



## Film Review: *Advantageous*

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What is the relationship between technological progress and personal happiness? How does physical identity, such as age, gender and race, affect one's relationship with technology? *Advantageous* (directed by Jennifer Phang, 2015) brings an intelligent and original standpoint to such questions. This independent film is about women of different ages, races, and statuses, and their experiences within familial and professional contexts in a technologically advanced future society. It confronts issues of age, gender and race in more depth than any other science fiction film I know of, and is reminiscent of the thought-provoking fiction of Ursula Le Guin.

In contrast to much other popular science fiction, *Advantageous* is intelligent enough to be neither a utopia nor a dystopia. Instead it is a balanced reflection of possible experiences of existence in a scientifically sophisticated society where many infrastructural factors are the same as those in our own society: gender and income inequality, market competition, and a nuclear family structure.

The story, in brief: Gwen Koh (Jacqueline Kim and Freya Adams) has a senior public relations position in a health facility that specializes in advanced medical procedures, including the transfer of consciousness to other bodies. Her role, as the “face of the company” is to promote these technologies. Since the company is diversifying to a different demographic, her own appearance is becoming unappealing, and she is considered too old for the target demographic. Hints are also given of her Asian ethnicity. Without the monetary reward of the position, Gwen will not be able to send her daughter, Jules (Samantha Kim), to the private school that will support her social success in this highly competitive and stratified society. Gwen is therefore forced by circumstances to undergo the consciousness transfer procedure in order to embody an image that is more aligned with the company's ideal – a “more universal” image, as the company director puts it.

The film explores two topics that are relevant to transhumanism: a) the role of physicality or the body in an era where technology has made it possible to overcome its importance; and b) the effect on identity of a transfer of consciousness from one body to another.

It deals with the first topic by representing a world with ubiquitous technology which, however, maintains many of the same values as our own. Characters are constantly talking on invisible phones and connected by holographic projection; yet they still live in recognisable homes, celebrate

Christmas, and have picnics. As in our own society, happiness is reached through access (to resources, knowledge, people, and objects). Also, as in our society, “access costs money,” making it a competitive commodity. A message that can be drawn from this situation is that, unless we specifically target inequalities and prejudices, technological progress alone will do nothing to mitigate the unhappiness that comes from them, and it may, in fact, amplify them. For example, Gwen and Jules’ neighbors cry routinely. “Upstairs woman or downstairs woman?” asks Gwen when she hears their sobs. “Both” replies Jules. Progress does not equal happiness in the world of the film.

In this society, identity is still defined in terms of the “primitive” criteria of gender, age, and race, and therefore all the problems associated with these restricted categories are present. Significantly, all the “transfer subjects” (those who chose to have their consciousness transferred) shown are women, suggesting that pressures to do with physical appearance are stronger for women in the film’s world, as indeed they are in our own. Also, Gwen is a mother and defines much of her identity in relation to this role. She eventually sacrifices herself for her daughter’s future: “There is nothing fiercer than a mother’s love,” says one of the company directors.

The narrative revolves around problems created by the nuclear family structure: Gwen does not speak to her father and does not allow him to see her daughter, indicating a history of abuse. Also, Gwen has an affair with her sister’s husband, introducing a further element of familial conflict. This way, gender is a pivotal element in the story. Gwen’s Asian ethnicity also brings race into picture. In the narrative, gender and race are not overcome by technology but are woven into it. Technology has not changed their reification and commodification; they are still used as signs of otherness and exclusion.

The film’s handling of the second topic, that of consciousness transfer and embodiment, reminds us of the phenomenological precept that consciousness is, in many ways, equal to embodiment. The events in the story underline that consciousness is not a substance that can be removed intact and placed in another “container.” Gwen undergoes the transfer procedure in a well-designed and aesthetically impactful sequence of scenes: electric impulses are transferred from her brain to the other body, which then assumes awareness in a dramatic coming to being.

Gwen 2.0 carries Gwen’s memories, but she is not the same person. The body’s instincts clash with the memories and create a different perception of the world – a new consciousness. Her relationship with her daughter, warm and affectionate before, becomes more distant and hesitant, reminding us that the body has its own memories and that affection is a physical reaction. Gwen 2.0 is a new creature rather than a continuation of the old one. The film, intelligently, does not judge or belittle this new creature.

*Advantageous* is a cerebral film which deals with difficult concepts in a thoughtful way without shortcuts. There are no stupid people (in contrast to much other popular science fiction). Gwen is creative (a musician), multilingual and skilled, and Jules is a gifted child. Similarly there are no villains. All the characters respond rationally to the opportunities and constraints created by their social system. This narrative strategy takes away the emphasis from individual intention to the relationship developed through interaction in a technologically infused social structure. It reminds us that power, happiness, and fulfilment are not intentional acts but reactions to relational contexts.

*Advantageous* is a sad film and perhaps its saddest element is that it shows no way to fight against the status quo. In its world, freedom has no role. However, rather than seeing this as a flaw in the narrative we could see it as a warning of how technologically controlled order can lead to a form of totalitarianism which can stifle even the possibility of seeing things differently (this is the film’s dystopian aspect). Gwen basically has no choice but to change her body or lose all status and power. In contrast to other consciousness transfer narratives, she does not carry out the procedure happily or with great hopes of fulfilment, but as a rational response to circumstances.

So, where does this lead us? The final scenes are ambivalent. There is a glimmer of hope in that all who were in a conflicted situation have now come together in cooperation – Gwen 2.0, Jules, Jules’s

school friends, and Gwen's estranged sister and brother in law. However, there is also a bittersweet element in that this cooperation is more a coming to terms and acceptance of a Foucauldian "order of things" than a wholehearted or enthusiastic embrace of a new way of life.