



# **Ideal Image and Technical Intervention: A Study of *Liking What You See: A Documentary* from the Perspective of Jung Archetype Theory**

Jiahe Yang

University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, China

Received: 05 Aug 2026; Received in revised form: 02 Sep 2026; Accepted: 05 Sep 2026; Available online: 11 Sep 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— *Ted Chiang's works have attracted widespread critical attention for their exploration of humanity and philosophical questions from the perspective of science fiction, with Story of Your Life being one of his most representative works. Among his writings, Liking What You See: A Documentary explores the complex relationship among appearance-based discrimination, social prejudice, and identity through the fictional technology of "calliagnosia." Adopting a pseudo-documentary narrative form, the work presents the changes that occur in both social aesthetic judgment and individual psychology following technological intervention. Accordingly, this thesis situates the work within the contexts of aesthetic archetypes and the development of fictional technology, examining how the "ideal image," as a deep-seated psychological structure, influences individual cognition and the operation of social structures. Drawing primarily on Carl Gustav Jung's archetypal theory, this thesis analyzes the archetype of the "ideal image" in the text. The discussion focuses on three major aspects. First, it examines the formation mechanism of the "ideal image" archetype within the narrative and the process through which it is socially reinforced. Second, it investigates how calliagnosia intervenes in and deconstructs the operation of the archetype by altering cognitive pathways.*



**Keywords**— *archetypal theory, ideal image, Liking What You See: A Documentary, science fiction*

## **I. RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

With the rapid development of technologies such as artificial intelligence and digital imaging, human modes of cognition are being reshaped through technological

intervention. In this process, technology has not only entered people's everyday lives but has also gradually penetrated the ways in which people perceive and understand "beauty." In contemporary society, physical

appearance continues to occupy an important position in the evaluation of individuals, while physical attractiveness exerts an invisible yet decisive influence on aspects such as career development and social interaction. This appearance-based mode of evaluation has consequently generated extensive discussions surrounding “lookism” and the ethical issues associated with it.

Against this social and technological background, Ted Chiang’s *Liking What You See: A Documentary* (hereafter referred to as *Liking What You See*) constructs a fictional social model highly centered on physical appearance and introduces the technology of “calliagnosia.” This technology deprives individuals of their ability to judge beauty and ugliness without altering visual information itself, instead interfering with their value judgments concerning physical appearance. By modifying the perceptual system, the technology temporarily eliminates people’s attention to appearance, thereby enabling individuals to focus more closely on the inner qualities of others.<sup>1</sup>

The story adopts a pseudo-documentary narrative form and presents different positions toward calliagnosia through multiple interviews, transforming “beauty” from an individual experience into a broader social issue. Within this framework, Ted Chiang not only reveals the socially constructed nature of aesthetic standards but also addresses a deeper question: Is human dependence on “beauty” merely the result of social conditioning, or is it rooted in a deeper psychological structure?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Previous Studies

At present, academic research on Ted Chiang’s works has mainly focused on narrative techniques, thematic

concerns, and technological ethics, with scholars both in China and abroad having produced a number of relevant studies.

In international scholarship, researchers have generally focused on the tension between technology and humanity in Ted Chiang’s works. Some studies have pointed out that his works reveal the fragility of human value systems through extreme technological settings, emphasizing that technological progress does not necessarily lead to ethical progress. Other scholars have analyzed his works from the perspective of narratology, arguing that his use of multiple perspectives, nonlinear structures, and the “pseudo-documentary” form effectively enhances the sense of realism and argumentative quality of his texts. In studies specifically concerned with *Liking What You See*, some scholars have regarded the work as a critique of appearance-based discrimination, arguing that the novel challenges a social evaluation system centered on physical appearance by imagining a “de-aestheticized” society.

In domestic scholarship, relevant studies have largely approached the work from the perspectives of thematic analysis and social criticism, examining how the novel reflects the commodification and mediatization of aesthetic standards in contemporary society. For instance, some studies have pointed out that the novel reveals the manipulation of “beauty” by advertising and the media, as well as individuals’ pursuit of the ideal image within consumer culture. Other studies have focused on the narrative form of the work, arguing that its interview-based structure strengthens the plurality and openness of the text, allowing different value positions to be presented alongside one another.

### 2.2 Theoretical Overview

This thesis is theoretically grounded in Carl Gustav Jung’s archetypal theory. Jung argues that the human

---

<sup>1</sup> Chiang, Ted. *Liking What You See: A Documentary*. [C] *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Vintage Books, 2002, 123–140.

psyche contains a “collective unconscious”<sup>2</sup> that transcends individual experience and encompasses universal archetypal structures. These archetypes are not concrete images but latent psychological patterns that manifest themselves through cultural symbols and behavioral practices, profoundly influencing individual cognition and modes of response.

