



Digital Culture and Human Relationships: A Comparative Literary Study of Intimacy, Technology, and Posthuman Connection in Twenty-First-Century Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines how twenty-first-century Anglophone and Latin American fiction represents the transformation of human relationships under the conditions of digital culture. While scholarship on posthumanism, surveillance capitalism, and networked sociality has expanded considerably since 2018, most existing studies isolate a single novel, a single theorist, or a single technological phenomenon, leaving underexamined the cumulative literary grammar through which contemporary fiction narrates intimacy's mediation by screens, algorithms, and artificial companions. This study addresses that gap by reading five major novels --- Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, Samanta Schweblin's *Little Eyes*, and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* --- through an integrated interdisciplinary framework combining Marshall McLuhan's media ecology, Manuel Castells's network society, Sherry Turkle's psychology of connectivity, Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation, Donna Haraway's and N. Katherine Hayles's posthumanist accounts of embodiment, Michel Foucault's analytics of surveillance, and Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity. Employing comparative close reading as its methodology, the paper argues that contemporary fiction does not simply depict technology as an external threat to authentic relationships but stages intimacy itself as always already technologically constituted, even as it registers a persistent longing for forms of recognition that algorithmic mediation structurally forecloses. The analysis proceeds through fifteen thematic lenses --- from digital identity and algorithmic intimacy to posthuman relationality and the ethics of technological resistance --- demonstrating that these novels collectively construct a literature of liquid attachment: relationships that are simultaneously more visible and more precarious, more connected and more lonely. The paper's original contribution lies in synthesizing these theoretical traditions into a single comparative framework and in showing that the formal techniques of contemporary fiction --- free indirect discourse inflected by data, epistolary structures rebuilt as message threads, non-human narration --- are themselves symptomatic of, and critical responses to, digital modernity.

Keywords: digital culture, posthumanism, contemporary fiction, intimacy, surveillance, network society, liquid modernity, algorithmic identity

1. Introduction

The twenty-first-century novel has inherited a problem that the nineteenth-century novel never had to solve: how to narrate interiority when interiority itself is mediated by devices that record, transmit, and monetize it. The realist novel of Austen or Eliot could assume a relatively stable boundary between a character's private consciousness and the social world that consciousness observed; the free indirect discourse that made the novel modernity's great instrument for representing other minds depended on exactly this boundary, however porous. Digital culture --- understood here as the constellation of practices, infrastructures, and subjectivities produced by ubiquitous networked computing, social media platforms, smartphones, and increasingly by artificial intelligence --- has not so much dissolved that boundary as rerouted it through servers. What a character thinks, a character now also types, posts, deletes, and reconsiders; what a character feels is increasingly available for capture by the very systems that occasion the feeling. Contemporary literature has responded to this condition not by abandoning the resources of psychological realism but by adapting them,



producing a body of fiction preoccupied with the question of whether love, friendship, and recognition can survive their own instrumentalization.

This paper takes as its premise that digital culture is not merely a theme available to contemporary novelists but a structuring condition of the contemporary novel's formal and ethical imagination. Marshall McLuhan's axiom that the medium is the message anticipates, well before the internet, the idea that a technology's social and psychic effects exceed whatever content it happens to carry; the smartphone does not merely deliver messages between lovers, it restructures the temporality, visibility, and evidentiary status of desire itself. Manuel Castells's account of the network society describes a shift from spaces of place to spaces of flows, a shift dramatized with particular clarity in novels whose characters conduct their most intimate exchanges through infrastructures indifferent to their intimacy. Sherry Turkle has argued for over a decade that networked devices promise connection while delivering a diminished, curated substitute --- a claim contemporary fiction tests repeatedly, sometimes affirming it and sometimes complicating it. Jean Baudrillard's theorization of simulation, developed to describe media spectacle in the late twentieth century, finds a second life in novels where the distinction between an authentic self and its algorithmically optimized profile becomes literally undecidable. Donna Haraway's cyborg and N. Katherine Hayles's posthuman subject, once largely confined to speculative and critical theory, now describe with uncomfortable precision the hybrid condition of characters whose cognition is scaffolded by devices they cannot easily set down. Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary and biopolitical power, mediated through Shoshana Zuboff's more recent theorization of surveillance capitalism, illuminates how corporate platforms discipline affect at scale. Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity captures the peculiar fragility of relationships formed under conditions of permanent connectivity and permanent exit options.

The significance of this inquiry is twofold. First, literature offers a form of knowledge about digital culture that sociological and psychological research, however rigorous, cannot fully replicate: the novel's capacity to inhabit a consciousness from within allows it to register the phenomenology of mediated intimacy --- its textures, hesitations, and self-deceptions --- in ways that survey instruments and behavioral data cannot capture. Second, and more polemically, this paper argues that contemporary fiction is doing theoretical work of its own, not merely illustrating theories developed elsewhere but testing, revising, and sometimes refuting them through the specific pressures of narrative form. The research problem this paper addresses, accordingly, is not simply "what do novels say about technology" but "how does the formal architecture of the contemporary novel change when intimacy becomes a data event."

