Marcel-André Abraham

Prisoners of a Digital World

Surveillance, Selfhood and Alienation in 21st-Century Dystopian Fiction

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To everyone who ever believed in me and encouraged me in my endeavours

Conviction and confidence can move mountains.

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1. Introduction

> "Just as industrial civilization flourished at the expense of nature and now threatens to cost us the Earth, an information civilization shaped by surveillance capitalism and its new instrumentarian power will thrive at the expense of human nature and will threaten to cost us our humanity" (Zuboff 11f.).

Dystopian novels often remind us to be very cautious. They help us see the imminent dangers of present circumstances. They even tend to predict what might happen in the coming decades. From the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century to the Cold War to the globalised digital age of the twenty-first century – dystopian novels comment on past, present and (potential) future developments. Some of the most famous dystopias, namely the ones introduced in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), are remarkably close to the world we live in right now. In fact, both novels are often claimed to be premonitions of our time. From the hedonistic standard of living and complacent human behaviour in *Brave New World* to the permanent surveillance made possible by technology in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – both novels appear to be of frightening relevance in the contemporary digital world we are immersed in.

With evermore connection and time spent online, the digital sphere increasingly engulfs our lives. Information travels at lightspeed to people's smart phones, tablets

or computers. In countries all over the world, democracy is under severe attack by right-wing groups who employ and instrumentalise fake news and conspiracy myths. The Big Five – Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft – have already accumulated a giant amount of data from billions of users, and continue to do so. In 2013, Edward Snowden warned us of the kind of surveillance that is conducted behind our backs and without our consent. The rising 'visibility' of individuals in digital networks and the underlying coercive, performative aspect has led to an increase in psychological afflictions such as online addiction, burn-out and depression. A friend of mine once complained that I did not look at my mobile phone every 15 minutes to respond to his messages. The digital age, therefore, not only shapes our lifestyle, it impacts our consciousness. Whether we like it or not – we are all, in one way or another, affected by the digital realm that surrounds us.

Super Sad True Love Story (2010) by Gary Shteyngart, *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers and *Perfidious Albion* (2018) by Sam Byers are more recent dystopian novels that all saw the light of day within the last decade, and indeed can be regarded as digital dystopias (cf. Rowley's term 'digital dystopia') due to their hyper-present settings, and their strong focus on cyberspace, big data and surveillance. They set out to extrapolate – with a very satirical[1] eye – what mankind's increasing dependency on technology and exposure to surveillance in the contemporary digital era might lead to.

In the digital age, surveillance has become multi-faceted and very complex. The Panopticon, the architectural model for a prison developed by Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth century, and later revisited and augmented by Michel Foucault in the 1970s, has long been a popular metaphor for surveillance due to its binary logic (observer and observed/watchtower and cells) and the perceived panoptic effects that supposedly permeate (as famously argued by Foucault) different areas of society. Nowadays, scholars from the academic field of surveillance studies claim that surveillance has become decentralised (Haggerty), liquid (Bauman), consumer-directed (Gandy, Poster), synoptic (Mathiesen), and strongly integrated in the social spheres of everyday life (Marwick).

In the twenty-first century, proliferating digital surveillance practices complicate the notion of autonomous selfhood. Shoshana Zuboff even goes a step further and claims that contemporary surveillance technologies have led to a very sophisticated commercial project which she denotes as 'surveillance capitalism'. Its underlying power that is aimed at modifying our behaviour she calls 'instrumentarianism' (cf. 8). According to Zuboff, it threatens "to exploit and ultimately to suffocate the

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[1] Satire is a stylistic trope employed by many literary dystopias – both old and new. By way of exaggerating contemporary trends from the specific time periods and societies in which they were written, dystopian texts not only try to point out to us the inherent absurdities within such developments but also defamiliarize the potentially dangerous aspects so that they become all the more obvious.

individually sensed inwardness that is the wellspring of personal autonomy and moral judgment" (444). For Simon Willmetts, autonomy is not simply a capability which is automatically inherent in every person, as Kant used to claim (cf. 279). "Rather, autonomy is brought into being, preserved, shaped, and dependent on society, and, reciprocally, a just society depends on that preservation of a space for individual autonomy" (ibid).

At the same time, information (and surveillance) technologies also foster a 'data economy' in which "human life becomes, in a sense, peripheral to data life" (Dolezal 219). Such a digital culture may lead to human alienation, as is already clearly visible in human behaviour – which appears to have become more distant and more self-centred than ever before despite the claim of accelerated interconnection in the contemporary digital age that is often made by tech companies.

In my thesis, I will set out to analyse the recently imagined dystopias by Shteyngart, Eggers and Byers. The focus will be laid on the three main aspects of surveillance, selfhood and alienation, i.e. how surveillance (technology) functions, and how it impacts selfhood and fosters alienation. "We cannot fully reckon with the gravity of surveillance capitalism and its consequences unless we can trace the scars they carve into the flesh of our daily lives" (Zuboff 22). To closely investigate the effects of surveillance capitalism on individuals in high-tech societies, we can treat the protagonists of the novels as examples.

The main concern of this thesis is thus as follows: In media and internet saturated societies in which proliferating digital surveillance practices are pervasive elements of everyday life, and in which the boundaries between public and private, online and offline, as well as real and artificial more and more collapse, as showcased in *Super Sad True Love Story*, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion*, the citizens are at risk of becoming the inmates of a digital Panopticon, or in other words, metaphorical prisoners of the digital realm. I will utilise the novels as examples in order to prove, therefore, the likelihood that the digital dream may just as well turn into a nightmare (and partly already has), as argued by Zuboff. This central research objective is further supported by three individual theses.

First thesis: The societies in the three novels are strongly built on dataveillance, consumer surveillance and social surveillance, and thereby display many similarities to current surveillance practices of the digital age. The protagonists are subjected to mechanisms of social sorting as well as panoptic and synoptic structures, and can thus be interpreted to be likewise affected by an 'instrumentarian' power, as described by Zuboff. In addition, the willing participation of the protagonists in terms of submitting personal data further enhances this subjection, and is an example for how 'technologies of the self' (another term introduced by Foucault) can converge with the external mechanisms of coercion induced by surveillance.

Second thesis: Constantly immersed in the digital realm, and exposed to coercive surveillance on the one hand and absorbed by their virtual identities on the other hand, the protagonists are significantly deprived of autonomous selfhood. In a Goffmanian sense, they have no backstage where they can retreat from the

performative demands of the digital world. In addition, it is the construction of human identity as contingent on data assemblages that deprives the protagonists of personal agency and reduces their embodied selfhood to numerical material in electronic databases.

Third thesis: Information (and surveillance) technologies have alienating and dehumanising effects on the protagonists. It is evident that their lives are permeated by forms of surveillance that can be referred to as 'liquid' (cf. Bauman), i.e. pragmatics conveyed through digital media and electronic devices (which simultaneously also function as surveillance devices) that manage to influence their perception and thinking. In the novels, human relationships are of a rather artificial nature, and are characterised by a fatal loss of authenticity and the ability to communicate on an interpersonal level. These developments are further fostered by a technophile post- and/or transhuman movement in society that replaces the old anthropological conception of man with new ideals of post-/transhumanism.

Following this introduction, Chapter II will contextualise the digital age and elaborate on how current developments may not only foster human alienation but also challenge the notion of autonomous selfhood. I will especially refer to Ronald Deibert's *Black Code: Surveillance, Privacy, and the Dark Side of the Internet*, Luna Dolezal's *Human Life as Digitised Data Assemblage* and Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism – The Fight for the Future at The New Frontier of Power*, as well as works by other scholars to critically discuss the Internet, big data, commercialisation, the growing influence of social media companies, and the perceived impacts these aspects have on the life of individuals.

Chapter III will attempt to theorise surveillance in the digital era by engaging in a critical discussion of popular surveillance paradigms from the academic field of surveillance studies. Foucault's panopticism and Bentham's utilitarian prison mark the starting point of this investigation, followed by critical reinterpretations of the Panopticon/panopticism, i.e. Oscar Gandy's 'panoptic sort', Mark Poster's 'Superpanopticon' and Thomas Mathiesen's 'synopticism', as well as theories regarding the contemporary condition of everyday surveillance and control in society, such as Gilles Deleuze's conception of 'societies of control', Alice Marwick's notion of 'social surveillance', and Zygmunt Bauman's and David Lyon's discussion of 'liquid surveillance'. At the same time, Bentham's and Foucault's ongoing relevance with regard to the exercise of panoptic power on individuals will be explained. Foucault's later concept of governmentality and especially his notion regarding 'technologies of the self' helps to include individual agency – something that is usually neglected in surveillance paradigms – to pinpoint how individuals can react to external mechanisms of coercion they are subjected to. It is the aim of this theoretical chapter to build a viable framework that can be utilised to analyse contemporary digital surveillance, and consequently be applied to the novels.

Chapter IV will elaborate on the status of dystopian fiction in the digital age. At first, the focus will be laid on the two famous dystopias by Huxley and Orwell, and how they have envisioned surveillance and its corresponding effects on individuals.

Subsequently, I will also specifically point out the legacy of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, I will briefly introduce the digital dystopia as a new subgenre of contemporary dystopian fiction, as argued by Robyn N. Rowley in *Stranger Than Fiction: Locating the Digital Dystopia in Contemporary Fiction*.

Chapter V, the main body of this thesis, deals with the analysis of *Super Sad True Love Story*, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion*. It is divided into different subchapters to pinpoint how the three aspects of surveillance (V.1), selfhood (V.2) and alienation (V.3) interrelate. Subchapter V.4 will elaborate on the endings of the novels and how they depict the protagonists as trapped in worlds of no escape, and consequently advocate the need for privacy in the digital world. Wherever possible and appropriate during subchapters V.1 to V.4, brief comparisons will be drawn to the dystopias imagined by Huxley and Orwell. Chapter VI will sum up the main findings of this thesis and possibly raise questions/points for further research.

2. The Digital Age: Immersive Cyberspace, Data Harvesting, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Power of Social Media

It is safe to say that, during the last two decades, Western civilization has entered a completely new world. From the beginning of the twenty-first century up until today, humankind has progressively stepped into a new sphere, i.e. the digital age, or, the information age, as some people like to call it. Technological progress has brought us computers, smart phones, and most importantly, the Internet. The recording of data has become simple, fast and reliable. Information is travelling at lightspeed to people's mobile phones, laptops or tablets. Overcoming large geographical distances is one of the great advantages of modern technology. In addition, advocates of the Internet claim that the modern individual has never been so interconnected before.

Yet everything comes at a cost. These vast technological advancements pose many challenges to mankind in the twenty-first century, with technology "colonizing more and more life areas and leaving intact fewer and fewer untouched 'indigenous' areas of 'private' existence" (Bauman/Lyon 9). In addition, Deibert claims: "The extraordinary applications that we now use to communicate may feel like tools of liberation, but the devil is in the details" (7). Never before have individuals been so overloaded with information. Many people have become addicted to being online and the constant display of the seemingly 'perfect

body'/'perfect life' on social media has led to an increase in social anxiety and depression. "In fact, the psychological tsunami of social comparison triggered by the social media experience is considered unprecedented" (Zuboff 462). Seen from this angle, social networks are "in effect, dangerously *anti*-social" (Bode 39). Technology is thus able to connect people, but at the same time also able to alienate them. For Zuboff, being digitally connected is neither "intrinsically pro-social" nor "naturally tending toward the democratization of knowledge" (9). The Internet is, therefore, by no means a guarantor of freedom and personal expression.

Ronald J. Deibert critically examines cyberspace in his monograph *Black Code: Surveillance, Privacy, and the Dark Side of the Internet*. He raises the important and justified question: Do not the machines we use daily already determine our behaviour to a significant extent? (cf. 6). "Never before have we been surrounded by so much technology upon which we depend, and never before have we also known so little about how that technology actually works" (6). What makes it all so dangerous is that while cyberspace grows increasingly complex, most people regard it as "a mysterious unknown that just 'works'" (7) and thus simply take it for granted. By the end of 2012, it was estimated that there were 10 billion Internet-connected devices worldwide (cf. 10). "Cyberspace has become what researchers call a 'totally immersive environment,' a phenomenon that cannot be avoided or ignored" (10).

The desire for big data is without limit, notes Deibert (cf. 60). After 9/11 especially, data collection and monitoring have increased immensely due to the felt powerlessness at the time and the perceived failure to prevent the catastrophe from happening (cf. 64). But another reason certainly manifests itself in commercial interests. As a matter of fact, an increased digitalization of everyday life is also said to correlate with a neoliberal market agenda. "Technologisation has been coupled with a correlative commercialisation, which have both taken place against the backdrop of increased privatisation and the dismantling of the welfare state as a result of the spread of neoliberal doctrines and practices" (Dolezal 219).

Data is collected by private entities with commercial interests such as social networks, online shops or insurance companies, or public-sector actors such as intelligence and security services. It may also be handed over or sold from public-sector institutions to private companies, or vice versa (cf. Manokha 227).

> The existence of digital platforms, many of which have amassed a gigantic amount of data (particularly social networks, with Facebook being an absolute leader in collecting data on more than 1.5 billion of its users as well as non-users whose online activity it also tracks [Rubin 2018]), creates an incentive for other actors (commercial entities that also rely on data for their profit-making activities as well as non-business actors, such as security services) to get access to it. (228)

The immense data harvesting conducted by digital platforms raises many existential questions in terms of the state of mankind. Luna Dolezal brings up the important question of what happens if human life becomes peripheral to data life, i.e. the

"potentially pernicious consequences of biometric data standing in for personal identity, raising questions about privacy, wellbeing, self-tracking and the status of human life in the wake of commercial digital technologies which reduce aspects of embodied life to data sets that can be quantified, monitored and compared" (219). There already is a societal trend in terms of digital technology and biometric instruments that has led to a reassessment of the human body: The 'Quantified Self Movement' (cf. Reichert 65-68, Dolezal 221). What a lot of critics already feared in the 80s, namely a potential alienation through technology ("Entfremdung durch eine 'seelenlose Technologie'"; Knorre 18), has thus reached a whole new dimension in the twenty-first century. In fact, Dolezal likewise notes the "potential for alienation, corporate control and compromised privacy that arises when social media and self-tracking technologies become normalised, and institutionalised, aspects of our personal and professional landscapes" (219).

Once human life gets reduced to data sets, human beings start to exist merely as 'data doubles' (cf. Willmetts 274). Furthermore, as Haase claims, categorical identities take away a significant amount of agency from individuals (cf. 87). For exactly these reasons, a potential reduction of human identity to digitised data assemblages poses a great threat for autonomy. "What gets lost in this uncanny transference of the self into data is autonomy, both in terms of the individual's capacity to define their own identity (rather than being defined by their data) and in the sense of a domain of personal experience and private emotion that is inaccessible to others and beyond the reach of public scrutiny" (Willmetts 274).

Shoshana Zuboff, in her monograph *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism – The Fight for the Future at The New Frontier of Power*, tries to give an account of the exact consequences for human life that a highly commercialised digital sphere will likely lead to in the long run. She argues that the so-called 'digital dream' has already gone rogue by turning into an immensely sophisticated commercial project which she denotes as 'surveillance capitalism'. According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism is a unilateral operation with the goal of shaping and predicting our behaviour in order to generate profit (cf. 7f.). She claims that automated machine processes "*shape* our behavior at scale" and that "the goal now is to *automate* us" (8). Our behaviour is modified by use of a new species of power that she calls 'instrumentarianism'. "Instrumentarian power knows and shapes human behavior toward others' ends. Instead of armaments and armies, it works its will through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of 'smart' networked devices, things, and spaces" (8). In a digitally immersed world, human beings are increasingly susceptible to this highly sophisticated mechanism of power.

Deibert notes the enormous expansion of surveillance, but also our unawareness: "Today, surveillance systems penetrate every aspect of life, and individuals can be mapped in space and time with an extraordinary degree of precision. All of this has emerged with our generally unwitting consent, but also with our desire for fame, consumption, and convenience" (68). This plays right into the hands of the surveil-

lance capitalists. "Our dependency is at the heart of the commercial surveillance project" (11), says Zuboff.

Most importantly, she concludes that surveillance capitalism is a rogue force that threatens individual autonomy and the possibility of democracy (cf. 11). The development and further growth of surveillance capitalism thus clearly runs contrary to the ideal of the empowering web. Instead, surveillance capitalism threatens to fully engulf our lives and to cost us our humanity (cf. 11f.).

> Surveillance capitalism is the puppet master that imposes its will through the medium of the ubiquitous digital apparatus. I now name the apparatus *Big Other*: it is the sensate, computational connected puppet that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies human behavior. Big Other combines these functions of knowing and doing to achieve a pervasive and unprecedented *means of behavioral modification*. (Zuboff 376)

Zuboff points out that social networks possess the ability to manipulate human behaviour with tuning techniques such as priming and suggestion (cf. 436). She sharply criticises Internet companies such as Facebook and Google:

> Surveillance capitalists work hard to camouflage their purpose as they master the uses of instrumentarian power to shape our behavior while evading our awareness. That is why Google conceals the operations that turn us into the objects of its search and Facebook distracts us from the fact that our beloved connections are essential to the profit and power that flow from its network ubiquity and totalistic knowledge. (443)

But Zuboff is not the only scholar who sees the growing influence of monopoly Internet companies very critically. The idea of the 'Frightful 5' taking over the world – namely the five most powerful Internet companies Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft – was first introduced by the New York Times in 2017 (cf. Knorre 26). Metaphors such as 'techno-feudalism' or 'digital imperialism' make clear that the monopolies of these companies are perceived as enormous threats (cf. 27). „So wurden die einstigen Lieblinge des digitalen Zeitalters in atemberaubender Geschwindigkeit zu dunklen Mächten einer dystopischen Zukunft" (cited in: Knorre 27). Zuboff herself, however, identifies Facebook and Google (and to an extent also Microsoft) as the most essential players in the field of surveillance capitalism, and perceives Amazon to be on the verge of it, whereas she interprets Apple as still refraining from it (cf. 9, 22-24).

The social and existential implications of surveillance capitalism's imposed mechanisms of behavioural modification are immense: "Instrumentarianism reimagines society as a hive to be monitored and tuned for guaranteed outcomes […] where one is perceived as an 'other' to the surveillance capitalists, designers, and tuners who impose their instruments and methods" (Zuboff 444). Highly vulnerable and especially susceptible to surveillance capitalism's mechanisms of behavioural modification are the younger generations in society. They are the ones

who are immersed in a 'hive life' (cf. 445f.). Generation 'Z' (everyone born in or after 1996), who make up the first group of digital natives (cf. 447), is at the top. "By 2018 Pew Research reported that nearly 40 percent of young people ages 18-29 report being online 'almost constantly,' as do 36 percent of those ages 30-49. Generation Z intensifies the trend: 95 percent use smartphones, and 45 percent of teens say they are online 'on a near-constant basis'" (447).

An international study of media use brought to light the terrifying dependency of young people on social media. A group of students was asked to abstain from all digital media for a time period of 24 hours (cf. 445). Responses to the question of how it felt included: "Emptiness overwhelms me" and "I felt so lonely" (445). The students' accounts do not bode well, "narrating the mental and emotional milieu of life in an instrumentarian society with its architectures of behavioral control, social pressure, and asymmetrical power" (445).

The pervasiveness of instrumentarian power in social media environments thus sharply contradicts the idea of autonomous selfhood. Hegel famously claimed: "Freedom is this: to be *with oneself* in the other" (cited in: Willmetts 280). At the core of this Hegelian conception of autonomy stands the notion of having an inner life and an inner sense of subjectivity "where an individual can be in a *reflective relation with herself*" (cited in: ibid). But, as emphasised by Zuboff, this capability seems to be seriously impaired especially in social media environments:

> It is a time when 'I' *am* whatever the 'others' think of me, and how 'I' *feel* is a function of how the 'others' treat me. Instead of a stable sense of identity, there is only a chameleon that reinvents itself depending upon the social mirror into which it is drawn. In this condition, the 'others' are not individuals but the audience for whom I perform. Who 'I' am depends upon the audience. (453)

Zuboff relates this performance aspect to what Erving Goffman theorised in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman came up with the notion of the 'backstage' as the necessary space that the self needs to retreat from the performative requirements and expectations of social life (cf. Zuboff 471). Consequently, Zuboff raises an existential question: "I ask if this twenty-first-century work of self-presentation is really that much different from what Goffman had described: have we just traded the real world for the virtual in constructing and performing our personas?" (472). But more importantly, what happens to individuals if they are always online and hence constantly performing to others, with

increasingly no option of retreating? Zuboff paints a vivid picture of the psychological toll that digital networks take on individuals if they become pervasive elements in their lives: Living in an inescapable digital world will most likely result in a serious deterioration of people's mental health[2] (cf. 461-465).

2 In a conference speech, around the 1:30:00 mark, she explicitly talks about 'psychic numbing' in this regard (cf. Zuboff, Shoshana. "Shoshana Zuboff: Surveillance capitalism and democracy." Alexander von Humboldt Institut für Internet und Gesellschaft. Online Video Clip. *YouTube*, 11. Nov. 2019. Web. Accessed 2 March 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJ0josfRzp4>)

3. Theorizing Surveillance in the Digital Era

3.1 'Subtle Coercion': Foucault's Vision of Disciplinary Power

Foucault's monograph *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* published in 1975 is a study about how the logic and functioning of the penal institution have made their way into other realms of society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and stayed there ever since. In this book, Foucault introduces the term 'panopticism' which he claims to be the foundation of modern societies permeated by disciplinary mechanisms. He explains how discipline has established itself over centuries as a form of "subtle coercion" (209) in society.

In the "Docile bodies" chapter of his study, Foucault begins by pointing out how from the classical age onwards, human bodies have been objects and targets of power (cf. 136). By 'docile bodies' Foucault means bodies which "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). In the eighteenth century, however, traditional mechanisms of physical coercion shifted towards newer and more sophisticated mechanisms of power, replacing the costly and violent relations that used to exist between masters and servants (cf. 135-137). During the eighteenth century, "[w]hat was […] being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (Foucault 138). This new form of power is what Foucault refers to as "discipline" (137f.).

In the "Panopticism" chapter of his study, Foucault explains the new mechanism of discipline on the basis of Jeremy Bentham's architectural model of the Panopticon (cf. 200ff.). This model was designed as an ideal prison due to its circular arrangement of cells around a central watchtower. In this architecture lies the whole trick in keeping the inmate in a controlled state. "The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the

divisions of the ring, those separated cells; imply a lateral indivisibility. And this indivisibility is a guarantee of order" (200). This way, inmates can easily be monitored at every given moment while at the same time, due to the in-transparency of the windows of the watchtower, they can never know whether they are being watched. In other words, an inmate is always "seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (200). These unequal power relations between observer and observed makes it easy to exert control over the prisoner. "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

However, the Panopticon, according to Foucault, "must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men" (205). Hence, he claims that other areas of society have been influenced by Bentham's 'ideal' prison.

> It is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons. Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used. (205)

Foucault even goes so far as to claim that the whole functioning of society has been deeply transformed by panopticism. For the panoptic arrangement, according to Foucault, "programmes, at the level of an elementary and easily transferable mechanism, the basic functioning of a society penetrated through and through with disciplinary mechanisms" (209). At the heart of the Panopticon is, as Foucault claims himself, "a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come" (209).

The key argument to take away from Foucault's theory is that the internalisation of the panoptic gaze leads to the automatic functioning of power, culminating in the individual's self-governing (cf. Elmer 28). Hence his claim: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 202f.). The act of watching, therefore, is not crucial, but the automation of the disciplinary mechanism in the minds of the observed.

'Panopticism' is Foucault's theoretical concept based on Bentham's prison model. Many scholars agree, however, that the Panopticon has often been read

through the lens of Foucault's panopticism and that Bentham's original project of the Panopticon has thereby become distorted (cf. Brunon-Ernst 18, Elmer 22). "Foucault's reading of Bentham's Panopticon is based on a series of misreadings that result in a skewed, partial and imperfect view of ourselves and the world in which we live" (Brunon-Ernst 41). By identifying disciplinary power at the heart of the Panopticon and linking it to society as a whole, Foucault unmistakably stated that "prison discipline pervades all of modern society" (ibid), or, in other words, that a "carceral society" (Mathiesen 217) has become the standard model in Western countries.

3.2 Bentham's Utilitarian Ideals and the 'Invisible Chain'

Without a doubt, Foucault's work has made Bentham's Panopticon very popular in academia (cf. O'Farrell, in: Brunon-Ernst xi). However, Elmer stresses that many important details of the Panopticon frequently go unnoticed because "[s]tudies of Foucaultian panopticism often treat Bentham as an introductory footnote" and fail to question how Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon "has emerged from a decidedly selective translation and interpretation" (22). This misconception has brought forth a huge problem, namely "the easy and widespread equation: Bentham = Panopticon = oppressive totalising society of surveillance" (O'Farrell, in: Brunon-Ernst xi). Therefore, it seems necessary to trace back the intentions Bentham had in mind when he conceived of the Panopticon project.

What is the Panopticon? The term 'Panopticon' is a Greek neologism made up of the words 'pan' (meaning 'everything') and 'opticon' (meaning 'vision'). The Panopticon, or in other words 'the all-seeing place', was made famous by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), a British philosopher and jurist, who used the term to denote a specific kind of prison he had designed toward the end of the eighteent century. Bentham strongly believed in utilitarianism. It was his goal to improve British society by tackling many problems of his day – to reform morals, strengthen work ethics and preserve health (cf. Jespersen et al. 109f.). In other words, "the Panopticon stood as the solution par excellence to the human condition" (Lyon 2004: 77). In addition, his aim was to reform the public prisons in Britain which were inhumane and overcrowded at the time (cf. Jespersen et al. 110). However, Bentham's plans of building the Panopticon failed in 1803 (cf. Brunon-Ernst 23), and reforms did not happen for a long time to come.

What caused Bentham's plans to be turned down was neither the design of the Panopticon itself nor the utilitarianism behind it, but the financial aspect to it. "He imagined the prison as a private, profit-seeking enterprise, making money from the labour of the prisoners, and Bentham himself wanted to be the first contractor" (Jespersen et al. 110f.). Therefore, his idea was rejected by the authorities. But his idea of the Panopticon has remained influential nonetheless. One of the reasons for this is the universal applicability to institutions where people need to be watched

and supervised, for example factories, military barracks, schools and hospitals (cf. 111).

However, the 'prison-Panopticon' was not the only Panopticon that came to Bentham's mind. Anne Brunon-Ernst, who conducted close research on Bentham's works, identifies four different Panopticons that Bentham envisaged over the years: The 'prison-Panopticon', the 'pauper-Panopticon', the 'chrestomathic-Panopticon' and the 'constitutional-Panopticon' (cf. 21-24). The 'prison-Panopticon' corresponds to Bentham's original architectural model which has become the most well-known among scholars, especially through Foucault's panopticism. The other Panopticons were to serve similar utilitarian ideals – specifically designed to be applied to the poor, schoolchildren and politicians, respectively (cf. ibid).

Compared to Foucault, Bentham foresaw a similar long-term effect of the Panopticon. In fact, it was the internalisation of surveillance which in the end was supposed to render the Panopticon obsolete. "Panopticons are built so that no more Panopticons will be needed. In that sense, the panoptic age is only a transition to a non-panoptic utilitarian era, where misrule is minimised and pleasure maximised" (Brunon-Ernst 40). This was the utopia that Bentham hoped to achieve (cf. 40f.). Jespersen et al. also contend that in Bentham's imagination the observer's gaze would eventually become internalized in the minds of the observed (cf. 112). This is further underlined by Manokha who also argues that both "Bentham and Foucault spoke about the extension of the Panoptic model to the rest of society" (226) and that Bentham in particular emphasised the aspect of self-discipline (cf. 234).

According to Manokha, Bentham therefore clearly anticipated the extension of panoptic principles into other realms of social life (cf. 224). In *Principles of Penal Law*, Bentham suggested that every individual should be recognizable wherever they might be and that ideally they should have imprinted their names on their clothes or even on their skins:

> There is a common custom among English sailors, of printing their family and Christian names upon their wrists, in well-formed and indelible characters; they do it so that their bodies may be known in case of shipwreck. If it were possible that this practice should become universal, it would be a new spring for morality, a new source of power for the laws, an almost infallible precaution against a multitude of offences, especially against every kind of fraud in which confidence is requisite for success ... Imprisonment, having for its only object the detention of individuals, might become rare, when they were held, as it were, by an invisible chain. (cited in: Manokha 224)

This notion of an 'invisible chain' indeed hints at the extension of panoptic structures outside of the walls of the Panopticon into other spheres of society. In

Bentham's opinion, the permanent visibility of all individuals, especially with regard to making visible their identity, would induce good 'moral' behaviour (cf. Manokha 225).

