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From Simulacra to Hyperreality: Digital Masculinity and Algorithmic Oppression in Ted Chiang's "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling" and Isabel Fall's "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter"

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Abstract

This article interrogates the consolidation of digital masculinity in contemporary speculative fiction, with particular attention to the ways algorithms and digital representations regulate and enforce identity. Through a close examination of Ted Chiang's "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling" and Isabel Fall's "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter," the article explores the nexus of technological mediation, gender performativity, and systemic bias. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theorization of simulacra and hyperreality alongside Safiya Umoja Noble's analysis of algorithmic oppression, the paper argues that these narratives function as critical diagnostics of our present technological condition. Chiang's portrayal of "Remem," a flawless memory-recall device, discloses the protagonist's subjectivity as a precarious simulacrum, a hyperreal identity contingent upon distorted memory. In parallel, Fall's narrative—where gender is literally reprogrammed into the ontology of a militarized machine—exposes the entanglement of weaponized masculinity and algorithmic structures of control. By bridging speculative literature with critical theory, this article situates digital spaces as generative agents of oppressive gender constructs and underscores the imperative to dismantle the algorithmic infrastructures that perpetuate them.

Keywords: Digital Masculinity, Algorithmic Bias, Simulacra, Hyperreality, Speculative Fiction

Introduction

Isabel Fall emerges as one of the most provocative and contested voices within contemporary speculative fiction, her work staging the fraught intersections of identity, gender, and militarism through a discursive matrix informed by trans theory, cybernetic embodiment, and postmodern critique. In particular, Fall's prose destabilizes normative binaries—man/woman, civilian/soldier, real/simulated—by mobilizing the speculative mode as a critical optic that renders visible the co-implication of intimacy and violence as constitutive forces of subjectivity. The story most closely associated with her oeuvre, the polemically titled *"I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter"*

(*Clarkesworld*, 2020), recuperates a transphobic internet meme and transvalues it into an allegory of radical embodiment and metamorphic liberation. In narrating the protagonist's transformation from pilot to militarized "war machine" through gender modification, Fall exposes how technology mediates both ideological inscription and corporeal reconfiguration, while also foregrounding the psychic and material costs exacted by combat, empire, and femininity. The protagonist thus occupies an ambivalent position as simultaneously victim of biopolitical violence and agent of subversive resistance.

Placed in counterpoint to Fall, Ted Chiang has been widely recognized for speculative narratives that entwine technological speculation with ethical-philosophical inquiry. His short story *"The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling"* (2013) unfolds across two parallel narrative arcs: one structured around "Remem," a near-future technology that records and renders memory with forensic precision, and the other recounting the transformative effects of literacy within an oral tribal culture. By orchestrating a dialogue between the epistemic registers of digital recall and cultural inscription, Chiang interrogates whether "truth" is anchored in factual accuracy or in interpretive narration. This dialectic resonates with contemporary critiques of digital masculinity, wherein algorithmic representation and codification increasingly displace embodied experience, producing masculinities defined by abstraction, disaffect, and technicity rather than lived relationality.

Theorizations by Jean Baudrillard, Safiya Umoja Noble, and Joshua Thorburn sharpen this literary terrain and situate it within a broader critique of digital subject-formation. Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) argues that in postmodernity, representation ceases to mediate reality and instead eclipses it, ushering in the regime of the hyperreal wherein simulacra precede and determine their referents (1, 6, 11). Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) exposes how ostensibly neutral digital infrastructures reproduce and amplify racialized and gendered hierarchies, naturalizing hegemonic masculinities premised upon aggression, rationalization, and emotional detachment. Complementing this, Thorburn's *Exiting the Manosphere* (2020) delineates how online subcultural formations such as r/IncelExit and r/ExRedPill fabricate masculinities through performative grievance, algorithmic amplification, and peer validation, even as they generate "exit narratives" that gesture toward destabilization and reconstitution (4). Taken together, these theoretical interventions reveal how speculative fiction and digital culture converge in their interrogation of masculinity's fragility, its algorithmic re-engineering, and its perpetual renegotiation within technologically mediated environments.

Literature Review

The constellation of works surrounding Isabel Fall's "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter" (2020), Ted Chiang's "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling" (2013), and allied feminist and sociological studies provides a profound meditation on the conditions of identity, technology, and discourse in the digital age. What crystallizes in this constellation is a multi-voiced interrogation of subject formation, wherein the human is simultaneously produced, regulated, and unsettled across intersecting terrains of gendered embodiment, mediatic inscription, and activist praxis. Each critical reading—whether Sal Fleischer's Foucauldian reframing, June Martin's surrealist allegory, Punya Mishra's McLuhanesque interpretation of Chiang, Josiane Jouët's sociology of digital feminism, Muna Khan's polemical editorial, or Batool, Qadri, and Amir's humanistic pedagogy—becomes a tessera in the larger mosaic of contemporary critical discourse.

