

“If you weren’t operating in the light of day, what were you doing in the shadows?”:  
Surveillance in Twenty-first Century Speculative Fiction

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2024

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

This thesis explores speculative fiction as a tool for examining the ethical, societal, and legal implications of surveillance and data-driven technologies. By analyzing *The Circle* by Dave Eggers, *Followers* by Megan Angelo, *Going Zero* by Anthony McCarten, and *The Warehouse* by Rob Hart, I investigate how speculative fiction imagines possible futures shaped by current technological and societal trends. This thesis draws on frameworks such as Shoshana Zuboff's "psychic numbing" in the context of surveillance capitalism, Neil Postman's idea of the Technopoly, and theories of datafication from Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias to examine themes of surveillance, power imbalances, and the erosion of individual autonomy. I will also incorporate Nicholas Mirzoeff's concepts of visibility and countervisuality to explore how figures of authority maintain power by regulating visibility, and how resistance emerges through attempts to reclaim what he terms "the right to look."

The first chapter focuses on the digital panopticon, examining how pervasive surveillance in *The Circle* and *Followers* demonstrates the commodification of the human experience and the narrowing of individual agency in data-driven surveillance societies. The second chapter shifts to the question of power and exploitation as I look at how corporations in *Going Zero* and *The Warehouse* leverage surveillance technologies to consolidate control, perpetuate inequality, and undermine democratic principles. Through these narratives, I examine ways in which speculative fiction serves as both a critique of unchecked technological advancements and a tool for envisioning alternative futures, as well as paths to resistance.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank Professor Heather Love for the mentorship, guidance, and framing that allowed this thesis to come to fruition. Without her patience, and thoughtful feedback, many of these ideas would have remained unclear.

I am also thankful to my committee readers, Dr. Marcel O’Gorman and Dr. Aparajita Bhandari, whose insightful feedback and thoughtful suggestions helped refine and strengthen this work significantly.

To my partner, Wei, whose unwavering support and understanding made this work possible. Thank you for being my anchor through this process and for all those late-night discussions where we bounced ideas back and forth to help organize my thoughts.

To my parents, who have supported my academic pursuits from day one, thank you for always believing in me and encouraging me to push further.

I am also grateful to my friends, Nevin, Symphony, Kasvin and Nicole who provided both welcome distractions and encouragement along the way. Your friendship has been invaluable.

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## Introduction

Speculative fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has evolved to mirror the anxieties of this digital age, especially concerning Big Data collection and mass surveillance. In the wake of events such as the 2013 NSA leak and 2016 (Greenwald) Cambridge Analytica scandal (Hakim and Rosenberg), to name a few, the public has become increasingly aware of the depth and breadth of surveillance practices, not only by governments but also Big Tech. The NSA was discovered to have been collecting extensive amounts of communications data on American citizens (Greenwald) and global netizens alike (Savage et. al), without their consent. Similarly, Cambridge Analytica was found to have been exploiting Facebook's vast troves of user data and creating profiles that could manipulate public opinion and influence election outcomes (Rosenberg et. al). These revelations have undoubtedly raised concerns about surveillance tech and its impact on not only users' privacy but also the integrity of democratic processes (Königs 8, Dowling 231). In response to these revelations, fiction has emerged as a useful medium to grapple with these anxieties and explore the implications of surveillance technology on individuals and societies.

This heightened scrutiny and skepticism towards digital privacy in technology, or lack thereof, is portrayed in a rising number of literary texts in the last decade or so. Authors are increasingly drawing from contemporary fears brought about by real-world events and imagining possible futures shaped by current trajectories in technology and surveillance practices. Through these narratives, fiction writers provide a lens through which readers can reflect on the ethical and societal implications of allowing their privacy to be compromised by intrusive surveillance systems. By setting these narratives in the present and near future, these authors effectively blur the lines between fiction and potential reality. The technologies and their applications described

in these narratives often mirror that of the real-world, therefore inviting readers to consider the very real consequences of unchecked surveillance practices.

## Chosen texts

In this thesis, I will explore four contemporary novels that offer critical perspectives on the role and ramifications of surveillance technology in the 21st century: *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers, *The Warehouse* (2019) by Rob Hart, *Followers* (2020) by Megan Angelo, and *Going Zero* (2023) by Anthony McCarten. These novels offer important criticism regarding the pervasiveness of 21st-century surveillance technology, especially on its impact on privacy, individual autonomy and democracy. They highlight how surveillance tech can be wielded as a tool of control and manipulation by powerful corporations and governments, raising questions about the ethics of surveillance and the preservation of civil liberties in the digital age.

*The Circle* follows the story of Mae Holland, an ambitious young woman who has quit her uninspiring municipal government job in her hometown to work for The Circle, a powerful tech company based in an urban center clearly meant to evoke Silicon Valley. Here, it is a company that has “subsumed Facebook, Twitter, Google, and finally Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe, and Quan” (Eggers 23). As Mae climbs the ranks and becomes more involved in the company’s operations, her everyday life becomes increasingly “transparent” to everyone who uses the platform. She is encouraged to participate in The Circle’s culture of transparency and constant online presence, blurring the lines between her personal and professional life. As she embraces the company’s philosophy of total openness, she finds herself unwittingly contributing to the erosion of privacy and individual autonomy.

Another novel featuring a world where a powerful corporation controls important aspects of individuals’ daily lives is Rob Hart’s *The Warehouse*. Cloud, a fictional company which

shares striking similarities to Amazon, controls nearly every aspect of commerce and daily life in Hart's world. The story is told from three perspectives, those of Zinnia, a corporate spy determined to take down the Cloud; Paxton, a disillusioned security guard who holds a grudge against Cloud for wrecking his startup years ago, and also with whom Zinnia forms a complex relationship; and Gibson, the founder and CEO of Cloud who has just appointed his daughter as his successor after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. As Zinnia and Paxton attempt to navigate their new roles as Cloud employees, they have to grapple with the constant surveillance the company employs to keep their workers in check.

A more extreme case of surveillance can be seen in Angelo's *Followers*, which follows the lives of Orla and Marlow, two women whose lives are heavily influenced by a world dominated by social media and constant online monitoring. Told in two different timelines, the novel contrasts perceptions of social media and the internet from before and after "The Spill" (203) – a massive data leak and cyberattack that impacts every American by exposing not only their private lives but also their darkest secrets. Before the Spill, Angelo portrays a world that closely resembles our own reality, one where nobody thinks extensively about surveillance, and individuals share their lives online without much consideration for the consequences. After the Spill, however, the once carefree attitude towards using the internet is replaced by fear and paranoia. As Orla and Marlow's storylines converge, the text explores the ways in which human behavior can be shaped under constant surveillance.