On this basis, this thesis introduces the “ideal image” as its central analytical category. Although this concept is not an established category within Jung’s archetypal system, it can be defined as an archetypal structure continuously reinforced by social and cultural forces, centered on the imagination and normative construction of an “ideal state.” Specifically, the “ideal image” exists in an internalized form within the individual psyche. By linking physical appearance, value, and social recognition, it constitutes an important frame of reference through which individuals establish self-identity and evaluate others.

Focusing on this archetype, this thesis primarily analyzes the appearance-oriented mechanisms of value judgment and the aesthetic biases reflected in the novel, while examining the influence of technological intervention on the operational pathways of this archetype.

### 2.3 Research Methods, Objectives, and Significance

The primary research method of this study combines literary analysis with Jungian archetypal theory. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this study examines the “ideal image” archetype, technological intervention in aesthetics, and their psychological effects on individuals and society in Ted Chiang’s *Liking What You See*.

First, literary analysis is employed to examine the plot structure, characterization, and symbolic expressions of the text, with particular attention to how calliagnosia influences aesthetic judgment and social interaction. The study also analyzes the symbolic meaning of “beauty” and its transformation under technological intervention.

Second, Jungian archetypal theory is used to examine the “ideal image” as an internalized evaluative structure and its influence on individual cognition, social standards, and self-identity. The study further explores how technological intervention disrupts the archetype’s operational pathways and produces psychological and social instability.

Overall, this thesis aims to explore the interaction among technology, archetypes, and social structures, thereby deepening the understanding of the text’s underlying implications and contemporary significance.

## III. THE MECHANISM OF ARCHETYPAL PROJECTION IN CHARACTER DIFFERENCES

In *Liking What You See*, Ted Chiang does not explicitly theorize the “ideal image” archetype; instead, he illustrates its individual projection through the differentiated narratives of multiple interviewees. From a Jungian perspective, archetypes are not merely latent structures within the collective unconscious but can be externalized through projection onto others, social norms, and one’s own identity. Consequently, individuals may conform to, deviate from, or fluctuate in relation to the “ideal image” archetype according to their social positions, experiences, and physical conditions<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, the differences among the characters are not simply differences in personality or attitudes toward calliagnosia, but distinct manifestations of the same archetype at the psychological level. More importantly, these differences reveal how the “ideal image” is internalized as part of self-identity and subsequently produces emotions such as anxiety, inferiority, superiority, and confidence.

### 3.1 Beneficiaries of the Archetype: Identification and

<sup>2</sup> Jung, C. G. *Man and his symbols*[M]. 1964

<sup>3</sup> Jung, C. G. (1969). The archetypes and the collective unconscious[C]. In *Collected works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9*. Princeton University Press. 3-41

### Maintenance (Annika)

The character represented by Annika Lindstrom presents a typical state of an “archetypal conformer,” in which the individual’s physical appearance closely corresponds to the socially constructed “ideal image” and consequently receives continuous positive feedback in reality. In her account, appearance is not merely an objective characteristic but also a social resource that can be actively utilized. She explicitly acknowledges that her appearance attracts greater attention from members of the opposite sex. Rather than avoiding such attention, however, she psychologically identifies with it and derives pleasure and a sense of superiority from it.

In this process, the mechanism of psychological feedback is particularly significant. At the emotional level, Annika experiences a sustained sense of confidence and superiority. Because her appearance continuously receives positive evaluations from others, these evaluations are repeatedly reinforced through social interaction and gradually transformed into a stable system of self-evaluation. Jung points out that when the ego becomes consistent with a particular archetypal structure<sup>4</sup>, it produces a smooth flow of psychic energy, manifested in confidence, certainty, and affirmation of one’s own value. Annika is situated precisely within such a state.

Second, at the cognitive level, she naturalizes this advantage, regarding “beauty” itself as a legitimate difference that should be preserved. This process of naturalization indicates that the archetype has been transformed from an external norm into an internal belief. Her opposition to calliagnosia is precisely based on this internalized structure: in her view, the technology is not a neutral tool for social regulation, but rather a deprivation of her “inherent advantage.” This mode of reasoning demonstrates that the “ideal image” archetype is no longer

understood by her as a cultural construction open to question, but instead as a form of “natural right.”

Annika’s case demonstrates that when an individual continuously benefits from the “ideal image” archetype, the archetype is not only identified with but also actively maintained. This process reveals that the archetype functions not merely as a psychological structure but also as part of an interest structure, whose stability derives in part from the tangible benefits it provides in reality.

### 3.2 The Marginalized by the Archetype: Questioning and Resistance (Warren)

In sharp contrast to Annika is the character Warren Anway. His experience reveals how the “ideal image” archetype is transformed from a “norm” into an “oppressive structure” when an individual deviates from it. In the novel, Warren explicitly expresses dissatisfaction with his own appearance and even develops an avoidance of his own reflection, at one point becoming unwilling to look in the mirror. This detail is psychologically significant, as it indicates that the individual has already established a negative self-representation and developed a persistent negative evaluation of his own appearance.

