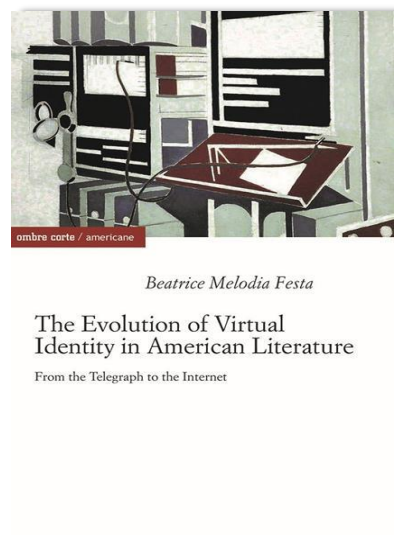


Beatrice Melodia Festa

# The Evolution of Virtual Identity in American Literature

From the Telegraph to the Internet

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Review by Cristina Consiglio

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Critical discourse has long been fascinated with the resonance of technology in the United States to such an extent it is hard to offer new readings on this topic. As such, there is plenty of firm evidence that technology and identity are essentially entwined issues, as proved especially by the ongoing debate on the new media. In this sense, the merit of *The Evolution of Virtual Identity in American Literature* by Beatrice Melodia Festa, published by Ombre Corte in 2022, is to shed light on virtual identity in American fiction. While scholarship such as that of Rosi Braidotti, Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, just to mention a few, prominently focused on technology and identity concerning the body and the blurred lines between the human and the machine, Melodia Festa examines the porous boundary between identity and technology through the networked self, that “state of being”—to quote the author—that arises from direct interaction with the machine when our identity abandons reality to immerse itself into the network.

In so doing, the book sets itself the fascinating and ambitious goal of tracing the origin of virtual identity through American literature, laying out its evolution from the late 1800s up to the 2000s. Indeed, the strength of the volume lies in its broad interdisciplinarity, providing rich thematic intersections. Through methodological rigour and compelling critical reflections, Melodia Festa examines literary texts (transitioning from the Industrial period to the digital age) using them as decoding tools capable of outlining the historical, cultural, and literary path, toward the construction of a wired/virtual self. To do so, the author traces an interpretative

approach that follows the development of communication technologies, from the telegraph at the end of the 19th century, through the telephone and the new media in the 1980s, to reach the Internet age. As such, the volume is divided into five chapters and explores almost two centuries of communication systems. The intent of this book stems from the desire to offer a comprehensive and exhaustive overview of literary texts that have received low critical attention, and—as the author convincingly argues—hold a specific role in their illustration of the challenges that led to the construction of a virtual self.

Indeed, the interesting novelty of this book is to demonstrate how human interaction with communication systems has produced a new, essentially virtual identity, based on a constant performance of the self. To examine the relationship between technologies and artificial identity in literature, the author develops an interdisciplinary method involving an interplay between sociological studies and literary criticism. Demonstrating that the concept of virtual identity originated with the first means of communication in the late 1800s, *Melodia Festa* shows how American literature, through different genres, has been able to register and question the transformation of an artificial and virtual self reshaped by the machine. Following this initial premise, the author constructs a multidisciplinary discussion in which literature fruitfully dialogues with sociology. In the first section, the volume tackles the two macro concepts at its core, identity and technology, developing a clear line of interpretation and laying the groundwork for the analysis that follows, offering a substantial sociological and cultural survey on the question of identity. Initially, she addresses it in broad terms and then narrows the scope of analysis, laying out the challenges to its definition within American culture. The author shows how identity in the United States is an extremely fleeting notion that, while inherent to the country's culture, eschews a univocal definition, as the self is constantly engendered by different factors. In the concluding part of this first chapter, the author focuses on self and performance as modes of identity representation, a theorization that will be fundamental for the following analysis. Drawing from the theories of Erving Goffman, Manuel Castells, Sherry Turkle and Tiziana Terranova—just to mention a few of the perspectives examined—*Melodia Festa* demonstrates how the virtual becomes a fundamental dimension to define identity in the modern age. By examining the concept of performance and the effects of information technology on personal identity she surveys the sociological questions addressed by media scholars, showing how the issue of identity today can undoubtedly be defined through a virtual component. Thus, as the author implies, an iteration of the self and the virtual is inseparable from a performance of identity related to the construction of an artificial personality.

