Ruins of the Future: The Crisis of Communication in Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House*

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Abstract: Exploring the topics of humanism and posthumanism, Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* depicts a futuristic society dominated by social media and its services, as introduced by the media corporation Mandala. The themes of the erasure of the private space and subjectivity are deeply intertwined with the crisis of communication since the social media in this novel serves as the mediator between people and their friends, ancestors and their descendants, as well as contemporaries and even loved ones. The overarching crisis of communication in the novel extends even to those who attempt to exist outside of the social media reality, both quotidian and academic, proving communication to be equally prone to failure in whatever setting in the futuristic world of Egan's America. Following the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, Martin Heidegger, Don DeLillo, as well as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, this paper aims to highlight the crisis of narrative and the narrative of crisis within the domain of communication in *The Candy House*, focusing on the clash between the human and posthuman experience in the mass media dictated world.

Keywords: communication, crisis, narrative, mass media, *The Candy House*

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AMERICANA – E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary, Vol. XX., No. 1., 2024
ISSN 1787-4637

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14232/americana.2024.1.103-114

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The Epicenter of the Future

Contemporary American fiction has now long been concerned largely with the topic of communication, specifically its contemporary forms and variations in the 20th and 21st centuries. With the influence of modern mass media, communication theory and practice have been constantly evolving, for better or for worse, thus challenging traditional forms and strategies of communication, at least as we know or knew them. Authors such as Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon, Rachel Kushner, and Jennifer Egan focus their works on this issue implicitly or explicitly and approach the problem of contemporary communication differently, yet with the same conclusions. In terms of communication theory, the corruption of communication, both formally and substantially, defines more complex issues, such as identity, social behavior, and human functioning in a community, since its negative impact thoroughly changes and reinvents traditional patterns of operating within a society, both on the individual and the collective level.

Jennifer Egan's novel *The Candy House* (2022) is a loose sequel to her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). While it explores similar topics as its prequel, as well as maintains some of the protagonists and their storylines, the latter novel seemingly preoccupies itself with communication set in the semi-futuristic world in which social media have evolved to bafflingly intrusive levels. One of the novel's protagonists, Bix Bouton, a social media mogul, has established a social media and tech corporation, ironically named Mandala, which caters to the people's desire to expand one's existence even after death. Among numerous services that interfere with traditional communication (the vast majority of Mandala services are concerned with transferring one's consciousness to other people, in various ways and through various machinery), Own Your Unconscious and Collective Consciousness seem to be ones that challenge our notions of communication and its nature and patterns the most. By circumventing regular conversation and verbalization of one's thoughts and ideas, these services proceed to communicate in consciousnesses, or in its abstract externalized embodiments, presented and sold in the form of the infamous Mandala Cube. Egan's ironical oversimplification of the process of externalizing one's consciousness, and even subconsciousness in some cases, cannot be read otherwise but as a poignant commentary on the ever-changing nature of communication in the world we live in, one that is not so far removed from Bouton's vision of the future in the novel.

This paper also focuses on the parallels between Egan's novel and Don DeLillo's essay "In the Ruins of the Future," both mostly concerned primarily with the mass media and its influence on the culture of contemporary America. DeLillo's essay focuses on the aftermath of 9/11 and the consequences this tragic event has left on American society (both on the level of the historical and the quotidian). However, a crucial part of this essay examines the mass media's role in the way history, reality, and everyday events are communicated to the public, thus affecting their perception of the world as they know and understand it. Given that in Egan's novel even one's consciousness becomes interpreted and communicated through one form of mass media, it is necessary to regard these two pieces of writing in contact, and to highlight the common denominators in mass media strategies and patterns of operating, as well as the deep-seated influence they have on communication and its tradition.

Externalization and Performance: Performative Communication in *The Candy House*

The Mandala corporation bases its services dominantly on the process of externalization, which in the novel represents the digital transfer of one's consciousness and subconsciousness onto a piece of hardware called the Mandala Cube. Egan never engages in the specificities of such an operation, and it is not exactly clear how such an endeavor is achieved. All that is described is that externalization takes place by the use of a headset with brain sensors, which transfer the conscious and unconscious onto the Cube. The digital services are reduced to comical caricatures of technology, operating dominantly on the marketing level worthy of Facebook or the rest of the popular social media. The only difference is that real-life social media operates via accounts and profiles that the users create and modify using more or less changed traditional strategies of communication, whereas different Mandala services are hilariously simplified and almost dehumanized. One's consciousness presumably exists unchanged on the Cube, and yet no one even thinks about the possible modifications, or the implications thereof, that the process might leave on an entity defined as one's consciousness or subconsciousness.