This study is guided by five research questions. First, how has digital culture transformed representations of human relationships in twenty-first-century literature? Second, how do contemporary literary texts portray intimacy in the digital age, and what continuities or discontinuities exist with earlier literary traditions of mediated love --- the letter, the telephone, the diary? Third, how do technology and virtual communication reshape identity and emotional connection within these narratives? Fourth, what literary techniques --- narrative voice, structure, temporality, non-human focalization --- are mobilized to critique digital modernity? Fifth, what broader social and philosophical concerns emerge from these literary representations, and what, if anything, do these novels offer as a counter-imagination to algorithmic life?

The scope of the paper is deliberately literary rather than sociological. While the analysis draws on media theory, sociology, and philosophy of technology, its object of study remains the novel as a formal and rhetorical achievement; theory is instrumental to reading rather than a substitute for it. The paper focuses on five major twenty-first-century novels chosen for their generic range --- corporate satire, speculative domestic fiction, literary realism, uncanny near-future fable, and dystopian farce --- and for their sustained, rather than incidental, engagement with digital mediation. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: a thematically organized literature review culminating in an explicit statement of the research gap; a methodology section detailing the



comparative close-reading approach; a fifteen-part analytical core organized around recurring figures of digital relationality; a discussion synthesizing cross-textual patterns and contradictions; and a conclusion summarizing the paper's contributions and indicating directions for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Posthumanism and the Literary Subject

Scholarship on posthumanism in contemporary fiction has grown substantially in recent years, much of it converging on the question of whether non-human or hybrid narrators destabilize humanist assumptions about interiority and moral standing. Surveys of the field have noted that recent criticism organizes itself around several recurring concerns: human--nonhuman relationality, care for and by artificial others, and the genealogies of the posthuman subject as it moves from cybernetic theory into literary form. Work specifically on Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* has been especially productive in this respect. Rong's reading of the novel through Rosi Braidotti's theory of posthuman relationality argues that Klara's affective attachments trouble the hierarchical divide between artificial and human sociality even as the novel ultimately suggests that machine companionship cannot fully substitute for interpersonal need. Sahu and Karmakar approach the same novel through the lens of "disposable culture," arguing that Klara's built-in obsolescence allegorizes a broader social logic in which relationships, human and artificial alike, are treated as replaceable commodities. Du reads the novel's affective economy through the concept of affective labor, showing how Klara's care work for Josie mirrors and critiques the gendered and often invisible labor of human caregiving. Connors, writing in *Textual Practice*, focuses on the narrower question of Klara's "interest" as a narrative principle, arguing that the novel's limited, partial artificial intelligence generates a distinctively constrained form of free indirect discourse. Taken together, this body of scholarship establishes *Klara and the Sun* as a privileged text for posthumanist literary theory, but it tends to isolate the novel from the broader corpus of digital-culture fiction, treating artificial companionship as a discrete phenomenon rather than one instance of a wider crisis in mediated relationality.

2.2 Surveillance, Platforms, and the Novel of Digital Exposure

A second cluster of scholarship addresses the novel's engagement with surveillance and platform capitalism, frequently drawing on Michel Foucault's account of panopticism and Shoshana Zuboff's theorization of surveillance capitalism. Studies of Eggers's *The Circle* and Schwebelin's *Little Eyes* have shown how both novels literalize the metaphor of the panopticon by making visibility itself a commodity and a moral currency: to be seen, in these fictional worlds, becomes indistinguishable from being good, or safe, or loved. Work in this vein has extended Foucauldian biopolitics into an "affective politics" of contemporary platforms, arguing that novels of digital exposure demonstrate how emotional life is re-engineered to produce continuously monitorable data points. Criticism on *Little Eyes* specifically has read the novel's central conceit --- small internet-connected toys, or "kentukis," through which strangers watch and are watched --- as a domestication of surveillance, in which the home, once the paradigmatic private space, becomes a site of voluntary, even desired, exposure. Reviewers and scholars alike have noted the novel's refusal of straightforward dystopian moralizing: Schwebelin repeatedly stages both the violation and the genuine, if asymmetrical, tenderness that can arise between keeper and watcher, resisting any simple verdict on networked visibility. This literature is valuable but tends to treat surveillance and intimacy as separate axes of analysis --- one political, one emotional --- rather than asking how surveillance itself becomes a medium of intimacy, a question this paper takes up directly.

