



Disconnected Connections: Technology, Alienation, And The Postmodern Experience In Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From The Goon Squad*.

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Abstract

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* offers a compelling exploration of disconnection in the digital age. This paper examines the intersections of technology, alienation, and the postmodern experience in the novel, focusing on how Egan critiques the impact of technological advancements on human relationships and identity. Employing fragmented narrative structures and temporal shifts, the novel mirrors the fractured nature of contemporary existence. This study engages with postmodern theory to analyze the alienating effects of technology and the cultural dislocation depicted in the text, offering a commentary on the paradox of connectivity in an increasingly digitalized world.

Keywords: technology, alienation, postmodernism, fragmentation, digital age, disconnection.

The rise of digital technology has transformed human interactions, fostering a paradoxical blend of connectivity and alienation. Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* captures this dynamic, portraying characters grappling with fractured relationships and the fleeting nature of identity in a hyper-connected world. The novel's fragmented narrative structure and nonlinear timeline reflect the disjointed experiences of modern life, aligning it with postmodern literary traditions. This paper explores how Egan employs these techniques to critique the alienating effects of technology while addressing broader cultural and existential concerns.

Jennifer Egan's life and career offer context for the themes explored in her work. Raised in San Francisco and educated at the University of Pennsylvania and Cambridge, Egan's early travels inspired her debut novel, *The Invisible Circus*, and her short story collection, *Emerald City*. Her journalistic pursuits,

including award-winning essays on homelessness and mental health, reflect her deep engagement with societal issues, which permeate her fiction. Jennifer Egan rose to prominence with her critically acclaimed novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which earned her widespread recognition. The book received several prestigious awards in 2011, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics' Circle Award, and the LA Times Book Prize. Additionally, Egan's nomination for a National Book Award and the widespread acclaim for *Goon Squad*, solidify her reputation as a bold, inventive storyteller.

Egan's ability to intertwine deeply personal narratives with broader cultural reflections creates a kaleidoscopic portrayal of the human condition, making *A Visit from the Goon Squad* a landmark work in contemporary literature. The novel presents technology as both a tool for connection and a catalyst for alienation. It explores memory, kinship, time, and the nature of narrative, presenting a unique structure that defies traditional genre boundaries. Neither a straightforward novel nor a typical collection of short stories, it operates as a hybrid of interconnected chapters, each focusing on different characters at various points in their lives. These individual narratives weave together to form a complex, symphonic work that delves into human relationships and the fragmented yet interconnected nature of existence. Egan "pieces together bits and pieces of narrative" into a cohesive whole, despite the narrative's shifts in time, space, and subject matter (Coward 252).

With its thirteen interconnected chapters, each with a distinct protagonist, tone, and style, the book constructs a narrative that is as much about its characters as it is about the forces shaping their lives. Unlike a short story collection, these chapters form a unified story about time, technology, and the music industry, with Benny Salazar, a music producer, and Sasha, his assistant, at its core. Radiating outward from their lives, the narrative spans decades, exploring the evolution of society and culture, particularly the ways technology shapes art and human connection.

Egan's depiction of the music industry serves as a microcosm for examining the broader societal shifts brought about by technology. Benny Salazar, a relic of the rock'n'roll era, laments the loss of authenticity in music. "The problem is it's not about sound anymore. It's not about music," (Egan 103) he vents, reflecting the industry's transformation from a symbol of rebellion and individuality to a business driven by algorithms and profits. In the futuristic 2020s envisioned by Egan, music becomes a fad, its value determined not by artistry but by social media hype. Scotty Hausmann, one of Benny's friends, achieves overnight fame not through talent but through an elaborate campaign orchestrated by social media influencers, or "parrots." These hired voices promote Scotty's concert, convincing the public of his greatness without any actual evidence.

The scenario is eerily prescient. In today's world, social media algorithms and targeted advertisements dominate the music industry, shaping public tastes and preferences. Record labels and artists can manipulate audiences by tailoring ads to specific demographics, creating viral sensations overnight. Egan's portrayal of this phenomenon underscores a disturbing reality: individual taste often succumbs to corporate interests. In this environment, art risks losing its soul, becoming another commodity in the marketplace of ideas.