The author remains consistent in the parodical representation of futuristic social media; all services mentioned in the novel are equally ridiculous in their approach to externalizing what we might also describe as one's personality. Consciousness and subconsciousness here represent the building blocks of a personality, and if we are to regard an individual in the same technical fashion as the novel, we might claim that Mandala reduces the human to the simple components, and thus offers their posthuman, technological counterparts back to the consumers. For example, MemoryShop allows the users to externalize their consciousness and subconsciousness and then remove painful memories and trauma from one's mind (in a fashion quite similar to the *deus ex machina* solution in Gondry's 2004 movie *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*). Likewise, Skin-to-Skin service allows the users to access the consciousness of another person just by using a gadget that transfers the elements of one's personality when the device is applied to one's skin. Own Your Unconscious includes the externalization of one's consciousness and subconsciousness onto the Mandala Cube, which people massively leave to their descendants after they pass away (almost literally expanding Eric Packer's wish to live on a chip after his death in Don DeLillo's acclaimed novel *Cosmopolis*). As a culmination of the overall ridiculousness and audacity of the corporation, Collective Consciousness creates a hyperreal universe of numerous consciousnesses and subconsciousnesses, which users choose to upload onto a joint server, which can then be accessed and searched by those who sign up for it. This seems to be quite in tune with Egan's fiction in general. As Kelly observes, her novels and short stories accept "as [their] premise a world where the category of reality no longer holds out the promise of orientating the self" (Kelly 2021: 158). Collective Consciousness transgresses reality as such and establishes itself as a hyperreality that simulates the veritable reality that we know and inhabit. Moreover, this reduction of the Self to separate parts to be exploited digitally echoes the posthumanist "move away from the anthropocentric" that Estes recognizes in Egan's fiction as a form of the "transformation of the human" (Estes 2016: 290). In *The Candy House*, this transformation is indeed present, but questionable, since it is debatable whether the new, technologically advanced form of human existence is an actual extension of the Self, or rather its mutation, and even more, simulation.

Externalization as a process is quite transparently parodied in the novel, given its definitions within the fields of psychology and sociology and how it is regarded in *The Candy House*. To externalize implies taking something out of its original place of dwelling and/or existing and placing it or projecting it outside of the scope of its original limits. In psychology (specifically within the context of Freudian psychoanalysis), such a process would involve the demonstration of emotions or trauma (for example, acting out, aggression, and other forms of antisocial behavior, according to the American Psychological Association on https://dictionary.apa.org/externalizing-internalizing). In some contexts, externalization can also be related to the concept of memory (by making concrete notes, written traces, or other

forms of artifacts that serve to preserve memories from oblivion), but even in those cases, it is explicitly related to trauma and negative experiences, operating dominantly as a defense mechanism (for example, writing as a form of therapy).

In the novel, however, externalization seems to operate on the most technical level of the word; it includes a literal transfer of one's consciousness and subconsciousness out of the limits of one's brain onto the separated hardware provided by the Mandala corporation.

> Well, remember: Bix Bouton's genius lay in refining, compressing, and mass-producing, as a luscious, irresistible product, technology that already existed in crude form. Memory externalization had been whispered about in psychology departments since the early 2000s, with faculty speculating about its potential to revolutionize trauma therapy. *What really happened? Wouldn't it help you to know what you've repressed?* [...] I've wondered many times whether knowing those answers would have allowed me to live my life with less pain and more joy. But by the time one of my father's caregivers told us about a psychology professor at Pomona College who was uploading people's consciousnesses for an experimental project, I was too wary to participate. (Egan 2022: 132-133)

Although the novel never dives deep into the explanation of the process, it is notable that Bix Bouton's corporation seems to be rooted in the scientific method. In Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit for the Goon Squad*, there is an episode from Bix's life back in the 90s in which he dreams about the world he will later actually create in the sequel. Much like *Cosmopolis'* Eric Packer, he foresees a world in which the human form evolves past the physical body with the help of digital technology, which would, supposedly, be able to capture the human spirit (hence the spiritual twist to the company's name).