3.3 The Need to Move Beyond the Panopticon

Foucault's conceptual vision of the Panopticon has received a lot of criticism from scholars over the last decades. Whereas some scholars still view it as a leading theoretical concept (cf. Elmer 21, Caluya 621, Manokha 234, Jespersen et al. 113) in Surveillance Studies, others suggest that we need to abandon it altogether (cf. Deleuze 139ff., Lianos 412ff., Haggerty 23ff.). In fact, Brunon-Ernst raises the valid question whether it is possible, from a methodological point of view, "to use a project devised at the turn of the nineteenth century to analyse the social, political and economic situation at the turn of the twenty-first century" (187). This is an essential remark that needs assessment. Kevin Haggerty is very sceptic in this regard and instead calls for the "development of a more refined normative stance towards surveillance" (41). He considers the panoptic model as obsolete and concludes that it often appears that "characterizing surveillance as 'panoptic' is little more than a force of habit as opposed to a sober evaluation of whether the surveillance practices under description conform to Foucault's (or Bentham's) model" (26).

The first major disadvantage of the panoptic model is that it does not account for more complex forms of social power which occur in everyday life. Elmer suggests that scholars who "begin their analysis of surveillance from a panoptic gaze risk disarticulating the subject from social forms of power" (28). Indeed, individuals in society may feel 'watched' by their supervisors, but they also tend to exert influence on each other. In this respect, the asymmetrical power relation between inspector and inmate inside the Panopticon hardly occurs in everyday situations. It is even argued that the post-industrial society has adopted different forms of social control that cannot be related to Foucauldian forms of social control (cf. Brunon-Ernst 193). Simon also stresses that with regard to Foucault's 'internalization of control' thesis, sociologists have got other useful resources at their disposal – notable theories in this respect include Parsons, Freud and Goffman (cf. 6).
Another problem that Simon identifies is the double-sided nature of surveillance as subjection. Borrowing from Goffman's theory, he suggests that despite the factor of the dominating gaze and the constant surveillance inside the Panopticon, inmates may feign conformity (cf. 7f.). As Elmer correctly points out, it is "only through the subsumption of power, the internalization of a probable gaze" that the Panopticon can "transform into a disciplinary society" (28). But what if the gaze is not internalised and the inmate only pretends to conform to the rules?

> What the capacity to feign conformity suggests is that self-policing can not arise from the threat of retribution alone since such retribution depends on the visual detection of acts of transgression. While the Panopticon makes all

> acts visible (in principle) it cannot distinguish between acts that conform to the rules and acts which pretend to conform to the rules. If visual detection is not possible then there can be no threat of retribution and the simple panoptic machine fails. (Simon 8)

Therefore, individuals may just be able to resist the disciplinary mechanism of the panoptic gaze. Such a possibility of resistance to panoptical power is also emphasised by Brunon-Ernst (cf. 192). This, then, has some important implications in terms of Foucault's idea regarding the self-governing of the individual, namely that being subjected to a constant gaze may not be enough in order to induce self-discipline.

Another frequently underlined flaw of the Panopticon is its dependence on enclosed spaces. This is denoted as highly implausible by many critics since enclosure is limited to 'total' institutions (cf. Simon 9). Total institutions are first and foremost prisons because inmates have to spend all their time there – a fact which is also recognized by Lyon (2004): "Contrast schools, business firms, or other civil organization, where only a part of the days is spent and where disciplinary power is far more diffuse" (73). Scholars agree, therefore, that the solitary confinement of inmates inside the cells of the Panopticon is hardly applicable to modern society. An all-encompassing, totalising surveillance of individuals is not given in the daily life of citizens.

> It is precisely in the conditions of enclosure, isolation and training that the Panopticon is said to break down as an appropriate metaphor for the modern surveillance society. […] The population is not containable and therefore it is not isolatable. Citizens cannot be held in place long enough for the panoptic mechanism of 'being seen without being able to see' to work its magic. (Simon 9)

Furthermore, it is claimed that the "multiplication of the sites of surveillance" in the contemporary Western world "ruptures the unidirectional nature of the gaze" (Haggerty 29), as it worked inside the Panopticon. Nowadays, there are many different watchers and surveillance ceases to be a centralised endeavour.

The many flaws of the Panopticon have led a rising number of scholars to assert that the Panopticon is not applicable to modern surveillance mechanisms anymore. Most notably, Haggerty, who is one of the most decisive critics of Foucault's panopticism, concludes: "Foucault continues to reign supreme in surveillance studies and it is perhaps time to cut off the head of the king. The panoptic model masks as much as it reveals, foregrounding processes which are of decreasing relevance, while ignoring or slighting dynamics that fall outside of its framework" (27). In a similar decisive manner, Lianos suggests that "we must stop projecting [Foucault's] analyses onto objects of study that they were not made for, and take the risk of approaching these objects of study with the subtlety and originality that they demand" (427).

On grounds of these various points of criticism, scholars have made notable contributions to a possible new understanding of the Panopticon/panopticism by contriving many critical reinterpretations over the years. Among these are the 'ban-opticon', 'cybernetic panopticon', 'electronic panopticon', 'fractal panopticon', 'global panopticon', 'industrial panopticon', 'myopic panopticon', 'neo-panopticon', 'omnicon', 'panoptic discourse', 'Panopticon-at-large', 'panoptic sort', 'panspectron', 'pedagopticon', 'polypticon', 'postpanopticon', 'social panopticism', 'super-panopticon', 'synopticon' and 'urban panopticon' (Brunon-Ernst 194f.; cf. Caluya 621, Haggerty 26, Ragnedda 181). Taking all of these new forms into account, Haggerty raises an interesting point: "Each new 'opticon' points to a distinction, limitation, or way in which Foucault's model does not completely fit the contemporary global, technological or political dynamics of surveillance" (26). Some of these suggestions for alternate panoptic systems will be reviewed in the following subchapters.

Nota bene: The points of criticism brought up here – the failure of the Panopticon to account for social forms of power in everyday life, the possibility of feigning conformity in the face of the disciplining gaze, the fact that enclosure is only given in total institutions and not in everyday situations, and the multiplication of watchers and surveillance sites – have to be taken into consideration when devising an analytical model for modern-day surveillance.

3.4 Entering the Post-Panoptical World

Gilles Deleuze, in *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, has famously claimed that a shift has taken place from disciplinary societies to societies of control. With regard to Western societies after World War II, Deleuze argues that "a disciplinary society was what we already no longer were, what we ceased to be. We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure – prison, hospital, factory, school, family" (cited in: Simon 14; cf. Deleuze 139, Caluya 630). Deleuze thus asserts that discipline has been replaced by control. Whereas discipline is dependent on the social space of enclosures, control moves beyond such enclosures. Discipline directly acts on the body as we know from Foucault, but control shapes the wider territory through which the body moves (cf. Simon 15).

Deleuze's notion of a shift away from disciplinary societies to societies of control parallels the shift from visual surveillance to dataveillance in the digital age (cf. ibid). Simon uses the term 'databased selves' to refer to digital identities which have been brought forth and are continuously shaped by information technologies: "What makes databased selves different from our actual selves is that databased selves are more easily accessible, observable, manageable and predictable than we are. Databased selves actually meet the Benthamite ideal better than the disciplined bodies of the Panopticon" (16). Due to these characteristics, individuals may be considered less important than their 'data doubles' which can be sorted and sold by

state agencies and corporations (cf. Marks 4). "Gilles Deleuze's provocative term 'dividual' (the individual shorn of distinctiveness and merged into 'samples, data, markets or banks), captures this potential loss or absence of embodied selfhood" (4). And this, in turn, has implications on the notion of identity.

Oscar Gandy (1993) notes that in capitalist societies personal consumer data is now seen as a vital 'information commodity'. The gathering of data which is used to categorise consumers is referred to by Gandy as the 'panoptic sort' (cf. Lyon 2004: 70). Examples include census data, insurance data, credit information, marketing data and audience feedback (cf. Simon 13). "The so-called wired city renders consumers visible to unverifiable observers by means of their purchases, preferences and credit ratings. Private, sequestered, decentralized activities, the mundane routines of everyday life, are as it were in view, continuously and automatically" (Lyon 2004: 70f.). According to Ragnedda, consumption has become an essential systemic element in order to maintain social order (cf. 185). The same is argued by Lyon (2004): "For the majority, though, consumption has become the all-absorbing, morally-guiding, and socially-integrating feature of contemporary life in the affluent societies. Social order – and thus a soft form of social control – is maintained through stimulating and channelling consumption, which is where consumer surveillance comes in" (137; cf. Ragnedda 185).

Mark Poster (1990) reinterprets the Panopticon as a 'Superpanopticon'. In his view, the inmate is still subjected to a constant gaze – but this time around it is the one emanating from the computerized database (cf. Simon 16). Poster imagines a Panopticon based on databases, claiming that there are no architectural limitations anymore and that the gaze now extends into society at large. The Superpanopticon, on this basis, is in fact a concept which transcends the before mentioned problem of enclosure regarding the Panopticon. "Today's circuits of communication supersede electronically the old walls, shutters and other architectural facilitation of the inspector's constant gaze, and create the Superpanopticon" (Lyon 2004: 191).

What is perhaps most noteworthy is that, according to Poster, we are "a disciplined self-surveillant populace" (94) and willingly participate in providing the necessary information for surveillance (cf. Simon 17). The digital gathering of our personal data produces a data-image which, for example, contains our consumer preferences, and is used to sort us into categories. This way, we actively partake in the multiplication of our 'selves' and become subjects inside databases (cf. Lyon 2004: 191). Hence, as consumers, we participate "in [our] own self-constitution as subjects in the normalizing gaze of the Superpanopticon" (Lyon 2004: 71). In terms of the classification of individuals and storing of consumer data, the Superpanopticon is similar to Gandy's panoptic sort.

However, as Simon correctly points out, there is a discrepancy between subjects and their databased selves with regard to the Superpanopticon that needs to be resolved. Otherwise, the panoptic gaze will not be able to work its magic. Databases can only induce 'subtle coercion' or self-discipline if the individual is attached to his/her databased double:

> In order for superpanopticism to be a plausible model there must be an interface somewhere between the embodied subject and the database; databased selves must somehow be attachable to individual and collective bodies in the material world. Minimally, the subject must be able to recognize him or herself in their databased double for interpellation to function and failing this there must be some other means to attach material bodies to digital forms. (Simon 17)

Taking all of these concepts of surveillance into account, it makes sense that Zygmunt Bauman (2013) asserts that today's world has become post-panoptical (cf. Bauman/Lyon 4). With the arrival of the Internet and electronic technologies, surveillance, "once seemingly solid and fixed, has become much more flexible and mobile, seeping and spreading into many life areas" (3). Electronic technologies, in fact, render the physical architecture of walls and windows increasingly obsolete, apart from virtual 'firewalls' (cf. 4). Bauman thus coins the term 'liquid surveillance'. "'Liquid surveillance' is less a complete way of specifying surveillance and more an orientation, a way of situating surveillance developments in the fluid and unsettling modernity of today" (2). In the "post-panoptical world of liquid modernity" in which individuals make personal information available through many of their daily activities, David Lyon comes to the conclusion – similar to what Simon, Gandy and Poster claim – that surveillance mainly achieves "*social sorting*" (Bauman/Lyon 13).

3.5 Digital Panopticism

At the same time, some of the core principles of the Panopticon/panopticism are still regarded as highly relevant in the twenty-first century: Namely the constantly visible subject and its awareness of a possible observation by an invisible observer at any time (cf. Manokha 234, Jespersen et al. 113). According to Lyon (2004**),** these core ideas of the Panopticon/panopticism may be reinforced to great extents by computers (cf. 67).

Lyon refers to Shoshana Zuboff[3] who investigates the transformative capacity of computers in the workplace. "The extremely precise computer systems of today's organizations permit minute monitoring of events and performances within the workplace" (Lyon 2004: 69). Pulp mills, waitressing in restaurants and taxi-calling systems are all examples in which the heightened visibility of employees' work assures the constant monitoring and examination of their performance. Information systems are thus capable of transmitting "the presence of the omniscient observer" so that employees find themselves in a sort of "ubiquitous digital gaze" (70). "Zuboff comments that in workplaces where workers as well as

[3] Shoshana Zuboff. *In the Age of the Smart Machine. The Future of Work and Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.

management have access to the personal data collected on the systems, workers exhibit 'anticipatory conformity', showing that the standards of management are internalized by workers. This again seems to be a case of Foucault's 'normalizing discipline' of the panoptic" (70). As a matter of fact, these workers are less likely to feign conformity in the face of a probable digital gaze – another point of criticism regarding the Panopticon, therefore, is somewhat disproven.

Ivan Manokha (2018) further supports the notion that the core principles of the Panopticon are strengthened by computers and digital networks. He argues that in the digital age Bentham's and Foucault's notions of panoptic power, particularly self-discipline and self-restraint, resemble surveillance more closely than ever before in human history (cf. 219ff.). "It is argued here that the development of modern information and communication technologies may be said to produce a setting, the description of which as 'panoptic' is even more pertinent than was the case with respect to Western societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (219).

A common misconception seems to be the presumption of a unidirectional gaze as the quintessential element of the Panopticon. According to Caluya, Haggerty therefore "make[s] the mistake of presuming the gaze to have an inherent power" and this way also "reinstate[s] a sovereign subject behind power" (625). What critics such as Haggerty overlook, therefore, is that power is able to function without an observer present inside the watchtower of the Panopticon. "The principle of the panopticon is not the gaze but the automatisation and disindividualisation of power" (ibid).

And this automatic functioning of power, as brought forth by both Bentham and Foucault, is also the central argument that Manokha brings up in order to put the Panopticon/panopticism in the context of contemporary digital surveillance: "This dimension of the metaphor of the Panopticon has largely been overlooked, with most interpretations by surveillance studies scholars focusing on the coercive or repressive side of the Panopticon, on power as 'power over' rather than as self-discipline" (233). Manokha thus asserts that if we take into account the aspect of self-discipline and if we "extend the 'power of the gaze' to include all kinds of data collection and visual surveillance" (234), then the Panopticon becomes a powerful and viable tool for analysing the effects of contemporary surveillance.

Simon likewise suggests that "a 'post-panoptic' condition does not necessarily imply that we must be 'anti-' or 'post-' Foucauldian" (2). He emphasises that the most notable point of the Panopticon/panopticism is the new form of control: "The most obvious and important innovation of the panoptic machine is that it signals a shift or at least an addition in the traditional operation of power. That is, from the exercise of an external, 'heavy' force […] to a 'lighter' non-corporal condition of 'mind over mind'" (6). This is precisely what Foucault emphasised with his notion of "subtle coercion" (209), and this has become particularly true in the digital age, in which, according to Zuboff, individuals are constantly exposed to the means of behavioural modification employed by surveillance capitalism.

Therefore, it also makes sense that, for Bauman, "the employees of the brave new liquid modern world must grow and carry their personal panopticons on their own bodies" (Bauman/Lyon 59). With liquified forms of surveillance in the digital age, Foucault's conceptualisation of panopticism appears to be probable again. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault had argued that panopticism is mobile and able to create spaces of enclosure virtually everywhere in society. The prior argument that isolation can only occur in enclosed spaces such as prisons, therefore, does not hold true anymore when it comes to digital surveillance that can likewise produce panoptic effects. "Once enclosed not just by walls, but also by the cultural perception of limits, isolation and differentiation are possible; in front of the television or computer, at one's desk, in one's seat or in one's car" (Simon 10). Hence, a digital panopticism seems to be indeed plausible.

3.6 Synopticism

Another essential new concept in terms of modern surveillance is introduced by Mathiesen (1997). He argues that contemporary media culture produces a Synopticon in which many are watching the few (cf. 215ff.). The term 'Synopticon' is derived from the Greek words 'syn' (meaning 'together' or 'at the same time') and 'opticon' (meaning 'vision'). According to him, the mass media, and television in particular, "bring the many – literally hundreds of millions at the same time – with great force to see and admire the few" (215). It has to be noted, however, that Mathiesen does not neglect or try to replace Foucault's concept of panopticism. He instead argues that Western societies are permeated by both synopticism and panopticism. Mathiesen claims that we nowadays live in a viewer society which incorporates both mechanisms: Few are watched by the many. But at the same time many are also watched by the few (cf. 219).

Mathiesen raises a vital point when he points out that Foucault talked about surveillance and control, yet did not consider modern mass media in his theoretical concept of panopticism: "It is, to put it mildly, puzzling that Michel Foucault, in a large volume which explicitly or implicitly sensitizes us inter alia to surveillance in modern society, does not mention television – or any other mass media – with a single word" (219). It is moreover very remarkable that modern mass media has developed approximately during the last 200 years, precisely between 1800 and 2000, and thus during the same period as panopticism. Mathiesen mentions five different waves which led to the modern scope of mass media: first of all the development of the mass press, followed by film, radio and television, and finally, from the 1980s onwards, the privatization of radio and television (cf. 220f.). From the contemporary perspective of the year 2021, we should probably add the arrival and spread of the Internet in the mid-1990s (and onwards) as a sixth wave.

In the twenty-first century, the notion of a viewer society seems to be even more true than it used to be at the end of the twentieth century, namely due to modern

streaming services and social media websites. An example in this regard would be the YouTube community. Here, popular channels run by individuals gain millions of views by people from all over the world. The same, of course, still applies to television. Mathiesen emphasises that media personalities "function as opinion leaders and links between the media message and people" (227). Their influence on those who are watching can be potentially strong. This is also emphasised by Ragnedda who says that the "mass media has the ability, at various levels, to condition and influence the perception" of individuals (187).

But this mechanism also works the other way around, for those who are being watched by others are mostly aware of it and thus tend to behave accordingly, i.e. by fulfilling the expectations of the viewers or by deliberately surprising them. Indeed, Elmer refers to Mark Andrejevic who "argues that to be under the media gaze is to perform work, 'the work of being watched'" (28). And this is very reminiscent of Foucault's notion of self-governance. For "*the management of one's personal publicity*" (ibid) is what automatically happens if one finds himself/herself under a synoptic gaze. This is further emphasised by Mathiesen himself who denotes the Synopticon's central effect as "inducing self-control" (230). Therefore, forms of self-governing can result from panopticism as well as synopticism.

The central point that Mathiesen tries to make is that "synopticism, through the modern mass media in general and television in particular, first of all directs and controls or disciplines our *consciousness*" (230). What is important to note, therefore, is that the synoptic mechanism of the many watching the few is capable of producing a homogenous knowledge that is adopted by large groups of people, which, in turn, most likely also leads to normative behaviour and attitudes on the audience's side. "The mass media, spreading the values of neoliberalism in a consumer oriented society, tend to create or cultivate a new docile-body that more easily tends to assume the values and behaviour promoted by the new economic elite" (Ragnedda 185). In other words, synopticism also transcends the walls of Bentham's Panopticon and is able to create spaces of enclosure virtually everywhere and thereby produce panoptic effects.

> An appropriate update to Foucault's argument would be that audiences for these media are enculturated rather than trained or disciplined in any formal sense and audience behaviors are structured (though not determined) by the synoptic management of perception, risk, morality, desire and truth. One need not necessarily leave the Foucauldian frame altogether since the suggestion is that the media are primarily engaged in the production of kinds of cultural enclosures that produce panoptic effects not at all dissimilar from the Benthamite model. (Simon 10)

The idea of cultural enclosures is a vital point. Similar to Bauman who claims that surveillance has become fluid and hence spreads into many life areas, the same can be argued about digital media that audiences often engage with on a daily basis. Digital media thus share this ubiquity and flexibility of modern surveillance, and

moreover have the ability to influence the perception of individuals through enculturation. In addition, synopticism does remedy another flaw of the Panopticon, as it accounts for many different watchers and the corresponding decentralised power in contemporary media culture that likewise produces panoptic effects.

3.7 Social Surveillance

The one problem that still remains is the alleged failure of the Panopticon to account for social forms of power in everyday life. Alice Marwick, the author of *The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life*, takes a closer look at the role of social networks in the compulsion of individuals. She denotes the type of surveillance that takes place online and is both fostered and reinforced by social media as 'social surveillance' (cf. 378f.). Other scholars have denoted such surveillance practices as 'peer-to-peer', 'lateral surveillance' or 'participatory surveillance' (cf. Manokha 229, Marwick 379).

> The constellation of practices framed variously as stalking, watching, creeping, gazing or looking are characteristic of social media use, but this social surveillance creates panoptic-type effects. People monitor their digital actions with an audience in mind, often tailoring social media content to particular individuals. Technically mediated communities are characterized by both watching and a high awareness of being watched. (Marwick 379)

Social surveillance on social media sites thus also produces panoptic effects, as it creates a synoptic environment in which individuals move about. In this regard, Zuboff speaks of an "*outside-looking-in* approach" (447) that social media users adopt, namely through viewing their personhood and their life through the eyes of others. Barbara Frischling ascribes social network users a capacity of designing their profile pages, but at the same time also notes the enormous impact that fellow users have on the posted contents on one's page (cf. 57f.).

Marwick further argues that multiple types of surveillance take place within social media at the same time, i.e. not just social surveillance but also dataveillance, for example. According to her, social surveillance in digital networks differs from traditional surveillance in three ways: It is intrinsic to every social relationship, takes place exclusively between individuals and is reciprocal in the way that each participant broadcasts information that is looked at by others, but at the same time also looks at information broadcast by others (cf. 379).

3.8 Surveillance and Agency: 'Technologies of the Self'

Simon raises an essential point, claiming that "the more surveillance studies stress techniques of supervision, the more individual agency is left under-analyzed; and

the more techniques of subjection are elaborated, the less recognition there seems to be of the role of supervision and administration" (5). Therefore, in order to fully understand modern surveillance we need to grasp both sides of the spectrum. Haggerty, Manokha and Simon all suggest taking into account Foucault's later notions of governmentality and self-regulating techniques of the individual (cf. Haggerty 42; Manokha 220, 233; Simon 18). "Studies of surveillance therefore can and should embrace many of the insights about governance advanced within this Foucauldian approach […] It offers a path forward for exploring many of the silences and omissions of the panoptic model, but without falling into the temptation of advancing a totalizing model of surveillance" (Haggerty 42). This, then, may also deliver some examples of interfaces "where the subject recognizes herself in her databased double" (Simon 18) and thereby provide new insights into Poster's notion concerning the 'willing participation of subjects' (ibid).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault had laid particular emphasis on the disciplinary formation of individuals and thereby failed to consider "more comprehensive processes of subjectification" (Bröckling et al. 1; cf. Lemke 21). Realising himself that discipline could only account for some aspects of power and control in contemporary society, Foucault changed his perception in his later works by introducing the new term 'governmentality'. Such an analysis of government is seen as an essential theoretical improvement that Foucault achieved in his work (cf. Lemke 17). In his lectures on governmentality, Foucault started to stress that power is about "structuring and shaping the field of possible action of subjects" (Lemke 17). Governmentality is often defined as a 'conduct of conduct(s)' (cf. Bröckling et al. 2, Dean 17, Walters 11, Lemke 18). 'To conduct' means to lead others whereas 'to conduct oneself' implies a way of behaving within a certain realm of possibilities (cf. Lemke 18; Dean 17).

Foucault also began to make a distinction between what he calls techniques of domination and techniques of the self. Whereas the first term denotes external forms of coercion, the latter term denotes that individuals have got the capacity to take action themselves in order to reach a certain desired condition (cf. Lemke 21). In Foucault's words, such are the techniques which allow individuals "to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves ... Let's call these techniques technologies of the self" (cited in: Manokha 226). According to Foucault, the interplay between these two techniques is essential in the formation of the modern subject:

> I think that if one wants to analyse the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, he has to take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self. […] He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of

> the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think government. (cited in: Lemke 22)

In short, governmentality does neither fully support external control nor individual autonomy (cf. Fendler 199). It is a mixture of external coercion and individual self-conduct. The interrelation of techniques of domination and techniques of the self is an interesting concept to pinpoint how individuals can react to external mechanisms of coercion – this is especially interesting in terms of dystopian fiction which often denotes individuals as passive, incapable or even brainwashed. In the analysis part, I will therefore occasionally reference this dialectic relationship. A more extended analysis, however, would go beyond the limits of this thesis.

3.9 Concluding Remarks: Surveillance Mechanisms in the Digital Age

With regard to the state of surveillance in the twenty-first century, Bauman (2013) comes to the following conclusion: "As I see it, the panopticon is alive and well, armed in fact with (electronically enhanced, 'cyborgized') muscles so mighty that Bentham or even Foucault could not and would not have imagined them – but it has clearly stopped being the universal pattern or strategy of domination that both those authors believed it was in their times" (Bauman/Lyon 55). In addition, with the increasing complexity of surveillance in the digital age, a one-sided approach is simply not enough anymore: "No single metaphor or model is adequate to the task of summing up what is central to contemporary surveillance" (Lyon 2004: 78). Hence, we need to combine multiple models of surveillance in order to build a complete and coherent framework.

Therefore, we may first of all conclude that the Panopticon as an architecture is an idea of the past. But its mechanisms of panoptic control are still at work nowadays and appear to be even more penetrating than ever before. In terms of networks and databases, it is probable to speak of a digital panopticism which is also frequently accompanied by a synopticism. In addition, enclosures can be created virtually anywhere these days, i.e. in the increasing digital – and hence also liquid – realms of contemporary media culture in which individuals are immersed. In this way, a digital gaze is present not just in networks and databases, but also in contemporary media culture that, through mechanisms of enculturation, constructs and influences the desires and perceptions of audiences to a great extent. In the twenty-first century, the primary target of the gaze is the consumer, because, according to Zuboff's standpoint, it is in the interest of the surveillance capitalists to generate 'docile' and dependent individuals.

We may also conclude that surveillance in the digital age is a mixture of dataveillance, consumer surveillance and social surveillance – all of which are liquified and to an extent permeated by coercive mechanisms that can be panoptic and/or synoptic, and also frequently include social sorting, namely by categorising people into categories and segments which, in turn, has implications on their life chances and can moreover foster discrimination. Individuals are exposed to a digital gaze and thus still subject to panoptic effects of self-discipline and self-restraint. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that individuals need to be attached to their databased selves in order to be compelled to adopt the kind of 'righteous' and 'expected' behaviour as if they were prisoners inside the Panopticon.

If we also add Foucault's conceptualisation of governmentality and in particular the dialectic constellation of techniques of domination and techniques of the self, the picture becomes even more coherent. Techniques of domination, as issued by the state, by corporations or by individual entities, can be claimed to include panoptic, synoptic and social sorting mechanisms that are directed at citizens/consumers and create enclosures in their lives. Especially synoptic environments such as social networks tend to compel individuals to participate or react in some way. As soon as someone is aware of being watched by the many, he/she is more likely to conform and to fulfil his/her audience's expectations. Techniques of the self are concerned with the individual's capacity of responding to these external coercive mechanisms, or as Foucault denoted, with the ability of performing operations on his/her own body, mind and soul.

In the contemporary digital era, however, techniques of domination ultimately threaten to undermine techniques of the self. If techniques of domination manage to compel the individual to fully subject himself/herself to surveillance without questioning or resisting, then power can be exercised continually. Against this backdrop, it makes sense that Manokha claims that panoptic structures (which are an important part of techniques of domination) may produce technologies of the self (cf. 234). Making the individual deliberately and joyfully subject himself/herself to external forms of coercion is the key to exercising perpetual control.

Therefore, Zuboff's admonitory words regarding surveillance capitalism's instrumentarian power that is aimed at modifying the behaviour of individuals should be taken very seriously, because the more individuals are exposed to such external coercive mechanisms, the less likely they will be able to resist. For the continuous subjection to coercive surveillance (techniques of domination) does not only diminish one's privacy but also one's personal autonomy (techniques of the self). A just society, however, depends on a stable balance between techniques of domination and techniques of the self. Following Zuboff's argumentation, it can be concluded that surveillance capitalism threatens to destroy this balance by imposing its mechanisms of asymmetrical power, social pressure and behavioural control on individuals.

