*A Day in the Life of Janet Smart*

*A Day in the Life of Janet Smart* is a novel in progress and, following *The Optical Effects of Lightning* (Wild Wolf Publishing 2011) it is also a mode of making and doing feminist new media and science and technology studies.

*A Day in the Life of Janet Smart* will intersect in multiple ways, online and offline with a mid-length, digital, print on demand academic monograph (also in progress) entitled *iMedia. The Gendering of Objects, Environments and Smart Materials* (Palgrave, forthcoming).

My aim is to enliven and enact a feminist critique of smart media and technologies that make disingenuous claims to individual human-centredness, care and cleverness while expanding, ad absurdum, the time frames for productivity and, especially, female labour. Janet’s day is quite a day. It bends, folds and extends into international time, differentiating her in and through her exhaustion.

Janet is generic and also very singular. She features in promotional videos for Microsoft, Google et al, peddling the new material of the day just as she did back in the 1950s when Monsanto placed her inside its home of the future – a 3D advert for plastic. Glass is the new plastic. Glass is in fact the new skin, protecting all data subjects by making everything clear. Glass cuts out the middleman, unmediating the world of infomatter. Janet moves through this world but her data stream is a double agent, a mole inside the newly merged Moogle Earthtechnics. Moogle Earthtechnics has exhausted the Earth’s resources and plans to move on to Mars. Janet operates within this spectre of extinction, working to implode a global expansion, working toward a future life without ME.

With apologies to Philip K. Dick,[[1]](#endnote-1) this is the start of Janet’s day:

**07.33 London/15.33 Seoul.**

Janet Smart was appreciating the quiet companionship of her car. Colin, as she sometimes called him, had greeted her by name at the airport car park, asked about her trip, registered her fatigue with the seat (heavy) and door (weak) sensors and tried his best to shut up. With Colin in control, Janet was able to check her makeup in the driver side pop up screen that displayed the time, time to destination and world clocks at recent and related locations. 7.33 a.m. 46 minutes, 24 seconds and counting. Seoul, 15.33 p.m. Beijing, 14.33 p.m. Kuala Lumpur, 14.33 p.m. Janet had been flying for 26 hours and 45 minutes including the stop in Tokyo. Her employer funded business class but not first class so she had the upright equivalent of bedhead and her pinched skin and slightly sunken eyes showed signs of mild dehydration. Still, she thought, as she retouched her lipstick and buffed her cheeks, not bad for someone staring down the barrel of middle age. The menopause was still a few years off and that proto-wattle could be dealt with if not by surgery then by those exercises she’d looked up. She opened her mouth as wide as she could, baring all of her teeth and stretching the sinews and muscles in her neck. That’s what got the job done, apparently. She opened wide and then made a tight o with her lips. She was supposed to repeat this at least fifty times every day. Just half of that made her face hurt. Janet ignored the rude young man in the car that overtook her and got as far as thirty when the purple light on Colin’s dashboard indicated that her seven-year-old daughter was calling.

As Chief Operator of the capital’s Pre-Consumer Agency, Janet was not often at home. She was returning from an international conference in Korea where pre-consumption had been widespread for over a decade. Their technologies were state-of-the art and their enforcement practices – Janet preferred to think of it as consumer consolidation – were hyper efficient. She was there to learn from them but what she’d come away with was a stronger sense of doubt. Her doubt did not concern the agencies themselves. Consumerism had been opposed in the past, she knew, and mostly by middle-class hippies and hypocrites who were content to deny others the stuff they took for granted. Real concerns, about natural resources and global warming had been lost, overtaken in a global fight between the haves and have-nots that had turned the market into a monolith that in turn had generated, for its own survival, the environment neutral devices they had today. It was certainly a twisted world in which insurance companies became the main funders of sustainable technology, but it was the world that Janet lived in and was therefore obliged to deal with. She remembered when that superstorm flattened half of Manhattan. Her partner at the time, the man who would become the father of her child, called her from work and told her to look at the news. She was busy and was short with him, but he insisted. She watched the deluge and the carnage on a loop, spellbound and horrified as a growing wall of water surged through Brooklyn, Queens and the Financial District. There was a value put on that, in lives, but also in dollars. Now, and this was her issue, she could no longer tell whether technologies existed to save lives or to save dollars. Who, or what exactly were they sustaining? The one thing she was sure of was that, present company excepted, they were not there merely for her own comfort, care or convenience.

‘Mum, I feel sick.’ Janet always felt weird when her face morphed in to Jennifer’s. It was the lack of correspondence if anything, the sense of a life to be lived differently, perhaps even tangentially. Janet didn’t mind that they were dissimilar. To the contrary, she loved her daughter’s willfulness, her sense of self, but she worried that her absence was the cause of it and of whatever effects might ensue.