The very first chapter of *The Candy House* sees him putting this into practice, as we follow him to a meeting with several academics and scientists (although the meeting is but a casual get-together that he infiltrates under false pretenses), where one of the scientists called Kacia mentions that, in their lab, they have already started "to externalize animal consciousness" by using "brain sensors" (Egan 2022: 15). Furthermore, his endeavor was inspired by a traumatic experience, namely a death of a close friend Rob, and one of his old acquaintances mentions that it was "his difficulty remembering them [the events surrounding Rob's death] – that first spurred him to try to mass-produce a memory externalization device" (Egan 2022: 60). The novel's depictions of Mandela Cube and Own Your Unconscious frequently veer towards psychological advertising the service, thus highlighting their potential for healing, but also for helping the American justice system. For example, one of the protagonists named Drew talks about Mandala's MemoryShop service, which works by externalizing "the portion of your memory containing the 'event'" that is the source of trauma, followed by a modification of the memory "with that part erased", and ending with reinternalizing the revised version of one's memory "overriding the original" (Egan 2022: 58-59). In a different segment, we are also told that "Own Your Unconscious has turned up all kinds of repressed brutalities, and thousands of abusers have been convicted based on the evidence of their victims' externalized memories, viewed as film in courtrooms" (Egan 2022: 57). However, the characters do often find flaws with the services. In such a way, Drew himself mentions that you might be able to erase the traumatic event, but then you would need to erase your subsequent life, as well, because you kept living with the traumatic event and kept feeling the consequences thereof. Nevertheless, the enormous popularity of the services remains unblemished, as Bix's company keeps gaining new customers.

The real problem with externalization in the novel arises when the characters consider another service – Collective Consciousness. The idea behind it revolves around building a hyperreal domain of individual consciousnesses combined to create a cohesive entity. The service indeed reminds us today of, for example, the Meta universe that the Facebook CEO is trying to build, only consisting solely of conscious and subconscious portions of people's minds

and without people's agency in joining the metaverse. Collective Consciousness can be accessed only if one is to upload their own externalized consciousness onto the joint server, after which the service allows one to surf and explore other people's uploaded externalized consciousnesses. Various characters in the novel consider using this service in order to find clues about their missing loved ones, to learn something about them, or to discover events that they missed or misunderstood. However, a more traditional and conservative view of the new technology is provided in characters such as Chris Salazar, who regards the idea with doubts, as seen in the following excerpt:

> The love-reunion stories move Roxy to tears, but they haven't budged Chris's belief that externalizing your consciousness for any reason, even as a hedge against dementia, is a grievous mistake.
> "If it stopped there, maybe," she's heard him say, "but it never stops there. The collective is like gravity: Almost no one can withstand it. In the end, they give it everything. And then the collective is that much more omniscient." (Egan 2022: 145)

The logic behind Chris's words has to do with the negative repercussions of this evolved form of social media, namely the erasure of private, personal space, as well as of subjectivity. The problem here arises both on the individual and the collective levels. Firstly, the Cube externalizes one's thoughts completely, including those that were repressed, consciously or unconsciously. The process does not allow agency for the consumer – one cannot choose which memories to externalize before the process, so no hidden corner of one's mind is beyond limits for the device. Secondly, when one uploads their externalized consciousness onto the collective server, one cannot decide who gets to access it. In other words, there are no private accounts on Collective Consciousness; once one uploads the content of one's mind, it is there for the world to see and peruse. At one point, Egan seems to parody this intrusion, by noting Roxy Kline's view of the Cube. Specifically, Roxy declares that "[t]he Cube is *her* in a way" and that it "contains the entire contents of her mind: all the things she can and can't remember, every thought and feeling she has had", only to comically conclude that "[a]t last, she is the owner of her unconscious" because she "knows where everything can be found" (Egan 2022: 156). Here, it is quite obvious that Egan tries to establish a clear connection between the Mandala services and contemporary capitalism in America or global consumer society. When writing about *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Lederer notices that "surveillance capitalism," as he describes the world in Egan's fiction, propels "the commercial race to render data from ever more intimate spaces in our lives; our homes, our bodies, and even our inner selves" (Lederer 2019: 225). This seems to be made quite literal in *The Candy House*, as people share their consciousness and the unconscious. The idea of owning one's mind only after externalizing it and having it in the form of a technological product is both comical and absurd. In the novel, Roxy does not see her mind as her own while it is inside her, untouched, only because it is not a palpable possession. Furthermore, she does not perceive herself as a part of society, as a contributing member of her community before the Cube. However, in the service, she sees an opportunity to become someone important, as seen in the following paragraph:

> Roxy understands now why Chris Salazar opposes even the most private, limited use of Own Your Unconscious. The logic of this process pushes *out*. She feels it as a natural force, a current drawing her consciousness beyond the limits of her self into a wider sphere. To converge, to be subsumed – how she longs for this! The prospect shimmers before her: a fulfillment of everything she has wanted in her life. *Make my mark*. (Egan 2022: 157)

Arguably, the biggest share of the product's allure might just lie in this precise aspect – it creates a community and an illusion for the individual that they make a significant part of it, rather than a mere, not at all unique building block for Mandala's hyperreality. It is notable that it vaguely

mimics the idea of the melting pot, such an important part of American heritage. Within the Collective Consciousness, the subjectivities merge, they melt into each other. However, instead of achieving something else, or becoming something new in the process (like within the melting pot, one becomes American, a brand-new identity for each and every one, at that point), within the Collective Consciousness, one becomes but an additional space for searching other people's lost things and persons. In fact, this aspect of Mandala's services is what contributes to the overall crisis of communication in the novel. The individual users do not connect in the traditional manner, they do not communicate. They are rather blended with each other's externalized minds in a process that is so technical, it is sterile and barren. Human agency becomes reduced and limited essentially to their initial decision to join the hyperreality. Once they begin the process, depersonalization takes place on all levels, including the one of communication. Mandala's services, as Egan's futuristic form of social media, thus defy the main purpose of the media as such. Particularly, Mandala's services do not manifest themselves as mediators, or as Luhan defines media, as "extensions of man" (McLuhan 1964) in the traditional sense. Rather, they establish themselves as human extensions in a posthumanist context – they are a technological extension of one's mind, however disconnected to the original body of dwelling. This establishes the media as a replacement, a signifier free of the original signified, or simulacra, as defined by Jean Baudrillard (1994). As a result, this system of empty signs (or Cubes) devoid of meaning, in the traditional sense of human communication, thus disrupts communication as such.

Moreover, the crisis of communication is also established in the novel through the concept of performance, and subsequent notion of performative identities. If we are to regard Mandala's services as forms of social media, as suggested by the novel, we have to consider the creation of content for one's account, albeit unconsciously made. In the very first chapter, the narrator notes that the "term 'social media' wouldn't be coined to describe Mandala's business for almost a decade, but Bix had conceived of it long before he brought it to pass" (Egan 2022: 5). At the meeting with scientists and academic researchers that Bix attends, one of the elusive protagonists Miranda Kline (the absent mother of one of the other protagonists in the novel) is mentioned as the scientific precursor to Bix's media conglomerate. One of the guests, Portia, informs the group that "Kline is better known for having had her work co-opted by social media companies than the work itself" (Egan 2022: 9). They mention her book titled *Patterns for Affinity*, in which she presented "algorithms [that] have helped social media companies to predict trust and influence" (Egan 2022: 14). Bix acknowledges he used these algorithms, and later in the novel, they are better explained, albeit somewhat parodically, as potential forms of social instruction (something directly related to the novel social media). However, these patterns are never incorporated for the purpose of enhancing communication as traditionally seen. They are comically put to use to parody the idea of identity on social media. This is perhaps most transparently seen in another media company's work. Namely, Mondrian is a non-profit social media company, which deals with proxying identities on social media, including Mandala's services. Its main task is to imitate human identity and activity online after one decides to "vacate" their account. Their operation indeed resembles a simulacrum, they "squat" on virtual accounts by taking "possession of an abandoned identity chassis" and they then aim to "maintain the established patterns of an individual's online activity – communication, commerce, and social media – as a way of hiding the reality that the original occupant of that identity has vacated it" (Egan 2022: 78). This reduces both communication and identity to the level of performance, and a digital one, at that. If software is able to perfectly mimic communication, it becomes its opposite – not a process of conveying meaning, but a process of simulating both the meaning and the interaction. Furthermore, it reduces an individual to an image they hold online, which means a person becomes reduced to a performance. For example, when considering the Skin-to-Skin service, another character called Gregory Bouton, Bix's son, exclaims:

> They always held hands, which meant they were likely using Mandala's new Skin-to-Skin™ tool that let people access each other's consciousness directly if their flesh was touching. "The End of Aloneness," the advertising said – now you could share another person's suffering and confusion and joy immediately and wordlessly. But the Skins tended to bellow in unison, which made Gregory think they were using Skin-to-Skin to watch streamers who broadcast their perceptions in real time, using self-implanted weevils. Social media was dead, everyone agreed; self-representations were inherently narcissistic or propagandic or both, and grossly inauthentic. (Egan 2022: 307)

This comical episode is yet another proof of the distortion of traditional communication patterns and strategies. The ad mentioned in the excerpt almost seems to mock the consumer. Selling a product that would end aloneness in the form of a device that demands that one is not alone while using it seems a mockery of both the seller and the buyer. As if that was not enough, the users seem to employ the service not for its original intent and purpose, but rather as yet another form of social media as we know it today – to watch streamers, like one could do on YouTube anyway, only without the fancy (and seemingly pricey) gadgets. It is almost painful to notice how communication becomes perverted in this scene. The youngsters using the device that could potentially enhance their communication by allowing them to experience one another at a remarkably personal and direct level is, for them, just a cooler form of cinema or a video-watching service. Moreover, the very last observation Gregory makes, speaks volumes on the state of communication and identity in the novel. He speaks of self-representation, which we might interpret correctly as an image one makes of oneself online. By perceiving them as propagandistic and inauthentic, Gregory seems to voice Egan's preoccupation with performance as a form of human identity in *The Candy House*, but also in her other works. Lambert writes that Egan's works are "plagued by the seeming unreality and inauthenticity of a post-industrial, financialized world" (Lambert 2020: 396). In her latest novel, this is almost indubitable, since everyone lives with the idea of eventually uploading their consciousness onto the collective server, and it is inevitable to consider how large a portion of their daily life and thoughts are performed solely for the purpose of being representable one day on tape, or on the Collective Consciousness. This reduces an individual at the same time to a performer and a surveillance camera, since all of them will be both the potential observed object for future users and their means of finding another object for observation. Lederer observes Egan's preoccupation with "digital surveillance" in her other works, as well (223) noting that she writes about a "digitalized future as the site where self-formation and social power collide" (224). In relation to this, Alfred Hollander, one of the protagonists of *The Candy House*, calls the times he lives in "our Self-Surveillance Era" (Egan 2022: 30). Thus, in a world where people cannot live authentic lives, communication cannot be anything but inauthentic.

Deconstructing Communication: Hermeneutical Reading of *The Candy House*

Hermeneutics dominantly deals with the interpretation of text and, thus, communication in general and the different ways it is understood. Grossberg and Christians established that "interpretation is a constant and pervasive condition of human existence" and that hermeneutics "attempts to explicate this fundamental notion, establish its parameters, and assess its significance" since interpretation is "the central aspect of human communication" (Grossberg & Christians 1978: 1). The two theoreticians also comment on, arguably, three of the most significant theoreticians in hermeneutics of the 20th century – Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. They recognize that the 20th-century hermeneutics (much like today's) revolved around the "investigation into the meaning of Being, language, and human existence" and "into the nature and structure of understanding and interpretation" (Grossberg & Christians 1978: 17). All of these are inevitably related to communication within the domain of hermeneutics, because to understand the meaning of these concepts is to comprehend them

primarily narratively and to manifest them through communication. Desilet highlights that communication traditionally represents "the exchange or transfer of an intended or constituted meaning" (Desilet 1991: 165). Furthermore, it involves intention and agency (both on the conscious and unconscious levels), as it "includes unintended yet interpretable behavior" as well as "the use of language in a clearly strategic way" (Desilet 1991: 152).

In Egan's novel, hermeneutics is applicable both to the art of communication and self-understanding, or even better, self-representation, as her characters are dominantly represented, or rather underrepresented by language, which marks the problem of their existence in the traditional realm of society and social discourse.