The music industry serves as a central thread connecting the characters and their experiences. Lou, a hedonistic music producer in the 1970s, mentors Bennie, a young bassist who later becomes a music executive. Bennie, in turn, hires Sasha, whose kleptomania and personal struggles reflect the inner turmoil many characters experience. The web of connections extends further: Sasha has a fleeting relationship with Alex, who later collaborates with Bennie to revive the career of a washed-up musician. Other threads include Bennie's wife, her journalist brother, and a publicist embroiled in scandals and redemption arcs. These interlocking stories exemplify the novel's theme of interconnected lives.

Beyond its critique of the music industry, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* explores the impact of technology on politics and democracy. Egan envisions a future where words like "American" and "democracy" are reduced to hollow symbols, manipulated by those in power. As Bosco remarks, "...American. It doesn't mean anything anymore. Just some brand for you to sell things" (Egan 127). In her 2020s, elections are no longer about policies or ideals but about financial influence and subliminal advertising. This is evident in Alex's observation that "They said the pulses were meant to create good feeling, a sense of safety, but it's hard not to feel like it was just more marketing" (145). Such dystopian visions mirror real-world concerns, such as the alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the growing role of social media in shaping political discourse. Egan underscores the pervasive influence of technology, warning, through Alex's perspective, "Everything we know about ourselves has been calculated for us" (153). Technology, as Egan suggests, has the power to subvert democratic processes, turning elections into battles of wealth and marketing.

At the heart of the novel lies a preoccupation with time—its passage, its distortions, and its consequences. Egan's narrative does not proceed linearly but leaps across fifty years, moving between the 1970s and a speculative version of the 2020s. Time becomes more than a backdrop; it emerges as a character in its own right, constantly reshaping lives and relationships. Benny's declaration, "Time's a goon, right?" (Egan 127) underscores the novel's central idea: time is both an antagonist and a force of transformation. The title's "goon squad" does not reference mobsters; it symbolizes the relentless force of time. The narrative reveals how time influences and shapes its characters, often with unexpected outcomes. Egan's masterful storytelling portrays lives as shaped by circumstances, relationships, and moments of human frailty, emphasizing how time, much like the people around us, has the power to transform and disrupt.

As the narrative jumps across decades, readers witness the effects of time on individuals, the music industry, and technology, highlighting the inevitability of change and the struggle to find meaning within it. The narrative structure of *Goon Squad* moves fluidly across decades and continents, highlighting characters at different stages of their lives. Punk teenagers in 1970s San Francisco evolve into disenchanted adults in the New York suburbs of the 1990s, while their children navigate a slightly dystopian future in the California desert. A significant event—a concert at "The Footprint," built on the site of the former Twin Towers—anchors one chapter in the 2020s. This fluidity between past, present, and future reinforces the book's meditation on time and its impact on identity.

Postmodernism thrives on fragmentation, self-reflexivity, and a questioning of grand narratives. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* embodies these characteristics through its fragmented structure and temporal shifts. Each chapter functions as a standalone story, yet collectively they reveal an intricate web of interconnected lives.

Egan's nonlinear timeline mirrors the fragmented reality of postmodern existence, where individuals often struggle to find coherence in their lives. Bennie Salazar's reflection on his youth juxtaposes the vibrant promise of the punk rock era with the disillusionment of his present life. The narrative's refusal to adhere to chronological order reflects the fluidity of memory and the difficulty of reconciling past and present in a postmodern world.

Fredric Jameson's theory of "waning of affect" provides a useful framework for understanding the emotional detachment prevalent in the novel. Characters like Bennie and Sasha exhibit a muted emotional response to their circumstances, indicative of the postmodern condition where technological saturation dulls authentic emotional engagement (Jameson 16). Egan critiques the commodification of human experience in the digital age. Through characters like Bennie, a music producer disillusioned with the industry's decline, the novel examines the loss of authenticity in art and human interaction. Bennie's longing for the raw energy of punk rock contrasts with the commercialized, formulaic music of the present, symbolizing broader societal shifts. Sasha's kleptomania serves as a metaphor for the emptiness that technology fails to fill. Her inability to form genuine connections reflects the novel's broader commentary on the superficial nature of digital communication.

