

ALETHEIA

Alpha Chi's Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship

Volume 9 | 2024

The Pursuit of Authenticity in a Technological World

Ashlee Reed

Abilene Christian University
Texas Psi Chapter

Aletheia Vol. 9, 2024

Title: The Pursuit of Authenticity in a Technological World

DOI: 10.21081/ax0400

ISSN: 2381-800X

Keywords: technology, standing reserve, Heidegger, photography, authenticity

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Author contact information is available upon request from aletheia@alphachihonor.org.

Aletheia—The Alpha Chi Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship

- This publication is an online, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary undergraduate journal, whose mission is to promote high quality research and scholarship among undergraduates by showcasing exemplary work.
- Submissions can be in any basic or applied field of study, including the physical and life sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, education, engineering, and the arts.
- Publication in *Aletheia* will recognize students who excel academically and foster mentor/mentee relationships between faculty and students.
- In keeping with the strong tradition of student involvement in all levels of Alpha Chi, the journal will also provide a forum for students to become actively involved in the writing, peer review, and publication process.
- More information can be found at www.alphachihonor.org/aletheia. Questions to the editors may be directed to aletheia@alphachihonor.org.

Alpha Chi National College Honor Society invites to membership juniors, seniors, and graduate students from all disciplines in the top ten percent of their classes. Active on nearly 300 campuses nationwide, chapters induct approximately 8,000 students annually. Since the Society's founding in 1922, Alpha Chi members have dedicated themselves to "making scholarship effective for good." Alpha Chi is a member in good standing of the Association of College Honor Societies, the only national certifying body for academic collegiate honor societies. A college seeking a chapter must grant baccalaureate degrees, be regionally accredited, and be a not-for-profit institution.



Title: The Pursuit of Authenticity in a Technological World

DOI: 10.21081/ax0400

ISSN: 2381-800X

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

The Pursuit of Authenticity in a Technological World

Ashlee Reed

Abilene Christian University

Texas Psi Chapter

Abstract

In the novel *Look at Me*, Jennifer Egan illustrates how technology captures physical representations of the human body and constructs personal history. As technology evolves from photography to social media throughout the novel, Egan's characters negotiate their relationships with technology and struggle to gain power over the technology that surrounds them. This paper analyzes *Look at Me* through the lens of Martin Heidegger, relying heavily on his explanations of standing reserves, tools, Dasein, and authenticity. Such a reading reveals how technology turns humans into standing reserves, destroys one's understanding of their body, lures the mind away from living authentically, and distorts the ability to place oneself in a historical context.

In *Look at Me*, Egan presents her answer to this technological dilemma through the dichotomy between Moose and Charlotte, the novel's central characters. These characters' journeys suggest that living without technology is not necessarily the answer since technology can be used as a tool to understand the authentic self. Heidegger supports this by suggesting that technology's function must be correctly defined in order to save humanity from its clutches.

Keywords: *technology, standing reserve, Heidegger, photography, authenticity*

The foundation of the novel *Look at Me* by Jennifer Egan is: “We are what we see” (149). This line is spoken by the brilliant, unstable academic Moose who studies the industrial history of Rockford, Illinois. He is an expert on the ever-changing roles of technology in society and refuses to participate in its hold on humanity. Charlotte Swenson, the main character of the novel, is an active victim of technology — once exploited physically by photography, then transformed into a source of personal history that can be sold on social media. Because of technology’s ability to portray and extract from the self, our understanding of the physical and personal is inevitably muddled by *what* technology commodifies at any given point in history. In applying Heidegger to *Look at Me*, it becomes evident that technology has already succeeded in turning the physical body into a standing reserve and, as predicted by Egan, has also turned personal privacy into a standing reserve, which ultimately prevents us from living authentically.

To truly understand what Egan is saying, the history of technology and its relationship with the physical body must be analyzed. Egan uses Moose, an enigmatic scholar, to explore the history of technology. Moose understands technology chronologically; his academic beliefs revolve around the discovery that “quicken[ing] sight [was] made possible by the proliferation of clear glass... mirrors, spectacles, windows — light... surely the most shocking revelation had been people’s own physicality, their outward selves blinking strangely back at them from mirrors” (139). This hyperawareness of physical appearance is exactly what Charlotte, a model, struggles with during the first half of the novel. Completely dependent on her physical appearance for income, Charlotte saw herself as just a physical object rather than a Being with agency; this was because every image she had of herself was purely technological (specifically presented to her through the technology of photography). In her own words: “[f]acial features... breasts... waist... hands... What these qualities meant, how they conjoined to form a human being who looked and moved a certain way, I had no idea” (Egan 168). This physical-appearance-based relationship with oneself turns “the human subject into just one more object to be mastered and controlled... just another late-modern entity to be efficiently optimized along with everything else” (Thomson). Therefore, the body and self become resources that can be mined by technology.