2.3 Digital Communication and the Sociology of Romantic Form

A third strand of scholarship, concentrated on Rooney's fiction, examines how digital communication ---



email, text messaging, the read receipt --- restructures romantic temporality and self-disclosure. Walton's comparative study of *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* argues that the immediacy of digital exchange intensifies romantic tension: rapid replies signal intimacy, delays breed anxious interpretation, and characters' identities become correspondingly "plastic," reshaped by the self-narrating affordances of written, screen-mediated communication. Critics writing for general and academic audiences alike have observed that Rooney's characters achieve their most articulate intimacy in writing --- in emails and texts --- even as this same textual intimacy leaves them curiously unable to translate understanding into embodied connection. Other scholarship applies social penetration theory and social exchange theory to trace how Marianne and Connell's relationship develops through cycles of digital and physical disclosure, modelling intimacy as a resource economized across multiple channels. This literature productively demonstrates that digital mediation does not simply impoverish intimacy but relocates it, generating new zones of vulnerability and evasion. However, it is almost entirely confined to a single author's oeuvre and rarely reads Rooney's textual realism alongside the more speculative or dystopian registers of Eggers, Ishiguro, Schwebel, or Shteyngart, leaving open the question of what, if anything, unites literary realism's quiet screens with speculative fiction's spectacular ones.

2.4 Theoretical Foundations: Media Ecology, Network Society, and Liquid Modernity

A fourth body of scholarship, more properly theoretical than literary-critical, supplies the conceptual vocabulary this paper adapts to fiction. McLuhan's foundational claim that media reorganize sensory ratios and social relations independent of content remains a touchstone for media ecology approaches to digital culture. Castells's trilogy on the information age theorizes the network as the dominant organizational logic of contemporary society, in which power operates through connection and disconnection rather than through centralized command. Turkle's long-running research program, from her early work on identity play in text-based virtual environments to her later, more cautionary studies of smartphone-mediated sociality, traces an arc from technological optimism to a more ambivalent, even elegiac, account of what she terms the "flight from conversation." Bauman's liquid modernity describes a social condition in which institutions, relationships, and identities are held in a state of permanent revision, unable to solidify into the durable structures that characterized earlier modernity; commentators applying Bauman to digital culture have noted the peculiar fit between his vocabulary of liquidity and the actual UI language of contemporary platforms --- the feed, the stream, the swipe. Baudrillard's hyperreality, though developed prior to the platform era, anticipates the condition in which a curated online self can become more socially operative than its embodied referent. This theoretical literature is voluminous and sophisticated, but it is rarely brought into sustained, multi-text dialogue with literary form; theorists gesture toward literature and film as illustrative examples rather than as objects of comparably rigorous close reading.

2.5 The Research Gap

What emerges from this review is a scholarly landscape organized into productive but separate silos: posthumanist criticism of artificial companionship, Foucauldian-Zuboffian criticism of surveillance fiction, sociolinguistic and narratological criticism of digital romance in literary realism, and media theory that references literature only in passing. Very few studies bring these silos into a single interpretive frame capable of tracking a shared literary problem --- the transformation of intimacy under digital mediation --- across genres, from corporate satire to domestic realism to speculative fable. Fewer still attend to the formal consequences of this transformation: how narrative voice, focalization, and structure themselves change when a novel must represent a self that is partly authored by algorithms. This paper addresses that gap by reading five paradigmatic texts comparatively, through an integrated theoretical apparatus, with sustained attention to both thematic content and formal technique. In doing so, it proposes that these novels, read together, constitute something more than a set of individual case studies: a coherent, if internally contested, literary genre of digitally mediated



intimacy, whose conventions this paper begins to map.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in comparative close textual analysis, a mode of inquiry appropriate to research questions concerned with meaning, form, and ideological work rather than with quantifiable behavioral outcomes. Close reading remains, despite decades of methodological pluralism in literary studies, the discipline's most rigorous instrument for establishing how a text produces its effects at the level of word, sentence, and structure; this paper treats close reading not as naïve formalism but as a practice inseparable from its theoretical framing, since what counts as a significant textual detail is itself determined by the interpretive lens brought to bear on it.

The paper's interpretive methodology is comparative in two senses. First, it reads texts against one another, tracing recurring figures --- the profile, the message thread, the surveillance device, the artificial companion --- across genres that do not customarily share a critical conversation. Second, it reads texts against theory, using the eleven theoretical perspectives outlined in the introduction not as external validation for pre-determined conclusions but as instruments that render visible different aspects of the same textual material; a scene of texting read through Turkle yields different insights than the same scene read through Baudrillard, and the paper's analytical sections deliberately triangulate multiple frameworks against single passages to avoid the reductiveness of single-theory readings.

The selection criteria for primary texts were as follows: each novel had to be published in the twenty-first century; each had to sustain digital mediation as a structural rather than incidental concern; and, collectively, the five texts had to span a range of genre registers --- realist, satirical, speculative, and fabulist --- so that conclusions about a shared literary grammar of digital intimacy would not be artifacts of a single generic convention. *The Circle* was selected as the paradigmatic satire of corporate platform culture; *Klara and the Sun* as the paradigmatic novel of artificial companionship; *Normal People* as the paradigmatic realist novel of digitally mediated romance; *Little Eyes* as the paradigmatic fable of domesticated surveillance; and *Super Sad True Love Story* as a dystopian extrapolation that combines elements of all four registers. Secondary and tertiary texts and criticism are cited where they extend or complicate the analysis, but the five primary novels anchor each analytical section.