‘I can see that. Has Zachary taken your temperature? You haven’t been experimenting again have you?’

‘Yes he has and I told you that. We’re making my wallpaper. I told you yesterday.’

‘That was the middle of the night for me darling: your night, anyway. What did Zachary say?’

‘A hundred and four and guess what? He wanted to get me a hot water bottle.’

‘Stupid machine!’

‘Mum! Don’t call him that. It was funny. I couldn’t sleep so he’s been helping me.’

Jennifer had known Zachary her whole life. He was her care robot and Janet struggled with that, trying but invariably failing to deal with her envy and resentment. He was not a humanoid robot but that didn’t seem to make any difference. Jennifer loved him and it was that simple. She understood clearly enough, thank you very much, that he was not human. What kind of slow tool adult would think she thought that? He ran on wheels for one thing and even the new robots with legs made funny noises when they walked, like wheezing and sighing, only not from their lungs because they didn’t have any. He couldn’t do things like sport but so what? She wasn’t in to that kind of thing anyway. Jennifer had resolutely refused to have Zachary replaced. Ever. On account of his phase two mechanics, Janet had indeed ruled out sport. His throwing arm, for example, was pneumatic and she was pretty sure he wasn’t waterproof. His reading voice had destroyed any nascent love of literature but Zachary had instilled in Jennifer a love of experimental science and he was currently nurturing her ambition to be a biodesigner. Together, they had been growing her bedroom wallpaper out of mosses, lichens and small plants. They’d been working on their own species with tiny, delicate orangey-red flowers that would protrude through holes in the double-layered photovoltaic glass containing capsules of nutrients activated by rainwater filtered down from the roof. Maybe Jennifer’s sickly hue was just a reflection of all that green stuff on the worktop in front of her.

‘Have you been eating properly? I’ve told him a hundred times that fruit loops don’t have fruit in them.’

‘He knows.’

‘Not really. You need to go back to bed. Try and sleep. I’ll message him and check that he’s told Mrs Thompson at school.’

‘Mrs Thompson will be notified at 08.30. Good morning Janet. How was your trip?’

‘Why haven’t you called the doctor, Zachary?’

‘Jennifer vomited into the Massashitsu Mark 1 automatic toilet at 06.42 and I will receive the full analysis in 29 minutes from now. Her mirror reading is not conclusive. However, I have reviewed the symptoms of mumps, chickenpox and three other juvenile afflictions and can report no measurable statistical correspondence.’

‘Great, so it’s probably the flu.’

Janet flicked away her personal screen and changed from self-drive to manual. As she did so, Colin’s windscreen displayed the route and remaining journey time.

The all-screen Augmented Reality Flags and Edifice Outlines had been set to Major Landmarks and Roadblocks Only but it kept defaulting to Retail, Fast Food and Coffee Outlets. For a moment, Janet could hardly see where she was going.

‘AR off! She ordered, as the amber light flashed to indicate an external call. Red was for her mother.

‘Yes, hello, who is this?’ She asked; failing to recognize the man she’d slept with on her third night in Seoul. She was bored with networking by then and he was young, fit and if the translation provided by her watch was anything to go by, really funny. He was also, unfortunately, smitten.

‘You are a bountiful woman Janice,’ she heard, moments before he had mimed the words. ‘I am think move to UK.’

‘I am think not,’ she muttered, cutting him off. ‘Bring up home AmI.’

As she waited for her house Ambient Intelligence System to respond, the faint, blurred film of an unromantic but energetic encounter played in her mind. She had obviously misread his ardor for lust since that is all she had signed up for that night. She remembered them both laughing as they slid down the gap between the twin luxury beds and was just retrieving the sensation of a taught buttock in her hand when the familiar intro signaled the readiness of her ambient intelligence.

Due to the well-documented problems of voice recognition, it had been necessary for Janet and Jennifer to invent names for the various household systems. If they couldn’t figure out what you were saying, they might at least know which of them you were saying it to. At the time though, Janet had not thought through the consequences of deferring the naming process to her then five-year-old.

‘Fart.’

Nothing.

‘Fart!’

‘I heard you say: fart. Is this correct?’

‘Yes, brilliant. Now put me through to the fridge, please.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t hear that. Could you repeat.’

‘Fart.’

‘Connecting.’

‘Good morning Janet, how was your trip?’ Bum asked, cheerfully. Pausing for an answer but not getting one, it proceeded to ask about her bathing requirements for the day. Janet would have killed for a nice hot bath. Briefly, she thought of filling one and pushing Zachary in. Then she thought of Jennifer. She ordered a bubble bath for her, one third full for 6.30 tonight and then managed eventually to get back to the fridge in order to make sure there was enough milk, juice and tomato soup. That left Crayon the curtains, Lolly the lighting and last but not least, the Heebie Jeebies.