According to Heidegger, a standing reserve is that which “conceals itself as to what and how it is. Revealed, it stands... only as standing-reserve, inasmuch as it is ordered to insure the possibility of [something]” (*The Question* 298). Even though Heidegger claims that “[s]ince man drives technology forward, he takes part in ordering as a way of revealing,” and, therefore, “man is challenged more originally than are the energies of nature, i.e., into the process of ordering, [so] he never is transformed into mere standing-reserve,” it is not absurd to claim that if he were alive today, he would reverse this claim since technology now seems to be driving humanity (*The Question* 299-300). In fact, Heidegger’s explanation of nature as a standing reserve can be used to prove how humans have been turned into standing reserves.

To become a standing reserve, something must become an object only relevant to an end goal. When applying this definition to Charlotte and other models, Heidegger’s tool analysis is especially useful. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explores the concepts of “ready-at-hand” and “present-at-hand,” venturing into the realm of how humans understand the tools they use. The tool analysis Heidegger uses is that of a hammer as equipment; “the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become” (*Being and Time* 98). The more we interact with a tool that successfully helps us reach a goal, the more we disregard the tool as a physical item as it blurs into us, i.e., our relationship becomes “ready-to-hand.” This type of harmonious action “has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which [the tool] acquires its specific Thingly character” (*Being and Time* 98). If our tool breaks and can no longer be used to complete a task, our minds revert to “present-at-hand,” a more scientific, purely physical understanding in which the tool’s individuality must be recognized. To reiterate, ready-to-hand and present-at-hand “are two modes of being that pertain equally to all entities. Objects can withdraw into their hidden underground action [while we use them] or they can become objects of explicit awareness [when they break]” (Harman 19).

As a model, Charlotte’s body, namely her face, is a tool that she uses to complete modeling jobs; technology captures her and then disperses these images to be consumed by the public, and without her body, this end goal could not be met. Selecting modeling as Charlotte’s

occupation was intentional on Egan's part, for it brings into question how models' bodies are "commodified" (Mears). In the unflinching gaze of technology, bodies, especially women's, are always broken and never enough. Thus, the body and the self become estranged, and the physical self is viewed through the Heideggerian lens of "ready-at-hand." Throughout most of the novel, Charlotte struggles with her identity because her body is central to how she understands herself, and the modeling industry regards bodies as impersonal tools. This "ready-at-hand" view of her body, and by extension, herself, prevents her from reconciling with her past, present, and future until the end of the novel. Charlotte's perfect face, one that was desired and captured by technology, provided her with the illusion of "safety, self-containment, acceptance," or in other words, a false authentic existence (Bordo xxi). Just as nature is demanded to supply energy, to yield energy for an end goal, so then was Charlotte's body, and still so many other models', used to ensure that idealized images of beauty were being produced. Technology falsely reveals one's self as an object, and it has ultimately caused human bodies, and even human identities, to become standing reserves.

Egan presents Charlotte's foil in the form of Moose, an academic who criticizes and strives to understand technology, rather than being exploited by technology like Charlotte. Moose claims that technology's source began with glass and mirrors; technology is "clear sight... the origins of a phenomenon whose reach extended all the way to present day — screens, frames, images — a world constructed and lived from the outside" (Egan 497). Moose would agree with Heidegger that "[e]verywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it," and photography has expedited this process (Heidegger 287; Egan 498). Thus, photography marks the genesis of technology driving humans instead of humans driving technology because it began the process of rendering the human body into a physical standing reserve.

As an art form, photography excels in the realm of realism, however, "[p]erspective 'distortions' can be introduced and subtleties of shading eliminated by choice of lens or manipulation of contrast," leaving photographs prone to falling away from realism (Walton 18). As a standing reserve, Charlotte's body can also be distorted before it is captured through photography, further destroying the authenticity of her physical presence. So, not only does Charlotte mistakenly understand herself

as an object, but this very object that she had constructed her entire existence around is distorted. For example, at one of Charlotte's modeling shoots, Charlotte's face is veiled in makeup, her ears are painted red, and her hair is formed into a curly, marble-like mass atop her head; almost every aspect of her has been altered for the camera (Egan 175-182). Additionally, when discussing the nature of her profession as a model, Charlotte's friend begins to wonder: "You spend your whole life watching other people... I have a feeling it eats away at your soul," and to this Charlotte says, "I thought being photographed did that" (192). It is evident that Charlotte is what she sees and has used her physical appearance as captured in photographs to understand herself and the world around her, which is an ineffective tool in the pursuit of living authentically.