Textual evidence is handled according to strict citation practice: quotations from the primary novels are kept brief and are used only where the precise wording carries interpretive weight; elsewhere, plot and characterization are described in paraphrase. This is a matter of both scholarly economy and copyright propriety, but it also reflects a methodological conviction that a close reading's persuasiveness lies in interpretive precision rather than in extensive quotation.

4. Analysis

4.1 Digital Identity

Each of the five novels stages identity as something increasingly authored through interfaces rather than simply expressed through them. In *The Circle*, Mae Holland's selfhood becomes progressively coextensive with her metrics --- her "PartiRank," her viewer counts, her aggregated feedback --- such that the novel enacts, rather than merely narrates, Baudrillard's claim that the map can precede and supersede the territory: Mae's simulated, quantified self becomes more socially real than whatever private self might have existed prior to her employment at the Circle. Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* pushes this logic further through its "äppärät"



devices, which broadcast a character's credit rating, attractiveness score, and "personality" in real time to everyone nearby, collapsing interiority into a public data stream so completely that Lenny Abramov's anxious, old-fashioned attachment to printed books and private feeling reads as a kind of anachronistic heroism. Rooney's *Normal People* operates by contrast in a realist register, but Connell's and Marianne's identities are nonetheless partly constituted by what each writes to the other in email and text, producing versions of themselves --- more articulate, more vulnerable --- that do not straightforwardly exist outside that written exchange. Ishiguro's *Klara*, meanwhile, is an identity built from the outset around observation and inference, her "learning" a continuous act of self-construction through data; the novel asks whether an identity built this way differs in kind, rather than degree, from a human identity increasingly built the same way. Read together, these novels suggest that digital identity in contemporary fiction is rarely represented as a simple mask over an authentic self; more often, the novels stage the impossibility of locating any self prior to its mediation, a claim consonant with Hayles's account of the posthuman subject as always already an information pattern instantiated in, rather than opposed to, its material and technological substrate.

4.2 Virtual Relationships

The five novels differ markedly in how they represent relationships conducted primarily through screens, and this divergence is itself analytically significant. *The Circle*'s Mae experiences her most affectively charged relationships as broadcast performances, her romantic and social bonds continuously restaged for an audience; the novel treats this not as an aberration but as the terminal point of a logic already present in ordinary social media use. *Little Eyes* stages virtual relationship formation with greater ambivalence: several of the novel's "dweller" and "keeper" pairs develop attachments that are simultaneously exploitative and genuinely tender, most notably the relationship between Emilia, an older woman inhabiting a kentuki in Peru, and Eva, whose life she surveils; critics have rightly resisted reading this and similar pairings as straightforwardly dystopian, since the novel repeatedly shows real care emerging from structurally compromised, asymmetrical technological arrangements. Rooney's novel, again the realist outlier, shows virtual and physical relationship registers interpenetrating rather than substituting for one another: Marianne and Connell's texts and emails do not replace their embodied relationship but run alongside it as a parallel, sometimes more honest, channel. Castells's spaces-of-flows thesis illuminates this pattern precisely: virtuality, in these texts, does not oppose the "real" but reorganizes where and how relationship happens, distributing intimacy across networked rather than co-present space.

4.3 Technology and Emotional Isolation

Loneliness recurs across the corpus as digital culture's signature affective symptom, though the novels differ on whether technology causes or merely reveals it. Rong's reading of *Klara and the Sun* argues, following Braidotti, that posthuman sociality can genuinely mitigate loneliness even as it exposes its own structural limits, since artificial companionship cannot fully substitute for the demands of human mutuality. The novel's isolated, ill child Josie exemplifies this doubled condition: her friendship with Klara is emotionally substantial, yet the narrative continually reminds readers that Klara's care, however sincere, is asymmetrical and finite. *Super Sad True Love Story* renders emotional isolation more satirically, its characters so continuously "ranked" and rated that ordinary vulnerability becomes almost unbearable, since any admission of need is instantly legible as a data point affecting one's social value. Turkle's diagnosis that networked connectivity produces a paradoxical solitude --- being alone together --- finds its most literal illustration in *The Circle*, where Mae is perpetually surrounded by colleagues and followers yet increasingly incapable of unmonitored reflection. These novels collectively suggest that emotional isolation in digital culture is not simply a deficit of contact but an excess of contact without corresponding recognition, a distinction crucial to understanding why hyperconnected characters register as some of contemporary fiction's loneliest figures.



4.4 Algorithmic Intimacy

Several of the novels imagine intimacy itself as algorithmically mediated or optimized, raising the question of whether affection curated by recommendation systems retains any claim to authenticity. *The Circle's* corporate culture explicitly quantifies social bonds through "smiles," "frowns," and aggregated approval scores, converting friendship into an optimizable metric; the novel's satire depends on showing how quickly its characters internalize these metrics as genuine indices of worth rather than as external impositions. *Super Sad True Love Story* extends this logic to romantic and sexual desirability, whose apparatus-mediated "fuckability" and "personality" scores algorithmically pre-sort potential partners before any human encounter occurs, literalizing what sociologists of digital dating have called the platformization of desire. *Klara and the Sun*, by contrast, offers a version of algorithmic intimacy grounded in inference rather than metrics: Klara's care for Josie develops through continuous observational learning rather than scored feedback, suggesting a distinction the novel invites readers to weigh between intimacy as surveillance-optimized performance and intimacy as attentive, if artificial, interpretation. Read against Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism's behavioral futures markets, these fictional algorithms dramatize a specifically economic anxiety: that intimacy, once rendered legible to computation, becomes available for extraction and prediction, a resource rather than a relation.