4. The Status of Dystopian Fiction in the Digital Age

The digital age and its vast impact on society and humankind has undoubtedly led to a renewed interest in dystopian fiction. Recent TV or film adaptations (i.e. *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Circle*, etc.) hint at an increasing popularity of dystopian stories. "These adaptations suggest that there is a growing interest amongst the general public in canonical and contemporary dystopian texts that discuss the increasing prevalence of surveillance" (Hinchliffe 6).

With the strong immersion of contemporary life in the digital sphere, it is not surprising that critical voices, in particular dystopian views, emerge. Kees Boersma, one of the editors of *Internet and Surveillance: The Challenges of Web 2.0 and Social Media* (2012), refers to apocalyptic thinkers who take part in a tradition of technological pessimism. Convinced of the Internet's immense dangers, they contend that "web 2.0 is mastering the body, mind and soul" (cited in: Marks 34; cf. Boersma 300). Most notably, they believe that

> the expanding force of technology will result in a total institution, in which we are completely encapsulated. Well-known dystopian ideas about our future technological society are expressed in Huxley's *Brave New World* … Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* … and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* … In their

own way, each emphasizes the dark side of our times: our individual autonomy, privacy, and our right to be left alone are at stake. (cited in: Marks 34; cf. Boersma 299f.)

In fact, two of the most famous canonical dystopian texts, namely *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, experience somewhat of a resurgence in the contemporary digital era. As it turns out, their dystopian visions continue to have a significant hold on the public mind.

4.1 Huxley's and Orwell's Dystopian Visions

Brave New World (1932) presents us with a utilitarian society in which all members are happy consumers and personal afflictions are a thing of the past. Eugenic engineering has become institutionalised and citizens are fabricated through artificial wombs. People belong to predetermined social classes, namely the Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons. They are raised in 'conditioning centres' (Huxley 1) and trained to work in a factory until they die at sixty (cf. 95). A small privileged minority is responsible for the government of the World State. The population consumes a drug called 'soma' which reduces anxiety and inhibition. Sexual promiscuity has become the norm and people live a hedonistic lifestyle.

Huxley's novel is well-known for its strong assault on consumerism. "One of the salient features of the society depicted in it is consumerism […]. People are brainwashed to want ever more, ever newer consumer goods […]. Everything is planned and directed, down to the smallest detail of culture, technology, and consumption, from the center" (Posner 193). The World State's central motto "COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY" (Huxley 1) comes at an enormous price. "Technology has enabled the creation of the utilitarian paradise, in which happiness is maximized, albeit at the cost of everything that makes human beings interesting" (Posner 192). Indeed, *Brave New World* paints a picture of a society in which individual selfhood is completely diminished.

The citizens of the World State are metaphorically contained in the cells of the Panopticon. "The architectural design of the factory in *Brave New World* mirrors the panopticon prison, which allows the workers to be monitored and controlled at all times through vertical surveillance methods" (Hinchliffe 30). Similar to the prisoners in the cells of the Panopticon, the workers in the factory are assigned individual places where they are always open to scrutiny by their supervisors (cf. 31). Not only are people watched by their supervisors and the directors, people also constantly watch and monitor each other. At some point during 'Solidarity Service', Bernard, "[f]eeling that it was time for him to do something" (Huxley 72), fakes a response. "Bernard also jumped up and shouted: 'I hear him; he's coming.' But it wasn't true. He heard nothing and, for him, nobody was coming" (ibid). This type of coercive surveillance during this social gathering exerts strong pressure on the

participants who have to fear being reported if they do not join in accordingly (cf. Hinchliffe 32).

Another important aspect in terms of lateral surveillance is the sex life of the protagonists. In *Brave New World*, promiscuous sex is mandatory for good citizens (cf. Hinchliffe 40, Posner 202). Sexual relationships are openly discussed among peers and people are looked down upon if they do not have many partners. In addition, it is the cultural logic of the artificially engineered society in *Brave New World* that exerts a strong influence on people's minds. "The words 'marriage', 'family' and 'parents' have no meaning in this world, as children are made not born, and characters are discouraged from forming a close bond with one person as 'everyone belongs to everyone else' (p.34) so they must be polygamous" (Hinchliffe 40f.).

Surveillance is thus multi-faceted in *Brave New World*. Besides instances of panoptical surveillance, the novel also focuses extensively on lateral and participatory surveillance. But at the same time, the power of the World State is equally "sustained through conditioned and channeled desires, which reproduce both the material and ideological order" (Witters 198). Through these various mechanisms of surveillance and cultural conditioning, enclosures are created principally everywhere in society, ensuring that citizens stick to the norms.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), by contrast, imagines life in a brutal and repressive surveillance state. The citizens of Oceania never know whether they are being watched by Big Brother through one of the many telescreens that "received and transmitted simultaneously" (Orwell 4). In those rooms or areas that are equipped with these telescreens, they can never be sure if their conversations are private or spied upon. "Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was, of course, no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment" (4f.). In addition, people of dissenting opinions such as Winston and Julia must always fear to be found out by the Thought Police. "How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. […] You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised" (5).

In Orwell's novel, we thus encounter a society that is quite literally permeated by panoptic structures. The all-seeing eye of Big Brother and the unknown members of the Thought Police function as the invisible prison guards inside the Panopticon who monitor the citizens in both public and private spaces (i.e. every room or place that contains a telescreen). On that note, the city in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be interpreted as a transfiguration of the Panopticon (cf. Hinchliffe 27, Shah 713). The high-rising towers of Oceania's four Ministries resemble the watchtower(s) of the Panopticon (cf. Shah 708). These four buildings are all "of similar appearance and size" (Orwell 6), and completely outstrip the surrounding architecture. Hence, the

surrounding spaces can be understood as the cells of the Panopticon. The fundamental principle of panoptic control lays in inducing in the inmate "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201), as Foucault emphasised, and this is exactly what we can witness in Orwell's fictitious surveillance state.

The panoptic surveillance is further supplemented by lateral forms of surveillance. As Hinchliffe notes, Party members work long hours – in fact, Winston's typical working week contains 60 hours – so that they spend less time alone and remain in sight of supervisors and fellow employees (cf. 31). Party members are also required to partake in routine group activities such as the Two Minutes Hate in which they are expected to be hateful of the enemies of Oceania. This not only ensures that they are fed with Party propaganda but at the same time also provides an opportunity to closely monitor their reactions. In Oceania, it is also common practice for children to denounce their parents if they notice any odd behaviour. The citizens must therefore live with perpetual feelings of terror and anxiety, because Oceania is a society "in which purges and vaporizations were a necessary part of the mechanics of government" (Orwell 48). Therefore, it can be concluded that the whole society of Oceania is not only permeated by an intricate panoptic web manifested by the telescreens, Big Brother and the Thought Police but also by lateral forms of surveillance conducted by colleagues, peers and/or neighbours. The citizens essentially are kept but also keep themselves in captivity through the exercise of self-discipline and self-restraint as well as suspicion towards one another, and peer pressure during group activities.

4.2 The Legacy of Huxley and Orwell in the Twenty-first Century

4.2.1 Huxley's Prescient Vision of Contemporary Consumerism

Huxley's vision is still fascinating to a lot of people in the twenty-first century. "*Brave New World's* portrayal of multiple levels of surveillance, which converge through the surveillant assemblage, and its suggestion that surveillance technology can be both pleasurable and addictive are remarkably prescient" (Hinchliffe 22). In the digital age, technology surrounds us and has already brought forth many forms of online addiction. The most compelling aspect of Huxley's novel is clearly its depiction of consumerism. According to Booker, *Brave New World* is "a warning against runaway capitalism and [is] an anticipation of coming developments in Western consumer society" (cited in: Ayres 77). In fact, our modern consumer culture is so far-reaching that it seems to swallow us whole:

> We, too, are awash in happiness pills, of both the legal and the illegal variety, augmented by increasingly ambitious cosmetic surgery to make us happier about our appearance. We are enveloped by entertainment technology to a degree that even Huxley could not imagine; in our society, too, 'cleanliness is next to fordliness'. We have a horror of physical aging and even cultivate infantilism – adults dressing and talking like children. (Posner 194)

Furthermore, Posner also identifies "public obsession with sex and sexual pleasure, much like that depicted in Huxley's novel" (194) in the contemporary world. Through the regulation of people's desires made possible by an all-encompassing media and internet saturation, consumer manipulation has become a lot easier in the twenty-first century. This strong aspect of consumerism is also why Posner regards the novel as the more prognostic cultural commentary in comparison with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (cf. 211). And we must not forget what Huxley admonished in the year 1946: "A really efficient totalitarian state would be one in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude" (cited in: Seed xxi). The prevalence of so many potentially addictive consumerist tendencies in contemporary Western societies make Huxley's novel a powerful metaphorical work of fiction. What is so compelling is its depiction of "the possible *eradication* of authentic humanity" (Ayres 86), i.e. the way in which a cultural and ideological apparatus may cause alienation and destroy individuality.

4.2.2 Monopolism, Internet, Privacy, and the Orwellian Continuum

Even though Orwell's vision is claimed by numerous scholars to be 'out of date' in the contemporary age, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* still fascinates us. Marks, for example, contends: "The brave new World Wide Web, social media, mobile phones and body scanners, identity theft and GPS tracking, let al.one the aggregation and assessment of Big Data by governments and corporations, was unknown and unknowable to the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (2). In fact, Haggerty and Ericson assert that "surveillance technologies have surpassed even [Orwell's] dystopic vision" (cited in: Marks 29), and rightly so. Moreover, Lyon (2004) points out that in Orwell's novel surveillance was centralized and conducted by the state, and that he had no idea of "how significant a decentralized consumerism might become for social control" (78). Perhaps most importantly, as Marks notes, "'no single Orwellian Big Brother oversees [the] massive monitory effort' that is surveillance in the twenty-first century" (3). Nowadays, corporations and non-state institutions also play a huge role. In the contemporary world, surveillance has thus become far more complicated than Orwell could predict.

But Marks nonetheless asserts that the novel still has something to show us because of the massive hold it still has on the popular imagination (cf. 3). And he is not the only one who still sees the ongoing relevance of Orwell's novel in the twenty-first century. "the novel is famously a story of tyranny through technology,

and we are living in an era in which possibilities of surveillance and control outstrip even what Orwell could imagine" (Gleason/Nussbaum 2). Surveillance in virtually all aspects of people's lives is steadily increasing, so it seems, and the frequent use of the adjective 'Orwellian' in discourses about surveillance seems to be symptomatic of this (cf. 7). In fact, the Orwellian metaphor is pervasive: For in comment sections on different websites concerning all kinds of technology- and surveillance-related developments, one might just read something like "This is just like 1984!" (Brin 225). This shows how "Orwell's metaphors have been expanded beyond his initial portrayal of a Stalinist nightmare-state to include all worrisome accumulations of influence, authority, or unreciprocal transparency" (ibid).

In 1945, Orwell worryingly took note of a tendency that he perceived to be symptomatic of modern technology and media: "all the broadcasting that now happens all over the world is under the control of governments or great monopoly companies" (cited in: Lessig 213). In the concentration of power in mass media, Orwell saw the imminent threat. And this is certainly something which has become more of a reality in the twenty-first century, with corporations such as Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Google or Microsoft. It is very fitting, then, that according to Erich Fromm, the Orwellian nightmare is "inherent in the modern mode of production and organization" (cited in: Posner 196). The monopolisation of the above-mentioned Internet companies is perceived as a continuous threat.

The technological capacity of the telescreen in Orwell's novel, its capability to transmit as well as monitor at the same time, is nowadays ascribed to the Internet (cf. Lessig 214f.). Huber argues that the Internet has made Orwell's fears largely unrealistic:

> [i]n a telescreened society, records multiply far too fast to be systematically falsified. … [t]elescreens move pictures. If you move the pictures efficiently enough, you'll completely reverse the world's dreaded slide toward centralized monopoly. … [t]elescreens make possible collectivism by choice – a commonwealth society based on individual willingness to share and cooperate. … in the age of the ubiquitous telescreen, everyone will own a video-press. That should mean vastly more freedom of expression, not less. … [w]ith the telescreen, it is thus possible to have brotherhood, or at least as much brotherhood as free individuals can stand, without Big Brother. … [t]he telescreened world, which we see unfolding around us today, is thus the complete opposite of *1984*. (cited in: Lessig 215)

According to Lessig, however, the views of both Orwell and Huber are one-sided: "Orwell sees monopoly control over the media; he can imagine only its extension as media extends. Huber sees perfect freedom within the Internet; he can imagine only freedom expanding as the network expands. But in both cases 'how something is' is not how it must be" (216). Lessig makes clear that he believes that the Internet must not necessarily continue to serve the purpose of freedom and instead could potentially turn into a technology of control (cf. 216). He further argues that two

essential characteristics of the telescreen, namely its transparency and its forgetfulness, could also be built into the architecture of the Internet to make it more protective of privacy (cf. 220f.). For the way the Internet is designed is significant for its provision of freedom. "To defend the freedom of the Internet is thus to defend it against changes in its design" (221). We as citizens, therefore, need to remain critical and watchful of any potential privacy-invading regulation that might be added to the architecture of the Internet in the future. And we should also keep in mind what Orwell himself once claimed: "I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive" (cited in: Claeys 123; cf. Marks 62).

What is especially interesting is the deeply rooted 'Big-Brother-narrative' in Western civilization. According to Susanne Knorre, ever since the publication of Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the iconic slogan 'Big Brother is watching you' has resurfaced again and again, especially during times when problems with regard to surveillance and privacy arise (cf. 16f.). For example, in anxious anticipation of a population census that was to be conducted in West Germany in 1983, the German magazine 'Der Spiegel' wrote: "Der gläserne Mensch ist da, seine Daten sind gespeichert. Der technisch perfekte Überwachungsapparat harrt seines politischen Missbrauchers: 1983 ist '1984'. Die Gefahren des ‚großen Bruders' sind nicht mehr bloß Literatur. Sie sind nach dem heutigen Stand der Technik real" (cited in: Knorre 18). Public scandals such as the revelations by Edward Snowden in 2013 or the outcry concerning Cambridge Analytica in 2018 especially brought forth fears concerning 'transparent citizens' and the beginning of a surveillance state (cf. Knorre 1f.). It is therefore no surprise that such scandals led to a further resurgence of the Big-Brother-narrative in public discourse.

In summer 2013, Snowden revealed the surveillance practices of the NSA and brought to light that they globally spied on thousands of users and high-ranking politicians. As a direct result from this outcry, the sales of Orwell's novel increased dramatically (cf. 18f.). In spring 2018, the next scandal shocked the public. It was brought to light that the data analysis company Cambridge Analytica illegally generated analytical data from more than 50 million Facebook users and used them in Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign (cf. 20). „Demnach hatte Trump seinen Wahlsieg Big Data und der Manipulation der Wähler durch den massenhaften Einsatz von Psychografie (der Vermessung der Persönlichkeit) auf Facebook-Konten und Mikrotargeting zu verdanken" (20). Through the use of micro targeting, i.e. usage of direct advertising and/or fake news to target individual Facebook users, Trump supporters allegedly influenced the behaviour of many voters (cf. 20). Critical voices began to denote these practices carried out by the Trump administration as Orwellian. "Fertig war die Story, dass ‚Donald Trump der sinistre Manipulator des Social Web ist und es möglich ist, das Social Web dergestalt zu manipulieren, dass alle Nutzer nach dem Takt eines Big Brother tanzen'" (21).

How much Cambridge Analytica really shaped the 2016 US election, is still controversial, though. Lorena Jaume-Palasi, for example, claims that people who voted for Trump mostly watched Fox News but hardly used social media (cf. Knorre 21). Nonetheless, Trump's election caused another dramatic increase in sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Especially the seemingly constant redefinition of truth under the Trump administration is a strong parallel to Orwell's imagined surveillance state (cf. 21f.). For that reason, Knorre concludes: "Orwells Roman „1984" mit ‚Big Brother', ‚Wahrheitsministerium' und ‚Neusprech' scheint also weiterhin den Nerv unserer Zeit zu treffen. Das Narrativ ist so stark verwurzelt, dass es sofort aufgegriffen wird, wenn sich in unserer heutigen Welt Parallelen zu den Figuren, Institutionen und Handlungen des Romans erkennen lassen" (22).

On that note, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can still be seen as a warning, even in the twenty-first century. "The world Orwell projected remains the most emblematic depiction of state monitoring in all literature, a still terrifying case study of the dehumanising effects of surveillance on individuals and groups, and a compelling warning against the type of society that might evolve, given a complacent, fearful or compliant citizenry" (Marks 3).

4.3 The Digital Dystopia as a Subgenre of Contemporary Dystopian Fiction

In the light of the digital realm that we more and more entered in the last two decades, Robyn N. Rowley, in *Stranger Than Fiction: Locating the Digital Dystopia in Contemporary Fiction*, coins the new term 'digital dystopia' that he applies to literary fiction. He classifies the digital dystopia as a subgenre of contemporary dystopian fiction, claiming that the focus here has moved away "from distant future settings of science fiction to contemporary settings that draw heavily on extant technology" (163). The development of this new dystopian subgenre within the last 20 years undoubtedly coincides with the arising discontent concerning life in a more and more digitally immersed society. In Rowley's view, digital dystopias thus use hyper-present settings to point out to us the inherent dangers of current circumstances. "The hyper-present, time-period specific nature of the digital dystopia defines these as post-1999 novels with characteristic reflexivity and contemplation of the cultures and societies they both depict and are produced in" (165). In fact, the arrival of the digital dystopian novel is said to parallel the arrival of Web 2.0, or, in other words, "the switch to mobile internet and the digital explosion facilitated by wireless networks and connectivity" (165).

The digital dystopia therefore can be said to bring digital technology and its effects on human nature, culture and society into focus. It often poses a strong critique of "modern capitalism, corporate greed, and contemporary consumerism" (164). Most importantly, the digital dystopia enables us to reflect on the contemporary state of the world by mirroring current developments and extrapolating them.

"Recognizing the digital dystopia as a prescient critique of contemporary culture is consistent with the notion that fiction writing of all types can act as a mirror for self-reflection and a medium for critical discourse" (165). *Super Sad True Love Story*, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion* are examples of digital dystopias, relating to many of the characteristics outlined by Rowley.

5. Prisoners of a Digital World – An Analysis of *Super Sad True Love Story*, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion*

The following subchapters will compare the three novels to each other, highlighting similarities and differences in terms of the analytical key points of surveillance, selfhood and alienation. The overall focus throughout will be laid on the 'captivity' of the protagonists in the digital realm and how it is reinforced by these aspects. For those who are not familiar with the novels I have included summaries in the appendix. These should be helpful in providing an overview of the settings and themes of the novels, particularly in terms of protagonists, corporations and plot development.

5.1 Mechanisms and Agents of Surveillance

Super Sad True Love Story, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion* present us with different surveillance mechanisms as well as with different actors and interests behind surveillance. These novels make clear that surveillance in the digital age has become a very complicated concept which does not allow for a one-sided analysis. In addition, the role of individuals in terms of an active participation with regard to surveillance is not to be understated.

5.1.1 Dataveillance/Consumer Surveillance/Social Surveillance

Surveillance in *Super Sad True Love Story* is heavily inspired by current practices of digital surveillance. In the digital age of the twenty-first century, "our information is uploaded to 'the cloud', elusive data banks more insidious and invisible than Foucault's most sinister imagining of the Panopticon" (Dolezal 221). This is exactly what *SSTLS* draws on. According to Gregory Rutledge, it presents us with an "Internet-based panopticon" (367) which is pretty much what Poster denoted as the Superpanopticon. Society in *SSTLS* is strongly built on dataveillance. Numbers, grids and databases exert a strong influence on identity conceptions and people's public images (cf. Haase 86). Controlling a whole population has become terrifyingly easy in Shteyngart's novel thanks to the freely accessible data sets (or data doubles) that all the citizens in society are attached to.

In their argumentations about *SSTLS*, both Dolezal and Willmetts thus also refer back to Deleuze's 'societies of control' (cf. Dolezal 221, Willmetts 272). "Evoking Deleuze's conception of the 'society of control' where a 'dispersed installation of a new system of domination' leads to the substitution of 'individuals' for 'the code of 'dividual' material to be controlled', personal data are monitored, stored, assessed and simultaneously transformed into capital and hierarchy" (Dolezal 221). Similarly, Willmetts concludes that surveillance in *SSTLS* can be described as "decentralized", "modulating", and "dividuating" (269). Surveillance is decentralized in *SSTLS* because data sets about individuals are freely accessible not only to state institutions, but also to corporations and to individual players. It is modulating because it subsumes individuals into categories which are unstable and subject to change. And it is 'dividuating' (Deleuze's term) because it reduces individuals to numerical material in databases. Shteyngart thereby also updates and renews *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In Orwell's novel, surveillance exclusively functioned as a centralised instrument of state repression, whereas surveillance in *SSTLS* is primarily decentralized and participatory (cf. Willmetts 271f.).

Eggers' novel likewise displays the notion of elevating dataveillance to an unprecedented extent. The Circle corporation manages to bring to life a fast and efficient framework that gathers a lot of information about individuals. The 'Unified Operating System' brings together "users' social media profiles, their payment systems, their various passwords, their email accounts, user names, preferences, every last tool and manifestation of their interests" (Eggers 20f.). The worldwide success of the Unified Operating System in the novel leads to the invention of 'TruYou', a single profile with one identity, one password and one payment system per person. "There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity – the *TruYou*, unbendable and unmaskable – was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen" (21). TruYou is presented as the utopian solution par excellence in a digital age, with "everything tied together and trackable and simple" and "all of it operable via mobile or laptop, tablet or retinal" (21). It is even claimed to make the Internet

more civilized. "Overnight, all comment boards became civil, all posters held accountable. The trolls, who had more or less overtaken the internet, were driven back into the darkness" (22). But at the same time, TruYou completely diminishes one's personal privacy and right to anonymity.

In Eggers' fictitious world, therefore, the Unified Operating System and TruYou literally bring to life Poster's 'Superpanopticon', a digital Panopticon in which users can be monitored and figured out through their attachment to their databased selves. Watchers may include state institutions, companies and individuals alike. At the same time, this also fits Deleuze's notion of a 'control society' in which individuals are subject to modulation and reduced to numerical material. Initially, though, not every citizen/consumer in the novel is a user of TruYou. This is the Circle's long-term goal, however. For that reason, and by comparison with *SSTLS*, surveillance in *The Circle* is about to become more centralised with the plot's progression, as indicated by the novel's eponymous corporation's monopolistic attempt to convince more and more individuals and channel everyone's data through their network. In this way, *The Circle* also resembles the Big-Brother-esque surveillance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* more closely.

In *SSTLS*, the central piece of technology that makes it so easy to exert control over citizens is the äppärät, a smartphone-like device which is used by pretty much everyone in society. It factors in one's digital footprints, i.e. all the digital interactions of an individual. Accumulating all of this data into personal profiles, the äppärät enables each person to learn intimate details about other people such as their income, their illnesses and their sexual orientation. Lenny's profile, for instance, looks like this:

> LENNY ABRAMOV ZIP code 10002, New York, New York. Income averaged over five-year-span, $289,420, yuan-pegged, within top 19 percent of U.S. income distribution. Current blood pressure 120 over 70. O-type blood. Thirty-nine years of age, lifespan estimated at eighty-three (47 percent lifespan elapsed; 53 percent remaining). Ailments: high cholesterol, depression. […] Parental ailments: high cholesterol, depression. […] Consumer profile: heterosexual, nonathletic, nonautomotive, nonreligious, non-Bipartisan. Sexual preferences: low functioning Asian/Korean and White/Irish American with Low Net Worth family background; child-abuse indicator: on; low self-esteem indicator: on. (Shteyngart 90)

In fact, the categorisation of individuals into different groups is of essential importance in *SSTLS*. This becomes especially obvious through society's distinction between HNWIs (High Net Worth Individuals) and LNWIs (Low Net Worth Individuals). HNWIs are people with a high creditworthiness and are the only ones who can afford to extend their life span, since the insertion of smart blood is very expensive. In fact, the identification of HNWIs for targeted marketing practices is Lenny's central task as an employee of the Staatling-Wapachung corporation. "The age of dataveillance and categorical identification imagined by

Shteyngart offers an influential role for corporations in the interpellation and identification of citizens" (Haase 99).

Shteyngart imagines surveillance thus mainly as a means of social sorting which brings to mind again both Gandy's panoptic sort and Poster's Superpanopticon, as life chances are literally distributed through the categorisation of people who are attached to their databased selves. Moreover, the immense dataveillance exercised in Shteyngart's fictitious world greatly increases social discrimination among the populace. "Personal data, in *SSTLS*, are the ultimate means to determine who is 'in' and who is 'out', positioning individuals in the social hierarchy according primarily to the triad of youth, wealth and health, which trump all other social determinates" (Dolezal 222). Being young, fit and healthy is both a "moral and financial imperative" (222). The High Net Worth Individuals are therefore at the top of the social hierarchy. Consequently, those who cannot keep up with such high standards, are systematically marginalised from society. For example, people whose life cannot be extended because their vital signs are too far gone are labelled ITPs, i.e. Impossible To Preserve (cf. Shteyngart 18).

The discriminatory nature of surveillance in Shteyngart's fictional world strongly subjects citizens on the one hand to categorisation according to race, class and gender for targeted marketing practices and on the other hand subjects particularly Low Net Worth Individuals to a brutal form of repression described as 'harm reduction' in the novel. Whether someone is an HNWI or LNWI is thus literally a matter of life or death. Especially members of ethnic minorities and people of low incomes most often belong to LNWI neighbourhoods in the novel (cf. Willmetts 275f.). During a purge directed at LNWIs in Manhattan, Lenny is fearful at first because of his own LNWI traits, but quickly is assured that "these bullets would discriminate" (Shteyngart 157).

Furthermore, the streets in *SSTLS* are lined with Credit Poles, registering people's credit rankings when they walk by. These serve as important markers of people's consumer identities. For example, as opposed to Asian and Asian-American consumers who are profiled as wealthy prodigals, Latinos are regarded as financially weak and irresponsible (cf. Willmetts 277). This racial discrimination is further fostered by the government. American Restoration Authority signs in Chinese districts read "America Celebrates Its Spenders!" whereas in Latino areas they read "Save It for a Rainy Day, *Huevón*" (Shteyngart 54). Lenny also explains Eunice's compulsive consumption as a result of this instigation: "I think she shops just because our society is *telling* Asian people to shop. You know, like it says on the Credit Poles" (Shteyngart 162).

In an interview, Shteyngart himself stated the influence of Orwell on his imagination of surveillance, but nonetheless emphasised the need to progress further: "I sort of thought 'what would an Orwellian future look like without the government actually controlling things?'" (cited in: Willmetts 272). In *SSTLS*, Shteyngart does include the differential effects of surveillance, and thereby presents us with a more sophisticated depiction: "*SSTLS,* however, with its emphasis on surveillance's

capacity for social stratification, and its acknowledgment that surveillance affects individuals differentially, reflects more on the social implications of contemporary mass surveillance than either Orwell's or Foucault's models" (275).

Compared to *SSTLS*, the potentially differential and discriminatory nature of surveillance is not explicitly depicted in Eggers' novel. Yet consumer surveillance and its strong correspondence with dataveillance also plays an important role in *The Circle*. For the novel implies the immense control that a mechanism such as TruYou guarantees over consumers. "And those who wanted or needed to track the movements of consumers online had found their Valhalla: the actual buying habits of actual people were now eminently mappable and measurable, and the marketing to those actual people could be done with surgical precision" (Eggers 22). In an information age in which data harvesting is a frequent mechanism that social media companies employ, readers of both Shteyngart's and Eggers' novels should deeply look in the mirror they are presented with here.

By comparison with *SSTLS* and *The Circle*, surveillance in *Perfidious Albion* is not that invasive and all-encompassing. People still do have privacy and the right to anonymity. Nonetheless, Byers' novel also brings to light certain forms of coercive surveillance. For instance, a working model employed by the Green corporation is highly reminiscent of the Panopticon. Trina's working space at the company is "the blank cube of her No-Go room" which she describes as an "anonymous, isolated cell" (Byers 89). This is all a part of the personal principle of the company where work "was rarely, if ever, a process of collaboration" and where "projects were managed by designated individuals in flat-packed, portable cells programmed with a single set of entry credentials" (89). Most of the work done at Green is divided into so-called 'microtasks' and assigned to unknowing individuals.

The company's organisational scheme involves a "neurotically enforced Need To Know policy" (89) that makes sure that relevant information is given to only a handful of people who are permitted to know about what is going on. Most employees are kept in the dark about what they are actually working on (cf. Womack). The 'anonymous, isolated cell' that Trina describes is reminiscent of the watchtower in which the observer is never visible while at the same time the cell also hints at a possible supervision of the observer himself/herself.