Focusing solely on the problem of communication, one cannot but mention the two important names for hermeneutics, whose ideas about communication and understanding are respectively deconstructed in Egan's novel. Ricoeur and Gadamer both discuss the concept of understanding a narrative or a text, which we can easily interpret as a message, any sort of oral or written text used in communication. The two of them indeed have different approaches to hermeneutics, with Ricoeur's being the more traditional one. For him, narrative understanding has to do with the context a message appears in, as well as with language, symbols and metaphors this message is expressed with. He notes that the text is the very "medium within which we can understand ourselves" (Ricoeur 1981: 143) and, consequently, understand the world. To understand or interpret for him is to "unfold the possibility of being indicated by the text" (Ricoeur 1981: 56). Within his theory of metaphors, he introduces the concept of "productive imagination" (Ricoeur 1981: 39), which for him is a way of understanding the truth, or in other words, comprehend one's existence and the world. Concerning Gadamer, language is equally important, as it is a tool with which our consciousness is expressed or communicated. His interpretation of the world in terms of communication, however, revolves more around the concept of pre-understanding or preconception (also called prejudices in Gadamer's texts). This concept represents "the original structure of all our understandings that is always mediated by tradition" (Dobrosavljev 2002: 608). Thus, the text (the message, the utterance) is to articulate the presupposed, the knowledge that we share as humans, the context that guarantees our mutual understanding and successful communication. Desilet also highlights that, in Gadamer's view, "communication centers in the activation of an already shared understanding" (Desilet 1991: 165). Furthermore, Grossberg and Christians insist that "in our everyday communication, we do not produce a shared reality [...] but reproduce it, for it must be assumed in all real communication that there exists both a real intersubjectively shared world (tradition)" (Grossberg & Christians 1978: 25). What connects Ricoeur and Gadamer is the necessity of language and the human factor, without which communication and understanding are not possible.

In *The Candy House*, both Gadamer and Ricoeur's theories are challenged by the new forms of communication. It should be noted that traditional communication still exists in the novel, but it is both disrupted by technology (seen in the use of email and other, if we may say more traditional, new media) and directly violated (as represented in the threat of Mandala's services and various gadgets). Verbal communication, so necessary for both of their philosophies, is significantly reduced in the novel. Mandala's services, from Skin-to-Skin (which still involves some form of personal contact) to Collective Consciousness (which operates solely on impersonal observation of other people's mostly non-verbal experience), directly contribute to a significant reduction in the use of language in this futuristic world. In terms of Gadamer's hermeneutics, if the relationship between language and the world is disrupted, so is the relationship between consciousness and reality, thus leading to misunderstanding or a complete lack of understanding of Self and the world. Moreover, if one cannot articulate a meaning or a message, one is directly prevented from understanding it, and effective communication becomes impossible. In terms of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, the traditional context and linguistic set of expression is also under attack, and communication cannot be established in the traditional sense because it no longer takes the traditional form, nor does it

use traditional tools. Furthermore, in a twisted reinterpretation of his use of symbols and metaphors, in Egan's novels, people become reduced to images (or sets of images that move in an almost cinematic fashion), becoming more of Baudrillard's simulacra than anything else. This new way of existing thus disrupts productive imagination, since communication and articulation take place outside of the verbal context, which consequently leads to a lack of understanding. This is why characters such as Lulu Kisarian or Roxy Klein search for their fathers, and aim to understand them, through modern technology, all in vain.

The Candy House also seems to suggest a unique decomposition of communication and language, as a means of communication, corresponding to what Desilet suggests in her writing on communication and hermeneutics, particularly about how "the form (appearance) [corresponds] to its use but not necessarily to its function" (Desilet 1991: 166). The reinterpretation of communication in *The Candy House*, indeed marks a direct connection between the form and the use, since it tries to establish communication entirely outside the previously known forms and uses. However, its function as a means of building mutual understanding (of each other and the world) is severely impaired. If we consider Wilhelm Dilthey and his view of communication, we cannot overlook its main function or goal, which is "the creation of shared experiences and the co-construction of meaning" (Financy & Sitorus 2024: 24). In the novel, this is completely unrelated to communication; the shared experience and construction of meaning are tasks undertaken by technology. The previously discussed process of externalization is performed completely without human agency, much like the uploading of one's consciousness onto the collective. Moreover, the human agency which Karl-Otto Apel, for example, sees as crucial for achieving "communicative action" cannot be removed if communication is to be manifested as a "process of reaching a 'consensus' through reasoned argument and a willingness to revise one's own perspective in light of new information and understanding" (Financy & Sitorus 2024: 25). By attempting to remove human agency, Mandala's services violate traditional strategies of communication, thus attacking people's perception of reality. If one is unable to communicate and articulate oneself, one cannot even hope to reach a state of understanding, which is why all episodes involving the digital services in question are so parodic.