Much like the previous novels, *Going Zero* by Anthony McCarten discusses the storage and accessibility of vast troves of personal data by governmental bodies or corporations. In contrast to the other texts, however, this is more of a speculative thriller that dives into action early in the narrative, immediately drawing readers' attention to the chilling implications of mass

surveillance. The novel follows Kaitlyn Day (the alias of the character we eventually learn is named Samantha Crewe), one of the participants in the beta testing phase of a surveillance program called FUSION, developed to track individuals and apprehend high-profile targets. Kaitlyn, along with nine other participants, must find creative ways to evade detection for 30 days, for the chance of winning a substantial cash prize. Meanwhile, on the other end of the surveillance spectrum, we are given insight into the thought process of Cy Baxter, the developer of FUSION, exploring the consequences of granting too much power and control to a single corporate entity.

### The Rise of Technopoly

As Big Tech dominates the 21<sup>st</sup>-century global economy, we see a paradigm shift in the political landscape, marked by the remarkable resurgence of the tech industry following the dot-com boom in the early 2000s. Author Josh Riedel, who was also the first employee of Instagram, believes that “[i]n the 2010s, there wasn’t as much criticism of the tech industry [and] it was really easy to fall into the idea that [tech employees were] changing the world” (qtd. in Ackermann). Towards the end of the decade, in 2019, the world’s most valuable public companies were Big Tech (Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon and Facebook), a testament to the extensive influence and reach of these corporations, which extend well beyond traditional business domains (Aalst, Hinz and Weinhardt 645). The 2010s therefore marked a significant shift in the landscape of capitalism, characterized by unprecedented growth of these corporations. Reflected in modern fiction is this utopian vision of the future, largely shaped by the influence of Big Tech. Many works of modern speculative fiction explore worlds that have been transformed by technological advancements, depicting societies where innovations are pioneered by large corporations, bringing about an era of unprecedented convenience and interconnectedness. Along

with these utopian visions of technologically advanced societies, however, also lie cautionary explorations of the unintended consequences of humanity's drive for innovation and efficiency.

## Research Questions

The most well-known and most cited literary work in this domain is, undoubtedly, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Hinchliffe 415). Published in 1949, Orwell's dystopian novel presents a chilling portrayal of a totalitarian regime that exercises pervasive surveillance and control over its citizens. Set in a dystopian future where the government monitors every aspect of citizens' lives, this text serves as a warning against the dangers of unchecked state power and surveillance. *The Circle*, published in 2013, presents a more modern and social media-oriented approach to the themes of surveillance and control, echoing the concerns explored in Orwell's text. As such, Eggers' novel has attracted considerable scholarly focus and is frequently compared to Orwell's text in academic analysis (Benjamin 706). While there has been comparatively more attention on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Circle*, little scholarship has been published on more recent additions to surveillance literature, such as *The Warehouse*, *Followers* and *Going Zero*, given that these texts were published within the last five years. The limited scholarly work published so far on these novels tends to analyze themes other than surveillance itself. Robotics expert and author Robin R. Murphy reviewed *The Warehouse* from a technical perspective, focusing on challenges of human-robot interaction and the potential societal impacts of automated work environments. American Studies scholar Merry Byrd examined *Followers* through the lens of feminism, focusing on the theme of motherhood in a dystopian world. *Going Zero*, the most recently published of the four novels, has been reviewed but has not yet been subjected to scholarly analysis. Overall, the latter three novels lack in-depth examination specifically analyzing their portrayal and critique of surveillance culture and technology.

Examining these novels alongside media and surveillance studies on contemporary real-life events provides clear evidence of the influence surveillance has had on contemporary stories. Additionally, considering the rhetoric of fiction, in contrast to theories emerging from media and surveillance studies, enables an exploration of how this genre influences and stirs emotions within readers, and in extension prompts them to critically examine their own digital footprints and the extent to which they may be subject to surveillance in their daily lives. Aaron Mauro in his study of how the humanities can contribute to surveillance resistance, articulates this notion aptly, asserting that “literacy and imagination represent the two most potent tools to counter mass surveillance and coercive technologies” (12). Vivid storytelling and characterization engage readers on a more personal level, drawing us into the narratives and encouraging us to consider our own lives in relation to the dilemmas faced by the characters.

In light of the pressing nature of privacy concerns amid the continuous expansion of tech companies’ data collection efforts, this study aims to focus on narratives that offer nuanced explorations of overarching surveillance and its consequences. By examining how speculative fiction grapples with the ethical, social, and psychological implications of tech surveillance, this research seeks to shed light on the interplay between technology, privacy, and individual autonomy in the digital age. The research questions I aim to answer in this thesis include:

- (1) How does speculative fiction aid in the evaluation of contemporary technology, particularly regarding the growing intrusiveness of surveillance and mass data collection? While a substantial body of scholarship exists that evaluates modern-day surveillance and social media habits, this thesis aims to analyze how narrative fiction, particularly novels, effectively exemplifies these theories. I am interested in examining how speculative fiction highlights the anxieties of a society that is not only grappling with the ethical,

social and psychological implications of heavy dependence on technology, but also simultaneously contributing to this erosion of privacy and individual autonomy.

(2) How do the stylistic features of speculative fiction allow for explorations of complex, nuanced ideas and concepts compared to traditional scholarly writing? While media and surveillance studies focus on rigorous analysis and empirical evidence, speculative fiction allows for the exploration of nuanced and abstract ideas in a more imaginative and emotive manner, often employing features such as moral ambiguities, multiple perspectives, open-endedness to open up discussions about gray areas of issues surrounding surveillance tech.

### The role of pop-fiction

Each of these chosen texts, published within the same decade, explores the theme of pervasive surveillance by influential corporations and/or governments of the type that readers would be familiar with and can draw clear parallels to real-world scenarios. These novels have enjoyed widespread popularity, as evidenced by the fact that three of them have been adapted into film (*The Circle* in 2017) or are currently undergoing adaptation (*The Warehouse* and *Going Zero*). Although there are no plans for *Followers* to be adapted for the screen, the novel has achieved widespread success, garnering enthusiastic reviews across various platforms (Patrick, Pierce, Kirkus Reviews). As such, these texts can be classified as popular fiction, which is, according to Christine Berberich, a genre defined by its appeal to a broad readership (2-3), as well as “rate-of-sale and replaceability” (“popular fiction”).