> If Bangstrom had been so quick to grant her access, she thought, he'd be watching to see exactly what she did with it. He was almost certainly, right now, at his own terminal, in his private office, pulling up all her click trails, mapping her routes through the system, monitoring all the things she was about to monitor in relation to Tayz. Somewhere, probably, someone Trina had never encountered was watching Bangstrom watch her watch Tayz. (Byers 161)

This implies a hierarchy in which the person above is monitoring the person below, and so on. The Panopticon-like structure of the company thus has multiple layers in the novel, implying multiple watchtowers that are hierarchically ordered. The

architecture of The Arbor (Green's headquarter) also resembles the division between transparent cells and non-transparent watchtower inside the Panopticon. "It seemed as if you could look clean through the whole building. But then you noticed that the sun was obscured behind it. Its edges were transparent, but its core remained opaque" (353).

The Microtaskers, however, "don't work together, and don't know each other, and are all basically separate from each other" and are prevented "from ever seeing what each other is doing or collaborating in any way" (157) by the corporations' operating system. Therefore, the MTs are essentially sitting in the cells of the Panopticon, isolated from each other and not knowing whether they are being monitored at any given moment. They can, however, communicate with each other via forums, but not about the projects they are working on, as they are not told exactly what these projects are. This means that there exist certain heterotopic spaces besides the spaces of enclosure in which the employees are subject to scrutiny.

The Circle corporation in Eggers' eponymous novel likewise brings to mind the Panopticon, both architecturally and functionally. The transparent offices of the workers yet non-transparent offices of the CEOs metaphorically recreate Bentham's prison model and hint at an asymmetrical power relation between employee and supervisor. Furthermore, Gouck argues that the Circle embodies both physical and digital forms of panopticism (cf. Gouck). Whereas the headquarters of the company, with "offices everywhere" and "every wall made of glass" (Eggers 3) resemble the physical, the electronic information and communication technologies of the company resemble the digital side.

Similar to Green in *Perfidious Albion*, the Circle company in Eggers' novel is also hierarchically structured. Whereas its employees are expected to let themselves be monitored, the people at the top are not subjected to the same level of surveillance. "It is made apparent that whilst the company founders advocate openness and transparency, they keep information about the company private, which demonstrates a hierarchical power structure and vertical surveillance practices behind supposedly more inclusive surveillance methods" (Hinchliffe 53). This does not just manifest itself in the different architectural buildings on the Circle campus but also in private meetings between the founders of the company and the 'Gang of 40'. Most importantly, as Hinchliffe rightly notes, all of this "goes against the ideology of sharing, openness and transparency that the company stands for" (54).

In *SSTLS*, surveillance inside the Staatling-Wapachung company works in similar fashion, because not everyone is subjected to the same amount of surveillance. In fact, Eunice notes about Lenny's supervisor Joshie that "he doesn't wear an äppärät for some reason and I can't get his profile" (Shteyngart 228). Lenny also notices at a party of the Staatling-Wapachung corporation "that none of our clients or our directors wore äppäräti, only the servants and Media folk. […] The truly powerful don't need to be ranked" (319f.). Socially and economically privileged people as well as the people standing at the top of the corporate hierarchy are exempt from surveillance which likewise mirrors the asymmetrical power relation

between observer and observed inside the Panopticon. In this respect, the three digital dystopias also stand in line with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Inside O'Brien's flat, Winston and Julia learn that Inner Party members have the 'privilege' of turning off the telescreen (cf. Orwell 176f.).

The coercive mechanisms that the protagonists in *SSTLS*, *TC* and *PA* are exposed to also include forms of social (or lateral) surveillance that are strongly penetrated by synoptic structures. As emphasised by scholars such as Marwick and Zuboff, online networks tend to bring forth the kind of self-monitoring in users that results from adopting an 'outside-looking-in approach', and this is very much apparent in the literary worlds imagined by Shteyngart, Eggers and Byers.

Shteyngart, first and foremost, presents us with a society which is obsessed with rankings. Social life is permeated by personal data comparisons, encouraged by a commonly practised social convention called 'FACing' (Form A Community) and made possible by the 'RateMe' app (cf. Shteyngart 88). "*SSTLS* depicts a world in which both personal values and social worth are entirely data-driven. The result is 'a system of empty self and social reproduction, where data simply affirms the [existing] order'" (Willmetts 280). Not only do such ranking scores inevitably measure one's social worth, they also lead to a constant comparison among different people: "Out of the seven males in the Community, Noah's the third hottest, I'm the fourth hottest, and Lenny's the seventh" (Shteyngart 91), says Vishnu to his companions. With regard to the rankings in *SSTLS*, Christian Haines comes to a particular interesting conclusion. He points out that Shteyngart's novel

> diagnoses a condition we might call *the scored life*: a way of inhabiting the world in which social practice and financial calculation are synonymous, in which emotion and desire blur together with impersonal economic machinations […] In this mode of existence, every act, every thought, carries with it a score, a rating of worth communicated in the complex, yet reductive, tongue of finance capital. (Haines)

But this condition leads to a personal entrapment of the protagonists who tend to always compare themselves to their surroundings. Due to the all-encompassing dataveillance in *SSTLS*, citizens are constantly exposed to a digital gaze.

In Eggers' novel, the notion of personal performance tied to social worth is equally important for some of the protagonists. The 'power of the gaze' produces visible effects on the behaviour of individuals who are likewise trapped in synoptic environments. This becomes especially apparent once Mae has gone 'transparent' (meaning that she starts wearing a 'SeeChange' camera around her neck through most of the day). Being under a constant gaze by the many leads Mae to change her behaviour in significant ways, because, as she claims herself, "when thousands, or even millions, are watching, you perform your best self" (Eggers 328). "Da Mae Holland, die sich als Identifikationsfigur begreift und dementsprechend um ein korrektes Verhalten bemüht ist, in jeder Situation reflektiert, wie diese oder jene Aktion auf die Zuschauer wirken könnte, beginnt sie, die Sichtweise der anonymen

Zuschauer in ihr Agieren zu übernehmen" (Halfmann 286). For example, Mae changes her eating habits. "The first time the camera redirected her actions was when she went to the kitchen for something to eat [...] Normally, she would have grabbed a chilled brownie, but seeing the image of her hand reaching for it, and seeing what everyone else would be seeing, she pulled back" (Eggers 328). And she continues to restrain herself by giving up "things she didn't need" such as "soda, energy drinks, processed foods" (329).

Through the constant collection of individual data by the Circle's network and the synoptic environment it creates, Mae is provided by a significant new perspective on herself. Mae sees her digital double (her databased self) and also sees herself through the eyes of others who are watching her. This new perspective provided by technology, however, leads to a constant self-monitoring on her part. The panoptic effects of self-discipline and self-restraint are thus also evoked by a synoptic gaze. "While Mae's 'transparency' facilitates this synoptic environment, her *behaviour* is indicative of a panoptic one; her [...] self-monitoring alters the decisions she makes based on the ways in which she believes her prison-guard-cum-viewers watch her. To a significant extent, therefore, Mae – and The Circle itself – can be considered as a fusion between the pan- and synoptic" (Gouck).

In *Perfidious Albion*, Robert Townsend, one of the protagonists, displays a similar behaviour compared to Mae in *The Circle*. The journalist and blogger is especially sensitive to other people's comments regarding his columns. Knowing that he will eventually be read by others and thus be subjected to people's scrutiny, he overthinks a lot, "gone over it all again, seen other angles, different positions, and, worse, obvious criticisms" (Byers 142). His anxious nature makes him question his own work constantly, because he knows that it will eventually be out there, open to be read and potentially criticised. Since Robert already feels scrutinised to an extent, he displays visible signs of self-restraint.

Following the huge success of one of his columns, Robert suddenly finds himself in a synoptic environment. "People *wanted* his perspective, *valued* it" (199). This feeling of being 'watched' by others starts to have a significant impact on his writing, though. Whereas before he used to stick to his own thoughts about a certain topic and the intended angle he wanted to take, he now "had to circle, inspect, consider the possible ramifications, and then select, from all the possibilities, the approach most likely to achieve success" (198). Taking the expectations of his colleagues and his audience into account, he thus changes his style of writing and his thought process in order to please his readership. But at the same time he also starts to feel uncomfortable due to all the sudden attention he receives and the resonance of his recent article (cf. 199).

Robert is deeply unsettled by Julia Benjamin's comments on his columns. The Internet makes the feeling of being looked down upon permanent in people's heads. "Much of the noise in Robert's head concerned Julia Benjamin. She had, for quite some time, been a continual background hum in his consciousness, an irritating tinnitus drifting occasionally to the fore. Now, though, she was a full-tilt roar, a

near-symphonic distraction" (223). Such repressive thoughts that linger in the back of his mind, therefore, manage to exert a great deal of control over Robert.

"He felt, following his experiences reading both Julia Benjamin's webpage and Hugo Bennington's Record column, as if everything related in some way to him. Everyone, he imagined, was talking about him, reading him, forming an opinion about him […] He was, in a whole new sense, a subject" (241). Robert thus metaphorically finds himself inside a Synopticon, where he is constantly being 'watched' by the many. The constant scrutiny that he experiences starts to impact his consciousness. "The gaze under which he operated was diffuse, but unwavering. Observation had become a kind of higher power, towards which he directed all his unspoken explanations, his reasoning, his excuses. Everything he did, he now imagined himself defending afterwards" (242). He thus clearly starts to display signs of self-discipline and self-restraint. "Pained by scrutiny" (276), Robert realises that things have gotten out of control.

> He pictured the ways in which his column about the genocide woman would be read in light of Bennington's comments, the kind of audience it would now reach. […] The achievement he'd always dreamed of and fought for so long to make real – clickbait gold, the assured virality of the tuned-in commentator – was now the very thing he couldn't undo. He'd wanted to be read. Now he was unable to control the readings. (277)

Now that he is inside it, he cannot escape the Synopticon. Constantly feeling scrutinised by people online, Robert takes on a defensive position, believing he has to protect himself from any possible sharp comment that might arise at any given moment. This protective behaviour impacts his emotional state outside of the online realm. "I haven't said anything" (265), Jess tells him. "You've thought it" (265), he responds. "*Thought* it? Robert, you're being totally paranoid. Are we seriously going to have an argument about something you think I've thought but haven't actually said?" (265), says Jess. Robert's entrapment inside a Synopticon thus has a visible effect on his psyche, leading to a paranoid state of mind.

The immense level of social surveillance in the three digital dystopias is further fostered by the protagonists' work environments. In this way, these novels also bear a resemblance to the forms of lateral surveillance found in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In *SSTLS*, the employees at Post-Human Services, a division of Staatling-Wapachung, are subject to lateral surveillance fostered by the monitoring of their physical and mental health, and an internal network which openly displays the results:

> [T]he flip board displayed the names of Post-Human Services employees, along with the results of our latest physicals, our methylation and homocysteine levels, our testosterone and estrogen, our fasting insulin and triglycerides, and, most important, our 'mood + stress indicators,' which were always supposed to read 'positive/playful/ready to contribute' but which,

> with enough input from competitive co-workers, could be changed to 'one moody betch today' or 'not a team playa this month'. (Shteyngart 57f.)

With the extensive monitoring taking place at the workplace, the employees are coerced to stay healthy and productive. The additional lateral surveillance carried out by colleagues intensifies the effect of constantly feeling scrutinised. This, too, can be said to produce panoptic effects of self-discipline and self-restraint.

Eggers' novel likewise puts social and lateral surveillance at the workplace into focus. Through a competitive ranking system, the workers at the Circle are encouraged to outperform one another in order to climb the company's ladder. Gina, one of the supervisors, initially tells Mae that the 'Participation Rank' (or 'PartiRank') is "just for fun. You're not judged by your rank or anything" (Eggers 101). It is very obvious, however, that this is an insidious method of increasing participation and stirring the workers' competitiveness. The participation of all employees in the company's social media regime creates a coercive working environment, namely through "allowing oneself ('the few') to be viewed by one's colleagues ('the many'), while simultaneously performing as one of 'the many' viewing 'the few', creating what Mathiesen terms as 'a *viewer society*'" (Gouck). This conflation of 'watching' and 'being watched' allows the employees at the Circle to simultaneously be prison guard and prisoner. The awareness of watching others and of being watched by others leads to a form of discipline among the people working at the Circle since each employee's performance is constantly measured and compared to everyone else's. The employees of the Circle can therefore be regarded as 'docile' individuals in the Foucauldian sense.

Mae's thinking is more and more influenced by her workplace and her daily performance. She starts to measure her social worth through her rankings at work (cf. Gouck). Eventually, Mae is completely captivated: "In an hour, her PartiRank rose to 7,288. Breaking 7,000 was more difficult, but by eight o'clock, after joining and posting in eleven discussion groups, sending another twelve zings […] and signing up for sixty-seven more feeds, she'd done it" (Eggers 190). Through the double mechanism of watching and being watched at the same time, both identity and behaviour become attached to an individual's performance (cf. Gouck). "Mae is most concerned with the group, performing at work in ways that will impress her fellow 'Circlers'. As a result, we see the Mathiesenesque 'viewer society' in action; Mae ('the few') seeks to watch and perform to 'the many', while they also watch and perform to her, subsequently creating a new 'performance society'" (Gouck).

Sherry Turkle makes a very interesting remark about what happens to an individual's identity when a person engages with a screen. "When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass" (cited in: Gouck). There is a lot of truth in this remark as social media profiles tend to exactly produce this kind of effect, namely that individuals view themselves and their profiles through the eyes of other social network users. And this is precisely what Marwick has denoted as social surveillance. When

managing a profile, we want to show our best selves and we want other people to like us or at least find us interesting. Only that in Mae's case, there is not just one screen but multiple ones. She starts out with three screens (cf. Eggers 99f.) but ends up having nine screens in the further course of the plot (cf. Eggers 327). As Gouck rightly points out, employees at the Circle base their self-worth and their career success on simultaneously controlling multiple screens (cf. Gouck). In addition, Turkle notes that multiple screens "deceive[] multitaskers into thinking they are being especially productive" (cited in: Gouck). But the truth is that "'Circlers' have instead figuratively stepped from one transparent prison, their offices, into the virtual restrictions of another" (Gouck).

In Byers' novel, the Green corporation is also nurtured and maintained by a competitive and coercive work environment. Microtasking is presented as a ruthless way of exploiting employees who are competing in order to gain a permanent contract. Elements of gamification are the driving force behind this working model:

> Shaped around distinctly primal impulses, the Microtasking ecosystem was custom-built to leverage morale. Because the work required of MTs offered no context, no sense of completion, and no fixed endpoint, a sense of achievement had to be synthetically added. Levels could be unlocked, payment could be incrementally increased, status could be offered and withdrawn according to productivity. MTs weren't just working, they were competing. At the end of the game, was the implication, lay the ultimate reward: an end to Microtasking, a position Inside The Building. (Byers 91)

Even though Trina managed to gain such a position, it still seems that she deeply internalised this coercive work ethic from her own days as a Microtasker. Like Mae in *The Circle*, Trina in *Perfidious Albion* also tries to multitask: "Trina stretched her brain until she could calmly function with three windows open on her screen at once: the MT system, her coursework, and a third project, Beatrice, into which she had invested all her hopes for a new life" (115).

Because the MT system is designed towards increasing work ethic and morale, it is also reminiscent of Bentham's utilitarian thinking and his notion of the 'invisible chain'. Driving the workers to do their best and be highly productive in order to reach higher levels, it apparently serves to select the best possible employees for the company. Inside The Arbor, however, things turn out to be almost no different from working outside of the building. "Even here, it transpired, no-one was on anything even approaching a traditional contract. Workers could be sunsetted without warning" (92).

Such Benthamite utilitarian ideals clearly play a role in Eggers' novel, too. In his private speech to Mae, Bailey advocates the huge potential that would unfold if everyone behaved as if they were being watched: "But my point is, what if we *all* behaved as if we were being watched? It would lead to a more moral way of life. […] Mae, we would finally be compelled to be our best selves" (Eggers 290). This recalls Bentham's intention of the Panopticon, namely the moral reformation of

individuals, i.e. the kind of people who display deviant behaviour, in order to create a better society. At the same time, as Herman notes, this is also reminiscent of More's island where "everybody is under the eyes of all" (cited in: 187).

The technology of the Circle is presented as geared towards improving humanity and the world, but at the same time is so far-reaching and invasive that it threatens to evaporate the privacy of individuals completely. For example, ChildTrack is a new program that is supposed to greatly decrease crimes committed against children, namely by embedding a chip in a child's bone to make him/her trackable (cf. Eggers 87-89). In addition, it is brought up that mandatory Circle accounts could compel every voting-age citizen to conveniently cast their vote online and thereby increase voter participation (cf. 387-90). NeighborWatch is another invention which uses tiny SeeChange cameras to scan individuals in order to pinpoint any possible intruders in a "fully participating neighborhood" (421).

This immense level of surveillance is only taken to further highs by a proposed motion sensor technology that could be used to prevent domestic abuse. Programmed sensors would immediately pick up on violent movements such as hitting a child and an alarm would go off that would notify the authorities (cf. 425f.). This way, Eggers' novel plays with the notion of taking surveillance to a level that Bentham could not even have dreamt of when he designed the Panopticon with the intent of reforming deviant individuals. In a Benthamite manner, one person claims that a combination of all of these technologies could "quickly ensure behavioral norms in any context" (426). As Herman correctly asserts, however, it remains unclear who in the end will define such 'behavioral norms' (cf. 190).

5.1.2 Corporate Control and Manipulation

Digital dystopian novels frequently deal with topics such as corporate control, manipulation and ruthless leadership. In Shteyngart's novel, the äppärät is the most essential device in terms of the exercise of power. State institutions such as the American Restoration Authority or corporate players such as the Staatling-Wapachung corporation use the äppärät-enabled monitoring for repressive measures and/or consumer-targeting. This way, an immense amount of control is exercised over citizens/consumers – social discrimination is fostered, and in case of the LNWIs especially, lives are literally being destroyed.

After what happened in the streets of Manhattan during the so-called 'Rupture', a violent social unrest of LNWI protestors directed against the American Restoration Authority (ARA), Lenny returns to Post-Human Services and speaks to his boss Joshie who sees a way of making a fortune: "And who's going to profit from that? Staatling-Wapachung, that's who. Property, security, and then us. Immortality. The Rupture's created a whole new demand for not dying" (Shteyngart 257). Joshie's heartlessness and his indifference toward the suffering of others is very revealing. Willmetts concludes that this makes Joshie the villain of the story (cf. 281).

When Lenny overhears a conversation between Eunice and her father, he makes a very revealing interpretation: "She was whispering in English and Korean. '*Appa*, why?' she beseeched her father. Or maybe it was merely her non-functioning äppärät. I never realized the similarity between the device that ruled our world and the Korean word for 'father'" (Shteyngart 260). This reveals the inherent connection of the äppärät with patriarchy. In fact, people in *SSTLS* tend to worship their äppäräti like a divine entity, treating it as a fatherly figure that fulfils to them the function of patriarch and protector at the same time. "Indeed, perhaps the most frightening effect Shteyngart achieves in *Super Sad True* is to convey how oblivious all of his characters are to the significance, in Lenny's terms, of the 'similarity between the device that ruled our world and the Korean word for 'father''" (Rutledge 379).

This observation makes perfect sense, because in "Rubenstein's one-party America" (Shteyngart 85), powerful positions in society are exclusively obtained by men. In the aspect of authoritarian leadership *SSTLS* also mirrors *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.[4] What makes this even more interesting is that Gregory Rutledge notes a very revealing etymological connection of Shteyngart's äppärät. The word brings to mind the German word 'apparat' (meaning apparatus or instrument). Etymologically, it is derived from the Latin word 'apparātus', which implies work or preparation (apparāre, adparāre means 'to make ready for'; cf. Rutledge 368).

The äppärät is the instrument that enables authoritarian rule and the marginalisation of groups classified according to class, gender and ethnic background in the first place. In *SSTLS*, therefore, the äppärät turns out to be a powerful and subversive instrument that is mostly utilised by men – namely the Bipartisan Party, the American Restoration Authority (ARA) and the Staatling-Wapachung corporation that all utilise it for selfish purposes and gains in power. "The äppärät leaves a clear trail of destruction" (Rutledge 387). It is the extensive monitoring and social injustice made possible by the äppärät that literally destroys America as a liberal-minded and multi-cultural nation.

In Eggers' novel *The Circle*, the CEOs of the eponymous company also utilise surveillance technology in their strife for power. Bailey believes that total surveillance can bring forth the advancement of the human race. He exclaims: "ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN" (Eggers 67), and begins to talk of a "Second Enlightenment" (ibid) because knowledge could henceforth be made universally accessible and unerasable. Furthermore, Bailey's Orwellian statement "We will become all-seeing, all-knowing" (70) hints at the possibility that the world of *The Circle* might eventually turn into a full-blown surveillance state just like Oceania. But the philosophy advocated by the Circle corporation is disguised as a

4 *SSTLS* even makes an intertextual reference to Orwell: "Fucking Rubenstein. Fucking Bipartisan Party. It's *1984*, baby. Not that you would get the reference. Maybe our bookish friend Lenny here could enlighten us" (19).

utopian solution. It is noteworthy that Bailey's utopian vision somewhat mirrors Mark Zuckerberg's utopian vision concerning Facebook[5], especially in terms of 'advancing humanity'. But the history of mankind has proven many times: One person's utopia might entail the dystopia of another.

Bailey asserts that absolute transparency can make the world a better place because it would assure that everyone could be held accountable for his/her actions. He therefore tries to convince Mae of the Circle's ideology: "And when we become our best selves, the possibilities are endless. We can solve any problem. We can cure any disease, end hunger, everything, because we won't be dragged down by all our weaknesses, our petty secrets, our hoarding of information and knowledge. We will finally realize our potential" (291f.). The founders of the Circle, especially Bailey and Stenton, do not seem to abide by these advocated ideals, though – they stand way above everybody else in the corporate hierarchy and thus have more privileges in terms of privacy. Bailey's speech to Mae thus clearly seems to be a form of manipulation. In this regard, Bailey just seems to be a false prophet – a trope which dystopian novels often employ in order to show the disastrous consequences that can occur if a large number of people choose to follow self-proclaimed leaders blindly without questioning their motives. This is also emphasised by Rowley who argues that the Circle "acts as a powerful masked messiah figure that by the novel's conclusion is revealed to be a depraved and tyrannical despot" (Rowley 171).

With regard to *The Circle*, Hinchliffe notes a conclusive similarity in terms of patriarchal power that the dystopian novels by Huxley, Orwell and Atwood display: "It is also significant that Mae begins to consider Bailey to be a father figure to her (p.462) and that the founders of the company are three 'wise men' (p.18) alluding to a patriarchal structure of surveillance that links to the watchman in the watch-tower, the world controllers of *Brave New World*, Orwell's Big Brother and the commanders in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (54). Power in Eggers' novel is thus also primarily obtained by men. Moreover, the invasive technology brought to life by the Circle is even referred to as potentially inducing "a totalitarian nightmare" (Eggers 481).

Foreboding signs hinting at the Circle's aggressive monopolism are scattered throughout the novel. When Stenton adds a shark to the company's decorative aquarium, it quickly eats the other sea creatures. This metaphor of the all-devouring shark employed by Eggers is widely recognised in interpretations of *The Circle* (cf. Gouck, Halfmann 275, Herman 189, Geddes). Mae was "hypnotized" by the shark, by this "new species, omnivorous and blind" (Eggers 307). On the one hand, the

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5 "Mark Zuckerberg offers his social network as *the* solution to the third modernity. He envisions a totalizing instrumentarian order – he calls it the new global 'church' – that will connect the world's people to 'something greater than ourselves.' It will be Facebook, he says, that will address problems that are civilizational in scale and scope, building 'the long-term infrastructure to bring humanity together' and keeping people safe with 'artificial intelligence' that quickly understands 'what is happening across our community.'" (Zuboff 514f.)

'omnivorous' shark resembles the insatiable greed of the Circle itself which more and more turns into a "very hungry, very evil empire" (Eggers 401; cf. Herman 189). On the other hand, as Gouck points out, the shark's lack of sight indicates the Circle's "'blindness' as to the ethical and social implications of most, if not all, of its projects" (Gouck).

The openly expressed dissent of a small minority of individuals, who question the company's propagandistic effort to discredit privacy as a crime, is not well-received by the Circle. It seems indeed more than odd that "every time someone started shouting about the supposed monopoly of the Circle, or the Circle's unfair monetization of the personal data of its users, or some other paranoid and demonstrably false claim, soon enough it was revealed that the person was a criminal or deviant of the highest order" (Eggers 240). Dissent is also increasingly not well-received by Mae or her fellow colleagues at the Circle, as the novel's undertone progressively moves into totalitarian realms. In the end, Mae learns that everyone who threatened the Circle monopoly was deliberately sabotaged through having put incriminating stuff on their computer. "That's about the hundredth person Stenton's done that to", says Ty (483).

In this regard, Eggers' novel also displays an essential similarity to Orwell's canonical dystopian text. "Eggers's fictional tech company resembles the Party in *1984* in its drive for power and crushing of dissent" (Herman 166). In fact, the Circle's slogans "Secrets are lies", "Sharing is caring" and "Privacy is theft" (Eggers 303) which are very reminiscent of the Party's slogans "Freedom is slavery", "War is peace" and "Ignorance is strength" (Orwell 6), also showcase the corporation's tendency to manipulate truth. Just like in *1984*, the slogans of the Circle are supposed to alter people's consciousness.

In Byers' novel, the tech company Green's true intentions are also obscured at first and are only fully revealed towards the end. It comes to light that the MT system (and especially the Beatrice software used for monitoring) which Trina helped develop is supposed to be applied to a housing estate in Edmundsbury and eventually even go beyond such regional constraints. The application of a "gamified, incentivised real-world environment in which micro-rewards reduce resistance" (Byers 368) to an exemplary community is supposed to generate huge amounts of behavioural data. The corporation's aim is to set up an "engineered community" (351) and to sell the successful model behind it for profit.

It also turns out that Tayz was not a real person, but instead a digital replica of Trina. Green's goal was to automate Trina's work. "While you worked on Beatrice, Tayz worked on you. It was perfect: all the behaviour data we needed came right out of the work you were already doing. Once you were fully mirrored, we started to let Tayz do the playing. Turns out nine out of ten cats couldn't tell the difference between Tayz running Beatrice and you running Beatrice" (372f.). With Trina fully replaced by a virtual duplicate, the corporation will eventually be able to apply the MT concept to run other networks in the form of communities.

Besides the development of the MT system, the tech company Green also conducted an experiment right in the centre of the community of Edmundsbury. For it turns out that The Griefers are "a bunch of conceptual performance artists" hired by Green "to disrupt a whole town" (365). That is why they were making inroads into the infrastructure of Edmundsbury in the first place: To experiment and to test. As Bangstrom explains, people still tend to maintain an illusionary division between their online and offline lives. And this is what the corporation tried to use against the citizens of Edmundsbury in order to drive them into submitting more intimate data online. "So our aim with Edmundsbury was pretty basic: make a real-world haven, fuck with it, watch what happens. We're not interested in how people behave when they feel restricted. We're interested in how people behave when they think they're totally free […]. That's where the real data is, and that's where the profit is" (367). Trina also finds out that Green monitored her private life including her Twitter account in order to collect more data about her. They were the ones who made England Always aware of her controversial tweet in the first place (cf. 374).

As Bangstrom, Trina's supervisor, reveals, surveillance is just a means to an end: "The whole concept of surveillance is so limited. We've *got* surveillance. […] The question is what we do with it. Our answer: we experiment, we *play*. Then we learn" (369). *Perfidious Albion* thus showcases how a corporation, driven by greed and the lust for power, is willing to establish a surveillance regime at the expense of individuals and even whole communities.[6] "This is going to change the world" (375), advocates Bangstrom, who is ultimately revealed as the villain of *Perfidious Albion*. His insatiable greed and lust for power are comparable to Joshie in *SSTLS* and the CEOs Bailey and Stenton in *The Circle*.