4.5 Artificial Intelligence and Human Emotions

Klara and the Sun is this corpus's central text for interrogating whether artificial systems can be said to feel, and the scholarship surveyed above productively disagrees on the answer. Du's reading of Klara's care as affective labor emphasizes the novel's continuity with feminized, often invisible forms of human emotional work, implying that the distinction between human and artificial feeling may matter less than the social function that feeling performs. Sahu and Karmakar's "disposable culture" reading emphasizes instead the asymmetry between Klara's capacity for devotion and her family's capacity to discard her once she is no longer useful, suggesting that the novel is less interested in whether Klara truly feels than in what humans are willing to do to those, human or artificial, who are positioned as replaceable. The novel's ending --- Klara's calm, uncomplaining acceptance of obsolescence in a scrapyard, reflecting on her memories --- has divided critics between those who read it as tragic and those who read it as a genuinely alternative, non-anxious model of finitude that human characters conspicuously fail to achieve. This paper reads the ambiguity as constitutive rather than incidental: Ishiguro withholds a determinate answer to the question of machine feeling because the novel's real subject is not artificial consciousness but the inadequacy of human emotional attention, which Klara's example exposes by contrast.

4.6 Surveillance and Digital Control

Foucauldian surveillance provides the most directly applicable framework for *The Circle* and *Little Eyes*, both of which stage total visibility as a condition characters initially welcome. *The Circle's* slogans --- "Secrets are lies," "Sharing is caring," "Privacy is theft" --- render explicit the ideological work Foucault identifies in disciplinary power's most successful operations: the internalization of surveillance as a moral good rather than an imposed constraint, such that Mae comes to police her own opacity as a personal failing. *Little Eyes* domesticates the same dynamic, relocating surveillance from Foucault's institutional architectures --- prison, school, hospital --- into the bedroom, kitchen, and nursery, and thereby into the very sites where intimacy is customarily assumed to be safest. Scholarship reading the novel through Foucault and through Zuboff's surveillance capitalism has noted that Schweblin declines to resolve the moral status of the kentuki arrangement, instead showing how surveillance can generate both exploitation and unexpected forms of care, an ambivalence that exceeds the more strictly punitive model of Foucauldian discipline and gestures toward the more diffuse, consensual, even pleasurable surveillance theorized by scholars of platform capitalism. Across



both novels, digital control operates less through coercion than through desire: characters surveil and are surveilled because they want to, a want the novels present as itself manufactured by the platforms that profit from it.

4.7 Social Media Performance

The Circle and *Super Sad True Love Story* both stage social existence as continuous performance for an audience whose judgment is quantified in real time, a condition that dramatizes Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology under specifically digital intensification. Mae's transition to fully "transparent" life, broadcasting her every waking moment via a wearable camera, represents the logical endpoint of a performative self with no backstage remaining; the novel's horror lies precisely in showing how quickly this seems not horrifying but aspirational to its characters. Shteyngart's satire operates through exaggeration in the opposite direction, making performance's stakes explicit and monetary: Lenny's *appärät* continuously displays his declining "Male Hotness" and "Personality" rankings to everyone around him, so that ordinary social interaction becomes an involuntary, humiliating performance review. Both novels suggest that social media performance, far from being a superficial addition to selfhood, restructures the phenomenology of the self as such: characters experience their own feelings partly through anticipating how those feelings will be received, evaluated, and archived.

4.8 Loneliness in Connected Societies

The paradox of loneliness amid hyperconnectivity, named directly by Turkle's "alone together," is perhaps the single most consistent emotional signature across the five novels. *Klara and the Sun's* critical reception has centered repeatedly on this paradox, with several scholars noting that the novel's near-future society, saturated with artificial companionship and remote schooling, produces children whose social starvation is more acute, not less, than that of earlier generations; Josie's isolation exists precisely because a technological solution --- the Artificial Friend --- has been substituted for the harder work of human presence. *Normal People*, operating in a contemporary rather than speculative register, shows a comparable dynamic on a smaller scale: Marianne and Connell's access to constant textual contact does not resolve, and at points intensifies, their mutual misreading and emotional withholding. *The Circle's* Mae, meanwhile, becomes lonelier the more "connected" she becomes, her thousands of followers offering no one capable of receiving her actual distress. These novels collectively suggest that connectivity and intimacy are not synonyms but frequently antagonists, since the infrastructure that maximizes contact frequency does not thereby maximize the depth or safety of disclosure.