While some have argued that pop-fiction does not “[transcend] time and space” the way classic, literary texts do, it “still tell[s] new generations about what our society cherished, celebrated or felt strongly about at a certain point in time.” (Berberich 4) With constant news

headlines centered around topics like government overreach, mass surveillance, and infringements on privacy rights, it is no wonder that speculative novels focusing on surveillance have become so popular. Speculative fiction focusing on this subject examines the “wariness towards giving technology more power than it already has” (Urbanski 43), speaking to the genre's capacity to explore and amplify societal anxieties regarding the accelerating pace of technological advancement and its potential to outstrip human control. The apprehension surrounding the delegation of excessive power to technology, Big Tech especially, is not only a fictional construct but also a reflection of societal concerns about our world. This concern is unlikely to dissipate soon, especially considering that public awareness of digital privacy issues has gained significant traction in recent years.

A common approach to examining surveillance is by looking at fictional narratives, as they often reflect the socio-cultural context of any given time period. Media theorist Neil Postman posits that new technologies not only shape our interests, but also “alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*...[and] the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop” (20). Speculative fiction therefore occupies a unique position in examining the ramifications of surveillance technology and the cultural shifts that are caused by it. As fiction writers extrapolate current trends to imagine possible futures, readers are provided with a semi-realistic perspective by which they can explore the consequences of modern-day surveillance.

### Definitions of speculative fiction

In defining the term “speculative fiction”, The *Oxford Dictionary of English* provides a broad overview, encapsulating the expansive and diverse nature of this “genre of fiction that encompasses works in which the setting is other than the real world, involving supernatural, futuristic, or other imagined elements.” The *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, on the

other hand, offers insight into the evolution of the term, which was “used by Robert A. Heinlein in 1947 to describe what science fiction did, extrapolating from known facts [but is] now used to suggest a broader range of exploratory genres (including fantasy) or to establish a class distinction between so-called ‘literary’ fiction and science fiction” (“speculative fiction”). The broadness of these definitions stems from the inherent difficulty in pinning down speculative fiction within rigid parameters. R.B. Gill provides a stipulative definition in trying to define the genre, describing it as “works presenting modes of being that contrast with their audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” (73), which, much like the definitions provided above, merely highlights its departure from reality, rather than provide a specific classification according to an array of criteria. Gill also postulates that speculative fiction often “lacks literary traditions that guide it” (Gill 74) as this genre often encompasses a myriad of subgenres, from science fiction and fantasy to dystopian and utopian narratives, each with its own unique characteristics. He concludes that any definition will inevitably be imprecise and open to disagreements as the exercise of trying to group together a diverse range of works under a broad umbrella term is “at best a complex and controversial activity” (83).

In contrast, the *Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* provides a categorization that is very much in line with the texts being studied. This source offers three definitions of the term, the first two of which are insightful but not as useful in addressing the function of the genre. The first definition delineates speculative fiction as a genre that encompasses many subcategories, such as pseudo-science, science fantasy, scientific fiction etc. (“speculative fiction (n.1)”) while also suggesting that the use of the term is sometimes regarded as pretentious by sci-fi readers. The second definition emphasizes its role as imaginative fiction (“speculative fiction (n.2)”), which is accurate, but not necessarily sufficient for understanding the genre’s broader significance or

purpose. The third, the definition most relevant for the purpose of this thesis, characterizes the genre as literature that incorporates tropes of science fiction but not necessarily categorizes as such due to its focus on the inappropriate use of technology rather than the intricate scientific concepts typically associated with traditional science fiction (“speculative fiction (n.3)”). This is a significant distinction that literary critic and novelist Margaret Atwood has addressed on multiple occasions. In a *Guardian* article, she distinguishes between science fiction and speculative fiction, noting that while both genres deal with future scenarios, they differ in their approach. Science fiction involves elements beyond current technological capabilities while speculative fiction imagines a future that could result from existing technologies (Atwood). Ultimately, understanding this distinction is essential for analyzing the texts in question, as it outlines the defining features and characteristics that I believe are most pertinent to the genre.

In this thesis, I will be working with the definition of speculative fiction that focuses on realistic potential outcomes of current technological trends, as the selected narratives explore the consequences of contemporary technology. Examining this genre, John L. Hennessy observes how “speculative fiction attempts the creation of an imaginary world that involves fantastic elements, but with a consistency and complexity that makes it seem plausible” (Hennessy 12). This combination of imagination and plausibility allows the stories to resonate with their readers, inserting them into a world that is both familiar and hypothetical at the same time. By depicting familiar settings with subtle yet impactful deviations, these narratives cause readers to reflect on their own reality and consider the implications of digital surveillance in their own world.

### Speculative fiction as a tool

Speculative fiction serves as a useful and powerful tool for exploring the complexities of our present reality by envisioning possible futures. This genre allows us to grapple with the

potential ramifications of current technological and societal trends, providing a lens through which we can examine the interplay between innovation, human behavior, and the systems that govern our world. Professor of Social Anthropology Kristín Loftsdóttir posits that “fiction about the future does not necessarily involve a vision or even a prediction of the future but can be seen as using the future as a tool to think about the present” (248). In the context of modern-day surveillance, speculative fiction allows us to contemplate the trajectory of technology and its impact on society. By imagining future worlds where data surveillance is omnipresent and privacy is virtually nonexistent, authors can shed light on the potential consequences of our current data-driven society. Through these imagined futures, readers can confront the ethical, social, and political implications of technologies that erode privacy and blur the lines between public and private life.