Moreover, the futuristic chapter "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" encapsulates the alienating effects of over-reliance on technology. Presented as a PowerPoint, this chapter underscores the fragmentation of human communication in the digital age. Alison's relationship with her brother and parents is mediated through technology, highlighting the lack of direct, meaningful interaction. The format itself—visual, non-linear, and depersonalized—mimics the digital experience, underscoring its impact on human relationships. This unconventional approach captures the gaps between words and meanings, reflecting the fragmented nature of human communication and familial relationships. The PowerPoint format becomes an evocative metaphor for the spaces between people, emphasizing disconnection in an age of digital communication.

The chapter "Selling the General" highlights the manipulation of perception in the digital era. Dolly's efforts to rehabilitate the image of a dictator underscore how technology and media are used to construct and distort reality. This manipulation extends to personal identities, as characters curate versions of themselves that are often at odds with their true selves.

From a New Historicist perspective, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* reflects the cultural anxieties of its time. The novel captures the paradox of increased connectivity leading to heightened isolation, a phenomenon rooted in the digital transformation of society. This paradox is evident in Lou Kline's relationships, where power dynamics and technological mediation strip interactions of authenticity.

Alison's PowerPoint chapter exemplifies this paradox, where family bonds are mediated through digital presentations rather than direct dialogue. By framing these dynamics within a futuristic setting, Egan critiques the direction of societal progress, inviting readers to reflect on their own digital dependencies.

The temporal shifts in Egan's narrative highlight the disjointed nature of modern existence. Characters like Sasha, Bennie, and Lou navigate fragmented timelines that mirror their fractured identities. Time operates as a "goon squad," an inevitable force that disrupts lives and relationships. The book's final chapter imagines a future shaped by technology, where language devolves into text-speak, reflecting a world where even communication succumbs to alienation. Phrases like "if thr r children, thr mst b a fUtr, rt?" (Egan 276) convey a chilling sense of cultural and linguistic decay.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity is particularly relevant here. Ricoeur argues that identity is constructed through storytelling, but Egan's fragmented narrative undermines this coherence, reflecting the challenges of maintaining a stable sense of self in a postmodern, technologically saturated world (Ricoeur 31).

Yet, despite its critiques, the novel offers a glimmer of hope. In the final chapter, Scotty Hausmann's concert, while initially gaining attention through social media, ultimately triumphs due to the intrinsic power of the music rather than the surrounding hype. The crowd gathered to hear Scotty is moved by the raw emotion of his "ballads of paranoia and disconnection" (321). Egan reminds us that while technology may disrupt and divide, art retains the power to transcend these barriers, reconnecting us to our shared humanity.

This message is echoed in one of the novel's most poignant moments, when Bennie reflects on the pauses in songs and their emotional resonance. He explains, "The pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn't really over, so you're relieved. But then the song does actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL." (271). His fascination with the pauses reflects a universal human desire to cling to hope, to believe that endings are not final, that renewal is possible.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan crafts a story that is both a critique of modern society and a celebration of its resilience. Through its exploration of time, technology, and art, the novel captures the complexities of contemporary life, offering a reminder that even in an era of disconnection and commodification, the song is not over. We must keep listening, waiting for it to start again.

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* offers an insightful examination of the sense of disconnection that characterizes life in the digital era. Through its fragmented structure, temporal shifts, and diverse perspectives, the novel critiques the alienating effects of technology and the postmodern condition. While *Goon Squad* is organized around discontinuity, it also emphasizes underlying connections. Egan's characters collide, scatter, and recombine in a manner that feels both chaotic and deliberate, reflecting the butterfly effect of human interactions. Recurrence becomes a motif, as characters' choices ripple across time, influencing others in ways both profound and subtle. This cyclical vision of history suggests that connectedness, rather than coincidence, shapes our lives. At its core, the book examines survival and self-destruction in the face of time's inexorable march. It offers a poignant meditation on growing up and growing

old in the digital age. Egan's work serves as both a reflection of and a commentary on contemporary society, urging readers to confront the paradoxes of connection and isolation that define the modern experience.

Works Cited

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