

Digitalized Capitalist Control in McEwan's *Machines Like Me* and Winterson's *The Stone Gods*



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Abstract: Ian McEwan and Jeanette Winterson are both prominent figures in contemporary British literature. Their works, *Machines Like Me* and *The Stone Gods*, closely follow the theme of the times and probe into individual, national, and global concerns. Current researches on these two novels often emphasize human-machine coexistence in it, with most Western critics mainly focusing on human ethical responsibility, such as man's violence towards AI. This neglects human beings as the passive victims due to the invasion of digital technology, and the potential Western capitalist exploitation. In the context of this, this thesis revisits the Western Marxist critique of Western capitalism, by examining how digital technology is applied in different areas of human society in the two novels, it aims to explore how these digital advancements facilitate today's capitalist control. The thesis finds that digital technology is mainly applied in three areas in the novels, namely, the capitalist manipulation process through digital market, digital commodity, and digital surveillance. Firstly, digital technology contributes to the emergence of digital market, thus providing a new domain for Western capitalists to control online transactors. Secondly, the innovation of online market has driven the digital transformation of commodities, with digital commodity becoming a new embodiment for Western capitalists to further control consumers. Finally, the increasing demand for digital commodities that could be used for surveillance practices indicates the phenomenon of digital surveillance, intensifying Western capitalist's control over the masses. In summary, *Machines Like Me* and *The Stone Gods* depict a world where digital technologies have penetrated nearly every aspect of life. In doing this, they show how these digital applications are, and could be used by Western capitalists to enhance their exploitation and exert a complete control over human beings.

Keywords: Ian McEwan; Jeanette Winterson; Digital Market; Digital Commodity; Digital Surveillance

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1 Introduction

In early December 2022, a significant conflict emerged on the renowned online art platform ArtStation in America. The conflict, revolving around the ownership of the copyright of a few artistic works, involves two sides: those artists of ArtStation who used traditional methods to create their artistic works, and those artists of the same platform who employed digital AI-generation tools to produce their artworks. The artists who protested against

the utilization of this AI technology and especially against the artists who did so, argued that this AI-generating-art technology "[undermined] the skills honed over many years by human artists" [1] because this technology relies merely on a digital dataset of numerous unauthorized artworks scraped from the Internet without any clarification of the copyright. Therefore, they called for a restriction on its unrestricted application. However, their

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protest has not been given any payback from the part of ArtStation. Instead, the issue of copyright infringement becomes increasingly complex because of the profitability of this digital technology in the artistic world. On the one hand, “many AI-art prompters *capitalize* on artists’ work when selling generative art” (*italics mine*). On the other hand, the company itself, ArtStation in this case, defended the incorporation of AI-generated works on its platform for financial benefits in spite of any copyright infringement [2].

This incident highlights two significant issues in today’s Western world, which have well entered into, in Ernest Mandel’s term, the stage of “late capitalism” [3]. Firstly, the latest advances in digital technologies, mostly represented by robotics technologies, i.e. what we generally know as digital Artificial Intelligence (AI), are becoming increasingly integrated into human life [4] because of “the widespread use of digital technologies” [5]. Secondly, this “digitalization” of “all dimensions of modern society” indicates “the modern stage of capitalist societies’ evolution”, where capitalists accumulate “money, power and hegemony” by making use of digital technologies [6]. In a word, the developments and commercialization of digital technologies allows for an ongoing penetration of capitalist control into people’s daily life. However, the detailed features of this newly recognized phenomenon have not yet been extensively explored.

It should be noted that the affinity of digital technologies and capitalism has already been discussed in a series of literary works produced over the last two decades, such as Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1993), David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007), Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* (2019), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and Sun* (2021). However, it is found that Western literary critics tend to pay more attention to the inclusive blueprint for the coexistence of human and artificial intelligence (generated by digital technologies) as depicted in these novels, therefore failing to recognize that the destiny of human beings themselves is going through a crucial crisis because of the hidden connection between digital technologies and its facilitated capitalist operations. Given that this digitalized capitalist control has been largely ignored in literary criticism (of Western critics in particular) so far, this thesis attempts to address this significant issue with great attention and concern.

Hence, this thesis intends to elucidate this overlooked issue in exploring digital phenomena in two noteworthy

scientific literary works, namely, Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* (2019) and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007). The reason to choose these two novels is that current studies of the two novels largely focus on ethical concerns and human moral failings, overlooking the possible harm those digital machines could cause to human beings. Even some of them acknowledging capitalist involvement in the novels, their relevant elaborations remain need further discussions.