In examining speculative fiction as a genre that helps shape the future, Donald L. Lawler finds that besides entertainment, this genre also functions as a medium with which humanity can project their hopes, fears and aspirations for the world they wish to inhabit: “If we are transforming our faculties of imagination with our speculative fictions, we are in effect providing ourselves with new imagined materials and ideals from which the future may be shaped. Perhaps for the first time in human history as we know it, people have the ability and the tools to make what they can imagine” (Lawler 20). There is merit to this assertion, especially since speculative fiction is often deployed in law scholarship as it provides an imaginative lens through which legal scholars can explore complex issues, anticipate future challenges and propose solutions. Kieran Tranter finds that legal writing is largely a speculative activity since “[t]he nexus between legal scholarship on technology and science fiction is in the inherent speculation by lawyers of technological futures that orientate and legitimate the project of law and technology” (817). In

addition, legal scholar Jeffrey Meyers emphasizes the unconventional, yet impactful role fiction plays in expanding perspectives: “[s]cience fiction, the subgenres of speculative historicism and futurism in particular, are admittedly an unconventional means by which to open up established discourses, including legal and political ones, to new perspectives” (2). Whether employed within academic disciplines, policy discussions, or public discourse, this genre offers a unique and compelling way of envisioning alternative futures and shaping the trajectory of technological progress.

These legal contexts alluding to speculative fiction highlight the genre’s relevance to critical policy debates and anticipating future legal challenges. In 2021, a legislative hearing titled “Holding Big Tech Accountable: Targeted Reforms to Tech’s Legal Immunity” was held, where Congressman Jeff Duncan alluded to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Duncan 116) in the context of addressing the threats of censorship and the issues surrounding legal immunity for technology platforms. This reference suggests the recognition that fiction, despite its oftentimes commercial and entertainment-driven nature, can serve as a tool in helping us understand our culture of technology and its potential impacts on society. One of the objectives of this thesis is to also think about the legal implications of the fictional scenarios that often mirror real-world events. For instance, *The Circle* explores the risks of involving social media and Internet use in democratic processes as seen with Demoxie (Eggers 400), reminiscent of Estonia’s newly implemented e-voting system (Scott); *The Warehouse* depicts workers that are subjected to constant surveillance, much like reports of Amazon employees experiencing the same (Greene); the cyberattack in *Followers* is a poignant reminder of the multiple data breaches that happened under the watch of major tech platforms, such as Yahoo’s 2013 data breach that affected more than a billion users (Esteves et al. 71); *Going Zero* depicts technological capabilities mirroring the NSA scandal,

which revealed the extent to which privacy has been compromised in the digital age (Greenwald). Overall, by portraying scenarios that resemble that of the real world, these fictional works provide readers with thought experiments to contemplate legal and ethical qualms resulting from real-world technological developments.

### Current scholarship and theory

Recent events such as the NSA scandal, Cambridge Analytica controversy and the consolidation of major tech platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp under Meta, have heightened discussions surrounding privacy concerns and the concentration of power in the hands of large corporations and governments. These anxieties predate the rise of Big Tech, articulated by critics such as Shoshana Zuboff and Neil Postman. Zuboff warns of a “one-way mirror” (81) dynamic where powerful entities surveil and accumulate data on individuals, while users remain largely unaware of the extent of this data extraction and the ways in which their personal information is being commodified. In 1992, Postman referred to powerful figures and institutions as the “winners” exploiting technological advancement, while average citizens are reduced to “losers” (11) within this context. These “winners” will encourage the “losers” to embrace computer technology enthusiastically, claiming that it will make their lives more efficient, while “discreetly they neglect to say from whose point of view the efficiency is warranted or what might be its costs” (Postman 11). These dominant forces, whether it be large corporations or governmental agencies, have a vested interest in portraying technology as a tool for empowerment, while concealing their true intentions, oftentimes found to be a quest for profit or, as evidenced by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, a ploy for them to influence masses of people in a way that will benefit the already-powerful group/entity. According to these critics then, the promises of technological progress are therefore merely illusions, masking the erosion

of individual privacy and autonomy while solidifying power and control of these large entities over the masses.

Zuboff also introduces the concept of surveillance capitalism, defined as that which “unilaterally claims human experiences as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” (8). In her ground-breaking book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, she describes how Big Tech has persuaded its users to give up privacy for the sake of convenience. We as users trade our data for products and services that we would not otherwise be able to access (256). Drawing largely from the data collection practices of Google and Facebook, Zuboff analyzes how these tech giants exploit user data to build intricate profiles, consequently predicting and influencing individual behaviors. Zuboff also showcases how these tech companies compromise users’ “right to the future tense” (331) in this context, referring to how corporations like Google and Facebook effectively manipulate users’ behaviors in a way that shapes their future outcomes, presenting “the deletion of uncertainty” as a “victory” (335), when in reality all it does is diminish one’s freedom of choice. Echoing Postman’s critique of the power dynamics inherent in technological advancement, Zuboff’s concept of surveillance capitalism underscores the erosion of individual autonomy and agency in the digital age, as powerful entities exploit user data for profit and control.

In a similar vein, media studies scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias delve into the socio-political dimensions of datafication and its implications for individual agency. In *The Costs of Connection*, they examine how the process of datafication intrudes upon users “space of the self, [...] the materially grounded domain of possibility that the self has as its horizon of action and imagination” (155-156). When one’s every action, preference, and online interaction is monitored, quantified, and used to influence future choices, the space for authentic self-

expression and independent decision-making becomes increasingly limited. In an Amanpour interview, Eggers makes a similar argument when he emphasizes the importance of privacy as he refers to it as “a safe space for dissent [...] to turn off, to explore, to think radically, to think anarchically even [...] which is essential to creativity” (“Why Dave Eggers Refuses to List His New Book on Amazon” 14:33). The digital panopticon threatens this very space; as our lives become increasingly tethered to the online world, personalization resulting from algorithmic processing only serves to limit and constrain our worldviews. As users are continuously presented with narrow perspectives of reality that conform to their predetermined preferences, their ability to engage with and comprehend nuanced perspectives, as well as challenge their own biases, becomes increasingly compromised.

Building on the concept of the “right to the future tense,” and “space of the self”, legal scholar Antoinette Rouvroy takes on a broader and more systemic perspective on the issue at hand, as she examines the role of algorithmic governance in the modern world. Algorithmic governance refers to “the idea of a government of the social world that is based on the algorithmic processing of big data sets rather than on politics, law, and social norms” (Rouvroy). Rouvroy warns of a shift towards a reality where algorithmic determinations preempt the often noisy and uncertain process of democratic decision-making. In this scenario, individuals become subjects to a preemptive form of governance, where their choices and possibilities are constrained not by coercion or persuasion but by the silent sorting and predicting operations of algorithms. This, she argues, undermines the foundational democratic principle of autonomy, the capacity of individuals to act according to their own will and judgment.

