolized teenage party boy and then, later, as a misanthropic adult with an all-consuming vendetta against post-industrialism.

Glass, for Moose, had always provided the key to self-revelation, just as it eventually, in a different manner, does for Charlotte. Propelled by an urgent attraction to the "evolution of technology," Moose found, "glass—glass he returned to repeatedly, that magically, liquid solid." Its seemingly magical properties at the heart of its transformative appearance, glass, as Moose studies it, engenders visual revelation and transportation—be it to a clearer, sharper world of imagery (via the camera's lens) or to a formerly unfathomable self-understanding (via the glass of a mirror). "The most precise technology," observed Walter Benjamin, "can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us" (58). Glass here reveals itself as perhaps the most precise (and ubiquitous) of technologies.

Moose, contemplating the ontology of glass, traces two transformations in its functional history. The first occurs with the dissemination and "proliferation" of newly-perfected glass, revealing to the masses a clear and bright picture of the world for the first time—a world unconnected to the dirty surroundings in which they had previously been living, in a sense out of focus. This transformation births the mirror, allowing for a new understanding of one's relation to oneself and to the world, or, as Moose exclaims, "Lacan's mirror phase wrought large upon whole villages, whole cultures!" This first transformation anticipates some of the transformations that would accompany early photography, which would reveal a temporal "present" through a perfecting lens.

Benjamin, in "A Short History of Photography," refers specifically to the glass of the camera lens, the mediating eye that fundamentally transforms our relation to time and self. In a

world first embracing the latest technological advancement of glass (the camera lens), he argues that the photograph provokes a moment of heightened temporal awareness; in gazing at a photo, in its uncomfortable proximity, we are compelled to test its faithfulness to an immediate present, searching for some small translation of the now that might, to a future-self gazing backward, render this singular moment in time accessible. "No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject," Benjamin writes, "the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it" (Benjamin 58). Benjamin's description allows for an argument that we *require* from the past an assurance for ourselves of Proust's *memoire involuntaire* in the future, and *long* for a bridge of temporality both looking forward and backward concurrently. With the incorporation of the glass lens and its images into every facet of modern life, photography would eradicate the necessity of the anchoring moments of keen temporal awareness that arise from contemplating the past, abolishing as well the need to account for the context of the lived present. The present would exist now always displaced—as, too, would the past.

Moose colors the proliferation of glass since the popularization of photography as at a point now of oppressive ubiquity. He laments this, concluding, "for now the world's blindness exceeds that of medieval times before clear glass, except that the present blindness came from *too much sight*, appearance disjoined from anything real, afloat upon nothing, in the service of nothing, cut off from every source of blood and life" (139). With this, Moose points to what Charlotte herself becomes as a photographed face plastered on billboards, magazines, and TV

commercials. While the first era of glass allowed for and provoked a connection between time, image, and identity, the second disallows it —again we look back to Debord's spectacular images sans context, sans history.

Quoting Dauthendey on early daguerrotypes, Benjamin writes, "'We didn't trust ourselves at first', so he reported, 'to look long at the first pictures he developed. We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see *us*, so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and the unaccustomed truth to nature of the first daguerrotypes" (Benjamin 59).[4] An apt summation of Benjamin's various definitions of aura, this anecdote reveals the same desire to bridge the temporal gap between the present of the photograph and the present of the now, as well as the photograph's uncanny resistance to our doing so. Additionally, it applies to Charlotte's experience, even at the end of the 20th century, in looking upon her uncanny former face. The onlookers Dauthendey witnesses see the faces in the photograph not as their own but as "little tiny faces" with imagined agency, demonstrating the self-alienation implicit in a photographic image as explored by Benjamin elsewhere.

After her face-shattering car crash, Charlotte realizes that photos of her—of which plenty exist in magazines, on TVs, and plastered on subway walls from her career as a model—cannot now convey the face she had worn pre-trauma, cannot allow her to bridge the gap between past and present selves and access that once-lived present. She emerges from reconstructive surgery with a face familiar to her original but somehow fundamentally warped—uncanny. The faces on

either side of her photos fail to connect because they imperfectly re-render the past, warping the faces in the photos and preventing them from aligning.