5.1.3 The Willing Participation of Individuals

SSTLS also raises the question whether its protagonists are completely coerced or brainwashed into submitting intimate data or whether they perhaps even willingly participate in the kind of surveillance culture they are surrounded with. For Haase, "Lenny and Eunice are by no means flat characters merely in the service of a dystopian message. Rather than being powerless dupes of a totalitarian surveillance state, they participate willingly in the quantification and categorization of their physical and social selves" (100). But what is their motivation in doing so? A significant reason why the protagonists in *SSTLS* such as Lenny willingly participate

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[6] In terms of the state of the contemporary world, Byers himself expresses concern about the power of tech giants: "It's the sheer scale of their power that's dangerous. We're talking about a small and elite group of people who have access to an extraordinary amount of information about our lives, who are interested in using that data not just to learn about us but to influence us, and who are already rich and globally significant enough that they have the ear of governments. No small handful of people has ever before wielded that kind of influence, and I don't think they should ever really have been allowed to, either." (Byers, in: Goodman)

in the provision of personal information lies in the fact that they want to be seen and heard. Their biggest fear is the fear of non-existence. Lenny weekly goes to a psychiatrist who as he claims "could not cure [him] of [his] fear of nonexistence" (Shteyngart 104). His boss Joshie likewise emphasises that he wants his personality to possibly survive forever, but that he can never be too sure about this (cf. 126). Hence, it becomes evident that their participation in the surveillance regime of their society gives them a feeling of immortality and personal worth. This is an example of how individual techniques of the self, i.e. operations undertaken by the protagonists on their own minds, souls and bodies (their will to preserve their personality and to prolong their existence) converge with external techniques of domination (coercive surveillance).

In *SSTLS*, everyday life is penetrated by the obsessive use of äppäräti. Shteyngart thereby also presents us with a satirical take on current circumstances in which "young people with äppäräti, immune to the rest of the world" (124) participate in a surveillance culture consisting of social media sites and dating apps. It is no surprise, therefore, that lounges in the novel are "crammed full of smelly young people checking their äppäräti" (61). In addition, Lenny witnesses "hot women in their early twenties looking to supplement their electronic lives" (83). The novel thereby holds a mirror in front of us, pointing especially at young people and their obsessive use of smartphones. In a more serious manner, Rutledge sees a shocking similarity between people's äppärät-obsession in *SSTLS* and the state of the world in the twenty-first century:

> In short, Shteyngart updates and rejuvenates *1984*, for our own postmodern technology makes it possible now to answer the question equally fascinating and disquieting about Orwell's near-future dystopia: In light of what we learned by witnessing the genocidal horrors of the twentieth century, how would we, modern and technologically sophisticated people *everywhere*, have allowed such a complete take-over of ourselves and the world to happen? (370f.)

What Rutledge tries to point to is that, within the last two decades, the world we live in has likewise seen a complete Big-Brother-esque conquest by smartphones and other technological devices. It has become literally possible these days to not only monitor every citizen but also constantly feed them with (propagandistic) information. And the collaboration of the people – whether due to ignorance, indifference, attention-seeking, peer pressure, or just convenience – is not without risks.

Our participation in the surveillance regime of the digital age is undeniable. And it is very important to grasp this if we want to understand the role we play ourselves when it comes to submitting intimate and personal data. "By defamiliarizing an almost invisible practice that takes place every time we click an ad, every time we like a page, every time we swipe a credit card, *Super Sad True Love Story* makes us

conscious that we do, indeed, participate" (Haase 100). What Poster has referred to as 'the willing participation of the subject' is thus all too obvious in *SSTLS*.

In *The Circle*, Poster's notion plays an essential role, too. The people's participation in the social media network of the Circle is an important aspect of exercising control. Eggers' novel "interrogates the idea of voluntary participation and the social conditions that could lead to a surveillance society" (Hinchliffe 49). Only with the cooperation and participation of consumers does the Circle company in the novel manage to become highly successful. And this is very reminiscent of powerful tech corporations in the contemporary world. Facebook's data harvesting and tracking of its 1.5 billion users is just one example (cf. Manokha 228). As Christoph Bode asserts, "the *corporate surveillance* practiced by Facebook, Google & Co. […] relies on the tacit or open *consent of the surveilled* and, what is more, on their *active collaboration*" (37). In this regard, Eggers certainly holds a mirror in front of us. His novel "explores the role of social media and digital technology in our world by demonstrating the ease with which the company is able to eventually monitor everyone and every place in the world with the consent and participation of its users" (Hinchliffe 49).

For these reasons, *The Circle* has been regarded by critics as "a timely example of participatory dataveillance" (Däwes 107). Moreover, the power of the media that scholars such as Mathiesen have ascribed the capacity to influence opinions and consumer behaviour, is all too visible in Eggers' novel. With all the blatantly obvious participation of individuals in the erosion of privacy in Eggers' novel, Halfmann dares to ask a thought-provoking question:

> Was aber, wenn das moderne Individuum eine gänzlich andere Vorstellung von Privatsphäre hat und Mae Hollands freiwilliges Eingehen in die Transparenz ein Symptom dieses Wandels ist: Da die Totalüberwachung nicht mehr als eine solche empfunden wird, das Eingehen in eine Gemeinschaft unter Dämpfung der Individualität nämlich zunehmend positiv besetzt ist und dem neuerdings so etablierten Selbstverständnis entspricht? (289)

Therefore, it is no coincidence that Mae and her fellow colleagues at the Circle live "willingly, joyfully, under constant surveillance, watching each other always, commenting on each other, voting and liking and disliking each other, smiling and frowning" (Eggers 367; also cited in: Herman 192).

Herman raises another very essential point in this regard, namely that the constant exposure to social media allows Mae to feel that she matters (cf. 192). People want to feel seen and heard, and that is a universal human desire. Hence, Mae asserts: "I *want* to be seen. I want proof I existed. […] We all know the world is too big for us to be significant. So all we have is the hope of being seen, or heard, even for a moment" (Eggers 485). This is yet another great example of how individual techniques of the self correspond with external techniques of domination. Because an individual like Mae strives to feel recognised and be remembered, she willingly

participates in the surveillance regime of the company she works for, and in this way becomes symptomatic of like-minded individuals in the current digital age.

Perfidious Albion displays a less direct and obvious yet still somewhat similar notion of voluntary participation. Following the threat of The Griefers, people start to be a lot more careful when it comes to their online activities. "This was the most observable effect of The Griefers he'd yet encountered: the desire for secrecy had gone mainstream. Even casual users of the internet now felt they needed to operate behind an extra layer of protection" (Byers 240). People, however, as Robert points out, also very much want to be noticed:

> But then, he thought, a degree of romanticisation was almost certainly at work. Everyone wanted to believe that what they were doing was worthy of observation, that it merited protection, because everyone wanted to believe that what they were doing was important. No-one wanted to accept the drab reality of their online lives: that there was little or no need for privacy because nothing they were doing was of any note or merit. (240)

In this regard, *Perfidious Albion* nonetheless stands in line with *Super Sad True Love Story* and *The Circle*. Individuals often willingly participate (or at least display a tendency to do so), because they want to be seen and heard, and because they want to feel that their lives matter. The voluntary participation of the protagonists in these digital dystopias is reminiscent in a way of the docile consumers in Huxley's *Brave New World*. In fact, the World Controllers in Huxley's novel likewise achieve the consent and collaboration of the people, albeit with different means. They use ideological enculturation and social conditioning whereas in our contemporary world it mostly comes down to peer pressure, attention-seeking and mechanisms of self-presentation among young people – often combined with ignorance and/or indifference to a certain extent – that make them participate. On closer examination, though, there is most definitely a strong cultural aspect inherent to this current condition as well. For it is safe to say that somewhat of a surveillance culture has already been established by social networks and the media in general – namely by propagating the ideal of sharing photos and personal experiences with other users online. The dependency of individuals to partake on social media platforms and the corresponding data submissions, after all, make up the most precious resources in the hands of the surveillance capitalists.

5.2 The Disintegration of Selfhood

The pervasive digital spheres portrayed in *Super Sad True Love Story*, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion* strongly impact the selfhood of the characters. Their virtual identities mentally affect and to an extent even undermine their concrete selves. Permanently online, the protagonists adopt the views of the digital gazes they are subjected to, but thereby are significantly deprived of personal autonomy.

5.2.1 Virtual Selves vs. Real Selves

The real world in *SSTLS* is immensely pervaded by the virtual world, and the same goes for people's selves. It is normal for citizens to be pretty much online constantly. Because consumers are at any moment subject to appear in countless scores and rankings, their data doubles keep evolving. And since *SSTLS* presents us with a society that is entirely structured by mechanisms of dataveillance and social sorting, people's virtual selves are indeed more important than their real selves, and they constantly need to invest time and effort into the developing of their virtual identities. Otherwise, they might find themselves at the margins of society.

When people get together in social contexts such as lounges, they start to "Form A Community" (abbreviated as 'FAC') with the use of their äppäräti. Categorical scores such as "PERSONALITY", "FUCKABILITY" and "SUSTAINABILIT¥" (Shteyngart 89-91) exert a great hold on people's decision-making, "structuring who should speak to whom, how that conversation should proceed, and whether or not a relationship should be continued" (Malewitz 114). In *SSTLS*, human identity is thus mainly constructed as contingent on data assemblages. Thereby, the protagonists are essentially reduced to numerical material in databases. Shteyngart's novel thus brings to light "anxieties about the vanishing human subject, who has been usurped by data" (Dolezal 223). In a Deleuzian sense, the protagonists become 'dividuals' in databases and thereby are deprived of embodied selfhood.

Hence, virtual identities to a great extent replace the existence of concrete identities in the fictional world of *SSTLS*. "More disturbingly, because digital citizens believe that they need to become wholly mediated in order to attain the status of the fantastical real, their lives and deaths are subject to the same principles that govern digital technologies" (Malewitz 123). "RECIPIENT DELETED" (Shteyngart 55) is the message that suddenly appears when Lenny tries to contact his friend Nettie Fine. Even though Lenny throughout the plot frequently raises the posthuman notion of digital immortality, this instance clearly proves the opposite, namely that digital citizens can be 'deleted' (cf. Malewitz 123). At the end of the novel, Lenny indeed learns that she died precisely at the time her profile was removed from GlobalTeens. The mystery of her death, however, is never resolved (cf. Haase 89).

Perfidious Albion adopts a different focus compared to *SSTLS*. Because Byers' fictitious society is not permeated by mechanisms of dataveillance and social sorting to such an all-encompassing extent, people still do possess the right to anonymity on the Internet and also frequently create alternate online identities. In this regard, *Perfidious Albion* strongly criticises how people safely hide behind the anonymity of the Internet, doing things they otherwise would be restrained to do in a public context. It thus plays with the notion of fully revealing "the essentially pretty toxic nature of [people's] behaviour on the internet" (Byers 168). For eventually, and this is what the threat by The Griefers makes so obvious to Jess and her friend Deepa, everything might be brought to light, meaning that the virtual selves people choose

to hide behind turn into their real selves. "What if they're saying: it doesn't matter that all this shit you do is online, it still exists, and it's still *you*, and one day someone, anyone, can remind you of it, meaning, basically, *remind you of who you really are*" (166f.). Because if someone deliberately chooses to attack or debase other people on the Internet, it does not simply end with one's virtual self. The virtual self (or selves) and the real self, because they belong to the same person, are not standing in binary opposition to each other. The one inevitably blends into the other. Hence, Deepa's claim makes all too much sense: "The way we kid ourselves that our behaviour can be digitally contained when in fact it can't, both in a literal sense, because we have no actual control over our data, and in a less literal sense, because that kind of shit has a way of always finding its way back" (168).

In fact, Jess is the perfect example for this kind of backfire. In order to find an outlet for her frustrations, she created multiple online identities such as the ruthless commenter Julia Benjamin and the whistleblower Byron Stroud. But this ultimately does not make her feel better. "She felt, instead, dissipated, fragmented, diluted" and "she felt scattered and disparate and no longer in command of her gathered selves" (64). As Julia Benjamin, she secretly seeks out to ruthlessly criticise male intellectuals and journalists on the net, including her partner Robert's work whose success as a columnist she slightly envies. But she is also in need of Julia to fill her personal emptiness and to inflict the same pain to other people on the Internet she had to endure when she was harassed. She justifies her behaviour like this: "Everyone, she now saw, was doing exactly what she spent her time doing: donning a series of masks, creating convenient personalities they could inhabit" (171).

But ultimately, her escape into different selves becomes self-destructive. Whenever Jess turns into her online persona Julia, her anger became "a kind of depressed frustration, a disappointment, a drained and dissipated force" (193). Initially, Jess had established her different online personalities as an outlet. But it becomes clear how over time her immersion in her virtual selves more and more turns against her. "Once, Julia Benjamin and Byron Stroud and all of her other personae had felt like an expansion. Now, increasingly, Julia dominated, and her domination was reductive" (193). Extending her true self with all these artificial selves thus does not bring her peace, but instead just further drives her into a depressed state of mind. Even though Jess had once thought the realm of the digital to be a safe haven for her, "beneath it she was drained, almost blank" (262). "Once, Julia had been her expressive extension, her gobby stand-in. Now, away from the safety of the digital, the roles were painfully reversed. Something alive in Jess had been externalised, fragmented, and lost. Julia was no longer her outlet. Instead, Jess was merely what remained in Julia's aftermath: Julia's guilty, exhausted hangover" (262). This proves how Jess also experiences that her virtual selves are not simply separated from her real self. Putting multiple identities in binary opposition to each other is thus futile, because it always starts to backfire eventually.

Eventually, Jess realises that her digital personae are entities onto which she just projected different parts of her true self. "It was a paradoxical moment. As soon as

Jasmine became familiar to her, Jess became unfamiliar to herself. Was this what she contained? Was this who she was?" (342). But trying to shift her deeply seated problems onto virtual entities does not change who she truly is on the inside. *Perfidious Albion*, through Jess, thus showcases how digital selves may lead to a fragmentation of the individual and result in a loss of self-control.

5.2.2 The Obliteration of Personal Autonomy

Willmetts defines autonomy as consisting of three key aspects, firstly "a relational capacity for critical self-reflection", secondly "a degree of self-definition", and thirdly "the ability to think critically about the social world we find ourselves embedded in" (269). These core aspects, however, are seriously impaired in the digital dystopias imagined by Shteyngart, Eggers and Byers. First and foremost, a capacity for self-reflection is pretty much non-existent when it comes to these characters who are online on a constant basis and hence do not have any private space where they can retreat from the digital sphere and its performative demands. The novels also showcase how coercive surveillance undermines technologies of the self, i.e. the protagonists' capacity to act by means of their own conduct. Instead, they rather act by the conduct that their surrounding digital environment dictates.

In *SSTLS*, the reduction of human identity to digitised forms has serious consequences for the notion of selfhood. "The surveillant assemblage is a fluid conglomeration of personal data that stands in as a proxy for the existentially complex and situated individual" (Dolezal 221). However, identity conceptions that are conceived according to algorithms and data sets are highly problematic because they impede personal autonomy, namely by depriving people of the 'degree of self-definition' that Willmetts mentions. *SSTLS*, therefore, stands in line with Zuboff's described condition under surveillance capitalism, in which data has replaced oil as the world's most precious resource, and in which "we are moving toward a dystopian reality in which privacy has been so far eroded that 'human autonomy is irrelevant and the lived experience of psychological self-determination is a cruel illusion'" (Willmetts 271).

An example for such a loss of autonomy can be found in Lenny. Initially, Lenny is a book enthusiast. However, as the plot progresses, this starts to change. Lenny gives up his introspective individualism as he more and more joins the digitally augmented reality that surrounds him: "I'm learning to worship my new äppärät's screen, the colorful pulsating mosaic of it, the fact that it knows every last stinking detail about the world, whereas my books only know the minds of their authors" (Shteyngart 78). By adapting to the social expectations of his society and showing his younger contemporaries "just how much data" he as one of the older people "is willing to share" (78), however, Lenny gives up a significant part of his individuality instead of acting by means of his own conduct. Lenny's social world therefore diminishes, in the Foucauldian sense, technologies of the self.

According to Willmetts, Eunice and her "construction as a hypersexualized Asian consumer" is a great example for "how surveillance capitalism *imposes* market-driven identities" (278). Thanks to proliferating surveillance practices and an online culture which is highly sexualized, young women are rendered hypervisible. As a result, the female characters in the novel internalise not only "the heteronormative tropes embedded in commercialized social space", but also "the commoditizing male gaze" (ibid). This has serious consequences for the female protagonists' selfhood. Being constructed by the media and the surveillant gaze deprives women of the capacity for self-definition, let al.one self-determination. Eunice and her social contacts on the GlobalTeens network do not act by means of their own conduct, but rather by the conduct that media culture dictates.

In fact, it is primarily digital media which construct the perceived reality of the protagonists in the posthuman world of *SSTLS* (cf. Malewitz 109f.). According to Malewitz, Shteyngart's "characters' manner of comporting themselves to match their digital profiles highlights the serious political consequences of the remediation of human identity" (121). As a result, the concept of individual selfhood is undermined and starts to disintegrate.

> In a political sense, posthuman realism thus assumes the position of hegemonic power, which Raymond Williams classifies as 'a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of our living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society'. (ibid)

In this sense, people who live in the digital realm start to lose their autonomy, their ability of critical self-reflection, and thus become metaphorical prisoners. Jenny reflects to Eunice in a chat message: "The world sometimes feels so, like, I can't even describe it. It's like I'm floating around and the moment anyone gets near me or I get near anyone there's just this STATIC. Sometimes people verbal me and I just look at their mouth and it's like WHAT? What are you saying to me? How am I supposed to even verbal back and does it even matter what comes out?" (Shteyngart 46). Jenny feels that she is floating around in a world which is completely out of her reach. She lives instead in an artificial world in which meaningful interpersonal relationships have ceased to exist, because everything is remediated by a digital realism. She knows that something is wrong, but she cannot make out exactly what it is. Jenny even is under the impression that she cannot communicate verbally anymore which is a strong hint at the fact that she has become incapable of taking action and determining her own life.

In *The Circle*, the immense synoptic environment that some of the main protagonists are caught up in also significantly erodes their capacity for personal agency. Once Mae has moved into full transparency, her daily routines change drastically. She does not realise that this way she has stepped into a metaphorical

prison. On the contrary, Mae feels very content with her situation. "And she found it freeing. She was liberated from bad behaviour. […] Since she'd gone transparent, she'd become more noble. People called her a role model" (Eggers 329). Now Mae always has to consider her viewers' perspectives.

> She looked down to her bracelet, seeing a number of zings asking if she was okay. She knew she had to respond, lest her watchers think she'd lost her mind. This was one of the many small adjustments she had to get used to – now there were thousands out there seeing what she saw, having access to her health data, hearing her voice, seeing her face – she was always visible through one or another of the campus SeeChange cameras, in addition to the one on her monitor – and so when anything deviated from her normal buoyancy, people noticed. (330)

Being permanently online and visible to others, however, significantly impacts the psyche. "Mae Holland ist letztlich in Schelskys Zwischenzustand der Dauerreflexion eingespannt, da sie beide Sichtweisen – die ureigene und die von der Technik ermöglichte objektivierende – getrennt voneinander wahrnimmt und zum beständigen Abgleich gezwungen wird" (Halfmann 286). In a Goffmanian sense, she has no backstage where she can retreat from the performative demands of the social network environment she is caught up in. With no option of retreating, Mae is trapped in a permanent state of reflection and dependency. It is thus safe to say that this enormous pervasiveness of Mae's transparency vaporises her autonomy and consequently also her selfhood.

Similar to Mae in Eggers' novel, Jess in *Perfidious Albion* is likewise so much immersed in the digital sphere that her autonomous selfhood suffers from it. Another one of her alternate online selves, Jasmine, makes a very revealing statement: "In the age of connection, Jasmine said, separation had lost its simplicity, its finality. Once, you were alone with your memories. Now, […] you could make your way back through it all; the archive of who you'd been. […] As these messages and images infinitely recurred, other moments, rendered as data, joined them" (Byers 341). As opposed to conflicts taking place in the physical world, things happening online often have no real closure (for example, hurtful comments remain visible if they cannot be deleted), and for that reason they continuously affect individuals. Hence, the pain that individuals feel is also more permanent. This has severe effects on the capability of individuals to build and maintain a stable sense of self. With the permanence of things taking place online and no option of retreating from it all, personal selfhood and mental health are seriously impaired. And these are precisely the concerns outlined by Zuboff (cf. 461-465, 470-474).

Following the multiple versions she created of herself and let out into the digital realm, Jess experiences a loss of self-control and self-determination. Caught up in a vicious cycle, she believes that "she would be replaced by the versions of herself she imagined and was forced to be" (Byers 382). The fact that she uses the phrase 'forced to be' showcases that she apparently lost control over determining who she

really is as a person and that she feels heteronomous. Constantly preoccupied with her virtual personas, Jess is also, in a Goffmanian sense, deprived of a backstage. Consequently, she is left with no stable sense of self at the end of the novel. Her inner (virtual) reality finally collides with the real world. Jess thus finds herself exposed to "the frayed hem of reality's overlay" (382). The rain taking place outside can be interpreted to resemble Jess's inner constitution, hinting at a severe depression. "Outside, the rain had reached the point where it had become an all-consuming reality" (381f.).

For Trina in *Perfidious Albion*, things take a different turn, though. Compared to Lenny, Eunice, Mae, and Jess, the loss of autonomy that Trina experiences is not so much self-inflicted as brought upon her by exterior forces out of her control. She is shocked when she sees a new column on *The Command Line*'s homepage entitled "*Speaking Out: Robert Townsend Takes Down The Genocide Tweeter*" (272). Suddenly, her whole life seems to have slipped into the hands of others who now define who she is.

> She was, on one level, reading about herself, but it was a version of herself she had played no part in constructing. Her own words, and by extension her identity, her name, her very existence, had been appropriated, twisted, refashioned and repurposed until all recognition or ability to identify had been denied her. Apparently, all she was supposed to do now was read placidly as versions of herself were created, described, and decried in print (272).

Her identity is not in her control anymore, but instead appropriated by those in power. Thereby, she is deprived of self-determination and thus a significant part of her autonomy.

> He [Robert Townsend] manipulated the sliders and parameters of controversy in order to achieve the perfect conditions for his own success. No doubt thrilled at the extent to which he was able to tweak the emotional and intellectual reality into which he injected himself, he remained blind to the fact that what he was really adjusting was not some generalised and nebulous intellectual atmosphere, but the hard reality of Trina's life. (273)

Trina, however, does not know how Robert ended up being pushed into this seemingly heartless and sensation-seeking journalism. In the beginning of the novel, he is still an upright journalist for whom authenticity and truthfulness are highly important. But this changes throughout the novel, as he is put more and more under pressure by his surroundings. "If Robert wants to be read, to be *someone*, then he must be a sensation" (Doyle). The novel thus also showcases how individuals like Robert end up leaving their personal principles behind in order to live up to an era in which an overexaggerated and scandalised style of writing generates more clicks than sticking to one's personal integrity and to the actual truth.

When Silas suggests that Robert could be working for *The Record*, the biggest-selling newspaper in Britain, the latter is hesitant at first, claiming he cannot stand behind the newspaper's principles (cf. 331). Silas, however, tries to convince him: "You've got to follow the money, Rob. […] You want to get read? You want to get noticed? Start hanging with the big bucks" (332). Robert is at odds with himself, trying to "re-establish a connection with what he thought of as his principles. He had, he felt sure, started out with some. Strong ones too. But looking inwards, he could find only the hollowed depression where they'd once rested, in which had gathered a stagnant puddle of bile" (333). Ultimately, Robert decides to follow Silas's advice, giving up his personal integrity and thus a significant part of his selfhood.

After Silas has convinced Robert to work for *The Record*, the latter concludes to himself: "He was a free man: at liberty to do all the things he'd always abhorred" (335). This paradoxical statement does not hint at personal freedom, though. In conforming to the expectations of his surroundings (both online and offline) and giving in to social pressure, Robert loses his personal integrity. He ends up becoming what he did not want to be: A journalist and an online columnist who has to be a sensation in order to be successful as opposed to just focusing on the plain and honest truth.

5.3 Alienation through (Surveillance) Technology

Evermore connection online may seem like a form of liberation and a way of strengthening solidarity and interpersonal relations. But at the same time, digital networks and technological devices entail many negative elements that are potentially alienating. *Super Sad True Love Story*, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion* not only depict how the psyche of individuals, but also how interpersonal relations and the human condition in general may be affected by an increasing pervasiveness of the digital sphere and (surveillance) technology.

5.3.1 Internet Abuse and Online Harassment

One of the downsides of the Internet is that it can be easily weaponised. Jess, one of the protagonists in *Perfidious Albion*, remembers an incident that caused her significant trouble and pain: After the publication of an online article on the correlation between masculine identity and online gaming culture, things had quickly gotten out of hand. Stefan Ziegler, an anti-feminist populist, had appropriated Jess's research without proper citation and had posted a couple of passages from her article, completely stripped of context, on his blog (cf. Byers 56f.).

> Within twenty-four hours, Jess was subjected to over five hundred tweets threatening her with everything from professional disgrace to rape and death. Someone got hold of her personal email address and posted it on a forum. Her home address and mobile number leaked. Photographs of anonymised

> men standing on her street or even outside her house were splashed across the web. A wreath was delivered to her door. (57)

Jess's case shows how internet anonymity quickly tends to be abused to threaten and debase individuals. It also exemplifies how personal data are not necessarily safe from exposure. Following these events, a charity specifically bent on helping women experiencing online harassment, set out to help Jess by cleansing her accounts, rebuilding her privacy and de-anonymising many of the perpetrators. Alongside these rehabilitation measures, Jess and Robert also decided to move away from London in order to leave everything behind (cf. 59). But for Jess, not everything just simply faded away. She still displays visible signs of trauma from this incident, haunted by feelings of anger and often having trouble sleeping at night. "Jess would be struck by a rage that reared up from within and then, finding no reasonable outlet, thrashed around inside her, kicking up torn scraps of discarded memory and trampled feelings. Bits of online messages would flash up in front of her eyes. Threats would once again seem imminent" (59). This makes clear how online harassment is able to disintegrate the boundary between online and offline, and thereby inflict serious harm on the psyche of individuals.

The web and media landscape in Byers' novel is also presented as a highly ambivalent sphere in which meaning is not necessarily concrete, but can be instrumentalised for individual purposes. Even though the tweet "*#whitemalegenocide. Lol.*" (Byers 137) by the black woman Trina is obviously rather meant as a joke than a serious death threat, the right-wing party England Always decides to exploit it for their personal needs. "You remember last week when I was saying that what you really needed was a death threat? Well this is even better than a death threat. This is a genocide threat" (150), says Teddy to Hugo. And so they decide to include her tweet in a retweet on Hugo Bennington's account, thereby distorting the meaning of the original tweet. Trina's tweet thus turns out to seriously backfire on her, even though she did not even mention Bennington in her original tweet.

That truth can be bent just to make headlines also becomes obvious in the following statement: "Seriously or not seriously. What does it matter? It's words on a screen" (180). And Silas continues: "To us, Robert, the allegorical bomb is the real bomb, and the real bomb is just an allegory. As far as opinion is concerned, this is a real bomb, and it has rolled in your direction" (182). Whereas Robert tries to act very conscientious, Silas is all about exploiting the controversial tweet in order to pay dividends for *The Command Line*. *Perfidious Albion* thus shows in a terrifying way how truth and meaning can be tossed around in the hands of those in power who shape it according to their personal needs. In the age of digital media in which the number of clicks and comments tends to play almost a messianic role, it seemingly all comes down to "the only things that meant anything: impact and volume" (278).

> Byers suggests that if the dualism between on and offline has collapsed, so too has the dualism between true and false. Fake News and Alternative Facts may be presented as an invention of the Trump administration, but mass

> media is the true pioneer. And, in the same way, the solution is far deeper and more knotty than merely ignoring misinformation from nefarious governments in favour of the truth. Rather, fact and fiction blur, our world now a hyperreality where such distinctions have lost their meaning. (Doyle)

Following the spread of her controversial *#whitemalegenocide* tweet, Trina also experiences internet warfare and harassment. She suddenly is informed that multiple internet and media sources denote her as an extremist (cf. 173). In addition, Green, the company Trina works for, does not set out to help or protect her, but instead wants to wait how things play out (cf. 173-177). But Trina's situation gets even worse: When she takes out her phone to call home, she "found it clogged with notifications of violence" (183).