The disruption of communication in *The Candy House* is also important on the socio-historical and cultural levels. Grossberg and Christians claim that "communication is always a socio- historical, discursive event within which the speaking of individuals is itself both evidence of, and determined within that historical discursive process" (Grossberg & Christians 1978: 34). In other words, communication does not just establish mutual understanding between individuals, but contributes to the construction of society and history, as such, since articulation and verbalization are essential for both. In addition to this, Bruhn Jensen observes that communication "articulates not only what is, but also what ought to be, and what could be" (Bruhn Jensen 2018: 177), meaning that it is not crucial just for expressing the past and the present, but also the future. In this regard, the three issues he mentions with contemporary communication, which Bruhn Jensen sees primarily within the domain of the digital, in Egan's novel contribute to the deconstruction of past, present, and future communication. Firstly, Bruhn Jensen notes the problem of "the availability of information," which has to do with the "ground rules for which information may be shared, reflected on and contested in institutions of public communication" (Bruhn Jensen 2018: 179), is disrupted in the novel.

The entire context of communication becomes revisited and reconstructed, and the sole authority on what determines communication belongs to Mandala and other social media companies. Secondly, the issue of the "accessibility of information," which has to do with "what someone in particular can know or does know about, compared to other individuals, institutions or interest groups" (Bruhn Jensen 2018: 180), is also in direct relation to Mandala, only in terms of its technology. Information is reserved for those who buy Mandala's products, therefore, communication is accessible solely to those who embrace Mandala's newly invented context for communication. Thirdly, the issue of metadata and its ownership in the novel

problematizes both consumerism and the concept of social power. Bruhn Jensen defines metadata as "trails that are recorded and accumulated over time" which the social media companies use "with or without the users' knowledge or consent" (Bruhn Jensen 2018: 180). In Egan's novel, this is seen in the issue of ownership of one's Mandala's Cube after one's death. One may leave the Cube to one's descendants as an ironic form of inheritance; however, if one's consciousness is already uploaded onto the Collective Consciousness, the ownership of the Cube becomes symbolic, and people cannot affect how their consciousness is then used, either by the company or by other users. A special level of parody can be recognized in the novel if we consider Bruhn Jensen's concept of metacommunication, a kind of communication established and perpetuated solely by metadata (Bruhn Jensen 2018: 180). This is quite literally present in the Collective Consciousness service, where one's recorded memories and subconsciousness "communicate" with those who access it, even after one's death. It is then debatable whether any form of communication is possible in this context, especially if we take Rickman's claims that one must know the convention according to which communication is undertaken in order to understand the message that is being communicated (Rickman 1981: 100). Furthermore, he sees communication as a matter not only of style, "but also one of arranging and selecting content" (Rickman 1981: 104), all of which the communication through Mandala's services lacks. This brings us back to the issue of human agency in communication, but also to the concept of information richness (Daft and Lengel 1986). In a study of online communication, Lee uses the example of emails to establish the differences in the levels of information richness in communication via email and communication during a traditional face-to-face exchange (Lee 1994: 143). Although the author does claim that email communication has its advantages and that it does have a satisfying level of information richness for its form and context, it is clearly established that the two communicational situations have vastly different value, at the advantage of the direct, interpersonal one. In the novel, it is obvious that communication is limited by the scope of one's memory and consciousness (and even subconsciousness), since the lack of interaction on one of the sides significantly reduces the potential for information richness. In other words, through Mandala's services, Egan's characters do not truly communicate – they rather experience each other's minds on a screen.