‘Raise the heating in bedroom two by ten degrees.’ She instructed, hoping to sweat Jennifer’s virus out.

During her quality time with the house, the amber light on Colin’s dashboard had not stopped flashing. Now it began to alternate with a red one.

‘Jesus,’ she hissed. ‘Mum. How are you doing?’

‘Well dear, I thought I’d better get in touch as I haven’t heard from you for a few weeks. Hello. Can you hear me?’

Janet did consider de-selecting the red channel, but instead she did something worse.

‘Can you hear me dear?’

‘Oh yes. I hear. You are bountiful, bountiful woman and I never stop thinking you.’

‘Who is this?’

‘I am Li-Kuo. You are not Janice Smart?’

‘Yes. I’m Janice Smart. Have we met?’

Leaving him with that thought, Janet slipped out of the conference call and, still 8 minutes, 26 seconds from the agency, decided to check in quickly with Marvin.

‘Polly has something. Something big. But she’s playing up again. I’ve got a couple of names but she won’t give me anything else. Tell her, will you?’

‘I’ll be there soon. Please try and get along ‘til then. And the trip went well, thank you for asking.’

Jennifer’s line was flashing again.

‘Mum, what have you done to the heating? It’s boiling. Zachary already turned it up.’

‘I’m sorry. He didn’t tell me that. I’ll turn it down again.’

‘No. It’s ok. Don’t. The plants like it. There’s this one, it’s skinny and needed a stick to grow up. Its leaves were all tight shut but now they’re opening and they’re all sticky. Zachary said we should feed it. I have to go and get some flies and beetles and stuff from the air filters. They’re high up so I need the ladder. Its in the basement I think and you had the key in your room because, I dunno, you’ve got a secret down there or something.’

‘Drugs. Alcohol. Dismembered bits of robot.’ Janet said, under her breath.

‘What? Anyway, what should we do?’

‘Nothing. I’ll find the key for you tonight, although I’m afraid we might not have a ladder any more. If you’re good and get some rest I’ll bring you back a Mackie-D for your triffid. Ok?’

‘Ok. What’s a triffid?’

‘Nevermind. Gotta go. Love you lots.’

As Janet pulled in to her parking slot she had a sneaky listen to the ongoing conversation between her mother and her one-night stand. They seemed to be doing fine. She set Colin’s communication channel to auto and put him on charge. Her gait had been measured and classified (weary) by the time she got to the lift which, apart from its obligatory greeting, kept the chat down to a minimum until she reached the second floor. The entrance to the Pre-Consumer Agency was not very subtle but it was mood sensitive. The floor-to-ceiling screens profiled key personnel and ran interviews and endorsements from politicians and celebrity consumers. The usual cacophony of colours and voices was suddenly muted and Janet got past reception while Andre, the receptionist, was having a not very private discussion with his boyfriend in Germany. Inside the agency suite (only one of them called it a lab) she gave Marvin a warning glance, placed her mobile on her desk and was presented with the day’s work in childlike, supersized text and gratuitous graphics. First on the list was case 4,510,342; nearly half of the population of London, as the recent public relations campaign had trumpeted. Paul Briddel and Mary Sommer were, according to the confidential ident from Polly, procurement officers for IASA, the International Aeronautics and Space Agency.

**07.02 At the Agency**

‘Macaroons!’ Exclaimed Polly the Pre-Con, her expression setting to anxious-shocked. The intermediate states were fitted as standard to the Emos, but Polly was a first edition and overdue an upgrade.

‘Multi-coloured. In a box. Two layers. She’s…on a diet!’

‘Name?’ Marvin asked, without lifting his head from his flexiglass ebook. He was reading *The Time Machine* for the forty-third time. To him, it was more than a classic. It was a document, a manifesto for future travel that had been wrongly classified as fiction. Reluctantly, he selected menu and bookmarked page eighty-two, the part where the sun had grown red and large and the Earth was heading toward entropy. Polly hadn’t finished talking, but Marvin had already decided that on this occasion at least, she didn’t have anything interesting to say.