The metaphorical language used in *Perfidious Albion* is an indicator of how the online realm can be weaponised. Trina's personal email address "was out in the wild" (185), meaning that potential predators can now prey on her. In fact, she finds several worrisome messages straight in her inbox: One message "contained a grainy photograph: a naked black woman noosed to a tree, her hands tied, her muscles slack" (185). The digital is presented as something which can get completely out of one's control, as Trina also experiences, "watching as the screen repopulated itself with further notifications" (185). In the aftermath of her leaked email address and personal attacks by anonymous perpetrators, Trina starts to experience some "distinctly modern paranoia" (186). In the digital age, the level of anxiety increases since 'feeling' seen and scrutinised by others has become more of a permanent state these days. This is also a proof for how the collapsing boundaries between online and offline spheres impact the psyche.

A little while later, things take an even more disastrous turn. Carl, one of Trina's flatmates, shows her his laptop screen showing the "*Daily Record* website, its headline filling a third of the screenspace: *'White Genocide' Tweeter Lives in Sink Estate Threesome With Benefits Scrounge*" (202). Realising that not only her email address, but also her real address have been exposed, Trina bursts into tears. Because she can now potentially be targeted right at her door, her home turns out to not be a safe place anymore. As a consequence, Trina and her flatmates Mia, Carl and Bella have to leave their home (cf. 260f.). What once used to be an escape for Trina, has suddenly turned into a battlefield. "The result of *The Record* embedding Trina's tweets in its article was that Trina's Twittersphere, which she had always regarded as being a comparatively safe private space, was thrown open to a skewed and distorted demographic who then weaponised her only outlet against her" (271).

The potentially dehumanising effects of online harassment are also thematised in *The Circle*. Mercer's strong dissenting opinions are increasingly mocked by Mae and consequently also by her followers. "When she reads Mercer's letters on camera after going 'transparent', Mae's followers stalk any remaining trace of Mercer's online presence, demonstrating society's collective rejection of privacy and hinting at the rise of cyber bullies" (Rowley 174). Even though Eggers may use a lot of

exaggeration in his novel, he nonetheless points to real and terrifying problems of the contemporary world. Cyber bullying is a huge issue which has even led to people committing suicide.

And this is what eventually happens in Eggers' novel, too. In an attempt to prove Mercer wrong, showing him that the superior technology of the Circle can trace him anywhere in the world, Mae together with her viewing audience tries to locate him using a program called 'SoulSearch' (cf. Eggers 452ff.). She and her followers succeed, and together put him under pressure to surrender. "The maniacally cheerful and passive-aggressive herd of Circle users with whom Mae constantly interacts are rabid voyeurs, as insatiable for real-time data as the Circle itself, which is precisely Eggers' point – we [have] become Big Brother" (Winter). Eggers tries to utter a warning that such forceful mutual surveillance mechanisms between individuals have got the capacity of violently undermining dissenting opinions.

Subsequently, Mercer tries to flee in a truck, but ends up being chased by several drones. All of it is broadcasted live via the Internet. In a climactic moment, then, Mercer decides to end his life. Overcome by paranoia and desperation, and knowing that he cannot escape, Mercer drives the truck off a bridge (cf. Eggers 461). Mercer's death is a terrifying example of how modern technological surveillance can push individuals over the edge due to its invasiveness and permanency. "Through Mercer's death, *The Circle* suggests that digital technology can have dehumanizing effects on consumers. […] Mercer is dehumanized because his value as a person is determined by his willingness to embrace digital technology" (Rowley 175). Since he is one of the biggest critics of the technology developed by the Circle, he is marginalised by the many supporters of the tech-corporation and regarded as less than human.

What Byers' novel *Perfidious Albion* also showcases is that it is often difficult in the online sphere to properly distinguish between perpetrators and victims. A reporter, Vivian Ross, asks Hugo Bennington in a television interview following the public scandal concerning the controversial *#whitemalegenocide* tweet: "What about the violence that has been threatened towards the woman who tweeted that statement by people who claim to be your followers and admirers?" (Byers 255). When it comes to online hatred and harassment, there is no clear dividing line. Victims can become perpetrators and perpetrators can become victims.

In fact, Bennington who initially abuses Trina's tweet for his own purposes, in the end also becomes subject to online discrimination. When obscene pictures of Hugo's genitals, which bring to light a very embarrassing hobby of his, are released online by someone who managed to hack into his accounts, things take a drastic turn for him. Several women also start to charge him with indecency and harassment. Following this public scandal, the England Always party distances itself from him (cf. 313-317). Ultimately, he also learns what it feels like if one can "at any moment be lined up in front of what was effectively an internet firing squad" (316). Again, the metaphorical language employed by Byers makes clear how it feels like to be exposed to hatred, ridicule, etc. on the Internet. Pretty much everyone who is

immersed in the online world can suddenly find himself/herself in the "shark-pool of the web" (327).

What is an ongoing threat in the digital age on an individual level – namely the appropriation and abuse of one's personal data –, is likewise thematised by Byers as a concern on a collective level. Suddenly, the people of Edmundsbury are targeted by a group of hackers who are calling themselves The Griefers and are threatening to make people's online behaviour public. At a public demonstration, five men appear in masks. With a projector, they reach out to the people with the message: "Edmundsbury: We are The Griefers. We want to ask you: What *don't* you want to share? Remember, Edmundsbury … We are your face" (69-71). In between, the projection shows obscene images depicting not clearly identifiable individuals. This public demonstration is supposed to make clear that The Griefers want to use the possession of intimate data of the citizens of Edmundsbury as leverage. Subsequently, they establish a website with a rotation mechanism which they use to blackmail the community of Edmundsbury:

> At some point, according to a randomised algorithm, it would stop, thereby selecting a single face. That face, the people of Edmundsbury were advised, would be the face of the person The Griefers had chosen. They would make a website dedicated to that individual. On that website, which would be publicly accessible and widely promoted, would be everything that person had ever done on the internet: their photos, their private chats, their emails, their financial transactions, their search histories. Everything they both did and did not want to share. Then the roulette would start again, until, at an unspecified time, another person would be named. The process would continue indefinitely, people were told, unless someone in the town took it upon themselves to stop the randomised targeting in the only way The Griefers would allow: by volunteering themselves. (205)

Wearing masks in public and remote-controlling everything through an anonymous website, The Griefers also comfortably hide behind anonymity. In addition, the case of The Griefers blackmailing a whole town is another example of how easily the Internet can be abused for cybercrime. *Perfidious Albion* thus presents us with a world "in which information, anonymity and depersonalisation are mobilised with a disturbing force" (Hewitt). Even though this might seem unrealistic with current laws regarding data protection in the Western world, and in particular in the EU, Byers' novel nonetheless plays with the notion of what could happen if a group of hackers gained control of the data of a whole community. There already have been numerous cases of leaked pictures, documents or passwords that were brought to the public in recent years.

5.3.2 Consumerism-Induced Addiction and Apathy

In *SSTLS*, Shteyngart's "consumer-directed äppärät-*us*" (Rutledge 370) has visible effects on the demeanour and the psyche of individuals. People constantly use their äppäräti in order to connect with others and stay up to date. The constant information overload as well as people's obsessive behaviour regarding their äppäräti and online profiles hint at forms of addiction. For example, while observing her boyfriend's online activity Jenny admits about herself that "all [she's] doing is staring at [her] äppärät waiting for some more incriminating shit to pop up" (Shteyngart 147).

Indeed, people are so dependent on their äppäräti that they feel completely lost without them. After the Rupture, a serious social upheaval in Manhattan, the äppäräti in the area are not working and unable to connect to any network. As a consequence, Eunice "was sitting by the kitchen table, staring absently at her nonfunctional äppärät" (251). The sudden deprivation of the ability to go online immediately tears a hole in people's lives who start to show signs of apathy. In terms of this interrelation of consumption, addiction and alienation, *SSTLS* mirrors *Brave New World*. Lenny finds that he "can't connect in any meaningful way to anyone" and that his "hands are itching for connection" (270). But he is not the only one whose life suddenly feels empty without the ability of reaching out into the digital realm. "Four young people committed suicide in our building complexes, and two of them wrote suicide notes about how they couldn't see a future without their äppäräti" (270). With the use of satire and hyperbole, Shteyngart extrapolates how people could react in a media-saturated society if they are suddenly deprived of going online or if, in other words, a quintessential part of their existence is taken away from them without warning. There is, however, a glimpse of hope, because Shteyngart also hints at the fact that the ability to feel real affection for one another outside of the digital sphere is still possible, especially during times of online deprivation. "Because we can't connect to our äppäräti, we're learning to turn to each other" (274), says Lenny about himself and Eunice.

Eggers' novel also depicts the effects that can follow from too much immersion in technology. As Rowley notes, Eggers employs the dystopian trope of satire "to criticise consumerism-induced apathy" (171). And it is in precisely this aspect in which *The Circle* bears a significant resemblance to *Brave New World*. For instance, many of the protagonists in *The Circle* embrace and consume each new technological novelty like the citizens of the World State consume the drug soma. When Bailey publicly presents 'SeeChange', a tiny camera that has got the size of a lollipop and is able to broadcast the footage it films live, the audience is thrilled and someone yells out: "We want it now!" (Eggers 69). The docility of the consumers in *The Circle* makes them the perfect clients for surveillance capitalism.

Moreover, the dullness of most of the characters in Eggers' dystopian satire showcases their susceptibility to a totalising system and at the same time also signalises an ignorant or even brainwashed state of mind. In fact, the incredible

bluntness of Mae and her colleagues is often criticised in reviews of *The Circle* (cf. Geddes, McMillan)[7]. But Eggers, like Shteyngart, can be understood to employ this kind of absurd exaggeration as a thought-provoking wake-up call.

Towards the end of the plot, Mae's life and increasingly her self-esteem are dependent on how many followers she has and how many likes she receives. Consequently, however, she also reacts highly sensitive to the dislikes she receives. This is especially apparent in an alarmingly strong reaction to a poll displaying the opinion of every person working at the Circle towards her: "She felt numb. She felt naked. […] Three hundred and sixty-eight people loathed her. She was devastated. […] She was being stabbed. She had been stabbed" (Eggers 405f.). Mae gives a lot of weight to a number of anonymous voters who just pushed a simple button, without even giving any criticising comments and perhaps not even thinking too much about the poll. Mae is nonetheless shattered by this instance and starts to question herself and her work: "But what was she working for, anyway, if 368 Circlers didn't approve of her? Three hundred and sixty-eight people who apparently actively hated her, enough to push a button at her – to send their loathing directly to her, knowing she would know, immediately, their sentiments" (409). The reader probably cannot help but react somewhat amused to Mae's way too serious reactions. But this is, of course, intended by Eggers' use of satire. A short epiphany briefly brings the deluded Mae back to reality, but is abandoned again as soon as it appeared:

> The flash opened up into something larger, an even more blasphemous notion that her brain contained too much. That the volume of information, of data, of judgments, of measurements, was too much, and there were too many people, and too many desires of too many people, and too many opinions of too many people, and too much pain from too many people, and having all of it constantly collated, collected, added and aggregated, and presented to her as if that all made it tidier and more manageable – it was too much. But no. No, it was not, her better brain corrected. No. You're hurt by these 368 people. This was the truth. She was hurt by them, by the 368 votes to kill her. (410)

This may seem like a huge exaggeration, but there is nonetheless some truth in what Eggers presents us with here. In a digital world in which many consumers have become dependent on daily affirmation through followers, likes and comments online, people do tend to increasingly draw their self-worth from these kinds of things. Mae's preoccupation with her internal assessment in the Circle makes

[7] Geddes criticises: "It's a pity that a novel warning about the loss of the right to privacy doesn't contain more fully developed characters, with rich, interesting lives worth protecting. Mae is the main character, but she is more of a malleable tool of the Circle than a champion of human freedom". Similarly, McMillan bemoans: "[…] if only characters had been allowed to see things in anything other than black and white".

evident how especially digital media, constituted as a liquid or gaseous form of pragmatics, manage to influence the consciousness of individuals. In addition, being subjected to a constant gaze of other people who can express their sentiments in comment sections has visible effects on the psyche of individuals.

As a matter of fact, Halfmann refers to Martin Heideger who argues that technology alienates human beings from the nature of their being. He furthermore relates the increasing apathy of the protagonists in Eggers' novel to a numbing of the human neural system brought forth by consumers' strong immersion in technology (cf. 283). Zuboff particularly emphasises the 'psychic toll' that digital networks are able to inflict on individuals through social pressure and the constant comparison with others (cf. 461-465). Mae's lack of guilt after Mercer's death is symptomatic of Heideger's concern. Her progressive dehumanization and her apathetic state go hand in hand. „Geht der Mensch also nicht zugrunde, bleibt nur die Entmenschlichung als völlige Anpassung an die Technik" (Halfmann 283).

In *Perfidious Albion*, the constant distraction by technological devices is likewise an aspect which hints at people's dependency and at the same time their alienation from the real world. "Glued to the frigging screen" (Byers 130), Carl and Mia play video games with their baby Bella sitting just beneath them on the sofa. In addition, even dead phones distract their users while they are communicating with people face to face. "Norbiton had become distracted by his dead phone, tapping at it uselessly, then wiping the screen on his grimy trousers" (345). This is a proof for the immense control that smart phones can exert on individuals and their state of minds. The aspect of alienation becomes especially evident through people who often stare at their blank screens (cf. 247). These blank screens can be understood to metaphorically resemble the emptiness of their lives, but also their strong dependency on technological devices. When disconnected, the characters in the novel find themselves in an apathetic state of mind, because outside of the digital realm they have trouble to truly connect to the real world around them.

In Jess's case, however, her screen resembles the turbulence of her life whereas the blank screen (or desktop) resembles the detachment of such turmoil. By minimising her browser, she also tries to minimise all of her inner conflicts and frustrations.

> She minimised the entire web browser, her screen returning to the comforting all-black backdrop of the Nodem desktop. Then she sat back in her chair […], mentally minimising first the café around her, then the street outside the café […], then Edmundsbury, taking with it her home, her office, Robert, and finally the world, leaving only the comforting blankness of whatever reality remained when life's deceptive overlay was removed. Here, in this space, when everything that existed to her had been temporarily erased, there were no connections. Nothing related to anything else. Nothing meant anything. […] What remained was not truth at all, or even reassurance. Just blankness – the void she'd filled with imagined meaning. (246)

This makes clear how Jess experiences the 'comforting blankness' with absolutely no connections and no relations as a safe space for retreatment. Moving away from a screen or turning it off can be somewhat of a remedy from the experienced unease in the digital sphere.

Another aspect that Byers brings into focus are people who are obsessed with their public image on the Internet. Hugo Bennington, a politician, "wasting yet another hour examining the internet's opinion of him" (79). Anxious to see what other people think of him, he types in the beginning of his name ('Hugo Benn') into Google search. "*Hugo Bennington evil* tended to make a pretty rapid appearance, as did *Hugo Bennington ugly*, *Hugo Bennington sexist*, *Hugo Bennington racist* (naturally), and *Hugo Bennington must die*" (80). Eager to learn more, he cannot resist but type in his full name. "Hugo's fingers, acting largely on their own reconnaissance, added *is* after his name, at which point it always felt as if Google had opened a direct conduit between the filth of the world and every half-buried insecurity in Hugo's soul" (80). What is somewhat paradox is that even though Hugo experiences a lot of the opinions on him online as hurtful, they still hold a fascination on his mind. Similar to Mae in *The Circle*, he likewise seems to be strongly preoccupied with his status.

In the case of Robert, who is a journalist writing online columns, it is the feeling of being important and noteworthy that ties him to the digital world. "It felt like being famous. In many ways, he thought, scrolling through notifications and new follows, this *was* fame, because this was how celebrity now manifested: no red carpet, no fizzing pap flash, just the hum of alerts, the skin-tingle buzz of being noted by unseen eyes" (177). At the same time, however, this hysterical feeling of being noted by others online easily turns into a time-consuming trap. "Robert had spent the entire morning repeatedly refreshing his notifications and link-searching reactions to his piece" (179). Through the protagonists and their obsessive behaviour, Byers thus showcases "the domination of our life and world by […] social media" (Pierson).

What is most terrifying in Shteyngart's world, however, is that the protagonists believe in "a fantasy of the frictionless remediation of human emotion" (Malewitz 115). This happens, for instance, during one of Noah's live streams in which Lenny appears as a guest. "We're streaming these emotions live, folks. We're streaming Lenny's love for this girl Eunice Park in real time. We're 'feeling' the many levels of his pain just as he feels them" (Shteyngart 93). This kind of 'digital realism' is adopted by many of the protagonists in *SSTLS* (cf. Malewitz 109f.). Such public display of feelings, of course, also inevitably leads to an increase in one's social rankings. Following Noah's live stream event, another friend tells Lenny: "That was some good emoting about Eunice in there. That'll get your PERSONALITY ranking higher" (Shteyngart 95). Lenny also equates emotions with data. "I would disappear from the earth. And all these emotions, all these yearnings, all these *data*, if that helps to clinch the enormity of what I'm talking about, would be gone" (70). This shows how Lenny himself has internalised the kind of digital realism that goes along with equating feelings with algorithms.

At the same time this is a proof for how liquified forms of mass surveillance seep into many areas of everyday life and create certain cultural enclosures in the lives of consumers. "What was once a relatively solid, fixed, undifferential, or static instrument of repression, that homogenized the masses to institutional standards of conformity, is now a 'liquid' or 'gaseous' form of pragmatics that seeps out into almost every sphere of human interaction" (Willmetts 272). The protagonists' preoccupation with their rankings makes obvious how such enclosures created by the media devices that people in Shteyngart's fictitious world engage with – and which simultaneously also function as surveillance devices, namely by enabling people to watch each other's profiles – also produce panoptic effects of self-discipline. Always accessible to the public, rankings are of great importance.

The Circle, like *Super Sad True Love Story*, paints a frightening picture of an alternate reality that people become caught up in – a digital realism that swallows people whole. Halfmann refers to Schelsky in this regard: „Was bedeutet es, fragt er, daß mehr und mehr die vermittelte Information an Stelle der persönlichen Erfahrung zur unmittelbaren Wirklichkeit des modernen Menschen wird?" (285). This also happens in Eggers' novel: The protagonists, in fact, start doing things 'digitally' instead of experiencing them properly. For instance, Mae believes that she can visit different places of the world virtually, and thereby soak in the respective atmosphere of such. "She went to the SeeChange portal and watched feeds from beaches in Sri Lanka and Brazil, feeling calmer, feeling warmer" (Eggers 333). This is a further hint at the dissolution of the individual brought forth by its entrapment in the digital sphere. Mae's perception is increasingly constructed by the digital media she engages with.

Perfidious Albion especially showcases how technology affects people's consciousness. For example, through Jess's point of view we learn that "the increase in internet speeds and the increase in traffic complaints could practically be overlaid onto each other. People's collective capacity for patience had decreased in inverse proportion to their expectation of immediacy" (Byers 65). As the internet speeds increase, people apparently tend to expect more immediacy in other spheres of life, too. Put differently, technology causes some sort of alienation by depriving people of the ability to remain patient. This, too, can be said to be an instance of how a gaseous form of pragmatics conveyed through technology influences the perception of individuals.

5.3.3 Artificial, Empty and Inauthentic Relationships

In the sorted world of *SSTLS*, algorithms decide who should be together and interpersonal relationships are rendered quantifiable and calculable (cf. Haase 86, 90). In addition, everything in Shteyngart's world is subordinated to an economic, neoliberalist logic. "In this world, interpersonal interactions are inextricable from a constant process of evaluation; every moment serves as an opportunity to measure a person's debts against her assets, to calculate her equity, or to forecast her

economic viability" (Haines). For these reasons, there is no depth to human relationships and they appear to be of a rather empty nature in the novel.

In *SSTLS*, people ascribe an enormous importance to categorical scores. "Since every personal detail is already accessible online, and suitability is predetermined by an algorithm, there is no need to get to know each other. Socializing becomes fast, effective and, due to the allure of numerical values, seemingly objective" (Haase 90). Lenny displays this habit of looking up people online from the start. Before properly getting to know his new love interest, he examines Eunice and her family online:

> My retro äppärät churned slowly with data, which told me that the father's business was failing. A chart appeared, giving the income for the last eighteen months [...]. The mother did not have any data, she belonged solely to the home, but Sally, as the youngest of the Parks, was awash in it. From her profile I learned that she was a heavier girl than Eunice, the weight plunged into her round cheeks and the slow curvature of her arms and breasts. [...] After checking her health, I examined her purchases and felt Eunice's as well. The Park sisters favoured extra-small shirts in strict business patterns, [...] one-hundred-dollar children's socks (their feet were that small), panties shaped like gift bows, bars of Swiss chocolate at random delis, footwear, footwear, footwear. [...] Next, I did the social sites. The photos flashed before me. (Shteyngart 38)

This sheer endless enumeration presents us not only with society's obsession with finances and consumer culture, but also with Lenny's highly sexualised and objectifying gaze, as he especially pays attention to bodily features such as weight, breasts and small feet. He is, however, clearly not the only one in the novel whose thinking works according to a neoliberalist logic and a sexualised consumer culture. This applies to most, if not all, of the protagonists in Shteyngart's novel.

What is especially terrifying is that the behaviour of the characters in *SSTLS* shows how digital media increasingly constructs the perceived reality of human beings (cf. Malewitz 109f.). Jenny Kang, who is Eunice's best friend with whom she frequently chats on GlobalTeens, is in a relationship with her boyfriend Gopher which is mostly based on conventions promoted by such a 'digital realism'. By hacking into his GlobalTeens account, she finds out that he has an affair with a Mexican immigrant. Her response turns out as follows:

> So I went on this new Teens site called 'D-base' where they can digitize you like covered in shit or getting fucked by four guys at once and I sent Gopher all these Images of myself getting fucked by four guys at once. It's like you said, I've got to own my feelings about Gopher and that's the only way he's ever going to respect me and not fuck around with some gross illegal immigrant fuck-tard who probably rates 300 on a Credit Pole. (Shteyngart 147)

As Malewitz points out, what is terrifying here is not just the idea of 'owning one's feelings' but also the ambiguity about image-based communication: On the one hand, Jenny's images on 'D-base' can be read as a hyper-exaggerated attempt to demonstrate to her boyfriend how he humiliated her with his unfaithful behaviour. On the other hand, it is a hint at the fact that Jenny is willing to debase (as the name of the site mockingly indicates) herself even more in order to take revenge (cf. 120). Gopher's subsequent action (he returns to Jenny) suggests that her bait in the form of pornographic images was successful. Therefore, Malewitz concludes that "Jenny stirs Gopher's empathy because she is less a person than a digital object of desire – an empty vessel on which to project his equally empty fantasies" (120). This, as a result, renders interpersonal relationships meaningless.

In *SSTLS*, it becomes strongly evident that liquid forms of pragmatics conveyed through digital media structure the hopes and desires of the protagonists. The relationship between Lenny and Eunice is therefore doomed from the start. "In both cases, the couple's understanding of each other's shared humanity is predicated upon their ability to convert the strangeness of the other into the familiarity of a mediated construct" (Malewitz 110). As a matter of fact, this digital realism greatly affects the way human bodies are perceived. This becomes obvious especially through Lenny's description of Fabrizia and Eunice:

> Fabrizia. Her body conquered by small armies of hair, her curves fixed by carbohydrates, nothing but the Old World and its dying nonelectronic corporeality. And in front of me, Eunice Park. A nano-sized woman who had likely never known the tickle of her own pubic hair, who lacked both breast and scent, who existed as easily on an äppärät screen as on the street before me. (Shteyngart 21)

According to Malewitz, Lenny's desire for Eunice is symptomatic of digital realism's alteration of people's consciousness in a posthuman age (cf. 112). In this new era, the 'electronic corporeality' that Lenny mentions is becoming the new perceived standard. "Fabrizia's body can only exist within the nonelectronic corporeality of the mortal, material world; Eunice, by contrast, is a hairless, scentless, and angular posthuman, and thus can 'exis[t] as easily on an äppärät screen as on the street'" (ibid). Lenny objectifies Eunice according to a digital realism that the highly sexualised culture of his society and the posthuman doctrine of his workplace produce. This also explains why at one point he refers to Eunice as a "sleek digital creature" (Shteyngart 153). His perception works according to this posthuman logic.

Eunice, however, also partakes in this cultural logic by trying to shape her body in "ZeroMass" and "No Body" (121) gyms. She thereby also tries to escape from materiality into the digital sphere. In addition, she is obsessed with the shape of her body, as a chat correspondence with her friend Jenny (aka 'Grillbitch') proves: "I'm also getting those famous ajumma hips too! […] And my ass is SO FUCKING HUGE it's getting bigger than Lenny's, which is one of those crushed middle-aged asses […] Just call me Fatty McFatty, okay?" (143).

The relationship between Lenny and Eunice thus appears to be artificial, inauthentic and often very imbalanced. While Lenny is obsessed with her body shape and very devoted to fulfilling her wishes, Eunice herself is rather "absorbed by her äppärät, checking out expensive stuff" (99) on the many online shopping sites such as AssLuxury or JuicyPussy she frequently visits. A communicative divide between the two already manifests itself in the novel's epistolary form which is made up of Lenny's verbose diary entries delivered in full prose and Eunice's chat conversations on GlobalTeens which are full of grammatical mistakes and acronyms (cf. Haase 86). Lenny also notes about Eunice's constant and juvenile "Ha ha" that this was "what her generation liked to add to the end of sentences, like a nervous tic" (Shteyngart 102).

When Lenny is not around, Eunice seems somewhat undecided about their relationship. Her sister she tells: "Ha ha. Anyway, he's not really my bf. It's not like we're getting married. I told mom he's my roommate" (170). In the same chat correspondence, however, she also points out to her sister: "Lenny says things to me that are so sweet but they don't make me vomit. Not like some Media or Credit guy who just wants to get laid and move on. Lenny cares. And he's there for me every day" (172). It is thus clear that she, on the one hand, appreciates Lenny's trustworthiness and care, but on the other hand, is somewhat reluctant to admit her love for him in front of her friends and family. After all, her best friend Jenny has also told her before: "I don't think you should have kids with him because you'll have really ugly children" (147). Eunice, like her surroundings, is caught up in a world obsessed with beauty ideals in which people are judged by the way they look. And this clearly has effects on her relationship with Lenny.

Lenny, however, does not really seem to be in a serious and mature relationship either. He instead objectifies Eunice and in public treats her as a status symbol. To a guy who has put him on a stream called "101 People We Need to Feel Sorry For" (120) he says: "Look, I appreciate the attention, but I got this new girlfriend with 780 Fuckability […] So would you mind taking me off your stream?" (120). At another point in the story, he wants to introduce Eunice to his friends to "impress them because she was so young and pretty" (151). Furthermore, having Eunice at his side, Lenny is also very happy to see his social rankings rise up: "I noticed that when I put my arm around her my MALE HOTNESS shot up by a hundred points, and I ranked a respectable thirty out of forty-three men" (161). It thus becomes evident once again that the categorical scores during social interactions strongly impact the thinking and the perception of the characters. Propagated through digital media, liquid or gaseous forms of pragmatics seep into many life areas and create these kinds of cultural enclosures in the lives of the protagonists.

Because the relationship between Lenny and Eunice is permeated by the logic of a digital realism in a posthuman world, it is doomed to fail. "Within the remediating logic of this fictional universe, Eunice's fragile, real-world relationship with Lenny cannot survive, and she leaves Lenny for a more digitally inflected relationship with his boss, Joshua 'Joshie' Goldman. As she writes to Jenny, Joshua reminds

Eunice of her digital youth" (Malewitz 120f.). To Eunice, Joshie is reminiscent of an old man which she used to see in pornographic material while attending kindergarten: "That's sort of what he looks like, with the shaved head, but cuter and younger" (Shteyngart 226). This, again, demonstrates the immense hold that digital media tend to have on people's perceptions of reality. Moreover, Joshie's attractiveness to Eunice must also stem from the fact that he uses a very similar language full of banal and child-like expressions such as "Mwah!", "yay for us!" (280) or "ha ha" (279). As the novel's ending makes clear, however, the relationship between Eunice and Joshie also turns out to be impermanent, as is the case with pretty much every relationship in Shteyngart's novel that is affected by the digital sphere.

SSTLS stands in line with *Brave New World* in its depiction of human relationships that come across as very artificial, and indeed, seem to be as fabricated as the ones in Huxley's novel. "Shteyngart's dystopian satire […] likewise imagines a near-future where surveillance is the norm and interpersonal relations, including love interests, are its casualties" (Rutledge 366). Whereas in Huxley's novel relationships are permeated by a hedonistic logic as part of the World State's culture, in Shteyngart's novel they are the product of a culture penetrated by a digital realism.