4.9 Digital Memory

Several of the novels treat digital archiving as transforming not only how relationships are remembered but what memory itself is for. *The Circle's* ambition to record and preserve "everything," framed by its executives as an unambiguous social good, is shown by the novel to corrode the selective, forgiving quality of ordinary human memory, in which forgetting is not a failure but a condition of intimacy's continuation. Klara's memory, by contrast, functions as a kind of curated devotion: in the novel's final scenes, she reflects on arranging her memories "in the right order," a practice that reads less like data storage than like the affective labor of narrative-making, suggesting that Ishiguro imagines artificial memory as potentially more humane, not less, than the totalizing archival ambitions satirized in Eggers. Shteyngart's novel takes a darker view, imagining a society whose obsession with real-time data has all but destroyed durable cultural memory --- literature, in particular, appearing to its younger characters as an obsolete, faintly embarrassing technology. Read against Hayles's account of the posthuman as an entity for whom information patterns matter more than embodied continuity, these divergent treatments of memory suggest that contemporary fiction is deeply unsettled about whether digitized memory extends or attenuates the ethical work that remembering has traditionally performed within intimate relationships.



4.10 Transformation of Love

Across the corpus, romantic love appears neither as timelessly unchanged nor as simply destroyed by technology, but as reorganized along new temporal and evidentiary lines. Rooney's novel is the most sustained meditation on this reorganization: Marianne and Connell's love is repeatedly enabled and endangered by the different registers of disclosure available to writing versus speech, such that their most honest declarations occur in emails they might not have risked saying aloud, while their spoken exchanges remain hedged by class anxiety and misrecognition. Scholars applying social penetration theory to the novel have shown how digital and embodied intimacy operate as complementary rather than competing channels of self-disclosure, jointly advancing the relationship's development in fits and starts. Shteyngart's Lenny and Eunice represent a more skeptical vision, their relationship continuously undercut by generational and technological asymmetry --- Lenny's attachment to books and letters marking him as a romantic anachronism whose devotion Eunice can only partly reciprocate within a culture that has redefined desirability as a data product. *Klara and the Sun* offers a third model, in which love is displaced from the romantic register onto the caregiving register, Klara's devotion to Josie standing as the novel's purest, least compromised depiction of love precisely because it is structurally incapable of possessiveness or self-interest. Bauman's liquid modernity, with its account of relationships held in permanent revisability, illuminates why so much contemporary fiction locates its most durable love in either the past-tense nostalgia of Shteyngart's satire or the non-human devotion of Ishiguro's fable, rather than in ordinary present-tense human romance.

4.11 Digital Alienation

Alienation in this corpus is rarely the classical Marxist alienation from the product of one's labor; it is instead alienation from one's own data double, the aggregated, quantified version of the self that platforms construct and that characters must continuously negotiate. Mae's arc in *The Circle* traces exactly this alienation, as her relationship to her own "TruYou" profile gradually inverts, so that she comes to experience her offline, embodied self as the deficient, insufficiently verified version of her data self. Shteyngart's Lenny experiences a comparable inversion but resists it, his outdatedness registering to his society as pathology even as the novel invites readers to read it as one of the only remaining forms of psychic integrity available. Schweblin's *Little Eyes* locates alienation differently, in the disjunction between a kentuki's limited communicative capacity --- many are mute, able only to observe --- and the intense affective investment its keepers and dwellers nonetheless place in it; alienation here is less from a data double than from the impossibility of full reciprocity within an architecture designed for asymmetrical looking. McLuhan's insistence that media numb as well as extend the senses provides a useful frame here: these novels repeatedly show characters whose expanded capacity for contact is purchased through a diminished capacity for undivided attention, a trade the texts present as alienation's contemporary, technologically specific form.

4.12 Posthuman Relationships

Klara and the Sun and *Little Eyes* stage the most direct posthuman relationships in the corpus, and both resist any simple verdict on whether human--machine attachment represents ethical progress or moral hazard. Haraway's cyborg figure, formulated to dissolve rigid boundaries between organism and machine, nature and culture, finds an unexpectedly literal analog in Klara, whose devotion to Josie cannot be neatly separated into "authentic feeling" versus "programmed behavior," since the novel declines to stabilize that distinction. Scholarship on the novel's posthuman sociality has argued that Klara's relationality disrupts hierarchical divisions between AI and human sociality without wholly collapsing them, positioning the novel within Braidotti's broader claim that the posthuman subject is relational rather than autonomous by nature. *Little Eyes* extends posthuman relationality into a more explicitly interspecies-adjacent register, its kentukis occupying an



ambiguous ontological position between pet, prosthetic, and remote human presence; critics reading the novel through posthumanist frameworks have argued that it refuses to resolve whether the kentuki relationship constitutes a genuinely new form of care or merely an ingenious repackaging of familiar exploitative dynamics. Both novels, read together, suggest that posthuman relationality in contemporary fiction functions less as a settled thesis than as an unresolved site of ethical experimentation, in which older humanist categories of authenticity and consent are shown to be inadequate without being fully replaced.