Nicholas Mirzoeff’s theory of visibility and countervisibility provides another crucial lens for understanding power dynamics in surveillance systems. Mirzoeff defines visibility as “the

visualization of history” by those in authority, who claim an exclusive “right to look” (2). This right encompasses not just the ability to observe, but the power to organize, classify, and control what others can see. Visuality then becomes a tool of authority, allowing those in power to determine what should and should not be visible to the rest of society. However, Mirzoeff also introduces the concept of countervisuality as a form of resistance, where the surveilled reclaims “the right to look”. This emerges as a direct challenge to authoritarian control over what can be seen and known, representing “the assertion of the right to the real” (26). This framework helps us understand how surveillance systems maintain power not just through watching, but through controlling visibility — determining who can see what, while simultaneously working to prevent the surveilled from seeing or understanding the systems that monitor them. This is an example of how surveillance technology has been co-opted by those in power to further consolidate their influence and extract greater value from those beneath them, perpetuating asymmetric power relations and inequities.

### Central surveillance themes

The chapters ahead will focus on two specific themes, namely the notion of the digital panopticon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in *The Circle* and *Followers*, and the dilemma of trading freedom for security in *Going Zero* and *The Warehouse*.

The experiences of Mae in *The Circle* and Marlow in *Followers*, through their constant surveillance, offer a modern exploration of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, yet in a context that diverges from its original intent, since it takes on the form of a digital panopticon, made possible by the presence of digital technologies that allow for pervasive monitoring, data collection and analysis of individuals’ online activities by corporations and governments. Unlike Bentham's vision, where the possibility of being watched keeps prisoners in check without the need for

constant observation (22), Mae and Marlow live in a reality where observation is not just possible but guaranteed and incessant. The Circle's platform, with over three billion users (Eggers 452), ensures that Mae, after choosing transparency, is perpetually monitored. Similarly, Marlow's life, broadcasted for the entirety of America, is a continuous performance. Every move both these characters make is subject to scrutiny and judgement. This level of constant surveillance creates a world where personal freedoms are eroded, and the distinction between public and private life vanishes.

Meanwhile, McCarten's *Going Zero* and Hart's *The Warehouse* depict the often-debated dilemma of trading freedom for security. *Going Zero* introduces "Predator," a lethal drone whose name ominously foreshadows its misuse by a CEO intent on silencing dissent to secure a nine-billion-dollar contract with the United States government (McCarten 16). Instead of safeguarding national security, this equipment ultimately leads to the death of a government official. Similarly, Hart's *The Warehouse* presents a workplace where safety justifications mask the true intent of surveillance—ensuring efficiency through constant monitoring. Very much like Amazon's employee-monitoring handheld scanners that track staff efficiency (Greene), CloudBands serve as a surveillance tool, monitoring employees' performance on the job (Hart 61). Gibson, CEO of the Cloud and antagonist of the story, asserts that this system contributes to the company's low rate of crime, but that proves to be a facade, as we later find that security officers often sweep incidents of misconduct or wrongdoing under the rug. Instead of carrying out due diligence, they sidestep processing cases that would expose crimes within the system, as it would reflect poorly on their own performance. Just as in *Going Zero*, where the misuse of technology leads to tragic consequences, the overbearing surveillance in *The Warehouse* serves as a tool for manipulation and exploitation. These novels not only highlight the inherent dangers of sacrificing freedom for

the illusion of security, but also, given how closely the characters and situations resemble that of the real world, the fact that we may already be living in a reality where such trade-offs between liberty and the promise of safety are commonplace.

## Chapter outline

This thesis will examine the four texts in pairs.

Chapter one examines *The Circle* and *Followers*, focusing on the intersection of social media, surveillance, and the digital panopticon. Both novels explore the consequences of heavy social media use as well as the downsides of extensive data collection and the appropriation of human life for profit. I will draw from Zuboff's theories of surveillance capitalism in my analysis of the protagonists in these texts, as they are manipulated into serving the interests of their employers by attracting and influencing millions of users to purchase the products and services of these entities. In addition, I will also focus on the ethical and psychological implications brought about by the digital panopticon and how it impacts those who are subjected to constant surveillance, specifically on how it affects what Couldry and Mejias refer to as "the space of the self" (155). By analyzing the protagonists' experiences within their respective versions of the panopticon, this chapter will shed light on the dynamics between the exploited individuals and the seemingly omnipotent entities that control them.

Chapter two shifts focus to the power imbalances inherent in surveillance technology, asking the age-old question of "quis custodiet ipsos custodes" – a question posed by classic Roman poet Juvenal (Satire 6, lines 347-348), translated as "who is to guard the Guardians themselves" (Kline 45), or "who will watch the watchers?" (Cerf). This chapter will look at *The Warehouse* and *Going Zero*, both of which offer insights into corporate entities exploiting their power over others to fulfill their own agendas. In contrast to *The Circle* and *Followers*, these

novels provide a closer look at the corporate figures who wield this power, such as Cy Baxter and Gibson Wells. Drawing from Zuboff's concept of asymmetries of knowledge and power in a one-way mirror (81), this chapter also discusses Neil Postman's critique of a Technopoly, which he defines as a "totalitarian technocracy" (48); those who possess specialized knowledge about the surveillance systems deployed accumulate and consolidate power at the expense of the broader social good. Additionally, my analysis also incorporates Nicholas Mirzoeff's ideas about visibility and countervisibility, examining how the protagonists in these novels attempt to challenge the Technopolists' monopoly on the "right to look" through acts of resistance.

The Conclusion synthesizes the discussions and observations from the preceding chapters, offering a holistic examination of how speculative fiction serves as a tool for envisioning potential futures resulting from current technological and societal trends. It highlights speculative fiction's role as a catalyst for critical reflection and envisioning the kind of future we want to inhabit by illuminating the potential pitfalls of unchecked surveillance.

Overall, the goal of this thesis is to contribute to the discourse surrounding the ethical and societal implications of modern-day surveillance through the lens of speculative literature. Through the imaginative narratives of fiction, the texts examined in this thesis offer nuanced explorations of the complex dynamics that arise when surveillance capabilities and data-driven insights are wielded by powerful entities, be they corporations or governments. By analyzing works that envision potential futures shaped by current trends, particularly those related to intrusive data collection practices, surveillance, and the unequal concentration of power and wealth, this thesis aims to shed light on the pressing need for accountability and responsible stewardship of emerging technologies.