Within Warren’s psychological structure, two typical consequences of archetypal internalization can be clearly observed.

The first is anxiety. Because appearance-based evaluation continuously exists in social interactions, he displays heightened sensitivity and nervousness when interacting with others, particularly members of the opposite sex. This anxiety does not originate from any specific situation but constitutes a structural emotion, arising from the persistent awareness that the self does not conform to the prevailing standard.

The second is inferiority. Inferiority is not simply a low evaluation of the self but a deeper structure of identity in which the individual regards himself as an existence that is “below the standard.” In Warren’s case, he does not

---

<sup>4</sup> Jung, C. G. Psychological aspects of the persona[C].In *Collected works of C.G. Jung, Volume 7: Two essays on analytical psychology*. Princeton University Press.1953.1-96

reject the legitimacy of the “ideal image.” Instead, he accepts this standard internally and uses it as a basis for negating himself. This demonstrates that the archetype has been internalized, but exists in a negative form.

It is precisely under this psychological structure that calliagnosia exerts a significant liberating effect on Warren.

Therefore, Warren’s support for calliagnosia is not merely a choice of value position but also an inevitable consequence of his psychological structure. The transformation he experiences reveals a crucial characteristic of archetypal influence: it is highly position-dependent. When an individual is unable to obtain benefits from an archetype, that archetype ceases to function as an “ideal” and instead becomes a form of social pressure that must be resisted.

### **3.3 The Archetype in a State of Flux: Reconstruction of Identity (Tamera)**

Tamera Lyons provides a more complex case. Rather than remaining stably in a state of either conformity or deviation, she undergoes a process of transformation in self-identity under different cognitive conditions. This process reveals the dynamic nature of archetypal influence as well as its characteristic of “re-absorption.”

When using calliagnosia, Tamera is unable to perceive traditional distinctions in physical appearance. As a result, the influence of the “ideal image” archetype within her cognitive structure is significantly weakened. During this stage, her self-identity is established primarily through dimensions other than appearance. However, after the technology is deactivated, she gradually becomes aware of the advantages of her own appearance and confirms them through the feedback of others. This process of “becoming aware” is essentially the process through which the archetype re-enters her cognitive system.

In Tamera’s case, this process is accompanied by

significant psychological changes.

At the positive level, she gradually develops a sense of confidence. Similar to Annika, when an individual discovers that they conform to the standards of the “ideal image,” they receive positive feedback from society. Such feedback is internalized as self-affirmation and consequently strengthens confidence.

However, unlike Annika, Tamera’s transformation has a distinctly “acquired” and socially constructed character. She did not initially regard appearance as a central dimension of her self-identity. Therefore, when re-entering the archetypal system, she demonstrates a stronger strategic tendency. For example, she begins attempting to utilize her appearance-related advantages to obtain benefits within intimate relationships. This behavior indicates that she does not completely “identify with” the archetype but instead, to some extent, “utilizes” it.

At the latent level, this process may also be accompanied by new forms of anxiety. Having experienced a state in which appearance was free from evaluation, she is more likely to recognize the social nature of appearance-based advantages. This reflective cognition produces a sense of instability in her relationship with such dependence even as she enjoys the benefits provided by the archetype. This is also one of the reasons why she ultimately chooses to activate calliagnosia again.

Therefore, Tamera’s case reveals several important characteristics of the archetype. First, the archetype is not fixed but can be activated or inhibited as cognitive conditions change. Second, the archetype possesses a characteristic of “re-absorption”: even when individuals temporarily escape its influence, they may be incorporated into its structure again once they re-enter the relevant social context. Third, the internalization of an archetype does not produce a single psychological outcome; rather, it may generate a complex psychological structure involving confidence, strategic behavior, and latent anxiety.

#### IV. TECHNOLOGICAL INTERVENTION AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE “IDEAL IMAGE” ARCHETYPE

##### 4.1 Technology Does Not Alter Reality but Changes Cognitive Pathways

The narrative repeatedly emphasizes that calliagnosia does not alter the physical appearance of the objective world, nor does it impair individuals' basic ability to visually recognize others. Individuals can still clearly perceive facial structures, but they are unable to evaluate these features as either “beautiful” or “ugly.” In the novel, neurologist Joseph Weingarten provides an explicit explanation of this mechanism: the technology does not operate on the visual system itself but interferes with the process through which individuals assign value to visual information. He states, “Calliagnosia itself does not eliminate appearance discrimination. In a sense, all it can do is make different appearances equally attractive<sup>5</sup>.”