2 Approach to the Study

With the limitations of previous studies on the two novels, which have often ignored the very trajectory of capitalist digitalized control, this section looks into the theoretical foundation for it, in order to explore the possibility of technologies being used by Western capitalist for their own benefits. To achieve this, this section is arranged into three parts: it first looks at Marx’s criticism on Industrial capitalism [7] and its influence on Western society in the 19th century. This includes an elaboration on how Western capitalist made use of the Industrial Revolutions to make severe profitable exploitation over people at that time. For this purpose, relevant elaborations will be discussed through three perspectives, namely, market, supervision and commodity, in order to provide a primary foundation to analyse capitalist profit-driven technological practices between the lines. Firstly, it is found that industrial technological advancements were applied to the area of “communication and transport” [8], allowing for trades in a world-level. However, on account of uneven technological development between Western countries and the third world, Western capitalists with advanced technologies were able to expand their exploitation to the globe. Secondly, technological inventions were applied to factory management for high-efficient labour productions. This means during the labour process workers’ were superintended [9], to be forced to cater to strict clock-hour and production machines, in order to maximize industrial profits. Thirdly, the widespread technological applications in industrial products gave rise to the phenomenon of “commodity fetishism” [9], which was presented by a belief that these products are “generative” by themselves self [10]. This means products lost its labour context, and dissociated from its production history. As a consequence, workers were separated and alienated from their own labour, and suffered from a more severe capitalist exploitation over their values.

In the second place, given that the background settings of both the two novels could be arguably traced back to the latter half years of the 20th century. (It is found that *Machines Like Me* sets an alternative past in Thatcher's time. At the same time, *The Stone Gods* imagines a future based on the social reality of the years 1980s.) The second part of this section focuses on an exploration of Western Marxists' critiques on the late capitalism after WW II. It is argued that different from Marx's time, where capitalist rationalized their exploitation through their control over people's economical life, the latter half of the 20th century witnessed an emphasis on the emergence of mass culture brought by "mechanical reproductive technologies" [11]. To illustrate this, this part concentrates on how an increasing usage of technology achievements in market, commodity and surveillance, disguised Western capitalist control over human society within people's daily entertainment. To begin with, technologies brought culture into the domain of markets. Examples of this commercialization of culture can be seen in financed museums and architectures [12]. They lowered the rank of arts so that these works can be transacted and consumed by even illiterate people. What's more, the application of reproduction technologies gave rise to cultural products such as advertisements and films. Examples were shown in "the rise of Hollywood" [12], which deeply influenced people's physical and mental lives in a way that benefited capitalist domination. Last but not least, with surveillance topic being a popular theme in mass culture, such as those hit spy films, revealed a reinforced capitalist control over social order through surveillance practices.

Finally, considering that technologies in the novels reflect 21st century's advances in digital areas, this section moves to discuss how the widespread usage of digital technologies modify Western capitalist mode of exploitation, allowing for "the modern stage of capitalist societies' evolution" [5]. This is unfolded through the three perspectives, namely, digital market, digital commodity and digital surveillance. First of all, Schiller proposes the concept of "digital capitalism" by indicating a market-driven network development, where capital owns and control digital technologies [13]. This corporate privatization of advanced technologies, as Fuchs notes, resulted in the phenomenon of Digital International labour division [14], and thus contributes to a more serious discrimination and exploitation. Additionally, Padios displays a more severe version of commodity fetish in digital age, where even human emotions could be extracted, are incorporated into a part of

commodities [15]. This, as Miconi argues, that capitalists have expanded their exploitation by "vampirizing people's life" [16]. Thirdly, Zuboff puts up with the notion of "surveillance capitalism" by noting the significant role of digital surveillance technologies in benefits global corporations [17]. Among these practical usages of surveillance technologies, automatic surveillance such as CCTV, becomes the most popular form, as it is believed to be an outstanding example of "technocratic justice" [18]. But the fact is that this assumed objective technologies and its inventions are influenced and manipulated by the capitalist authority.

3 Findings

The present thesis intended to explore how digital technologies in the two novels, facilitate Western capitalist accumulation and exploitation, thus results in the digitalization of capitalist control over Western society. The study expected to find that in the two novels these digital technologies were being put into practical use in three areas: digital market, digital commodity and digital surveillance. As a result of these usages, a new domain, a new embodiment and an intensification emerge for Western capitalist to exert their control in today's digital age.