The turning point for Charlotte, and the novel, occurs when her body, the standing reserve that she came to identify with, is destroyed. After a catastrophic car crash, her face is stitched together with eighty titanium screws, so that she is unrecognizable. As she returns to modeling gigs and the blinding background of New York City, very few people recognize her.

When Charlotte looks at her new face in the mirror for the first time, using old photographs as grounds for comparison, she realizes that "in addition to not knowing what [she] looked like [with her new face], [she] had never known. The old pictures were no help; like all good pictures, they hid the truth" (Egan 42). In another compelling moment, Charlotte and her new face encounter old painted ads on the sides of New York buildings. These signs, from her new viewpoint, "looked honest, legible in a way that the negligéed models [she'd] seen [that] morning in *Vogue*... would never be" (92). The destruction of her physical self triggers Charlotte to realize the ingenuousness of technology's images of her; she finally realizes that images are not tools that can be used to understand one's self, but rather they create phantoms.

Because Charlotte comes to reject understanding her existence as merely physical, she ponders her existence in a new way; she begins to think about her position in time, thinking, "It's over... my life. My life before the accident. My life until this moment, and possibly including it" (Egan 192). It is at this crossroad when she is approached to join a tech start-up created by a man named Thomas Keene. This new plotline serves as a larger symbol; Egan is predicting that technology's use of physical appearance as a standing reserve will shift

to instead use personal history (also understood as one's private life) as a standing reserve. Specifically, the website Thomas created is called "Ordinary People," and it aims to capture the everyday lives of people as well as document their past and present personal history (Egan 253). The profiles on the website would include tribal people, coal miners, the homeless, corporate employees, and, of course, the more extraordinary like Charlotte. Thomas claims that on this website, "'authenticity is everything'" (256). But what is authenticity? Obviously, it is not product placement, posting diary entries, or uploading audio and video captured from a camera installed in your apartment to the internet – all of which are the key features of Ordinary People (Egan 329). On an existentialist, Heideggerian-level, authenticity is an individual pursuit tied to existence. It is not something that can be given to you, but rather something that is destined to be revealed to and by one's self.

Within the fictional site of Ordinary People, Egan challenges her readers to consider whether technology can capture the essence of authenticity, even though technology also renders humans as standing reserves. When Charlotte agreed to offer her authenticity and personal history/everyday life to Ordinary People as a means to entertain others, the essence of her Being became a standing reserve. Charlotte, and, by extension, all social media users, offer information, and information is the inversion of the physical; it is "without shape or location or component parts. Without context. Not history but personal history" (Egan 368). With this shift in the novel, so is a pivot required in the concepts of Heidegger.

Authenticity, the very concept that Ordinary People wants to capture, is the key to fully realizing and experiencing one's existence. To reach authenticity, Dasein, a major element of Heideggerian thought, must be understood. "Dasein is ontically constituted by Being-in-the-World," and this "Being" is the first step towards understanding Heidegger's thoughts surrounding authenticity (*Being and Time* 329). Dasein has two main components — that of fallenness and that of mineness, which can help lead the individual to authenticity. First, fallenness suggests a giving-into everydayness; this is not inherently bad, but rather an acknowledgement of one's "Being-in-the-World." However, as summarized by Steeves, there is a negative aspect to fallenness, which is when one slips "into the ordinary and mundane" and away from an interest in "genuine existence" and

average, easily achievable possibilities that can help uncover the self (329). To counter this downfall, though, Steeves explains how Heidegger points to "mineness," where one takes responsibility for the possibilities they either do take or do not take and acknowledges their historical situatedness.

In Ordinary People's pursuit for authenticity, technology offers itself as the means of revealing, but there is a conflict here. The platform wants authenticity, but it also desires commercialization, and "Dasein can only possess itself and choose its Being in the mode of possibility and directedness... [I]f [one's self] were committed to being virtuous with a clear view of the implications of that on [their] future, present, and what [they] have already become, then [they] would be choosing [their] own Being and would be authentic" (Steeves 330).

Therefore, the essence of Ordinary People as a platform is contradictory and inauthentic, which is why it seeks to derive what it lacks from individuals. Charlotte's personal history becomes a standing reserve to fuel the commercialization of authenticity. The technology itself does not cause inauthenticity but rather can lead to that when it is weaponized against humans, turning aspects of them into standing reserves. Since *Look at Me* serves as a larger commentary on technology, it can be assumed that Egan is generalizing the Ordinary People platform to other media that she predicted would be created in the near future, lending to the argument that technology has turned personal history and, therefore, authenticity into a standing reserve.