Sal Fleischer's "The Panopticon of Gender" reclaims Fall's story from the reductive headlines that once engulfed it, re-situating the fiction within the theoretical apparatus of Michel Foucault. For Fleischer, the protagonist Barb exemplifies the panoptic subject: her transformation into an "attack helicopter" is not the effect of biology, but the performative enactment of a new discursive regime (Fleischer 45). Gender, in this lens, is not essence but discipline; Barb's violence is not naturalized instinct but self-surveillance, the absorption of external gazes into an internal regulator. Yet Fleischer complicates Foucault's model through Sandra Lee Bartky, who insists that patriarchal power is peculiarly modern in its intrusiveness, constructing "docile bodies" that are simultaneously self-

regulating and self-confining (Bartky in Fleischer 46). By fusing Foucault's panopticism with Bartky's feminist elaboration, Fleischer shows how Barb's escape from the restrictions of womanhood into the mechanical identity of an attack helicopter paradoxically functions as liberation—an ironic flight from one disciplinary regime into another.

June Martin's "I Sexually Identify as the 'I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter' Controversy" turns the controversy itself into a surreal protagonist, dramatizing how digital discourse dehumanizes by consuming the subject in a vortex of language. Her narrator does not identify as an aircraft but as the very avalanche of online rage, her hands felt as "posts calling Isabel Fall a nazi" and her skin tattooed with decontextualized reactions (Martin). In Martin's grotesque allegory, dysphoria is refigured not as a mismatch between sex and gender but between the human body and the discourse that overwhelms it. The narrator's declaration—"I am the sides" (Martin)—exposes the collapse of shade in polarized debates, wherein the individual ceases to exist except as a conduit of collective anger. If Fleischer reads Fall as a critique of gender's disciplinary logics, Martin reads the controversy as a critique of discourse's capacity to erase the human subject altogether, leaving only fragments of digital fury inscribed upon the body.

This dialectic between medium and subjectivity is echoed in Punya Mishra's reading of Ted Chiang's "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling." Mishra suggests that speculative fiction accomplishes what theoretical exegesis alone cannot: it renders media theory incarnate in narrative flesh. Chiang's twinned stories—an oral culture encountering writing, and a near future confronting total recall through searchable memory—dramatize what Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan might call "media revolutions," transformations of consciousness so fundamental that they alter our very sense of truth (Mishra). The oral world preserves a communal "truth of feeling," whereas the literate and hyper-digital worlds pivot towards the atomized "truth of fact." For Mishra, Chiang's brilliance lies in capturing the bargain implicit in every technological adoption: something is gained, yet something irretrievable is lost. His haunting image of humans as "cognitive cyborgs" crystallizes the very condition Fleischer and Martin also explore—subjects whose identities are inseparable from the media that structure them.

If Chiang and Fall illuminate the intimate entanglement of media and subjectivity, Josiane Jouët's "Digital feminism: questioning the renewal of activism" (2018) situates this entanglement within a sociological framework. Her two-year study of French feminist collectives reveals activism as "performative," both visible and heterogeneous, inseparably tied to digital aesthetics of humor, satire, and visuality (Jouët 133, 141). She argues for an "inter-twinning of online and offline activism" (146), noting that digital platforms both amplify feminist voices and expose them to virulent cyber-sexism (153). The tension between visibility and vulnerability here mirrors Martin's surreal dystopia of discourse: empowerment coexists with exposure, voice with silencing, solidarity with surveillance.

Muna Khan's "Boys to men" (2024) carries these concerns into the arena of misogynistic backlash, identifying in Andrew Tate and his ilk a "conspiracy-like matrix" that radicalizes boys into seeing women as property (Khan). Framing the fictional drama *Adolescence* as a mirror to real-world radicalization, Khan underscores how online discourses, much like those Martin critiques, shape male identity formation. Her editorial weaves global research—such as the UK police's alarm over "terrifying" radicalization and Monash University's study of Tate's impact on classrooms—into the Pakistani context, where gender-based violence and public controversies over polygamy demonstrate the local resonance of these global ideologies. Khan's rhetorical question, "Where are the role models our boys clearly need?" (Khan), thus emerges as a plea for counter-discourses that might resist this toxic masculinist pedagogy.