‘Zap bag containing two skinny fit tees and new season retro cords. Tag reads size twelve. She didn’t try them on. They’re not…going to fit! She only has 24 hours to exchange…’

‘Name!’ Marvin barked. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in the Emos and their superior predictive abilities. He had done courses in affective computing and data analytics at Imperial and had been drawn to work, for less money than he might have secured elsewhere, with the ground-breaking Pre-Cons, the mutant, emergent artificial life forms that were the unforeseen, almost miraculous outcome of massive data input, embodied emotional intelligence and good old-fashioned neural networks. Polly was a geek’s Goddess but what Marvin couldn’t stand was the breadth, the veritable Catholicism of her event filter. She might as well not have one. What women bought to eat or wear was of no earthly consequence. Correction: it was of only earthy consequence. Is that what the Pre-Consumer Agency was for? That’s not what they’d led him to believe at interview. Then, he’d been offered a vision of advanced technologies and ambient intelligent environments that would first cover the entire globe and then enable select groups to ship out to other planets. It wasn’t going to happen tomorrow of course but it certainly clarified their objective, namely to ensure that what the Pre-Con prophesied always came true. The marketers did what marketers do, but there was little point in people dreaming of their speech-enabled self-drive car if they didn’t actually buy one and if they didn’t buy one they were hampering, say, rocket development and robotics. The agencies owned the banks, so loans were no obstacle and it no longer mattered if the borrower defaulted because the agencies – there were four in England, but policy was led by London and the South East – could always compensate them selves. It was a vision and a goal that Marvin believed in and dedicated himself to. This is why he became frustrated when he felt that Polly’s talents and, indeed, time its self were being wasted.

The name Sal Evans appeared on Marvin’s desk screen and, as if to spite him, Polly projected Sal’s photo identification, complete with biometric and biographic information onto the display screens that dominated the room. Marvin pushed his chair back, stood slowly and walked toward Sal’s face, becoming, by degrees, more erect, more human. He really liked this bit, regardless of the potential purchaser. His gestures were direct, expansive and emphatic, like a conductor isolating members of his orchestra, holding some back, bringing others forward and lifting the whole for a crescendo of sound. Sal’s data, though of no importance to Marvin, scattered and combined, pulsing as he scanned it. With an authority and dexterity he lacked outside of his lab, Marvin drew Sal’s vital statistics, body mass index and recent medical history toward him so that they stood out from the transparent screen, and with his other hand he flung away the animated images of her youth, her memories of fashion and desirability that had encroached on her present and, like a subliminal advert, generated her intention to shop.

‘Should have gone to goggle-savers’, Marvin said as he brought up Sal’s half-scale hologram and spun it around faster and faster with his index finger.

‘Stop!’ Polly intervened, showing Marvin the pre-scene of Sal approaching the Pay Here desk.

‘Dispatch digital assistant,’ Marvin ordered, having already turned around and headed back to his desk and his book. He did not see the smiling assistant approach Sal and recognize her as one of Zap’s original fashion designers. Marvin hadn’t bothered to read her bio or, for that matter, her credit rating. There had been problems with the digital shop assistants, particularly with their tactful-truthful balance, but the job for the DA3 model was made easy by the fact that Sal was late for a board meeting, didn’t have time to search her bag for her reading goggles and had simply picked up the wrong sizes. The macaroons were for sharing. She was proud of her work, proud enough to wear it, and grateful for her assistant’s advice as well as the way she gave it. As Sal faded from Marvin’s screen, two new names appeared, and this time, Polly knew very well that he’d be interested, so she waited until Janet arrived, 27 minutes and 41 seconds from now.

**Marvin’s Mission**

Marvin should have been transfixed by what he was seeing. Instead, he fidgeted, folding and unfolding his arms, pacing this way and that, gazing at the screens and then at his feet. He had an annoying habit, well, several as far as Janet was concerned and one of them was chewing the skin at the corner of his nails. He did this systematically, both corners, working from thumb to little finger on his right hand and then his left. He was doing it now. The IASA officers were inside a show pod, a ME Bio-home living space designed and developed for the delayed 2024 one-way mission to inhabit Mars. In contrast to Marvin, Polly was enthralled-ecstatic.

‘It…*breathes* for them!’

‘Ok, keep your levels down,’ Marvin snapped. ‘She can see that for herself.’

Janet looked at the grassed glass interior walls and saw, with immediate impact what this was and what it might mean for her family.

1. *A Day in the Life of Janet Smart* is a parody, not of Dick’s *Minority Report* but of the way in which contemporary technology industries gender their realisations of it. Since my novel is not just about smart glass technology but the ecologies and economies it co-constitutes, I adapted Dick’s Pre-Con, placing Polly the Pre-Con inside a consumer agency that Janet runs. I like to think that Dick would be a tolerant host to this small act of parasitism or occupation. My stay is temporary but necessary – the fiction market does not easily accommodate women writers of literary science fiction, let alone those with feminist tendencies. Janet travels a lot, through time frames and also genres. She will guide us through Marvin’s world of sci-fi into the interior, character versus plot driven places and spaces of literary fiction and then out the other side. She does not know, because none of us do, what the other side looks like. That bit is the mystery, the thriller that she, on our behalf will also encounter. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)