Firstly, the latest achievements in digital technologies are being implemented in market practices, leading to the emergence of digital market. This digital market is brought in front of the public as the form of digital platforms in *Machines Like Me* [19] and "Jeton" transactions in *The Stone Gods* [20]. It is argued that it is through these two newly-developed market forms, people in the two novels are involved in issues of invisible inequality and unlimited exploitation from Western capitalists. In the first case of *Machines Like Me*, digital platforms seems to bring people more convenience and opportunities for make money, given that people can participate world transactions online from the comfort of their homes. However, these apparent convenience and opportunities do not equally distributed to everyone in Western society, but largely favour the Western capitalists. This inequality stems from the finding that "technological development is the result of the development of capital" [12]. In this sense, the ownership and control of advanced digital technologies are largely concentrated in the hands of Western corporations. As a result, Western capitalists, armed with digital technologies, participate in online transactions facilitated by digital platforms, and without doubt, become and always are the

largest beneficiary. Therefore, digital markets become the new domain for capitalists to exert their control. It should be noted that a consequence of it can be seen at two levels. At individual level, when average people, particularly those in lower-income groups like the blue-collars, participate in online market transactions, they have difficulty in affording the high-tech inventions and are thus left to be exploited. Even worse, they often blame themselves for their constant failures (bad luck) instead of recognizing the fundamental cause (the unequal market mechanism). At a country level, those Western capitalists with their privatization of high-tech inventions, could even influence national politics, such as the result of the Falkland wars.

In the case of *The Stone Gods*, digital technologies allow transactions to be mediated through the usage of digital currency "jeton" [20]. This jeton transaction is advocated under the name of citizens' benefits, but in fact indicates a capitalist control over people's all aspects of life. This is exemplified by the capitalist monopoly on digital tokens and its usage. On the one hand, capitalist monopoly on digital currency is presented by its introduction of "jeton" in replace of the existence of money, with the purpose of avoiding conflicts caused by money. However, on account of the fact that this jeton campaign was monopolized and completely owned by a global company named MORE, MORE has absolute right to decide the release and allocation of jeton. This means jeton users have to go to MORE's shops to transact MORE's products and services, such as clothes, food, houses and traffic. This phenomenon shows clearly a capitalist monopoly on jeton, and indicates the fact that MORE has already expanded its influence to all aspects of people's lives. Additionally, MORE's regulation on how to use jeton reveals a complete manipulation of capitalists over people's lives. According to MORE, jeton should only be used for renting items rather than purchasing them. This further emphasizes the fact that MORE has complete control over both immaterial (currency) and material resources (products) and their exchange in the market, given that jeton only allows people to temporarily experience or utilize these items within a limited time term. Therefore, the widespread acceptance of jeton transactions makes digital markets a domain for capitalist unlimited exploitation.

Secondly, the latest digital technologies achievements have greatly influence commodity consumption by contributing to the emergence of digital commodity. It is found that these digital commodities are introduced to people with an emphasis on their human-like capacity of com-

posing artworks in *Machines Like Me*, and of perceiving and responding people's feelings in *The Stone Gods*. This is presented by the phenomenon that people in the two novels are convinced of these human-like capacity possessed by these digital commodities, namely, a fetishism for these digital commodities. To be more specific, this fetish is presented by Miranda's thought that Adam, an intelligent machine, can really independently compose a poem of his own, and Billie's thought that Spike, a robot can exactly has her own feelings and emotions. This belief embodies a penetration of capitalist control. In *Machines Like Me*, Adam succeeds to convince Miranda of his independent aesthetic perception, that allows him to compose his own literature works. However, when making this conclusion, Miranda ignores signs that disproves Adam's capacity to compose aesthetic works like human beings could do. These signs detected from Adam's haikus, point out the fatal weakness of Adam to be a poet, namely, his lack in original feelings in compositions, his insistence in high-efficient production. It comes out that it is an algorithm in Adam's man-made body that operates, uses data inputs of human artworks to mass-produce similar quality artwork outputs. Therefore, Adam is a machine who could not compose lines, but produce lines based on human labour. And it is Miranda's failure to recognize it, the existence of human efforts, that gives corporations chances to exploit people's labour (aesthetic experiences and expressions) without their notice.