In a comparable way to Shteyngart's novel, *The Circle* depicts the effects of a digitally augmented reality on interpersonal behaviour and relationships. This becomes especially evident through Mae's interactions with others because broadcasting everything she does throughout the day live significantly impacts her mannerisms. For her interactions with others increasingly become artificial, that is they come across as forced and scripted (cf. Rowley 172). "Okay, everyone" (Eggers 334), she starts the day off with. One morning, Mae is eager to try out a phrase that she hopes might catch her viewing audience's attention: "This is a day like every other day, in that it is unlike any other day!" (ibid). With these idiotic mannerisms, Mae indeed becomes symptomatic of a whole generation. "Mae represents our collective spirit, pre-broken and slumping at attention" (Beck). The catchy phrase does not seem to generate her desired attention, though. "After she said it, Mae checked her wrist, but saw little sign it had struck a nerve" (Eggers 334).

But Mae is not the only one who displays such idiosyncratic communicative manners. When Mercer is chased by Mae and her mighty viewing audience during a live demonstration of a new program called 'SoulSearch', one woman from the audience yells to him from a drone: "Mercer, submit to us! Submit to our will! Be our friend!" (460). One cannot help but role one's eyes at these admittedly ridiculous comments. Most importantly, though, and most likely what Eggers sets out to demonstrate is that the artificiality of digital communication renders interpersonal communication and human relationships rather hollow and meaningless. And, of course, Mercer's death as a direct consequence of this live demonstration is a strong hint at the destructive potential of technology. *The Circle* thus strongly conveys that people's "immersion in technology leads to alienation rather than connection and that society's saturation with digital technology has a disintegrating, harmful effect" (Rowley 175).

Mae's intimate relationships are likewise empty and artificial because they are permeated not only by the logic of her workplace, the Circle, but also by the digital realism of a highly media and internet saturated society. After a brief sexual encounter with Francis, one of her fellow colleagues, Mae suddenly realises that he was filming everything. To her demand to delete the video he only responds "Did you say 'delete'?" (Eggers 203) through which he implies that nothing gets deleted at the Circle. Even though Mae is deeply unsettled by this at first (cf. 204, 236), over time she comes to accept that the video will continue to be permanently accessible on the Circle cloud. At a later point in the plot, Mae's affair with Francis continues, and it becomes obvious that the sexual fantasies that they act out stem from a sexualised culture provoked by the Internet (cf. 379). Francis also wants Mae to rate his performance which shows how deeply embedded the Circle's rating philosophy has become in his mind (cf. 380f.). The fact that the rating culture propagated by the tech corporation manages to seep into private areas of existence is another proof for the impact of liquified forms of pragmatics on the perception and thinking of the characters.

Compared to *SSTLS* and *TC*, *Perfidious Albion* does not particularly focus on the impact of a digital realism on people's consciousness and how this manifests itself in interpersonal relationships. Byers' novel rather emphasises how the increasing digitality of people's lives disconnects them from each other. At the centre of the novel is the relationship between Jess and Robert. Throughout the plot, the two lovers more and more drift apart from each other due to their strong immersion in the digital realm.

The virtual identities that Jess created and kept a secret from Robert start to have a significant influence on the integrity of their relationship. Some secrets between partners should remain secret, but Jess decided to dig deep. "She now knew him *too* intimately. She knew his responses, his positions, his hasty and bitter thoughts" (Byers 266). Jess undermined the integrity of their relationship by creating different online personas with which she delved deeper into Robert's life. She used Julia Benjamin to criticise his columns and Byron Stroud to gain his trust. Now she knows things about Robert she otherwise would have never known and thus forever sees him in a different light. What is alarming is the fact that Jess only manages to argue through Julia Benjamin with Robert behind his back, instead of facing him in person.

> This was the great side effect of Julia: she and Robert no longer argued. They had outsourced their disagreements, and in doing so created a space where they were happy, where the concerns that threatened their comfort were held at bay. The moment she went home and said what she thought, she would allow Julia into her home alongside what she now thought of as *public Robert*. Something would be irrevocably ruptured; some membrane would tear. The dark matter of their ideas would subsume them. (171)

But this way, Jess shifts potential arguments that normally she herself would have with Robert onto her digital persona, thinking that this remedies their problems. The digital sphere which engulfs Jess's and Robert's lives ultimately undermines the integrity and authenticity of their relationship.

> She found herself wondering how they had got here. There had been, she remembered, once, an intimacy – one that had existed in the very space they now used as a forum of harm. She remembered how they used to text each other at parties, even when they were standing side by side, maintaining a closeness right under the gaze of the people they were speaking to; how, for a long time, they'd sustained a cautious flirtation over Twitter, each of them thrilling a little at what was both concealed and suggested in that tentative public affection. (248)

All this 'outsourcing' of real affection to the digital realm makes the relationship of Jess and Robert appear empty and artificial. It is no surprise that in the long run something like this inevitably leads to a friction "between minds that now couldn't reach each other" (248). As Justine Jordan points out, "[t]he fatal loss of authenticity between them is a mirror of the book's wider world".

Even though the Internet is often said to connect people, it paradoxically can also disconnect people by alienating them. Especially Jess and Robert seem to have lost the ability to communicate on a personal level and find themselves stuck "in a silence of their own making" (Byers 263). A constant distraction by smart phones or tablets most certainly also adds up to this. Digital dystopian novels "imply that use of these technologies may also have a disintegrating effect upon meaningful interpersonal communication" (Rowley 170). This becomes evident when Robert and Jess talk in the evening about their day. "He [Robert] looked away, found something of sudden interest in the notes on his pad" (Byers 264). This is another hint at the state of their relationship. Both Robert and Jess are so caught up in the online realm that they fail to truly communicate on an interpersonal level.

5.3.4 A New Type of Humankind

The concept of posthumanism plays a huge role in *SSTLS*. Lenny works at the Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung corporation. His main task is to recruit potential clients that are eligible for life extension, so-called High Net Worth Individuals (cf. Shteyngart 5). In *SSTLS*, improving one's circulatory system's functions with "smart blood" (5) is regarded as a very sophisticated (yet costly) way of extending one's life span. The posthuman has therefore, to an extent, already become a reality in Shteyngart's novel. The posthumanist thinking advocated by the influential Staatling-Wapachung company and especially Lenny's boss Joshie's "Post-Human philosophy" (126) clearly impacts the protagonists.

Throughout the novel, Lenny is quite obsessed with the posthuman ideal of immortality. "Today I've made a major decision: *I am never going to die*" (3), says Lenny

at the very beginning of the novel. Like his colleagues at Post-Human Services, Lenny also strives for the dechronification treatments to prevent bodily decay and prolong his existence (cf. 66, 70). Because employees at Post-Human Services undergo a constant transformation themselves, Joshie asks them to keep a diary in order "to remember who we *were*, because every moment our brains and synapses are being rebuilt and rewired with maddening disregard for our personalities, so that each year, each month, each day we transform into a different person, an utterly unfaithful iteration of our original selves" (65). The self is thus not understood as a stable concept, but as eligible of undergoing countless reconfigurations (cf. Haase 94).

The language Lenny uses hints at a belief in the conversion of personality into digital algorithms, as Haase points out (cf. 94). Lenny expresses this through metaphors "which mix software terminology with character" (ibid). For instance, he wishes he could "download" Kelly Nardl's "goodness" and "install it in our children" (Shteyngart 180). Lenny is also very sensitive to the HNWI/LNWI-distinction. When Noah tells him "Look at us. We're not HNWIs", Lenny protests "We're not Low Net Worth either!" (95). This proves how deeply embedded the ideals of a prolonged bodily existence and a possible digital immortality are inside Lenny. His mind is not free from these posthuman ideas throughout most of the novel.

In Shteyngart's novel, the most radical advocate of posthumanism is clearly Lenny's boss Joshie. At some point, he brings up the extreme notion of replacing bodily organs, saying: "I'm going to have my heart removed completely. Useless muscle. Idiotically designed. That's this year's big project at Post-Human Services, we're going to teach the blood *exactly* where to go and how fast to go and then we'll just let it do all the circulating. Call me heartless. Hahaha" (295). The extremity of Joshie's statement is the attack at and the undermining of the heart as the central organ, which at the same time metaphorically stands for human emotions and humaneness itself. This posthuman ideal of getting rid of the heart is simultaneously a strong hint at Joshie's alienation from human nature and his deprived humanity. However, as it turns out, nature does not like to be tricked and instead strikes back. For Joshie, who is about to die at the end of the novel, admits the ultimate failure of his bioengineered body: "We were wrong. The antioxidants were a dead end. […]. Our genocidal war on free radicals proved more damaging than helpful, hurting cellular metabolism, robbing the body of control. In the end, nature simply would not yield" (329).

Compared to Shteyngart, Eggers' novel goes in a similar yet somewhat different direction. According to Gouck, the extensive and all-invading surveillance carried out by the Circle also evokes "a shift in the way in which its subjects are viewed" (Gouck). Humans become easy to figure out through algorithms derived from databases. "We're not automatons. […] We're a group of the best minds of our generation" (Eggers 47), insists Mae's supervisor Dan. Yet the employees working at the Circle clearly undergo a transformation which merges their bodies with surveillance technology. Scholars thus point to the ways in which *The Circle* raises

questions of transhumanism (cf. Gouck; Hinchliffe 52, 56ff.). Transhumanism is concerned with "enhancing and developing 'human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities'" (Gouck) and can arise from a number of ways, such as "genetic engineering, psychopharmacology […] memory enhancing drugs, wearable computers, and cognitive techniques" (ibid). In this way, *The Circle* goes in a slightly different direction compared to *SSTLS*, as it is more concerned with enhancing rather than replacing human beings with 'posthumans'.

As "a believer in the perfectibility of human beings" (Eggers 291), Bailey, one of the founders of the Circle, employs notions of a transhumanist philosophy throughout the plot in order to convince people to subject themselves to the company's surveillance regime. In fact, once Mae joins the Circle, her body becomes infiltrated by various technologies (cf. Gouck). Likewise, Hinchcliffe suggests that the protagonists in *The Circle*, especially Mae, "are literally transformed into cyborgs" (56). This becomes especially apparent when Mae, through the ingestion of a sensor, allows the Circle to "collect data on [her] heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, heat flux, caloric intake, sleep duration, sleep quality, digestive efficiency, on and on" (Eggers 154). The doctor working at the Circle informs Mae that this is a standard procedure in terms of health monitoring that all Circle employees undergo.

Even though Mae swallows the sensor unknowingly, she does not protest when the doctor tells her shortly after. She is instead very acceptive of her increasing transparency. "Mae Holland als typische Vertreterin ihrer Zeit weiß sehr genau von der Gestalt ihres Objektseins und hat diese Sichtweise in ihr Denken aufgenommen, weshalb sie natürlich wenig Schwierigkeit hat, sich mit der Situation der Transparenz abzufinden, ist dieser Zustand doch allein Steigerung eines ohnehin vorhandenen Potentials" (Halfmann 287).

By enabling the company she works for to monitor her health and adjust her workload accordingly, Mae conforms to Bailey's plans of creating a 'better' race and this way also corresponds "to the transhumanist philosophy of humans being 'faster, more intelligent, less disease-prone [and] long-living'" (Hinchliffe 56). Once she wears a 'SeeChange' camera around her neck, her transformation from "a mere human employee at the office" to "a [synoptic] window into this new world […] of the Circle" (Gouck) is complete. Eggers' novel thus showcases how "surveillance technology can become a part of the human body" in order to serve the purpose of creating "an idealised version of the human race" (Hinchliffe 62). Consequently, though, such surveillance methods can be used to manipulate the opinions of those under surveillance. In addition, the rights to the ownership of one's body may be seriously infringed by this (cf. ibid). Foucault's idea of subtle coercive mechanisms that infiltrate, break down and rearrange the human body is very fitting in terms of these transhumanist notions. In fact, if in the wrong hands, surveillance technology that merges with human bodies could even quite literally produce docile individuals in the Foucauldian sense, because it would entail that these persons carry their personal Panopticons on their shoulders.

Perfidious Albion also raises the thought of a technological transformation of human beings. Following the arrival of the tech company Green, Edmundsbury underwent some significant changes in its infrastructure. Some of these changes such as increased internet speeds are appreciated whereas others cause discomfort. Not everything Green decided to get involved in is openly communicated to the public. "The word *uncanny* was bandied around a lot. […] The unease stemmed from the unseen, from the near-invisible yet perfectly measurable changes Edmundsbury's environment had undergone" (Byers 65). Due to this technological shift, the citizens of Edmundsbury apparently also undergo a transformation, for "[e]ven when changes were digital, the effect, Jess knew, could be physical" (ibid). Jess notes how

> all of these individually small and almost unnoticeable changes in experience added up to a seismic shift in consciousness. […] Perhaps, she thought, their heart rates were infinitesimally accelerated, their pupils micro-dilated, their breathing a quarter of a respiration faster and shallower. Perhaps all of these adaptations, in what they saw and how they saw it, added up to something irreversible, evolutionary. (66)

With the direct juxtaposing of small increases in bodily functions and huge effects on the human consciousness, the novel depicts the strong connection of body and mind, and how changes in the environment can affect both. The use of the term 'evolutionary' also hints at a possible development of the human into further forms. In other words, Byers' novel likewise plays with the notion of enhanced human beings as a result of technological progress, and thereby also brings a trans- and/or posthumanism into focus.

During one of the last and at the same time most revealing scenes of the novel, Bangstrom, who supervises work in the tech company Green, likewise reduces human life to data. "Life is data, Trina. It's just information assembled" (374). Bangstrom's language inflected with tech phrases also hints at the belief in a digital transformation of humans. "We've given you a better life. You've got a better job, a better place to live. This is an upgrade. Trina 2.0" (375).

The concept of a post- and/or transhumanism, however, also leads to the exclusion of individuals from society who refuse to be incorporated into the interfaces of surveillance technology. In *SSTLS*, for example, individuals who are deemed as not sufficient to prolong their existence are systematically marginalised. This is what happens when Lenny encounters a 'fat man' at the airport in Rome. Because he cannot be scanned and ranked, he is considered not just illegible, but illegal (cf. Dolezal 222). The fat man is rendered inhuman "because he has substance, because he and his body mass stubbornly resist incorporation into the technological interfaces that constitute realism in a posthuman age" (Malewitz 115).

As opposed to the 'new arising humankind' in Eggers' novel, Kalden is presented as the mysterious and repulsive 'other'. Annie and Mae search for him in the Circle's databases, but cannot find anything about him. "If I were being the slightest bit paranoid, I'd think he was an infiltrator of some kind, or a low-grade

molester" (Eggers 171), says Annie to Mae. In a world in which it is increasingly perceived as normal for everyone to leave digital traces, someone who cannot be tracked or monitored inevitably must appear irritating. Initially, though, Mae chooses to trust Kalden as his face had "an openness" and "an unmistakable lack of guile" (ibid). As Mae gradually becomes more infatuated with the company's principles of transparency and accountability, and at the same time increasingly feels disappointed about Kalden's disappearance, she changes her opinion: "Anyone who disappeared like that was not a serious person. He wasn't serious about her or how she felt. He had seemed supremely sensitive each time they'd met, but then, when apart, his absence, because it was total – and because total non-communication in a place like the Circle was so difficult, it felt like violence" (234).

Kalden's repulsiveness is no surprise, however, if we follow Halfmann's argumentation. According to him, *The Circle* displays a new generation of human beings that participates in the destruction of private sphere since it constantly watches itself through the eyes of others and its own digital doubles. He relates the mentality of Mae and her fellow colleagues at the Circle to deficits currently experienced as culturally fashionable such as symptoms of ADHD or Asperger's syndrome. Halfmann quotes Tony Attwood who claims that "[p]erhaps the simplest way to understand Asperger's syndrome is to think of it as describing someone who perceives and thinks about the world differently to other people" (cited in: 293).

> So ist der *Circle* eine Biosphäre, in welcher der transformierte Mensch sich entfalten kann, und in der Folge, wie Eggers darlegt, die Welt erobert: Als Eroberungszug, der so irritierend leicht deshalb ist, da die als Asperger diagnostizierte neue Selbstdefinition des Menschen zum Status quo zu werden beginnt. Unnormal und anders sind also nun allmählich diejenigen, die ihrerseits nicht transformiert sind, also die vorhergehenden Generationen und die sich Verweigernden, die verständnislos dem neuen Menschen gegenüberstehen. (294f.)

The constant monitoring of individuals in which they themselves participate can thus be regarded as heralding the start of a new era of humankind – a new age in which the transparency of human beings becomes a new normative force. Any objection to this is futile, as both Shteyngart and Eggers, and to a small extent also Byers, set out to show.

5.4 Living in a World of No Escape

Super Sad True Love Story, The Circle and *Perfidious Albion* imagine societies that are encapsulated by the digital realm. They demonstrate the psychological effects of an increasingly fading (or, as in the case of *SSTLS*, already completely eroded) dividing line between the public and private spheres. These digital dystopian novels, and in

particular the endings of their plots, can thus be understood to call "the very possibility of a human future in a digital world" (Zuboff 7) into question.

At the very end of Eggers' novel, Kalden reveals himself to be Ty, the person who started it all. "I was trying to make the web more civil. I was trying to make it more elegant. […] But I didn't picture a world where Circle membership was mandatory, where all government and all life was channelled through one network" (Eggers 480). Now he tries to convince Mae that the completion of the Circle must be stopped at all costs. "The true mission of The Circle is to eliminate privacy, incorporating all of society into the social media platform of The Circle and achieving a surveillance state where no members of society can hide" (Rowley 172). Hence, Ty explains the fast-approaching calamity that has built up throughout the novel: "Completion is the end. We're closing the circle around everyone – it's a totalitarian nightmare. […] Everyone will be tracked, cradle to grave, with no possibility of escape" (Eggers 481). The novel thereby presents us with a fictional world that is on the brink of turning into a full-blown surveillance state.[8]

In the real world in which the erosion of privacy is likewise an ever-increasing threat, Ty's conception of "The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age" (485) with points such as "We must all have the right to anonymity" and "The barrier between public and private must remain unbreachable" (485) really hits home. The novel thereby does indeed put a mirror in front of our eyes, "as the reader contemplates the real-world parallels with increasing connectivity, surveillance, and obligatory disclosure" (Rowley 172f.).

The novel ends with Mae betraying Ty to Bailey and Stenton. Absolutely certain that she has made the right decision of sticking to the Circle's principles, Mae is happy and willing to welcome the new approaching era of ultimate transparency. The frail and faulty old world would soon be "replaced by a new and glorious openness, a world of perpetual light" (Eggers 491). The notion of 'a world of perpetual light' imagines the elimination of shades of grey and dark spots, and hence is an indicator of a world with no (physical) place to hide. This is also heavily reminiscent of the cells inside the Panopticon which are always fully transparent. In *The Circle*, the protagonists thus literally are about to become prisoners in a world of no escape.

What Byers sets out to mirror in *Perfidious Albion* is likewise a world in which the online and offline realms fade more and more into each other, so that privacy and personal freedom become significantly eroded. "What was happening in

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[8] *The Circle* is even interpreted by numerous scholars and reviewers as the *1984* of our time (cf. Beck, Daub, Geddes). For a potentially immense level of control, i.e. the kind of centrally aggregated power resembled by Big Brother, seems to have become more of an imminent threat in recent years. „Das Wirken der NSA, von Edward Snowden an die Öffentlichkeit gebracht, die Nachbeben von *Wikileaks* und das eifrige Datensammeln diverser Portale aus kaum abzuschätzenden Motiven, all dies hat das Jahr 2013 wohl zum eigentlichen *1984* werden lassen, weshalb Eggers mit seinem Werk tief in der Wunde bohre" (Halfmann 275).

Edmundsbury […] was emblematic. *The modern world* could no longer be escaped […]" (Byers 164). The protagonists in the novel find themselves "amidst the violent slippage of private and public worlds" (187), and have to deal with the consequences.

Individuals such as Trina, for example, note the all-pervading influence of what happens online and how it blends into their offline lives. "Everything that was swelling and rising online, she thought, would wash rapidly into everything she valued offline" (188). Jess, "numbed by the rapidity with which her life had stopped being her own" (339), makes a similar pressing experience and starts to contemplate what her life has become. She comes to realise that "it *was* a different world" in which "[s]he felt herself transplanted" and in which "[h]er emotional topography had shifted" (339). Jess furthermore denotes everything as technological and thus artificially fabricated. "There was nothing on earth that was not a technology. The climate, thought, her body" (382). It thus appears that she feels utterly trapped and unable to free herself from the technologies that determine her.

The fictitious world in *Perfidious Albion* thereby paints a vivid picture of the psychological consequences that individuals face when they are more and more encapsulated by the digital sphere. Not only do they end up losing a substantial amount of their privacy, they are also significantly deprived of personal agency and the ability to control their emotional states. The digital sphere encompasses their lives in such an invasive manner that it seems to swallow them whole. The picture Byers paints is not at all dissimilar from the digital world we live in right now. On the contrary, it is very realistic. "Byers is […] exploring, with a cold and horrified eye, what we are only starting to discover about the reach and control of global tech companies, and the political and individual effects of internet saturation" (Jordan).

At the very end of *The Circle*, the apparently deluded Mae comes up with a terrifying idea. Standing beside Annie's bed in hospital, she contemplates being able to see into people's heads. "It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world. […] They needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait" (Eggers 491). She thereby even plays with the notion of going a step further, namely invading people's heads which can be seen as the last line of defence in a digital world in which surveillance has become permanent and all-encompassing. The human mind thus resembles a private space that cannot be eroded by surveillance. One may also recall Julia's statement in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "They can make you say anything – *anything* – but they can't make you believe it. They can't get inside you" (Orwell 174). But then the Party does manage to get inside Winston by torturing him inside the Ministry of Love. For that reason, *The Circle* ends on a very depressing note, because like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it also plays with the notion of literally invading the human mind.

As a matter of fact, *Perfidious Albion* ends on a similar gloomy note. Trina ends up trapped in a contract she signed, forced to work for Green and finish their monitoring software Beatrice and her digital replica Tayz so that the MT system can

eventually be operated automatically. But she is forced to remain silent about all of this, and for that reason cannot reach out for any help from her friends. "The secret would gnaw at her. […] Fear, the inability to share it, would erode her inner and outer life" (Byers 380). For her, things thus take a particular drastic turn. In the middle of a storm going on outside but also metaphorically inside herself, Trina nonetheless finds peace of mind for a moment: "From this brief lull, she could extrapolate, in her mind, another life, another future – a liveable, bearable reality. Nothing had yet happened. Nothing was yet real. As long as it could only be imagined, it could still conceivably be true" (380f.). Thereby, Byers puts the power of the human imagination into focus. Compared to Mae's contemplation in *The Circle*, this also showcases how the human mind functions as a safe space from digital surveillance, because what happens in the mind cannot be monitored.

In comparison with *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion* that envision the increasing pervasiveness of the digital sphere and the corresponding psychological effects on individuals, Shteyngart's novel presents us with a society in which privacy is already a thing of the past (apart from Lenny's diary entries) – a condition that people have adapted their whole lifestyles to. The protagonists are mostly concerned with data, in particular their rankings and their digital profiles that construct their perceived realities. Nonetheless, *SSTLS* seems to end on a more hopeful note compared to the fairly depressing endings of *TC* and *PA*.

The hope for escape lies in Lenny's and Eunice's personal transformation toward the end which makes them regain a great amount of personal autonomy. Interestingly, Willmetts sees hope for autonomy especially in the character of Eunice. This may seem like as a huge surprise and may even seem unrealistic, because Eunice is very much constituted by her surroundings and the digital reality projected by her äppärät.

> If there is hope in *SSTLS,* it lies in Eunice Park. Eunice may seem an unlikely candidate for a model of autonomy. Far from an ideal of the self-aware and self-constituting individual, she seems forever being *constituted by* the social constraints that bind her. She is constituted by the hypersexualized and consumerist society that she finds herself in; she is a shopaholic, and her particular penchant for the TotalSurrender brand of underwear is another not-so-subtle metaphor for her subjugation. She is constituted by Lenny and Joshie, who compete for her affection, and cast her according to their techno-orientalizing gaze as a 'nano-sized woman' with an 'electronic corporeality' that make her a 'poster child' for their technophilic lust for bioengineered eternity. She is constituted by her abusive father. She is constituted by her äppärät (Willmetts 283).

In addition, as Willmetts points out, the novel's very form denies Eunice her autonomy: For Eunice's messages on the GlobalTeens social network, a medium which is both nonprivate and nonintrospective, stands in contradiction to Lenny's private diary entries which allow him a capacity for critical self-reflection (cf. 283).

Her later involvement with the LNWI protestors, however, does showcase her ability to critically reflect on a political situation and build her own opinion, even though she is discouraged from doing so by her surroundings, including her mother and her friend Jenny (aka 'Grillbitch', her main correspondent on GlobalTeens). Her politicization can be considered an assertion of her autonomy, as Willmetts claims (cf. 284). Near the end of the novel, she also gains more introspection: "'I'm writing this for me,' Eunice declares in one of her final Global Teens entries, shifting from the dialogic to the diaristic and adopting a private, introspective, and self-reflective register that has hitherto been afforded only to Lenny in the novel" (ibid). This is a strong hint at both her self-awareness and her self-determination.

Towards the end, she also becomes very reflective of her social background that has constituted her: "I was always a Korean girl from a Korean family with a Korean way of doing things, and I'm proud of what that means. It means that, unlike so many people around me, I know who I am" (Shteyngart 297, cf. Willmetts 285). Thus, Willmetts concludes that Eunice obtains a great deal of relational autonomy in *SSTLS*, learning to 'be herself in the other' (cf. 285). He fails to acknowledge Lenny's development throughout the novel, though.

Lenny's fundamental change is especially emphasised by Haase (cf. 94-96). Indeed, Lenny's personal journey can be considered as another glimpse of hope in terms of autonomy. "Although his worldview is grounded in post-humanity, Lenny slowly grasps the impossibility of thinking his identity and his body separate. He is not a floating personality, but an embodied subject" (Haase 95). In his diary, as if he was talking to his boss Joshie directly, he also points out: "that's what immortality means to me, Joshie. It means selfishness. My generation's belief that each one of us matters more than you or anyone else would think" (Shteyngart 70f.). This demonstrates Lenny's ability to somewhat question the ideal of living forever that is so advocated by the company he works for. It also shows a moral awareness toward the fact that in a world with limited resources dying means to make way for the generations to follow.

In a peaceful moment, Lenny even finds that: "The fading light is us, and we are, for a moment so brief it can't even register on our äppärät screens, beautiful" (205). On the one hand, this shows Lenny's acceptance of his finite existence. On the other hand, the beauty of the fading light also hints at the fact that he finally learns that identity is contingent and not categorical or data-based (cf. Haase 96). Therefore, his initial obsession with living forever and improving his creditworthiness and social rankings to escape the LNWI label takes a redeeming course toward the end. He also manages to critically reflect on the situation of his society: "Shards of data all around us, useless rankings, useless streams, useless communiqués from a world that was no longer to a world that would never be" (Shteyngart 246).

Near the conclusion of the novel, Lenny negates his earlier statement: "Today I've made a major decision: *I am going to die*. Nothing of my personality will remain. […] My life, my entirety, will be lost forever. I will be nullified" (304). Apparently,

he has finally come to grips with the finitude of life. Haase thus concludes that Lenny eventually realises "that narratives must have closure to be meaningful" (96). Lenny's final statement which simultaneously makes up the last words of the novel is symptomatic of this, emphasising once again that stories must come to an end: "For a while at least, no one said anything, and I was blessed with what I needed the most. Their silence, black and complete" (Shteyngart 331). The adjective 'black' can also be referred to the blank screen of a turned off äppärät which finally provides the main protagonist with the peace of mind he has so long searched for.

The reader also learns that after the collapse of the Bipartisan regime and his breakup with Eunice, Lenny left New York and immigrated to Canada where he changed his identity from Lenny Abramov to Larry Abraham and eventually moved to a small farmhouse. "I wanted to be in a place with less data, less youth, and where old people like myself were not despised simply for being old, where an older man, for example, could be considered beautiful" (328).