Meeting with her long-time modeling agent and friend Oscar for the first time after her reconstructive surgeries, Charlotte interrogates him, "'Did you recognize me?' Oscar snorted. His business, after all, was the business of sight, of recognizing what he'd never seen before. 'Through the window,' he said haughtily" (44). Oscar and Charlotte's working and personal relationship spans a decade, and his career has depended on turning her face into something recognizable, something branded, and something consumable. While other acquaintances perceive her as a stranger, Oscar recognizes Charlotte through the clarifying lens of the glass—the lens that had always stood between them just as it had between Charlotte and her consumers. Only in this manner could Oscar recognize the familiar in the unfamiliar, witnessing the difference between faces, images, and temporalities that so mystifies her other acquaintances. Oscar's "business of sight" mimics the business of every consumer, trained to recognize that which they do not know as that which belongs to them when aided by the mediating technology of the glass camera lens. The photographer's camera, in selling the illusion of history and self, capitalizes on its own ability to stage a timeline of memories.

Charlotte's new face can be seen as a literal manifestation of Wolfgang Haug's "second skin," a sparkling and attractive illusion provided by the promises of a commodity—the skin of the commodity itself that can be worn both as an aesthetic affirmation of exchange and as a desirable identity. As the surgeon peels back her skin and reconfigures it anew, he enacts a metaphoric recreation of the second skin Charlotte slips into when she first enters the world of modeling; entering "an unbroken vista of pure triviality," the face of a teenage girl becomes the

face of a Model, a photograph, an image itself to be exchanged via the magical power of the camera. At one point Charlotte reminisces, "I enjoyed the inconsequence of [modeling] even as I scorned it for being nothing; I enjoyed it *because* it was nothing." Charlotte knows its artificiality but persists in inhabiting the face of it anyway—this new skin provides the means by which she can escape her quotidian Midwestern industrial town. In the re-creation of her face after the accident, the mystery that remains and renews itself is the relationship between the interior subjectivity (underneath the second skin) and the image and surface of her face. Her reconstructed face only allows for the revelation that such subjectivity *might* exist. Divorced from the historical past and floating in the stasis of trauma, Charlotte's broken face reveals that which it cannot reveal—her own self. Both faces provide the attractive allure of exchange-value, but both also attest, in their own ways, to the estrangement from their interior that this entails.

Self-alienation finds fitting expression in the disjointed faces of Charlotte Swenson. When she gazes upon photographs of herself from the past, Charlotte cannot recognize herself because her new face literally, physically differs from the "old" face contained in those photos. Moments before cameras roll at the re-staging of Charlotte's accident in Rockford, Egan sets the scene, reporting, "Lightning strobed the cornfield making a daguerreotype from a hundred years ago" (511). The vast expanse between the "daguerreotype from a hundred years ago" and the high-tech cameras peppering the field matches what would seem like the great expanse between temporalities. However, this encapsulates the exact purpose of the shoot—to remedy that expanse by forcibly creating the past.

The investment into re-creating Charlotte's past and merging her two faces serves to smooth out the chronological appearance of her Extraordinary People profile. Charlotte

characterizes the idea to "[reenact] climactic moments of [her] story on film" as "a staple technique of *Unsolved Mysteries,*" a documentary crime television show that she watched voraciously in her period of post-accident wallowing (470). On location in Rockford, the farmer whose land they use for the reenactment divulges to the crew, Charlotte among them, that only a year or so ago a woman suffered a terrible accident in that very same spot. The farmer of course, unwittingly, refers to Charlotte's accident. Already, the re-enactment staged by Thomas Keane and Ordinary People begins to eclipse its event of origin. It begins to merge with the first crash, the details of which remain woefully inaccessible to the reader (and to Charlotte, too).

On the scene, Keane attempts to quell Charlotte's apprehensions about re-creating the past. Charlotte narrates, "'Char,' he said, when we were alone," (here, Keane yokes her name with images of fire, the phoenix, and charred remains). "'If I could rewrite history, if I could turn back the clock, I'd have us all set up in that field with cameras and lights and sound all ready to go when you landed there the first time. That would have been a thousand percent better, no question, because it would've been real.'" Keane suggests something at once peculiar and profound. The media event will in essence supersede the historical event—the camera makes the event real. Charlotte's memories (or lack thereof) no longer exist as the product of history, but as the product of Ordinary People's corporate authorship—of Irene's ghostwriting, of Keane's directing, and of Charlotte's own role as an actor.