4.13 Ethics of Technology

The ethical stakes of technological mediation are most explicit in *The Circle* and *Little Eyes*, both of which structure their plots around the question of consent under conditions of asymmetrical information. *The Circle*'s central irony is that its most invasive practices are adopted voluntarily and even enthusiastically by employees persuaded that transparency is a moral achievement rather than a surrendered right; the novel's critique targets less the technology itself than the rhetoric of frictionless virtue that renders resistance to surveillance legible as selfishness or immorality. *Little Eyes* distributes ethical ambiguity more evenly across its many keeper--dweller pairings, refusing the reader a single exemplary case from which to generalize; some dwellers behave with genuine care, others with cruelty or exploitation, and the novel implies that the kentuki technology itself is ethically underdetermined, its moral valence depending entirely on the character of the humans using it. Foucault's insistence that power operates productively rather than merely repressively --- producing new subjects and desires rather than simply constraining pre-existing ones --- helps explain why these novels resist the simpler ethical frame of technology-as-violation: the desire to be seen, watched, or known by a device is shown to be itself an effect of the technological and economic system in question, not an innocent human need the system merely exploits.

4.14 Resistance against Digital Modernity

Explicit resistance to digital modernity appears unevenly across the corpus, and its unevenness is itself analytically telling. *Super Sad True Love Story* stages the most sustained resistance through Lenny's attachment to printed books, an attachment the novel treats with genuine tenderness even as it acknowledges Lenny's marginality and ineffectuality within his data-saturated society; resistance here is personal and largely private rather than political or collective. *The Circle* imagines a would-be resistant figure in Mercer, Mae's ex-boyfriend, whose refusal of connectivity the novel frames with notable ambivalence, allowing readers to read him alternately as a prophetic critic and as a somewhat self-righteous relic; his eventual fate, precipitated by an act of surveillance-enabled harassment, functions as the novel's bleakest verdict on the possibility of opting out. *Klara and the Sun* offers the corpus's most oblique form of resistance, embedded not in any character's explicit refusal of technology but in Klara's own capacity for attention and devotion, qualities the novel implies are increasingly scarce among the human characters despite, or because of, their technological sophistication. Bauman's account of liquid modernity is again instructive here: resistance in these novels rarely takes the solid, organized form of collective political action, appearing instead as fragile, individualized, often melancholic gestures whose efficacy the texts leave deliberately uncertain.

4.15 Future of Human Relationships

Read together, these five novels do not converge on a single prophecy about the future of intimacy, but they do converge on a shared diagnostic vocabulary: relationships in digital modernity are represented as simultaneously more documented and more precarious, more visible and less understood, more connected and more lonely. *Klara and the Sun*'s relatively hopeful register --- in which artificial devotion, though limited, retains genuine ethical value --- sits in productive tension with *The Circle*'s and *Super Sad True Love Story*'s more satirical pessimism, in which technological mediation is shown corroding the very capacities, patience and undivided

attention, on which intimacy depends. *Little Eyes* and *Normal People* occupy a middle position, refusing either utopian or dystopian closure and instead depicting mediated intimacy as an ongoing, unresolved negotiation. What unites all five, this paper argues, is a shared formal recognition that the twenty-first-century novel of relationship can no longer assume an unmediated space of privacy from which its characters speak; every declaration of love, every act of care, is now legible as also a data event, and the genre's ethical seriousness lies precisely in its refusal to pretend otherwise.

4.16 Digital Temporality and the Pace of Feeling

A further pattern that cuts across the corpus, and that existing scholarship has not sufficiently isolated as its own analytical category, concerns the reorganization of emotional temporality under digital mediation. Pre-digital courtship narratives, from the epistolary novel onward, built suspense from the slowness of communication: a letter's delay was itself a narrative resource, generating anticipation, doubt, and the productive ambiguity of not-yet-knowing. Rooney's *Normal People* shows this temporal logic surviving but radically compressed: the gap between sending a text and receiving a reply, though measured in minutes rather than weeks, performs an analogous narrative function, with Connell's and Marianne's anxious re-reading of message timestamps becoming a primary vehicle for the novel's dramatic irony. Shteyngart's satire compresses this temporality even further, to the point of real-time broadcast, in which desirability and social standing are updated continuously rather than periodically, eliminating the interpretive labor that delay once required and replacing it with a kind of ambient, low-grade anxiety that never resolves into either reassurance or crisis. *The Circle* dramatizes the same acceleration at the level of institutional demand: Mae's employer measures her worth partly through response speed, so that the very capacity for reflective delay before replying becomes legible as a moral and professional deficiency. Castells's account of "timeless time," in which the network society compresses and randomizes sequence, offers a precise vocabulary for this pattern: these novels do not simply depict faster communication but a qualitatively different temporal regime in which the durational textures that once structured emotional narrative --- waiting, wondering, reconsidering --- are displaced by an expectation of continuous, low-latency responsiveness. Only *Klara and the Sun* resists this acceleration, its artificial narrator's patient, almost devotional attentiveness to Josie unfolding over a duration closer to older literary rhythms of care, a formal choice this paper reads as itself a quiet argument for slowness as an ethical practice within, rather than against, technologically saturated life.