## Chapter One

### **The Digital Panopticon: Privacy and Autonomy in a Monitored Society**

#### From Inception to Resistance: Surveillance States in The Circle and Followers

From the late 1990s to nearly a quarter way through the 21st century, we have witnessed rapid advancements in the realm of social media platforms. However, the rapid growth in this sector was also accompanied by the rise of dataveillance, – the “automated, continuous, and unspecific collection, retention, and analysis of digital traces by state and corporate actors” (Büchi et al.). Initially intended for tracking individuals “about whom some kind of concern or suspicion has arisen” (Clarke 504), dataveillance has more recently become a tool for advertising practices (Strycharz and Segijn 574). Addressing this newfound economic paradigm, social psychologist and scholar Shoshana Zuboff coined the term “surveillance capitalism” to refer to this practice of commodifying personal data, harvested from individuals’ online activities, to “[claim] human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” (Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism* frontispiece). Social media platforms, driven by the goal to maximize profits, have become enablers of this system, employing sophisticated techniques to capture, analyze, and monetize user data on a massive scale.

While mass data collection has bolstered efficiency and, in turn, convenience, in our daily lives, it has also introduced considerable complexities, particularly concerning the pervasive presence of technology and its impact on privacy, all for the goal of increasing revenue, paving the way for surveillance capitalism. Zuboff references Facebook’s 2007 Beacon program, which allowed advertisers to track users across the internet without their consent (47-48), igniting significant controversy. Although Zuckerberg shut down the Beacon program due to public outrage at the time, Facebook soon introduced Facebook Connect, which not only allows users to

sign in to third-party websites using their Facebook credentials, but also allows for these sites to access users' Facebook profiles (Robinson and Bonneau 247). Facebook promoted Facebook Connect by highlighting its convenience, framing it as something that “makes it easier for you to take your online identity with you all over the Web” (“Facebook Across the Web”). At the same time, the platform subtly shifts the responsibility of expanding this surveillance network to the users as it encourages them to reach out to their favorite websites and request that they integrate the program so that “we can all share more information across the web” (“Facebook Across the Web”). By doing so, the platform not only persuades users to embrace their digital identities as their true selves, but also normalizes the expansion of its data collecting practices.

This example of Facebook Connect highlights a broader trend within the expanding ecosystem of online surveillance, where convenience is often used as a justification for extensive data collection practices. The theme of privacy loss in fiction is therefore reminiscent of real-world concerns that continue to dominate public discourse, situating the two novels that form the core of this chapter's analysis—David Eggers' *The Circle* (2014) and Megan Angelo's *Followers* (2020)—firmly within the context of contemporary societal anxieties. From 2014 to 2024, numerous stories across various platforms reflected persisting anxieties over digital privacy. While this list of headlines is by no means exhaustive, it provides a glimpse into the evolving debates surrounding these issues during a period marked by rapid advancements in surveillance tech:

1. Americans believe they live in a privacy dystopia, report finds –*The Washington Post*, 13 Nov 2014 (Peterson)
2. What does the panopticon mean in the age of digital surveillance? –*The Guardian*, 23 Jul 2015 (McMullan)
3. Mark Zuckerberg Covers His Laptop Camera. You Should Consider It, Too –*The New York Times*, 22 June 2016 (Rogers)
4. Why Orwell's 1984 could be about now –*BBC*, 7 May 2018 (Seaton)

5. Double-double tracking; How Tim Hortons knows where you sleep, work and vacation. -*Financial Post*, 12 June 2020 (McLeod)
6. All the ways TikTok tracks you and how to stop it -*WIRED*, 23 Oct 2021 (O’Flaherty)
7. There’s no escape from Facebook, even if you don’t use it –*The Washington Post*, 29 Aug 2021 (Fowler)
8. Okay, Google: To protect women, collect less data about everyone –*The Washington Post*, 8 Jul 2022 (Fowler)
9. Can We Balance Security and Privacy? Thoughts 10 Years After Snowden – *Forbes*, 24 April 2024 (Pfau)
10. How to Stop Your Data From Being Used to Train A.I. – *WIRED*, 10 Apr 2024 (Burgess and Rogers)

These headlines reflect a sustained public dialogue and unease surrounding digital privacy, data exploitation, and the consequences of unchecked surveillance by corporations and governments. One similarity across these headlines is a pervasive sense of constantly being watched and monitored in the online world. Considering that “our online identity is a very real extension of who we are” (Mauro 2), these anxieties are therefore not merely concerns about data security, but real apprehensions about one’s right to privacy in the digital age. This ongoing tension between unfettered technological integration in our lives and the rise of surveillance capitalism has brought about a shift in how privacy is perceived and valued in the digital age. As our daily activities, preferences, and even emotions become data points to be collected and analyzed, we find ourselves in a world where nearly every aspect of our lives is potentially commodified. This commodification of personal experience not only erodes traditional notions of privacy but also transforms our very existence into a continuous source of economic value for corporations.

As we will see in Eggers’ *The Circle* and Angelo’s *Followers*, contemporary pop-fiction reflects this anxiety surrounding surveillance practices that not only have devastating consequences for individual privacy, but also prove difficult to opt out of. This chapter will explore the features of contemporary fiction that portray the encroachment of surveillance capitalism on individual privacy and autonomy, focusing specifically on settings and narrative

techniques that effectively depict psychological constriction in individuals. *The Circle* and *Followers* vividly illustrate scenarios where corporations wield immense power to mine and commodify users' personal data at an unprecedented scale, much like real-world companies such as Facebook and Google. This intrusive and insidious practice is far-reaching and unsettling in these novels. Besides looking at the effects of surveillance on privacy and autonomy, I will also explore how individuals are gradually acclimated into accepting and normalizing such intrusiveness. I will be examining this phenomenon through the lens of Zuboff's concept of "psychic numbing", a defense mechanism that "inures us to the realities of being tracked, parsed, mined, and modified" (11). This "psychic numbing" manifests in both novels' protagonists, Mae Holland and Marlow Cadden, whose narrative trajectories veer in opposite directions, making the novels complementary as inverse foils. *The Circle* demonstrates how individuals are gradually worn down psychologically, eventually rationalizing and accepting the intrusiveness of surveillance as beneficial or necessary; by contrast, *Followers* presents the opposite trajectory, in which an individual, deeply embedded within a surveillance state, gradually becomes aware of the abnormality and destructiveness of such a system, and seeks to escape it.