Both accessing and creating her past from the present, Charlotte becomes uncanny to her own self in the way that her new face appears uncanny to others. Charlotte's fixation on *Unsolved Mysteries* is no coincidence; the show dramatizes the stories of women who disappear in life and only reappear as remains and in re-enactments on camera. The re-enactment of

Charlotte's crash, which reminds her so much of that favorite TV show, reiterates the same process; Charlotte's "remains" alone emerge from the re-enactment. Egan further emphasizes here the self-alienation of photography rendered physical in Charlotte's two faces as Charlotte, under corporate guidance, gains control over that uncanny gap and closes it intentionally and for profit.

Charlotte recognizes her own ambiguous position as both historical witness and cinematic actor in this de-personalized context. She feels odd, she notes, "that as the 'subject,' I was both the center of attention and completely extraneous. The feeling brought with it an eerie, stultifying familiarity; I was still the model, after all. I was modeling my life." In claiming that she "models" her own life, Charlotte maintains her sense of self-alienation. She no longer resides in and experiences present life so to speak but rather exists as a product she both owns and displays—something to be bought and sold.

Charlotte sells herself in this way to Ordinary People. Thomas Keane's website aims to "catalogue" a global portfolio of individualities, meticulously recording every facet of an ordinary (or extraordinary) individual's "unique" lived experience with a fusion of reality TV, vlogs, blogs, and social network profiles. As Keane insists, "…I want to get Cyrano out from behind the curtain and bring him to the table." The company produces and presents historical re-enactments, achieved through the cunning technology of film and photography, as a sort of fetishized aesthetic of authored reality, exemplified best by Keane's elaborate "documentary" re-creation of Charlotte's accident. However, in this undertaking, Charlotte and the film crew *alter* the very conditions of the historical event that they aim to re-create—such that Charlotte in the

present only remains as a function of the media event itself. On location for the filming, Keane coaxes Charlotte, telling her, "'What am I saying? I'm saying forget all that, Char. Forget what happened. *This* is what happened, and it hasn't even happened yet! It can happen any way we want!'" (493) According to Keane, by manipulating what unfolds before the camera they control the creation of reality, displacing the "real" event upon which what's unfolding might be based.

In his 2014 article, "Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics," Joshua Clover provides a definition of "Retroactive continuity, to give it the full name nobody uses," which he outlines, "changes the backstory in one of several ways— generally categorized as addition, alteration, and subtraction—to rescue the present, which can now be re-rendered with a continuous surface." As Clover notes, retcon crops up most often in popular entertainment—mostly science fiction and comic books—where writers might introduce twists to a superhero's backstory in order to allow for whatever narrative development each new issue or movie requires, often with high-tech time travel as the device for such a change. To characterize it broadly, retroactive continuity aims to establish a *past* that allows for the *present* to be plausible or, in other words, changes the past in the service of a desired present.

Furthermore, Clover suggests that the literary function of retroactive continuity prompts comparisons to a hallmark of contemporary finance, the derivative. The derivative belies a contract between two parties betting on future fluctuations in market price and exchange rates, each party aiming to protect or increase their respective investments as time goes on. This type of contract fixes an agreed-upon moment for a sale or swap to take place with the purpose of managing and minimizing risk for the parties involved. So, while retcon transforms the past for

the present's sake, a derivative attempts to predict or establish a future for the sake of the present. In a sense, derivatives require us to project ourselves into the future wherein we treat that future as the future-*present* and our present as the future-*past*—we must figure the present as the past of the future. Both retcon and derivatives require the reinforcement of *a* past in service of continuity, but derivatives shift the moment at stake further down the timeline.

Paralleling the recursive loops of both retroactive continuity and financial derivatives, Egan employs a narrative structure in *Look at Me* that at once attempts to re-render the narrative continuity of her writing and also to ensure a favorable new present by projecting a certain future of her design. The novel self-replicates the act of revision over and over again, not only re-rendering the literal surface of Charlotte's battered face, but also the simple chronology of the novel's timeline as Egan flashes forward and backward in history. Moreover, Egan envisions a final re-rendering of herself as she at once ensures her present position as author and invests in her future position as an author of literary fiction.