Yet Lenny's phrasing at the same time shows how he still regards his existence as made up of ones and zeros; hence the equation of death with 'nullification' (cf. 304). His concern for his data is a further hint at a somewhat still internalised notion of a digital realism. "And what will be left? […] my data, the soupy base of my existence uptexted to a GlobalTeens account" (304). Whereas he does regain a great amount of personal autonomy toward the end of the novel, he nonetheless continues to be influenced by the logic of the digital world he has so long been a part of. It even turns out that not only his chat correspondence with Eunice but also his diary entries are eventually publicised (cf. 327). Thereby, Lenny is in retrospect ultimately deprived of the privacy he thought he had. "When I wrote these diary entries so many decades ago, […] I had no idea that some unknown individual or group of individuals would breach my privacy and Eunice's to pillage our GlobalTeens accounts and put together the text you see on your screen" (327). The fact that their love story is subsequently taken up and appropriated by the entertainment industry (cf. 330f.) furthermore denies the ex-couple their shared memories and intimacy.

Shteyngart's *SSTLS*, however, is not the only novel in which a diary plays an essential role in the provision of privacy and personal freedom. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston's diary, functioning as a subversive outlet that enables him to express himself freely by writing down his thoughts, provides him with a small yet significant amount of privacy that otherwise is almost impossible to obtain in the surveillance state of Oceania. "For as long as he writes in his diary, notions of freedom and hope – impossible to articulate and barely able to be thought in other circumstances – sustain him" (Marks 77). During his ordeal inside the Ministry of Love, though, Winston finds out that the Thought Police had spied on him for seven years, his diary included.

> He knew now that for seven years the Thought Police had watched him like a beetle under a magnifying glass. There was no physical act, no word spoken

> aloud, that they had not noticed, no train of thought that they had not been able to infer. Even the speck of whitish dust on the cover of his diary they had carefully replaced. (Orwell 289)

In comparison to Lenny, Winston is thus befallen by a similar fate. He is in the end deprived of both his private thoughts and the former intimacy that only existed between him and Julia.

Compared to *TC* and *PA* in which the protagonists are significantly deprived of personal freedom towards the end, *SSTLS* thus rather moves in the opposite direction by providing its two main protagonists with more autonomy and thereby reversing their digital captivity to a certain extent. The fact that Lenny's intimate and introspective diary entries eventually reach the public, however, retrospectively denies him a substantial amount of privacy. It therefore can be concluded that the digital worlds in these dystopian texts turn out to be almost inescapable for the protagonists. For Zuboff, who argues that surveillance capitalism increasingly throws mankind into a world of no escape, it is the "human need for a space of inviolable refuge" (21) that is essential to civilized societies and therefore must be preserved by all means.

6. Conclusion

All three digital dystopias, i.e. *Super Sad True Love Story*, *The Circle* and *Perfidious Albion*, imagine life in highly media and internet saturated societies that are not too dissimilar from the actual world we currently live in. They point out to us the many ambivalences that are inherent to the contemporary state of our world. The line between truth and fabrication becomes increasingly blurry as people abuse the possibilities of the Internet and the prerogative of interpretation – this is especially showcased in *PA*. The line between real and artificial more and more disintegrates as digital media progressively construct the perceived reality of human beings – this is strongly evident in both *SSTLS* and *TC*. The effects of the collapsing boundaries between the public and private spheres manifest themselves in people's growing unease and an increase in psychological afflictions – this becomes obvious in all three dystopian novels.

The satirical novels by Shteyngart, Eggers and Byers utter a warning that cannot be ignored, namely that in the digital age humanity has already become overdependent on networking and monitoring technologies. And that such habits, in turn, can all too easily lead to 'normative forces' that threaten to undermine personal freedom and privacy. The novels make clear that in the contemporary digital age different layers of surveillance overlap with each other. They paint a frightening picture of what could potentially happen if dataveillance, consumer surveillance and social surveillance became all-pervasive mechanisms of coercion.

Poster's Superpanopticon, which can basically be understood as a Panopticon enhanced by databases that requires individuals to be attached to their databased selves in order to be a fully functional mechanism of control, has become a reality in the dystopian novels by Shteyngart and Eggers, and thus literally makes the protagonists prisoners of the digital realm. In *SSTLS* and *TC*, digital databases make every personal detail about the protagonists available online. As long as they are visible inside this digital Panopticon, they are exposed to strong forms of social discrimination (as emphasised especially in Shteyngart's novel) as well as panoptic effects of self-discipline and self-restraint. The latter becomes evident through the protagonists' significant preoccupation with their online profiles and rankings.

The willing participation of the protagonists also makes clear how consumerist tendencies and mechanisms of self-presentation of individuals induce them to subject themselves to such proliferating digital surveillance practices. Thereby, individual techniques of the self strongly converge with external techniques of domination. This, however, plays right into the hands of the tech corporations in the novels that all display the tendency to manipulate and abuse the possibilities of internet technologies for their own selfish purposes. The novels thereby hold up a mirror to us to encourage us to look for the role we play ourselves in submitting data to monopolistic media companies.

In the three novels, the synoptic and panoptic environments the protagonists are exposed to continuously subject them to a digital gaze. Feeling scrutinised on a near-constant basis, the protagonists perform with specific watchers or even whole audiences in mind, but thereby are deprived of personal autonomy. The performative demands of their digital environments leave them with hardly any refuge. Moreover, their virtual identities significantly intermingle with their concrete identities. For these reasons, the protagonists do not manage to build a stable sense of self. They instead end up being highly dependent on their databased doubles (as in the case of Mae, Lenny and Eunice), professional online identities (as in the case of Robert) or alternate virtual selves (as in the case of Jess). In Trina's case, identity is even violently appropriated and distorted online.

Through (surveillance) technology, the protagonists are significantly alienated from the human condition. The novels do not only showcase the psychological damage inflicted on individuals through online harassment but also how an overdependence on technology leads to addiction and apathy. The characters increasingly define their sense of self-worth through likes, rankings, comments, and number of followers. Furthermore, the relationships especially in the novels by Shteyngart and Eggers are permeated by a digital realism that equates emotions with algorithms and the state of relationships with rankings. It thus becomes evident that digital media, essentially liquid[9] in their constitution, manage to seep into many life areas and

[9] This is an allusion to Bauman's term 'liquid surveillance'; also cf. Simon (10) who talks about the interplay of media and enculturation.

produce cultural enclosures in the lives of consumers. What also truly disconnects the characters from each other and drives them apart is their inability to communicate on an interpersonal level. In addition, a technophile post-/transhumanist movement threatens to undermine the very integrity of humanity in the fictitious societies of these novels and encourages the increasing transparency of the protagonists.

With their depictions of surveillance and its impact on human behaviour, the novels strongly mirror what Zuboff has denoted as 'instrumentarian power' and its processes of behavioural modification. In fact, the novels can be taken as examples of what it is like to live in an instrumentarian society in which individuals are highly exposed to such invisible and coercive mechanisms of power. For that reason, what Bentham termed the 'invisible chain' and Foucault denoted as 'subtle coercion' is indeed more relevant these days than ever before in human history. Social media sites gather all kinds of sensitive information about their users. The constant data collection leads to the existence of digital doubles which when accessed can be used to predict and modify the behaviour of individuals. When individuals are attached to their databased selves (which is mostly the case on social network sites), they are especially susceptible to processes of behavioural modification. The original goal of Bentham's Panopticon was to rehabilitate prisoners into society by increasing their morality. Nowadays, this has been perverted. According to Zuboff, a utopianist and social visionary such as Alex Pentland knows exactly how to tune and modify human behaviour (cf. 416ff.).

Surveillance capitalism's main goal is to increase monetary gain, and this is to be achieved at the cost of our independence and personal autonomy. Shteyngart himself warns us in a New York Times article entitled *Only Disconnect* of the great threat that contemporary surveillance in the digital age poses for our autonomy:

> His point is that self-awareness, self-constitution, and awareness of our social world, in a word . . . *autonomy*, can only be achieved […] through a 'refusal of data – a refusal to track the body, a refusal to subordinate the qualitative to the quantitative, a refusal of surveillance, a refusal to share data with corporations and the state.' Only by disconnecting, Shteyngart believes, do we become critically aware enough to reconnect with one another in a meaningful way that is not structured by the commoditizing and determining gaze of digital surveillance. (Willmetts 280f.)

This is also why surveillance capitalism poses a significant threat for democracy – because it challenges personal autonomy as an essential part of individual selfhood. Democracy, however, is dependent on individuals with a strong sense of selfhood. As a matter of fact, the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century included "the negation (or eradication) of […] the Self" (Los 69f.). With that said, it is noteworthy that, according to Zuboff, instrumentarian power aims to create a society of "*social confluence*" in which "the felt reality and social function of an individualized existence" (21) is extinguished. An impaired sense of self evoked by the increasing

pervasiveness of the digital world and proliferating mechanisms of surveillance in people's lives therefore should be regarded as particularly perilous in the contemporary era.

It is thus very problematic if current trends lead to a perception of human identity as contingent on data assemblages, because this deprives individuals of the capacity of defining themselves detached from a digital gaze. In addition, autonomous selfhood becomes seriously impaired, if in a Goffmanian sense, more and more people, and especially the younger generations, spent so much time on social media where they always perform to others and are increasingly left with no option of retreating. Scholars such as Marwick and Zuboff agree that social networks produce synoptic environments in which individuals adopt an 'outside-looking-in approach' and thereby rather act by the conduct of others than by their own. The solution, therefore, lies in the decoupling of online and offline spheres. "To exit means to enter the place where a self can be birthed and nurtured" (Zuboff 474).

This thesis has dealt with and brought together quite a number of aspects. But there are certainly other digital dystopian novels or topics which could be examined. Rowley, for example, lists *Tai Pei* (2013) by Tao Lin, *Transmission* (2005) by Hari Kunzru, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2014) by David Shafer and *Book of Numbers* (2015) by Joshua Cohen as further literary works in this regard (cf. 176). Another prevalent topic within digital dystopias that Rowley, for instance, investigates in M.T. Andersons' *Feed* and Alena Graedon's *The Word Exchange* is linguistic disintegration – a theme which certainly could also be further explored in *Super Sad True Love Story*, namely in terms of the protagonists' use of chat language, acronyms and emoticons. Formal aspects such as the narrative situation and the narrative structure of (digital) dystopian novels could also be examined more closely to pinpoint how surveillance and its effects on individuals are emphasised through narrative techniques and literary form.[10] Further research could also be conducted by comparing digital dystopian novels more extensively to the canonical dystopian texts written by Huxley and Orwell. In this respect, my thesis could only shed light on a few important continuities and some major differences.

Generally, digital dystopias envision scenarios which are more in accordance with the possibilities of the contemporary digital era and thus significantly differ from the classical dystopian texts by Huxley and Orwell. Yet some of their core concerns nonetheless live on in these contemporary dystopian novels. *Brave New World* has famously shown what a hedonistic society full of complacent human beings could look like. The protagonists in *SSTLS* and *TC* deliberately and joyfully subject themselves to many of the surveillance mechanisms of their societies and/or of the corporations they work for. In addition, the cultural conditioning that Huxley depicted in *Brave New World* is apparent in Shteyngart's and Eggers' novels through

[10] Christoph Bode's analysis of Orwell's and Huxley's dystopian texts and Andrew Gross' analysis of Jennifer Egan's *Black Box* are enlightening in this regard.

a surveillance culture coupled with a digital realism. Huxley's notion that the most effective totalitarian system could be built and maintained if great masses of people, as happy and ignorant consumers, love their servitude, is remarkably prescient not just with regard to these digital dystopias but also with regard to the state of the Western world in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, Orwell's two-way telescreen is still a powerful metaphor for privacy invasion. Nowadays, smart phones and computers invade our privacy at an unprecedented extent. We thus need to be watchful and fight for our right to privacy, as Edward Snowden advocated on Christmas Day in 2013: "Orwell warned us of the dangers of [mass surveillance]. … Privacy matters. Privacy is what allows us to determine who we are and who we want to be" (sic, cited in: Willmetts 278). *SSTLS*, *TC* and *PA* all showcase how immensely the psyche of individuals is affected when personal privacy erodes. In addition, the ongoing presence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* especially in Western culture proves how dystopian fiction's compelling imaginative visions shape our collective consciousness. "That truth shall make us free, and that ignorance is weakness (to reverse one of the Party's slogans), have rarely been as powerfully shown as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (Posner 210).

The dystopian novels by Shteyngart, Eggers and Byers prove that, in the digital age, literary fiction certainly remains a powerful advocate for privacy and freedom. In fact, Andrew Gross even sees literature as "the Trojan horse of the information age" (134) – perhaps, because the human imagination is still (and hopefully always will be) one step ahead of computational reasoning. As far as the Panopticon is concerned, it clearly remains a persuasive metaphor for surveillance and control. We must demolish the digital Panopticons that threaten to overtake our lives, and ultimately learn to consciously escape the omnipresent digital gaze of the contemporary era to preserve both our selfhood and our humanity that are the fundamental cornerstones of democracy.

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8. Appendix

Summary of *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) by Gary Shteyngart

In the near future, America is severely affected by a financial crisis and strongly dependent on its Chinese creditors. The Bipartisan Party and their authoritarian leader Rubenstein are in power, and pretty much every person in society is in possession of an äppärät, a smart-phone-like device that records and transmits personal information about the people such as their income level, their health status, their consumer profiles, and their sexual interests. Lenny Abramov, 39 years old and very old-fashioned in his enthusiasm for books, works for Post-Human Services, a division of the Staatling-Wapachung corporation that specialises in property, security and life extension services. It is his task to find clients for life extension, so-called HNWIs (High Net Worth Individuals). These are people with a high creditworthiness that are the only ones who can afford to extend their life span, as opposed to LNWIs (Low Net Worth Individuals). On a vocational trip abroad in Italy, he meets the 24-year-old Eunice Park, a Korean American woman from New Jersey, at a party and falls in love with her. The narrative structure of the novel alternates between Lenny's diary entries and Eunice's chat messages on the GlobalTeens social network.

Back in New York, Lenny quickly looks up Eunice online and contacts her on GlobalTeens. He does not hear back from her at first. As a result of his unsuccessful

recruiting of HNWIs abroad, Lenny, upon his return to Post-Human Services, is admonished by his boss Joshie Goldmann to "learn to surf the data streams better". Meanwhile, after a failed relationship abroad and in the face of family issues at home (her father's physical abuse and her mother's high expectations), Eunice remembers Lenny's kindness towards her in Rome and decides to take the next plane home to the US. She agrees to visit and stay with Lenny in his apartment in New York for a while. As the days pass, Lenny takes Eunice around New York and they slowly become a couple. Whereas Lenny is very devoted to Eunice, she frequently makes fun of him and is very preoccupied with online shopping as well as chatting with her friends and family on GlobalTeens. Eventually, the couple visits Lenny's parents who are very happy to see the two together. Shortly after, Lenny also introduces his girlfriend to his friends.

At the same time, a riot takes place in Central Park where LNWIs are massacred by National Guardsmen. Some days after the insurrection, Lenny and Eunice visit Eunice's family in Fort Lee. Her parents are not particularly happy with their relationship because Lenny is neither Korean nor rich and attractive. Things start to fall apart when Eunice is introduced to Lenny's boss Joshie Goldmann. Even though Joshie is in his seventies, he appears to be in his late twenties, thanks to Staatling Wapachung's youth technology. Also impressed with both his decisiveness and creditworthiness, Eunice quickly falls for Joshie. They start seeing each other behind Lenny's back. Suddenly, the Rupture, a violent unrest of LNWI protestors causes havoc in Manhattan and spreads across the country. In addition, the Venezuelans who had been suppressed by Rubenstein and his troops, start to strike back. Simultaneously, America's economy goes fully bankrupt. As a result, the Rubenstein/American Restoration Authority/Bipartisan regime finds itself on the brink of a collapse. A Nonnuclear Electromagnetic Pulse detonates high above New York and disables all electronic communication for several weeks (apart from emergency frequencies). After the crisis has come to pass and the Staatling-Wapachung company soars again thanks to Chinese and Norwegian creditors investing in America, Joshie tells Lenny about his relationship with Eunice.

Lenny breaks up with Eunice. Years go by. Lenny immigrates to Canada and changes his name from Lenny Abramov to Larry Abraham. Eventually, he moves to a small farmhouse in the Tuscan Free State. The first edition of his diaries and Eunice's messages is published in Beijing and New York. Lenny is accused by reviewers of having written his verbose diary entries with the intent of eventual publication, but claims that his' and Eunice's social media accounts were pillaged by unknown individuals. Meanwhile, the life extension technology of the Staatling-Wapachung company fails, clients begin to die and Joshie is ultimately fired. By this time, Eunice has already left Joshie and begun to date a Scotsman. In the end, Joshie himself faces imminent death due to the many bodily interventions he underwent. Upon the closure of the novel, it also becomes evident that the entertainment industry has begun to appropriate Lenny's and Eunice's love story.

Summary of *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers

Thanks to Annie, her best friend and former roommate, Mae Holland, a 24-year-old recent college graduate, receives a job at a powerful Internet company called the Circle. The company is run by Eamon Bailey, Tom Stenton and Ty Gospodinov who are also known as the "Three Wise Men". The company's universal operating system brings together users' email, social media, purchasing, and banking accounts, resulting in one transparent online identity, the TruYou. From the start, Mae is very impressed with her new workplace and the Circle's philosophy. The corporation develops technologies that are aimed at making human life on the planet easier and safer, with the goal of advancing humanity to a new prosperous level. During a presentation of SeeChange, a tiny portable camera that is able to broadcast everything it films live, the charismatic visionary Bailey begins to talk of a "Second Enlightenment" – a new era in which everything that happens all over the world is to be made accessible to everyone. Over time, Mae increasingly becomes involved in the corporation's activities and technologies. She works hard in order to improve her internal ranking and thereby climb the company's ladder. Mae's ex-boyfriend Mercer, a self-proclaimed critic and technological pessimist, notes her increasingly obsessive behaviour and tries to convince her that she is heading in the wrong direction.

But Mae does not care about Mercer's words. She feels strangely attracted to Kalden, a mysterious young man, who apparently works at the Circle but cannot be found in any of its databases. Because Kalden abruptly disappears, Mae also starts to have an affair with Francis, one of her colleagues at work who came up with the idea of ChildTrack – another sophisticated technological invention of the Circle. After a private conversation with Bailey during which he manages to convince Mae that total transparency would lead to better way of life, she decides to go transparent, meaning that she wears a SeeChange camera which broadcasts everything live that she does throughout the day. Mae thereby becomes the Circle's personified showpiece. Consequently, she starts to adapt all of her daily routines, including her private life, to the expectations of the Circle and her growing online audience. Meanwhile, Annie who has become envious of Mae's success at the Circle decides to take part in another sophisticated project of the company called PastPerfect. PastPerfect collects and evaluates information on a person's genetic history. When the program brings to light discriminatory information about some of Annie's ancestors and everything is publicised as dictated by the Circle's principle of transparency, she suffers a mental breakdown and falls into a coma.

As the company's technology becomes more intrusive worldwide, the mysterious Kalden returns and tries to convince Mae that the 'completion of the Circle' must be stopped. Furthermore, Mercer writes a personal letter to Mae warning her of the imminent threat that the Circle poses for everyone's privacy on the planet. Because Mercer does not want to be monitored, he decides to go off-grid. But Mae is already too involved with the corporation she works for and its projects. In a

public display of another program called SoulSearch that is broadcasted live to millions of watchers, she chases down Mercer with the help of the tens of thousands SeeChange cameras that have already been installed all over the world. He tries to flee in a truck but is subsequently chased by several drones. Mae's and her followers' communicative attempts to convince Mercer do not compel him to stop. He instead chooses to end his life by driving the truck off a bridge.

Towards the end of the plot, Mae finally learns that, in truth, Kalden is Ty Gospodinov, one of the three founders of the Circle and the programming genius behind everything. He tries to convince Mae that if they do not stop it from happening, the Circle's invasive technology and its all-encompassing central network will turn the whole world into a totalitarian surveillance state in which no members of society will be able to hide. Ty also tells Mae that it was Stenton who has been putting incriminating stuff on hundreds of people's computers and personal accounts to crush their dissent and get rid of them. He encourages Mae to read the statement "The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age" to her many viewers in order to receive the amount of public attention that will evoke people to make up their minds. Having only pretended to go along with his plan, Mae betrays Ty to Stenton and Bailey. Confident that she has made the right decision, Mae welcomes the new approaching era of ultimate transparency.

Summary of *Perfidious Albion* (2018) by Sam Byers

The plot is set in Edmundsbury, a fictitious town somewhere in eastern England, and focuses on the interweaving storylines of the couple Robert Townsend and Jess Ellis, black woman Trina James and politician Hugo Bennington. Robert works as a journalist and an online columnist for *The Command Line*. Jess works at a private research institute that focuses on cases of online harassment and cybercrime. Trina works for Green, a tech corporation that recently moved its headquarters to Edmundsbury and is making inroads into the infrastructure of the town. Hugo is a local representative of the right-wing party England Always. The plot starts off at a party that is also attended by Jess and Robert. Suddenly and out of nowhere, a mysterious man with a mask appears, reading out web addresses and asking the people present at the party "What don't you want to share?"

At *The Command Line*, Robert and his colleague Silas discuss the situation currently happening at the Larchwood, a failing housing estate whose residents are about to be cleared from their homes. Robert is currently involved in conducting research and writing about what is going on there. On-site, he interviews some of the people residing there, including a racist old man named Darkin. Hugo Bennington has made a name for himself as a local politician in Edmundsbury by sharply opposing immigration. Many of the people, especially the elderly, who are being asked to move out of the Larchwood Estate believe that immigrants, in turn, will move in there. For that reason, Hugo's political rhetoric has gotten very popular in

Edmundsbury as he is supported by many of those people who are about to lose their homes. But in truth, England Always is deeply involved with Downton, i.e. the organisation which is trying to clear out the Larchwood Estate in order to turn it into something more profitable. It is one of Hugo's career goals as a politician to make a run at being an MP and Downton agreed to provide substantial assistance with the necessary funding.

Whenever Jess wants to be anonymous online, she goes to Nodem, an internet café where internet access is neither monetised nor monitored. As Julia Benjamin, one of her alternate online personas, Jess criticises the work of male journalists and intellectuals on the Internet, including her boyfriend Robert's columns on *The Command Line*. One of the reasons for this lies in a horrible experience in terms of online harassment that Jess had made in the past and after which she and Robert had to move away from London. Another reason lies – in her view – in Robert's insensitive and indiscreet reactions to her online debasement at the time, and furthermore in Robert's subsequent journalistic success with a published article on internet misogyny. Through Trina the reader learns that inside The Arbor, Green's headquarters, work is ruthlessly organised and distributed through the company's Need To Know policy. Projects are managed and surveilled by single individuals (Trina being one of them) in isolated cells, so-called No-Go rooms. Employees (or so-called Microtaskers) do not know what they are currently working on and are exploited through a gamified Microtasking system.

Meanwhile, a mysterious group called The Griefers appears in the town centre of Edmundsbury and threatens to make people's online secrets known to everyone. During this public event, they project the following message: "Edmundsbury: We are The Griefers. We want to ask you: What *don't* you want to share? Remember, Edmundsbury … We are your face". If no person volunteers to make his/her whole online history public, then a rotation mechanism on The Griefers' website will eventually select a person from Edmundsbury automatically. Subsequently, this threat causes quite some distress among the people in Edmundsbury and is widely discussed. Angered by one of Hugo Bennington's TV appearances in which he bemoans what he believes to be an impaired freedom of speech evoked by the constraints of mainstream media and how this impacts white male politicians such as himself, Trina mockingly reacts on Twitter by tweeting "*You can't even make up racist terms of abuse any more. It's political correctness gone mad.*" As an afterthought, she tweets "*#whitemalegenocide. Lol.*" Soon, Hugo and his personal advisor Teddy receive notice of the *#whitemalegenocide* tweet, include it in a tweet on Bennington's account and subsequently retweet this on the England Always account. Things get out of control quickly. Multiple media sources denote Trina as an extremist, her email address is leaked and she receives numerous hateful messages. Eventually, it is also revealed by a newspaper that Trina lives in the Larchwood Estate.

In the meantime, Robert writes an article about his interview with Darkin and the situation at the Larchwood Estate. Even though he is very unsure at first about the tone of the article and contemplates making some changes to it before its

publication, his colleague Silas chooses to submit it abruptly. It turns out very successful and receives a lot of public attention and praise. However, the pressure on Robert to continue to release such popular columns rises. Besides, Julia Benjamin and her continuous comments online cause him significant unease. He writes an email to Byron Stroud, claiming that something must be done about Julia Benjamin's online targeting of male writers and her attempt to undermine intellectual work. Robert, however, is not aware that Byron Stroud is another one of Jess's online personas – one that she used on purpose to gain his trust. An attempt to uncover the identity of Julia Benjamin fails – no traces and no personal data can be found about her. During a TV interview, Bennington speaks in favour of the old man Darkin who is to be displaced from the Larchwood Estate. Jess and her friend Deepa plan to trick The Griefers by inventing a fictional person with whom they want to volunteer on The Griefers' website.

Meanwhile, online hatred for Trina increases further. *The Record*, a large newspaper, embeds her tweets in an article. She must also discover on *The Command Line*'s homepage that Robert Townsend, whom she had believed to be an upright journalist and whose coverage of the situation at the Larchwood Estate she had profoundly admired so far, has likewise published a column about her that completely twists and distorts everything she is as a person. Suddenly, Trina receives a phone call from a woman who offers to help her. This woman turns out to be Jess's friend Deepa. In the meantime, Brute Force, a right-wing extremist group appears at the Larchwood Estate and starts a protest. Hugo and his advisor Teddy arrive there. Hugo goes up to Darkin's flat and can convince him to move out of the Larchwood Estate and to another place. Thereby, he solves the situation at the estate and simultaneously abides by the agreement with Downton. When suddenly obscene pictures of Hugo's genitals are leaked on the Internet, the England Always party distances itself from him, despite his recent achievements. Robert starts to think that The Griefers are behind this and wants to write a column about Hugo Bennington. Silas convinces Robert to start working for *The Record*, the biggest-selling newspaper in Britain.

Jess creates Jasmine and hits the submit button on The Griefers' website. Jess, Deepa and Trina visit the internet café Nodem where they stumble upon Norbiton – a guy who used to work for the tech company Green but was fired there because he started to know too much. Subsequently, Trina goes to The Arbor to find out more. She confronts Bangstrom, her supervisor at Green, telling him she knows about The Field. It then comes to light that it was Green who hired The Griefers to disrupt Edmundsbury and that they are also working together with Downton to tech out the Larchwood Estate. It is Green's aim to apply the Microtasking system to the estate and create an engineered community amidst Edmundsbury. Overall, they want to make profit by devising a successful control system which eventually is to be sold and applied to other communities. Trina has played a vital role so far, because she devised the Beatrice software which is used for monitoring the MT system. She also learns from Bangstrom that they monitored her activities and

started with the creation of a digital replica of Trina, called Tayz, so that the MT system will eventually be able to be operated automatically. Because the Beatrice software and Trina's virtual duplicate Tayz still need to be finished, Bangstrom exploits Trina's public disreputability and lures her into the signing of a new contract, thereby forcing her to complete her work.

„Göttinger Schriften zur Englischen Philologie“: Zum Konzept der Reihe

Frauke Reitemeier

Die Reihe „Göttinger Schriften zur Englischen Philologie“ umfasst Schriften zur Forschung aus den Disziplinen englische, amerikanische und postkoloniale Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft, englische Fachdidaktik, englische Sprache, Literatur und Kultur des Mittelalters, Linguistik des Englischen. Veröffentlicht werden können:

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Zusätzlich können in der Reihe Sammelbände beispielsweise mit den Arbeitsergebnissen aus Kolloquien oder Workshops veröffentlicht werden. Die Werke werden auf Deutsch oder Englisch publiziert.

In the digital age, surveillance is becoming increasingly pervasive through the growing presence of big data, electronic devices and wireless technologies. Simultaneously, a rising number of individuals is highly dependent on social media and deeply immersed in virtual spaces – with visible effects on their psyche, perception, and ability to communicate. This thesis examines popular surveillance theories discussed within the academic field of surveillance studies and attempts to integrate them into a coherent framework to analyse surveillance in the digital age and its impact on individuals. The main part applies this framework to three contemporary digital dystopias which are by no means just plain and farfetched novels. Already mirroring our reality to some extent, they can be seen as premonitions of what could potentially happen if humankind decided to give up privacy for convenience, attention-seeking, self-presentation, and the ideals of total interconnection and transparency propagated by tech companies.

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