Mae's story arc shows her gradually giving up privacy and autonomy, going from being uncomfortable and bothered by the lack of boundaries in her employer's — the Circle's — company culture, to becoming a zealous supporter of its philosophy of complete transparency. Marlow's storyline, on the other hand, begins with a reality where privacy is virtually nonexistent. Prompted by questions about her parentage, she embarks on a journey that leads her to question and ultimately reject the surveillance system that had been normalized since childhood. She moves from a state of psychic numbness to becoming aware of the unnaturalness of her situation and ultimately resisting and escaping the surveillance society in which she was

brought up. In both novels, the protagonists' choices are shaped by the powerful forces that seek to control and profit from their identities as well as experiences. These forces are represented by looming figures who exert significant influence over their lives. In *The Circle*, it is the Three Wise Men (i.e. company founders), who embody the tech giants driving surveillance culture. In *Followers*, it is the network producers who dictate Marlow's every move, making life-altering decisions for her. The difference is, while Marlow actively resists the erosion of her privacy and fights to reclaim her sense of self, Mae succumbs to the influence of her superiors and the lure of the Circle's so-called utopian vision. As a result, the two novels showcase different engagements with what Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias term "the space of the self", defined as "the open space in which any given individual experiences, reflects, and prepares to settle on her course of action" (*The Costs of Connection* 156); as I will demonstrate, this space of individuality and agency is either eroded or restored over the course of the novels' respective narratives. I will argue that both novels center on the impact of surveillance on this very space, drawing from Zuboff's concept of psychic numbing to illustrate how pervasive, technology-enabled surveillance culture distorts and corrupts perceptions of privacy, freedom, and self.

This chapter begins with an examination of *The Circle*, focusing specifically on how a surveillance state comes to be. Here, Eggers presents a narrative that highlights the potential benefits of surveillance, such as increased efficiency and safety, yet deliberately omits the darker implications of such systems. I will analyze the gradual erosion of Mae's privacy as she becomes fully indoctrinated into the idealistic belief that technology can solve humanity's most complex problems. The repeated intrusions on her privacy, combined with her colleagues' indifference to these violations, gradually lead to a state of psychic numbing, a concept I will explore in more detail later. The second section of the chapter dives into Angelo's *Followers*, a narrative that

begins with the full realization of a surveillance state, painting a society where the existential threats of unchecked surveillance are fully realized. I will explore how Marlow ultimately breaks free from a state of psychic numbing, reclaiming her autonomy and escaping the grip of surveillance capitalism. Reading these two novels alongside one another allows for a comparative study of the subtle acceptance of surveillance that creeps into one's life and the challenge of breaking free from such a system once it's set in place.

## Definitions

Before examining the impacts of surveillance in these works of fiction, I will define some of the key I will be using to analyze the representation of surveillance culture in these novels. One of the central ideas I will allude to is “data colonialism,” a term coined by Couldry and Mejias to describe the “emerging order for appropriating and extracting social resources for profit through data, practiced via data relations” (xix, *The Costs of Connection*). When discussing the intersection of data extraction and capitalism, they refer to the *extractive rationalities* behind data capture, defined as the “social rationality that treats much of the labor that contributes to data extraction as value-less, as ‘just sharing’” (“Data colonialism” 340). This framing, they argue, echoes the colonial-era doctrine of *terra nullius*, which regarded lands as belonging to “no one” (*nullius*) and therefore open for claiming and settlement (Couldry and Mejias, *The Costs of Connection* 9). Just as *terra nullius* was a premise for colonization, viewing data as a byproduct of everyday life processes serves to naturalize the appropriation of personal data by tech corporations. The “labor” involved in producing data from online interactions represents a new form of value creation that, while not fitting traditional definitions of labor, is nonetheless subject to appropriation and commodification. This process effectively integrates virtually all aspects of human life into the capitalist production process, extending far beyond

conventional economic boundaries. The implication is that human life, essentially, is now part of a vast techno-capitalist production process aimed at generating profit, blurring the lines between private life and economic exploitation (Couldry and Mejias, xix).

The concept of labor traditionally implies a deliberate and conscious effort to produce economic value. However, in the context of data colonialism and surveillance capitalism, this labor becomes less overt and more seamlessly integrated into everyday activities. Framing the extraction of our online interactions by tech platforms as “just sharing” is a deliberately manipulative representation of a relationship fundamentally characterized by an imbalance of power. The result of this is a sort of cognitive surrender, which aligns with Zuboff’s notion of “psychic numbing” (11). She argues that the conflict between our need for efficiency and desire for privacy “disposes us to rationalize the situation in resigned cynicism, [creating] excuses that operate like defense mechanisms (‘I have nothing to hide’), or find other ways to stick our heads in the sand, choosing ignorance out of frustration and helplessness” (Zuboff 11).

The OED defines “psychic numbing” as “a psychological response to traumatic events, characterized by decreased responsiveness to and a feeling of detachment from the external environment and a reduction in the ability to acknowledge and express emotion” (“psychic numbing”, *N.*). While there may not be a singular traumatic event in the context of our everyday interactions with technological systems and online platforms, the persistent violation of personal boundaries and the knowledge that one's every move is being monitored, analyzed, and exploited by powerful entities can be deeply unsettling and emotionally taxing. In response to the stress caused by this intrusion, Zuboff argues that individuals develop a form of psychic numbing as a coping mechanism (11). By emotionally detaching oneself from one’s situation and suppressing one’s discomfort, individuals can continue functioning in a world where privacy is becoming

increasingly limited. This numbing effect allows a person to rationalize their continual use of invasive technologies, convincing themselves that they have nothing to hide or that the benefits outweigh the costs.

### Datafication and Productivity in *The Circle*

Despite what some critics describe as *The Circle*'s seemingly utopian appearance, Eggers' novel portrays a deeply problematic society where pervasive surveillance and enforced transparency create a subtle yet powerful form of oppression, establishing a more nuanced form of dystopia. In her analysis of the novel, Margaret Atwood considers *The Circle* as a "satirical utopia for our times", believing that it should not be regarded as dystopian since "there's no sadistic slave-whipping tyranny on view in this imaginary America [...] Plagues are not raging, nor is the planet blowing up or even warming noticeably" ("When Privacy is Theft"). While this is a valid observation, it overlooks the more subtle forms of oppression and manipulation present in the narrative. *The Circle*'s world may lack more obvious forms of brutality, but it embodies a subtler, more insidious form of violence; what exists is a surveillance culture that reshapes individual values and freedoms under the guise of transparency.