This statement demonstrates that the technology does not alter the “object” itself but rather changes the way in which the “object is understood.” This point closely corresponds to Jungian archetypal theory: archetypes do not directly exist within the external world but instead endow external objects with meaning through human perception and psychological structures. Therefore, when cognitive pathways are altered, the symbolic meaning carried by an external object can undergo a fundamental transformation even though the object itself remains unchanged.

The immediate consequence of this transformation is the disruption of the chain of “appearance—emotional response—value judgment.” Aesthetic preferences that would originally arise instantaneously are delayed or even eliminated, and individuals can no longer rely on appearance to rapidly construct social perceptions. This

transition from “immediate judgment” to an “absence of judgment” not only changes individual perceptual experience but also weakens the point of entry through which the archetype operates in reality.

The essence of calliagnosia is not to “eliminate the archetype,” but to prevent it from functioning in specific contexts by interrupting its operational pathway. This setting not only reveals the malleability of aesthetic judgment but also further demonstrates that the social power of the “ideal image” does not derive from its content itself, but from the mechanism through which it can be continuously activated and reproduced.

##### 4.2 The Deconstruction of the Archetype

In situations where calliagnosia is not used, individuals' perception of others usually demonstrates a distinct “aesthetic orientation.” At the moment of visual contact, physical appearance immediately triggers aesthetic judgment, which subsequently generates emotional responses and value associations. This process is highly automated and reflects the immediate activation of the “ideal image” archetype at the perceptual level<sup>6</sup>. However, once technology intervenes, this aesthetic orientation is systematically removed and replaced by a structural state of “cognitive blankness.”

When recalling her experience of using the technology, Tamera Lyons points out that, under this condition, they were “unable to judge whether someone was attractive.” She further describes how, when watching a film with friends, she was unable to distinguish differences in the characters' appearances and could only rely on narrative clues, such as the identity of the protagonist, to infer who was considered “more attractive” in the traditional sense. This experience demonstrates that aesthetic judgment is not simply absent but is instead replaced by a form of “indirect reasoning.” Such a transformation means that individual perception shifts

<sup>5</sup> Chiang, Ted. *Liking What You See: A Documentary*. [C] *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Vintage Books, 2002, 123–140

<sup>6</sup> Jung, C. G. *Man and his symbols*[M]. 1964

from “direct evaluation” toward cognitive construction under conditions of incomplete information.

This transformation directly affects patterns of social behavior. When appearance no longer provides effective information, individuals must rely on other dimensions to construct their perceptions of others. However, this process is not entirely positive. As the debate within the novel points out, “Calliagnosia takes away the bad things, but it takes away the good things too.” This statement reveals the dual nature of technological intervention: while weakening appearance-based discrimination, it also reduces individuals’ opportunities to obtain positive feedback through their physical appearance. From a Jungian perspective, this means that the archetype exists not only as an oppressive structure but also performs the function of providing recognition and meaning.

## V. CONCLUSION

The “ideal image” in *Liking What You See* functions as a structurally stable archetypal mechanism rather than merely a cultural preference. Through socialization, it becomes internalized within the individual psyche, linking physical appearance with value judgment, social identity, and hierarchical structures.

Technological intervention primarily affects the cognitive pathways through which the archetype operates rather than the archetype itself. By interrupting the connection between visual perception and aesthetic judgment, calliagnosia weakens the influence of appearance on social evaluation. However, the restoration effect shows that once the technology is removed, the original aesthetic mechanism can quickly resume. This suggests that the archetype, as part of the collective unconscious, remains highly resilient.

The novel also reveals the dual effects of technological intervention. While technology can reduce appearance-based discrimination by changing cognitive

conditions, it may also create new instability by weakening existing symbolic structures. Its effects therefore depend on its interaction with psychological mechanisms and social structures.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that aesthetic judgment is rooted not only in cultural construction but also in deeper cognitive and psychological structures. Although technology can alter the way the “ideal image” archetype operates, it cannot easily eliminate its underlying foundation. Understanding technological and social change therefore requires attention not only to technological functions but also to the psychological structures underlying human identity and social order.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*[M]. Sage Publications, 1992.
- [2] Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*[M]. 3rd ed., Princeton UP, 2008.
- [3] Chiang, Ted. *Liking What You See: A Documentary*. [C] *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Vintage Books, 2002, 123–140.
- [4] Gergen, Kenneth J. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*[M]. Basic Books, 2000.
- [5] Jung, C. G. Psychological aspects of the persona[C]. In *Collected works of C.G. Jung, Volume 7: Two essays on analytical psychology*. Princeton University Press. 1953.1-96
- [6] Jung, C. G. *Man and his symbols*[M]. 1964.
- [7] Jung, C. G. (1969). The archetypes and the collective unconscious[C]. In *Collected works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9*. Princeton University Press. 3-41