Postmodern Condition in the Digital Era —And How to Elude It

It has been previously established that Jennifer Egan is a writer dominantly concerned with the postmodern world and contemporary society. O'Riordan and Rouverol note that the "concept of contemporaneity [is] crucial to a critical understanding of Egan's work" (O'Riordan & Rouverol 2021: 142). She observes, describes, and criticizes both the world she sees around her and the world she foresees in the future if the current trends of contemporary social interaction proceed unchanged. Moreover, various (although not numerous, as Egan's work remains scandalously underdiscussed in academic circles) critics agree that what dominates her fiction is a "concern with affect, transformation, (dis)location, and temporality in terms of how her work relates to and engages with societal transformation in an increasingly technologized world" (O'Riordan & Rouverol 2021: 143).

The Candy House marks a notable transformation, especially when discussed in relation to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the novel's natural precursor. The rapid shift towards the technological is notable and frightening, especially because it is eerily similar to the rapid rise of AI in the present era. Egan's futuristic world seems a logical extension of the reality we live in, which marks the technological takeover of the previously humanly held spheres, such as direct communication. This is not to say that mass media, even when cutting-edge and futuristic as in *The Candy House*, are something entirely novel to human civilization, especially the Western one. However, as Fladager notes, in her works, we are "exposed to the surprising ways technologies can be reconfigured to humanistic ends" (313) especially in the way they corrupt the existing patterns and strategies of our social existence. In her latest novel, even the common practice,

such as playing D&D, becomes reflective of the chilling possibilities of technological advancement, as it echoes the inauthenticity of people's avatars online, the practice of performing one's identity for the online audience. What Fladager calls the "lived experiences" in the traditional sense take place within the digital, as it becomes a "crucial site of human relationships" (317-319). Thus, the digital announces its takeover of traditionally direct, interpersonal domains of human interaction, reducing people to passive participants, even human shells.

However, this is not to say that Egan's view of the future is entirely pessimistic. Arguably, her more positive, albeit comical and ironic, flashes of the world to be occasionally shine through characters who establish themselves as a counterculture to the dominant one. The previously mentioned non-profit Mondrian is one such example, although they operate within the digital. They provide people with an opportunity to escape virtual, online existence and protect their privacy. Furthermore, there is a group socially proclaimed as eluders, who are people refusing to join Mandala's hyperreality and use its services. It is notable that Bix Bouton, the very founder of Mandala is one of them – he refuses to upload his consciousness to the collective, for unknown and unspecified reasons. In a more comical twist, another eluder is Alfred Hollander, who seeks authenticity by disrupting social patterns of behavior and taking such countercultural activities to the extremes (he wears a paper bag over his head at public gatherings to protect his privacy, yells and acts out in public, so as to become unpleasant for one's memory or to present himself as a non-enticing content for one's future consciousness tape). Chris Salazar and Miranda Kline also remain elusive, even though they appear in someone else's memories, but they both refuse to participate in Mandala's hyperreality on their own. In other words, Egan does allow hope that it is possible to live outside of the media hyperreality, even if it is slight and occasionally chaotic.

Finally, in terms of DeLillo's essay "In the Ruins of the Future," Egan's novel represents the very embodiment of what DeLillo meant when he identified the internet as a counternarrative "shaped in part by rumour, fantasy and mystical reverberation" (DeLillo 2001: 4). In *The Candy House*, all examples of mass media, but especially those under Mandala's scope, prove to be based on individual subjective stories and interpretations, thoughts, and beliefs, no more plausible and believable than regularly communicated memory. The reliability of people's consciousness and subconsciousness is disregarded in the novel, which makes it that more ironic, since a large number of characters search for truth in the domain constructed of what are essentially people's impressions of the world. The aspect that does raise concern about the future influence of such media is reflected in the fact that very few characters consider the effect these have on their lives and civilization, and even fewer do so constructively. Rather than that, much like in DeLillo's novels, characters surrender to the novel media experience as to a higher force, almost religiously omnipotent, accepting the new circumstances without critically approaching them.

> "To hell with God," Fern said. "I'm worried about the Internet."
> "By which you mean an all-seeing, all-knowing entity that may be predicting and controlling your behavior, even when you think you're choosing for yourself?" Eamon asked with a sly glance at Rebecca. (Egan 2022: 15-16)

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