At the end of the novel, Charlotte abandons technology in order to live an authentic life, but she had to first address her personal history and future possibilities before this. In the last resort to convince Charlotte to join Ordinary People, Thomas tells her that the future of technology is "going to happen with or without you. But... if you give yourself to it, you'll own that future... If you resist, then when it rolls over you, and whatever you have now, you'll have less" (Egan 337). This bait is tantalizing, and Thomas' recognition of the future as a possibility ties into Heidegger's concept of "mineness," in which one takes responsibility for the possibilities they either do or do not take. Again, though, his desires are as inauthentic as the technology he is touting. In Charlotte's decision to participate in the future of technology, and thus offering her personal history as a standing reserve, she is taking control over herself in a way not yet exhibited by her character in the novel.

She is finally trying out authenticity, but she is looking in all the wrong places. “Heidegger explains that there are two possibilities for selfhood: being a ‘they-self and being an ‘authentic Self’” (Mansbach 330). A “they-self” merely lives according to social rules and expectations, whereas an “authentic Self” understands the weight and responsibility of existence. An authentic being accepts what they can control about their historical situatedness and what they cannot; this is the point in which choice and personal history can combine to lead to authenticity. To reach Dasein, one needs to “avoid being dominated by history, but instead to make history and be part of it” (Mansbach 91). Charlotte does make a mistake even in choosing possibility, for instead of truly weighing the gravity of the situation she was placing herself in, she decided to go wherever societal trends and money would take her. To be a genuine “authentic-Self,” one must acknowledge their past, present, and future to understand their own agency and make consistent, authentic life choices.

Finally, Charlotte and Moose’s dichotomy is relevant to understanding Egan’s views on how technology affects the pursuit to live authentically and how this relates to the final sentiments in “The Question Concerning Technology” and future implications of technology use. At one extreme, Moose has completely rejected the idea of technology, going so far as to refuse to own a computer (Egan 138). His lack of technology does not automatically make him authentic; he still struggles with the mystery of himself and cannot understand who he used to be (Egan 489). Charlotte is on the opposite end of the spectrum since she had a profile with Ordinary People and her life once revolved around technological images. She allows technology to use her, yet she somehow leaves the novel more triumphant than Moose, who is still stuck in a perpetual state of obsession and stagnancy. Even with there seeming to be one clear winner — Charlotte comes to understand her personal history in a way that Moose does not — it is still true that in the search of self, both characters are living authentically because “[c]ertainty as to whether the Self is authentically possessed, as to whether human existence is fully possessed, is not possible... human being is unceasingly making itself a Self” (Mansbach 91).

Charlotte’s unlikely triumph is the most interesting piece of Egan’s puzzle since it was ultimately the creation of Charlotte’s Ordinary People profile that allowed the opportunity for Charlotte to ascend out of fallenness.

Just as Heidegger suggested, Charlotte’s confrontation of her personal history is what frees her from the clutches of technology and leads her to authenticity. However, her interaction with Ordinary People’s technology allowed her to explore her personal history. As she worked for Ordinary People, she confronted her past, by revisiting her hometown to collect materials for her profile, the present, by acting in a recreation of the car crash that disfigured her, and the future, by acknowledging the possibilities available to her. Charlotte’s reckoning with her entire personal history was the essential last step before she could break free from the phantom that Ordinary People and the modeling industry created of her and truly go on to live an authentic life.

The Charlotte that appears at the end of the novel is completely transformed. She leaves Ordinary People, which requires her to sign away her identity, allowing Ordinary People full ownership of her likeness. In order to keep profiting from Charlotte’s Ordinary People profile, the company creates a lifelike hologram of Charlotte that belongs to the public eye. However, the real Charlotte is finally free from the unflinching gaze of technology. In fact, she does not reveal any detailed information about her new life to the reader; she decides to keep her new personal history private. In this way, Charlotte finally becomes authentic because she “is self-producing, self-arising, self-illuminating, not [something that] can be calculated in order to become a formless resource” (Blitz 76). Upon reflecting on who she was before she understood her personal history, Charlotte describes her old self as someone who just “went through the motions of [her] life, that [she] was someone other than that woman, Charlotte Swenson, in whose skin [she] had lived for so long” (Egan 524). She was just “a ghost sealed within [a] body” that had been turned into a standing reserve (Egan 526). In speaking to the reader on the last page of the novel, the real Charlotte would “rather not say much,” because she now knows that “[l]ife can’t be sustained under so many eyes” (528). In true Heideggerian fashion, Charlotte is aware of her historical position and her future possibilities, and she also acknowledges the power and responsibility she has to change her situation, as she did when she left Ordinary People.