In *The Stone Gods*, Billie is convinced into believing that Spike, a digital commodity, surpasses the limits of human-robot by gaining the capacity of feeling and responding emotions. However, the fact is that Spike can fulfill not only the role of Billie's lover, but also can adapt to the desires of any user, serving as a work partner, sexual toy, or ideal companion. This perfect-to-anyone attribute of Spike, highlights the man-made elements in Spike and proves that Spike is still a mechanical robot designed to cater to customers' preferences for profit-driven motives. Through the textual analysis, it is found that the so-called Spike's emotion can be justified by the function of algorithm that based on the human labour in the realm of emotions. Evidences are shown to prove that even human emotions can be measured, extracted to be fed to machines, allowing Western capitalists such as MORE corporation, to make profits from digital commodities. Under this circumstance, Billie's belief that Spike is her spiritual lover, is a fetish for digital commodity, on the ground that Billie ignores the operations of programs that are founded on

emotional data mined from human beings. This fetish facilitates capitalist control in that it portrays the touching story of interspecies love, and uses it to veil the reality that even human emotions can be transformed into data to be capitalized.

Thirdly, the latest advancements in digital technology facilitates the implementation of surveillance practices, namely, digital surveillance. By digital surveillance, here it refers to a form of automatic surveillance with no need of human interventions. It is through these digital forms of surveillance, Western capitalists succeed to maintain a society order dominated under their control. In *Machines Like Me*, digital surveillance is exerted by Adam, a digital machine, on a British citizen Miranda. Adam justifies his surveillance practices by his interpretation of justice, which he claims to be “symmetrical” and objective [19]. However, It is revealed that Adam’s version of justice is asymmetric because while Adam accuses others of illegal activities, he disregards the privacy violations committed by Adam himself through surveillance. The reason behind this lies in Adam’s fanatics about the ideas propagated by Thatcher’s neoliberal government, which are exemplified by his affinity for justice concepts that are used as justifications for the British government’s actions in the Falklands War. Thus, Adam’s surveillance practices, guided by his asymmetric justice, are regarded to contribute to the preservation of a social order under the existing Thatcher government. An example of this can be seen from Miranda’s case. Given that Miranda is hardly a criminal, and she is close to the working class (which can be seen from her attachment to Mark and his worker family), Adam’s insistence to use surveillance to identify Miranda as a criminal in fact hints at Thatcher’s frame on the reputation of union leaders, which reveals capitalist government’s repression on working class movements.

In the second case, it is found that this digital surveillance justifies itself by incorporating itself into a part of ordinary days of citizens. This is an ordinary life that is rooted in citizens’ blind trust on technologies, and is presented by the phenomenon that citizens hold firm belief that technologies can “fix” everything. According to the narration, digital surveillance technologies can help them more than “God” [20] can do, thus the information collected and retrieved by this technologies is necessary to offer citizens a better life. However, the fact is that these information are collected by Western capitalists (MORE corporation) for their dominance and control. This is not just shown by the reality that citizens physical behaviour is

closely recorded by satellite taggers, in case any loyalty issue to the city ruler, namely, MORE corporation. But more importantly, it is indicated by the phenomenon that citizens could not realize that being watched is a strange thing that should not happen in their days of lives. As it shown in Billie in the parking lot. It is not the fact that she’s being supervised that is strange, but the reality that she can perceive this surveillance is strange. In other words, being watched to citizens is their days of lives, and they would rather identify herself as “paranoia” (ibid), than have doubts on the existing system. This certainly indicates an intensified capitalist control.

4 Conclusion

Through the analysis, it can be concluded that the practical use of digital technologies in the two novels reveals capitalist influence threatening people’s life more severe than ever. It should be noted that this issue is exactly what we are confronting today in our digital age. In the first place, the privatization practices of ownership of advanced digital technologies, as shown in the novels, is exactly what today’s Western corporations are doing for their benefits. Examples are shown by constantly restrictions imposed by the U.S. government on the export of artificial intelligence chips and core technologies. It is clear that these restrictions are intended to retain advanced computing power within the U.S. and its allies [21].

In the second place, it is clear that this capitalist invasion into the field of our aesthetic and emotional experiences to make profits, as presented by the intelligent machines in the novels, projects what exactly global corporations are doing in today’s digital age. Examples are shown by the use of AI tools to make artificial artworks, and the development of digital companions for human beings, like Musk’s catwoman and companion robots for the old.

In the third place, it worthwhile to noted that the situation described in the two novel, where digital surveillance being carried out collectively by Western corporations and government for the order of Western capitalist society, is what exactly happens today. This is presented in the case of Snowden, who “leaked highly classified information from the National Security Agency (NSA)” [22]. These disclosed information “revealed numerous global surveillance programs, many run by the NSA and the Five Eyes intelligence alliance with the cooperation of telecommunication companies and European governments and prompted a

cultural discussion about national security and individual privacy". Therefore, under the circumstance of today's digital age, it is clear that our "enemy is the combination of privatized and state-controlled commons, corporations (Google, Facebook) and state security agencies (NSA)" [23].

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