Sumaira Batool, Farheen Akhtar Qadri, and Muhammad Asaf Amir's "Social Media and Women Empowerment" situates these questions within a pedagogical and literary frame. Their reading of Watch Us Rise foregrounds the ways in which digital platforms function as crucibles of feminist awakening, enabling young women to transform pain into modes of creative insurgency. The protagonists' blogs and hashtags emerge as extensions of embodied resistance, crystallized in the visceral refusal, "My body is not for yours for taking, grabbing, slapping, and commenting on…"

(Batool et al. 16). In attending to how fictional subjects articulate practices resonant with real-world feminist digital activism, Batool and colleagues advance a counter-discourse in which technology becomes not merely a panoptic apparatus of surveillance but a sanctuary of solidarity and expression. Unlike Martin's satirical fatalism or Khan's urgent admonition, their approach foregrounds resilience, interconnection, and hope.

Read together, these works form a palimpsest of critique: Fleischer demonstrates how gender identity is simultaneously disciplined and re-imagined through panoptic regimes; Martin exposes how controversy inscribes discourse onto the body, erasing individuality; Mishra, through Chiang, interrogates the bargains by which media reshape epistemologies of truth; Jouët chronicles the ambivalence of digital feminism's emancipatory potential; Khan warns against algorithmic radicalization of boys into misogyny; and Batool, Qadri, and Amir affirm the emancipatory promise of digital platforms. What coheres across these disparate analyses is a recognition that twenty-first century subjectivity is never unmediated—it is ceaselessly negotiated within discursive, technological, and collective matrices that discipline, fragment, empower, and radicalize. Thus, whether through Fall's helicopter metaphor, Martin's allegory of discourse incarnated, Chiang's cyborgian memory, or the embodied digital protests of young feminists, these interventions testify to the constitutive paradox of the digital: identity as both prison and possibility. Collectively, they reveal that the digital does not simply represent the subject; it produces the subject, endlessly reconstituting who we are and what we might yet become.

Discussion
The narrative framework employed by Ted Chiang foregrounds the ways in which digital memory and algorithmic inscription become mechanisms for reinforcing a particular model of masculinity, one intricately aligned with systemic biases embedded within technological infrastructures. In "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling" (2013), Chiang introduces Remem, a retinally embedded device that archives a subject's lifelog, functioning simultaneously as prosthetic memory and algorithmic witness. Through the Journalist—both narrator and father—the story dramatizes how truth, memory, and identity collide within technologically mediated recollection. Crucially, the protagonist's personality is revealed through his selective retention of events, where memory itself becomes an instrument of self-fashioning and denial. Remem destabilizes this subjectivity, exposing the Journalist's self-absorbed and authoritarian tendencies, particularly in his relationship with Nicole, his daughter. Chiang underscores this when the Journalist, revisiting a pivotal argument, discovers that his recollection has misattributed his own words to his daughter: "The words were just as I remembered them, but it wasn't Nicole saying them. It was me… She must have noticed my request for access to her lifelog footage and concocted this to teach me a lesson" (Chiang 20). The confrontation between digital record and selective human memory thereby enacts a crisis of masculinity predicated upon authority, control, and denial.

Safiya Umoja Noble's critique of algorithmic systems directly illuminates this crisis. Noble asserts that algorithms "are designed to reflect the biases present in the data they are trained on" and thus inevitably reproduce stereotypes, including patriarchal conceptions of masculinity (Noble 166). In Chiang's text, however, algorithmic bias functions not to conceal but to unmask—the *Remem* device acts as an unflinching apparatus that reveals distortions sustained by patriarchal memory practices. Yet, as Noble emphasizes, algorithms themselves are "systems of social control that encode and reproduce inequality" (Valentine 364). The paradox of *Remem* lies in its dual function as both revelatory and complicit within larger structures of control. This paradox is further illuminated through Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, in which "the simulacrum replaces the real… creating a hyperreality where distinctions between true and false collapse" (Baudrillard 1). Masculinity, as constructed through the Journalist's curated memories, emerges as a hyperreal performance: an image of paternal authority that conceals and supplants the actual truth of his aggression. Joshua Thorburn's observation that "digital masculinity is often performed through calculative and data-driven processes that normalize dominance and aggression"

(Thorburn 1–25) is embodied in the Journalist's reliance on distorted self-perception, algorithmically destabilized by *Remem*. Chiang's narrative thus demonstrates how digital memory both sustains and disrupts the patriarchal performance of masculinity, producing a simulacrum that oscillates between exposure and reinforcement of toxic norms.