Towards the closing of “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger suggests that technology is dangerous, but in its danger is also the “saving power” (310). He goes on, defining “to save” as “to fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence

for the first time into its genuine appearing” (*The Question* 310). So then, if the essence of technology is revealing, especially that of revealing one’s personal history, how can this be turned into a saving power rather than a destructive tool? For one, humans will have to take control of their technology once again. When we turn into standing reserves, we are no longer free, and freedom is the very thing that Heidegger and Egan know is essential to save us from the danger of technology: “[W]hen we once open ourselves expressly to the essence of technology we find ourselves unexpectedly taken into a freeing claim” (*The Question* Heidegger 307). Thus, Heidegger does not see technology as purely evil, and neither does Egan since it ended up aiding Charlotte on her journey to authenticity; both authors conclude that technology *can* be a helpful tool if used correctly.

Since everything else about Charlotte lines up so clearly with Heidegger, it would be thoughtless to assume that Charlotte’s benefits from and decision to abandon technology are not an attempt on Egan’s part to provide the inkling of an answer surrounding the saving power of technology. Charlotte’s encounter with Ordinary People was not entirely negative; it allowed her personal history to be revealed to her. However, it was the commercialization of this personal history that ultimately bound her. Perhaps the saving power of technology is the use of it as private documentation rather than personal exploitation. As Heidegger says, “Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth” (*The Question* 294).

Heidegger was unaware of the future of digital technology, so his thoughts concerning technology can really only help us understand the essence of technology rather than its present-day applications. This is why Egan’s work is so compelling; it serves as a modern epilogue to Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology.” With these two works, it can be understood that technology does not currently serve as a means of revealing truth, so humans must take control of technology if they want to use it to reveal truth. If not, they become standing reserves. However, in a hopeful interview, Egan stated that even with technology creating “mutant” caricatures of celebrities through exploiting their personal history and beauty, “a human being’s private life, and

personality, can never be simply eliminated” (Egan and Rielly). Charlotte, the disfigured model, the authentic Being that had to slay the phantom apparitions of herself, puts it best: “Even as we try to reveal the mystery of ourselves, to catch it unaware, expose its pulse and flinch and peristalsis, the truth has slipped away, burrowed further inside a dark, coiled privacy that replenishes itself like blood. It cannot be seen... It dies the instant it is touched by light” (528).

Works Cited

- Blitz, Mark. “Understanding Heidegger on Technology.” *The New Atlantis*, Center for the Study of Technology and Society, no. 41, 2014, pp. 63–80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43152781>.
- Bordo, Susan. “In the Empire of Images.” *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 10th ed., Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, Calif, 2003, pp. xiii-xxxvi.
- Egan, Jennifer. *Look at Me*. Anchor Books, 2001.
- Egan, Jennifer, and Charlie Rielly. “An Interview with Jennifer Egan.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 50, no. 3, Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, University of Wisconsin Press, 2009, pp. 439–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40664359>.
- Harman, G. “Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger.” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 34, no. 1, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 17–25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24232017>.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*. Edited by David Farrell Krell, New York, Harper & Row, 1977, pp. 287–317. This translation is slightly edited from the original English translation in *Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row, 1977, pp. 3–35. The German text appears in *Martin Heidegger, Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen: Günther Neske Verlag, 1954, pp.13–44.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, 1st English ed., Oxford, Blackwell, 1962.
- Mansbach, Abraham. “Heidegger on the Self, Authenticity and Inauthenticity.” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly / יועבר יפוסולף*, vol. 40, S.H. Bergman Center for Philosophical Studies / 1991, זכרמ ש. ה. ומגרמ וועל יפוסולף, pp. 65–91, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23350704>.

- Mears, Ashley. "Discipline of the Catwalk: Gender, Power and Uncertainty in Fashion Modeling." *Ethnography*, vol. 9, no. 4, Sage Publications, Ltd., 2008, pp. 429–56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24047909>.
- Steeves, James B. "Authenticity and Falling in Martin Heidegger's 'Being and Time.'" *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly / ןיעבר יפוסוליפ*, vol. 46, S.H. Bergman Center for Philosophical Studies / 1997, זכרמ ש. ה. ןמגרב ןויעל יפוסוליפ, pp. 327–38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23352580>.
- Thomson, Iain. "Heidegger's Aesthetics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/heidegger-aesthetics>.
- Walton, Kendall L. "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism." *Noûs*, vol. 18, no. 1, Wiley, 1984, pp. 67–72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2215023>.