Given this premise, the book then delves into the second macro-topic of the volume, technology. The author proposes a cultural reinterpretation of the concept, tracing the evolution of its innovations and demonstrating that literature has developed a conceptual framework in which identity paves the way for the reconceptualization of the body and inevitably questions the notion of self. As it unfolds, the chapter touches on key issues such as America's taste for progress, the machine-based aesthetic, the hybridity of the human, the redefinition of corporeity and the electrification of the body.

Delving into literary analysis, the author moves to consider the telegraph and the complications emerging from its use as it soon became the first communication system which questioned identity and, as Melodia Festa effectively proves, developed the first image of a 'wired' self. The first text under analysis, Ella Cheever Thayer's novella *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1879), proves particularly interesting for the purpose of this study. To the text, a story that prophesies modern online dating, Melodia Festa acknowledges the ability to have anticipated the construction of a wired identity through what is considered the true precursor of the internet. Following this thread, the book proceeds to examine Twain's well-known novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), underscoring how, as the character's identity is split between Arthurian England and modern America, the protagonist finds himself mysteriously transported in the past as he starts using telephone and telegraph through an evident performance of the self creating an artificial personality. Undoubtedly, the most compelling aspect of the second section of the book lies in the author's ability to consider the telegraph as the first example for the construction of a virtual persona produced by direct interaction with the machine. Of particular value is the opening to the third chapter where the author faithfully and accurately reconstructs the literature of the telegraph surfacing little-known texts and an unexplored branch of literature.

The volume proceeds chronologically following the progress of telecommunications in the 1980s, paying prominent attention to the telephone and the new media in a society oriented toward the digital revolution. Melodia Festa engages in a discussion that leads to an extensive examination of the convoluted relationship between postmodernist fiction and technological proliferation, paving the way to a pessimism that went hand in hand with the increase of new media. This section takes as its main point an investigation of the complex dichotomy between Self and Other (as the author implies, identity and the technological means) highlighted by David Foster Wallace in his debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987). As Melodia Festa suggests, the novel illustrates 'the system' (including the technological one) and the failures of subjectivity in the 1980s drawn from the postmodern and posthuman reality, in which the self

is consistently jeopardized by technological means approaching the digital revolution. Together with Wallace's analysis, the opening to this chapter is a good 'state of the art' on postmodernism which in part prefigures as a result of overwhelming technological growth.

In its last chapter, the book considers narratives set in the dystopian and digital scenario of computer addiction, Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). Here, Melodia Festa views both texts as the ultimate literary models of virtual identity constructed and, once more, 'performed' within the digital space. The author's compelling theorization on the notion of 'platformivity' concludes the premise of this study showing how both novels, set in the age of the Internet, illustrate a constant need to re-invent and perform the self on virtual platforms that, as the author maintains, even in literature become an artificial space of self-representation.

The texts and authors examined, ensconced in a solid critical and theoretical framework, show how personal identity, through its engagement with means of communication, has taken on a value of virtuality. This transformation leads to an evolution of identity in a constant performance illustrated by American literature through its display of the complex dynamics between the human and communication systems. In conclusion, this book is a significant contribution to the broad debate on technology in American studies. The author has the merit of delving into a wide-ranging and much debated field, shedding new light on little-known literary texts. Another credit to the volume goes to the capacity to demonstrate not only how the concept of virtual identity originated with the telegraph, but also how American literature has been able to record its evolution concerning human interaction with telecommunications. As the volume shows, literature becomes a useful decoding tool to examine the virtual self, a concept Melodia Festa underscores through a rigorous and extremely linear chronology of texts. The originality of the volume is also enhanced by a smooth, agile, and flowing prose and a fast-paced style that proposes an innovative approach on how we examine narratives in their depiction of communication systems. To this end, *The Evolution of Virtual Identity in American Literature* is a valuable and substantive contribution to our understanding of virtuality in American literature.

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