The recalibration of Egan's history through the publication of *Look At Me* depends in part on the reconsideration of memory and of history made necessary by the pivotal moment it occupies, caught between two catastrophic financial bubbles. Rather than poetics providing the means to testify to the elegant functions of finance, as Clover highlights, the cyclonic temporal and spatial mechanisms of finance leading up to the turn of the millennium provide a useful model by which we can grasp the foundations of self-authorship for Egan at this critical juncture in time.

By her own account, Egan completed *Look At Me* over the course of six years leading up to its release in September of 2001. From 1995 onward, Egan invests herself in crafting a

sprawling, layered narrative evolving out of her own concerns about the wide-ranging repercussions of what she saw as a technology-obsessed, image-based culture.[5] Of course, concurrent with the writing of *Look At Me*, one of the most significant speculative bubbles in recent history, the dot-com bubble, rapidly inflates and then bursts. Thomas Keane's Ordinary People, the propelling force behind the novel's second half, nods directly to the dot-com frenzy whose fever pitch spanned from 1997 to 2001, when an overconfidence in forestalling high risk losses met with the fetishization of high-speed technology would lead us ultimately to a dizzying market crash. The large flows of venture capital that were funneled into risky Internet speculation, often dependent on the network effects a company like Ordinary People exists to generate, finally resulted in bursting the speculative bubble before *Look At Me'*s completion.

In 2007's *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo retrospectively shadows the Twin Towers as "fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction," and as much could be said about the boundless, frenzied investments hedged at the peak of the dot-com boom. In fact, DeLillo's description of the towers leads us to the era's growing "new economy" techno-utopianism and precarious financial speculation in general, with both of their attempts at reconfiguring space and time— the increasing digitalization of labor which would result in deterritorialization as the exportation of labor ensures production never sleeps, and the high-frequency trading that relies critically on the physical distance signals travel through fiber optic cables.[6] Inarguably, Delillo's same description translates nearly perfectly onto the fragmented

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[5] See Footnote 1

[6] "Every extra foot of fiber-optic cable adds about 1.5 nanoseconds of delay; each additional mile adds 8 microseconds." "Too Fast to Fail: How High-Frequency Trading Fuels Wall Street Disasters," Nick Baumann, Mother Jones http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/02/high-frequency-trading-danger-risk-wall-street

storyline of *Look At Me*'s Charlotte Swenson: a commercial model's fantasy of a "mirrored room" exclusive to the rich and famous becomes violently exposed as a fantasy of self-destruction in the aftermath of her suicidal car crash.

The crash resulting from the dot-com boom, much like the crash that Charlotte suffers, de-stabilizes a history that had previously been predicted to only crystallize, one projected and assured by advisors and investors. Still wading in the wake of the bubble's burst, Egan highlights and critiques the technology- and image-driven fervor of the Information Age out of which it results, attempting to uncover the invisible shackles with which it entraps. Throughout *Look At Me*, Egan only hints at Charlotte Swenson's accident, which is never absolutely defined or witnessed, ascribing it to some fixed though unnameable point in the past which proves only as certain as points fixed in the future by speculation. But it is finally and only in harnessing the technology of the media event that the crash materializes as something from which Charlotte can determinedly walk away.

On the hill overlooking the site of Charlotte's crash, Moose, mourning himself and a world long since past, bellows into the wind as, down below, Charlotte screams with insistence the truth of her experience. After her accident, Charlotte gains fame, gains wealth, and gains far-reaching recognition, but ultimately, after all of this, just desires to withdraw from it. While for years she models her life unknowingly, when she reassumes that same role with the knowledge of its function, she gains access to something that, though always present, had until then eluded her — her voice.

By the same process, in this early novel Jennifer Egan displays her particular understanding of and relationship to the image-commodity in which her voice is immanent, as

well as the myriad ways late capitalism's temporal structures complicate and fragment that relationship. At the end of the novel, Egan suggests no resolution to the splitting of Charlotte Swenson's selves—Charlotte's future remains remarkably undetermined and unfixed, hearkening to a knowledge of some future necessity to re-render this present. Ultimately, Egan produces *Look At Me* as the potential point of rupture from the confinements of a genre-bound writing career, unshackling herself from the author she had theretofore been. Like Charlotte herself, Egan retreats to a "dark, cold privacy that replenishes itself like blood," in which she safely prepares for a future-present self—that Pulitzer Prize-winning self—who will draw her voice out and render the history that her new, desired present requires.

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