As the text unfolds, the narrator himself recognizes the fluidity and manipulability of memory: "Earlier I said that the details we choose to remember are a reflection of our personalities. What did it say about me that I put those words in Nicole's mouth instead of mine?" (Chiang 21). Here Chiang dramatizes the tension between lived experience, self-serving recollection, and algorithmic record, echoing Noble's concern that algorithms "resist transparency" while perpetuating invisible forms of oppression (Maragh-Lloyd 109–112). Baudrillard's insistence that "the simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is the truth" resonates in this context, for digital representations of masculinity, though fabricated, acquire ontological weight by displacing authentic human attributes. Thorburn's further claim that curated images "feed into superficial ideals of strength, obscuring vulnerability" (Thorburn 1–25) crystallizes in the Journalist's incapacity to confront his failures outside algorithmic mediation. Masculinity becomes a digital construct—an identity structured by algorithmic frames, disciplinary technologies, and cultural simulacra.

Isabel Fall's "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter"(2020) extends this interrogation of algorithmic masculinity into the domain of gender performativity. In this narrative, gender itself is reprogrammed through cybernetic modification: "My gender networks have been reassigned to make me a better AH-70 Apache Mystic pilot" (Fall 8). Fall positions gender as both programmable and weaponized, producing a critique of militarized masculinity and algorithmic constructions of identity. The text aligns with Noble's observation that algorithms "fixate on genetic and biological markers," thereby marginalizing non-conforming or fluid identities (Venturini et al.). For Baudrillard, "simulation is no longer a copy of the real, but a truth that replaces the real" (Baudrillard 2), a dynamic directly enacted in Fall's vision of gender as a machinic simulacrum. Thorburn similarly identifies how the manosphere and online influencers curate exaggerated masculinities of aggression and dominance, amplified through algorithmic circulation (Thorburn 1–25).

Fall's protagonist embraces gender as simulacrum, explicitly situating embodiment within the logic of militaristic technology: "My body is a component in my mission, subordinate to what I truly am" (Fall 2). Gender is reconstituted as prosthesis, a performance embedded within technological architectures of power. This resonates with Noble's analysis of algorithmic oppression (Noble 117–120), where biases inscribed in digital systems regulate and discipline identities. Moreover, Fall's depiction of cybernetic gender fluidity foregrounds Baudrillard's argument that "the image is the truth" (Baudrillard 2): gender is performed through technologically mediated images that supplant essentialist conceptions of biological sex. Thorburn emphasizes that "online influencers promote toxic masculinity under the guise of authenticity" (Thorburn 1–25), a claim that reverberates in Fall's narrative as algorithmic systems amplify programmed identities.

Both Chiang and Fall illuminate how algorithmic infrastructures and digital prosthetics reproduce hegemonic masculinities through simulation and systemic bias. Chiang dramatizes the crisis of paternal authority when confronted with algorithmic truth, while Fall critiques gender itself as a cybernetic performance bound to militarized and patriarchal codes. As Chiang writes, "My recollection of that argument was as clear as any memory I had, but… I was never the kind of father who could say such a thing to his child. Yet here was digital video proving that I had been exactly that kind of father" (Chiang 21). Conversely, Fall asserts: "Gender is stronger than war. It remains when all else flees. When I was a woman, I wanted to machine myself" (Fall 17). Together, these narratives confirm Noble's insistence that algorithmic systems "perpetuate inequality by design" (Valentine 364), and Baudrillard's thesis that "the simulacrum becomes the dominant reality" (Baudrillard 3). Thorburn concludes that "the manosphere's digital masculinity exploits algorithmic biases to sustain a cycle of toxic norms" (Thorburn 1–25).

Ultimately, both stories disclose that digital infrastructures are not neutral but active participants in the systemic reproduction of gendered violence and dominance. Masculinity, within these texts, is

revealed as an artificial construct—a simulacrum perpetuated by algorithmic processes and technological mediations. What emerges, then, is an urgent imperative to deconstruct the design of algorithmic systems and their representational logics, for they are not merely mirrors of culture but engines of normative enforcement. By staging the interplay between memory, simulation, and gender, Chiang and Fall expose the digital architectures through which contemporary masculinities are produced, reinforced, and weaponized.

Conclusion

Ted Chiang and Isabel Fall deploy speculative fiction to dramatize the algorithmic production of masculinity as a hyperreal form, divorced from lived interiority and sustained by the machinery of digital systems. In Chiang's Remem, the intimacy of memory collapses under the unyielding objectivity of recorded data, rendering personal identity as a simulacrum susceptible to exposure and distortion. Fall's gendered weaponization of the body pushes this dynamic to its limit, rendering subjectivity subordinate to a militarized algorithmic logic. When read through Baudrillard's meditation on simulacra and Noble's critique of algorithmic bias, both texts disclose how digital infrastructures manufacture masculinities that are aggressively performative and emotionally estranged. These narratives resist being read as cautionary tales alone; rather, they function as critical exemplars of how speculative fiction unmasks the structural complicity of algorithms in reinforcing patriarchal norms. In doing so, they underscore the urgent necessity of dismantling the myth of algorithmic neutrality that underwrites systems of oppression.

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