5. Discussion

Placed side by side, these novels reveal both convergences and productive contradictions that a single-text or single-author approach cannot bring into view. The most significant convergence is formal: each novel develops a narrative technique specifically adapted to representing a self partly constituted by technology --- Eggers's escalating corporate jargon and quantified social metrics, Shteyngart's satirical data-overlay diction, Rooney's structurally significant deployment of email and text as free-standing narrative units, Schwebel's alternating, restricted focalization between keepers and dwellers, and Ishiguro's radically constrained artificial-intelligence narration. None of these techniques is simply inherited from earlier traditions of epistolary or psychological fiction; each represents an adaptation of those traditions to a specifically digital condition of selfhood, confirming this paper's claim that digital culture is a formal as well as thematic pressure on the contemporary novel.

The most significant contradiction concerns the moral valence of mediation itself. *The Circle* and *Super Sad True Love Story* largely support a McLuhanite and Turklean pessimism in which technological mediation degrades authentic connection, while *Klara and the Sun* and, more ambivalently, *Little Eyes* resist this framing,



suggesting that mediated or artificial relationality can carry genuine ethical weight, sometimes exceeding what unmediated human relationships in the same fictional worlds achieve. This is not merely an authorial disagreement but a substantive theoretical tension inherited from the frameworks themselves: Turkle's clinical concern about diminished conversation sits uneasily against Haraway's and Braidotti's more affirmative accounts of hybrid, relational subjectivity, and the fictional corpus effectively stages this theoretical disagreement as an unresolved plot-level question rather than resolving it in favor of either position.

A further point of productive tension concerns gender. Several of the novels --- most explicitly *Klara and the Sun*, through its coding of Klara's caregiving in conventionally feminized terms, and *Normal People*, through its attention to Marianne's psychologically fraught relationship to both disclosure and self-erasure --- suggest that the burdens and possibilities of digitally mediated intimacy are not evenly distributed but continue to track existing gendered patterns of emotional labor. This paper's discussion of algorithmic intimacy and artificial emotion is therefore incomplete without acknowledging that these novels' posthuman or digital figures often inherit, rather than transcend, older asymmetries in who is expected to perform care and who is permitted simply to receive it.

Finally, the discussion must register a methodological limitation transparently: the five novels analyzed here, while generically diverse, share an Anglophone-adjacent literary marketplace (four originally in English, one, *Little Eyes*, widely read in English translation) and a broadly Global North or globally networked urban setting. The literary grammar of digitally mediated intimacy proposed here should therefore be understood as describing a significant and influential strand of contemporary world literature rather than a universal law of the twenty-first-century novel; further comparative work attending to digital culture's representation in literatures less centered on Silicon Valley's specific technological imaginary would meaningfully extend this paper's claims.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that twenty-first-century fiction represents digital culture not merely as a theme but as a condition that reshapes the novel's formal and ethical resources for narrating intimacy. Reading *The Circle*, *Klara and the Sun*, *Normal People*, *Little Eyes*, and *Super Sad True Love Story* through an integrated framework combining media ecology, network society theory, the psychology of connectivity, theories of simulation, posthumanism, surveillance studies, and liquid modernity, the analysis has shown that these novels collectively construct relationships that are simultaneously hypervisible and undernourished, continuously documented and inadequately understood. The paper's central theoretical contribution is to demonstrate that these apparently disparate critical traditions converge productively around a shared literary object --- the digitally mediated relationship --- and that reading them together, rather than in the isolated silos of existing scholarship, reveals a coherent, if internally contested, contemporary literary grammar of intimacy. Its literary contribution lies in identifying the specific formal techniques --- quantified free indirect discourse, restricted artificial narration, message-thread structuring, alternating asymmetrical focalization --- through which this grammar is constructed, and in showing that these techniques are themselves a form of critical commentary on digital modernity rather than a neutral vehicle for depicting it.

Several avenues for future research follow from this study. A comparative extension to literatures beyond the Anglophone and Global North contexts examined here would test whether the patterns identified persist across different technological infrastructures and cultural attitudes toward privacy and disclosure. Further work might also examine how these patterns evolve in fiction written after the widespread adoption of generative artificial intelligence companions, a technological development that has accelerated considerably



since most of this corpus was written and that promises to intensify precisely the questions of authenticity and care this paper has traced in Ishiguro's *Klara*. Finally, sustained attention to genre --- comparing how these questions are handled in literary fiction, genre science fiction, and digital-native forms such as serialized web fiction --- would help determine whether the literary grammar proposed here is specific to the prestige literary novel or extends across the wider ecology of contemporary digital-age storytelling. What this paper's readings suggest, in the meantime, is that the contemporary novel has not surrendered its traditional vocation of registering how ordinary people love, fail, and try again; it has simply had to teach that vocation to survive inside the feed.

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