Along this line of thinking, sociologist and surveillance expert David Lyon sees *The Circle* as a "utopian-dystopian novel" (*The Culture of Surveillance* 131), asserting that "Eggers' description locates all poverty, disease, and degradation *outside* the Circle's campus" (132) and "the world that Mae is so enamored with – and in the end won over by – appears utopian but is in fact dystopian" (133). From this perspective, the superficial perfection of the Circle's campus is but a facade; nothing and no one is authentic. Everyone's choices and behaviors are influenced by the ever-present surveillance and the pressure to conform to the company's ideals. Lyon further argues that Eggers' goal is "to show, ironically, that the apparent 'heaven' is, in its least

attractive aspects, closer to hell – understood as the full realization of the consequences of everyday choices” (*The Culture of Surveillance* 134). This would explain Mae’s quick descent into a state of psychic numbing: the cognitive dissonance between the appealing aspects of the Circle’s vision and the reality of having to be under constant observation can only be resolved through a kind of willful blindness.

The gradual shift in Mae’s valuation of privacy is marked by her initial discomfort with the blurred boundaries between her personal and professional life. At the start of the novel, when Mae first arrives on The Circle’s company campus to begin her new job, she is still sensitive to violations of her privacy; the line between the personal and the professional is distinct. We see this in her reaction to a social faux pas two weeks into her new role: she fails to respond to a colleague’s “Portugal brunch” (Eggers 109) invitation over the Circle’s social media platform, which gets her into trouble with HR. It turns out that all the pictures she had stored on her personal laptop, which includes those of a Portugal trip she made years prior, had become accessible to her employer the moment she transferred all her files to the company’s internal cloud server during the onboarding process. Without her explicit consent, these personal images had been used to identify her as a potentially interested attendee for the brunch. During an HR mediation meeting with the offended brunch organizer Alistair, Mae is bewildered by the situation as she cannot comprehend why she was invited to the brunch in the first place. In fact, she doesn't even know why she was called to HR: “Mae had no idea what the words meant: *Alistair’s Portugal brunch?* Could she say she had no idea what that meant?” (Eggers 107). Mae proceeds to apologize for her absence while offering a fabricated explanation for her non-attendance.

The key takeaway here is Alistair's belief that Mae's digital self, as represented by her being a (online) recipient of his brunch invitation, is every bit as real and engaged as her physical (offline) self. This assumption highlights this conflation of digital and physical identities in a hyper-connected world, which a newcomer like Mae herself does not yet understand but will soon come to embody and perpetuate. The ease with which Alistair accesses and acts upon Mae's data demonstrates how this practice has become accepted as an inevitable part of working at The Circle. This scenario calls to mind what Couldry and Mejias term "data relations," a concept central to the theory of data colonialism. Data relations refer to the new social dynamics that normalize the appropriation of human data, making it seem like "just the way things are" (*The Costs of Connection* 12). This datafication of Mae's life goes beyond mere information gathering. It represents a fundamental shift in how her identity is constructed and perceived within the company's ecosystem. Her digital self, as interpreted through data analytics, becomes a stand-in for her true self as a unique individual, influencing how others interact with her and potentially shaping her future experiences within the company.

After the meeting, Annie, Mae's best friend and higher-ranking superior at the Circle, informs her that these HR meetings occur frequently, not just for new hires, but even long-standing executives like herself. Exemplifying this transgression perpetuated via extractive rationalities, Annie normalizes and lauds this invasion of privacy: She explains to Mae that "the cloud gets scanned for information like that. You don't have to run around signing up for Portugal interest clubs or anything [...] It saves about a hundred hours of nonsense." (111) Despite this positive framing of the situation, Mae is still "weirded out" (111) by the whole ordeal and repeatedly seeks validation: "You think it's okay, that meeting with Dan and Alistair?" (113). Mae's persistent unease and need for reassurance reveal her struggle to

reconcile her intuitive sense of privacy violation with the company's normalized practices. Being consistently met with Annie's indifference, Mae is positioned as the "uncalibrated" one in their dynamic, something that will change in the latter half of the novel. Her employer, through an algorithm, has effectively commodified and made public her personal interests, social connections, and even potential future activities. This practice of making public what would typically be considered private information based on her past life experiences blurs the lines between personal and professional spheres, eroding traditional notions of privacy. This system essentially creates a digital dossier of Mae, accessible to her colleagues without her explicit consent or input.

Mae's experience here echoes what legal scholar Antoinette Rouvroy refers to as *algorithmic governmentality*, "the idea of a government of the social world that is based on the algorithmic processing of big data sets rather than on politics, law, and social norms" ("Algorithmic Governmentality"). Instead of being afforded the agency in choosing her own social affiliations by following typical social practices like meeting people and joining communities on her own accord, an algorithm continually reinforces and amplifies certain aspects of her digital identity, which may not necessarily coincide with her present interests or social inclinations. Mae's selfhood has been reduced to rigid data representations and her ability to freely define her own subjective experiences is overwritten. A glimpse into how the Circle operates is revealed in Annie's belief that the traditional processes of social networking entails "a hundred hours of nonsense" (111), framing the automated scanning and sharing of personal data as a more efficient alternative. This scenario aligns with Cathy O'Neil's observations in *Weapons of Math Destruction* about the nature of algorithmic decision-making. As O'Neil notes, "oceans of behavioral data, in coming years, will feed straight into artificial intelligence systems.

And these will remain, to human eyes, black boxes” (173). The Circle’s algorithm, which has identified Mae’s potential interest in Portugal and made this information available to her colleagues, operates as such a black box.

This focus on efficiency and data control parallels philosopher Steven Katz’s examination of technology’s role in the Holocaust, where he critiques the ethics of expediency. He describes technology as “the embodiment of pure expediency”, espousing “rationality, efficiency, speed, productivity, power” (Katz 266) and warns that such extreme and single-minded pursuits of expediency risk not only the “potential brutality and inhumanity” intrinsic to that philosophy, but “a rationality taken to such extremes that it becomes madness” (267). While not nearly as extreme as the atrocities Katz examines, the Circle’s algorithmic categorization of Mae’s interests based solely on extracted data, replacing organic social connections, stems from a similar philosophical framework. In both contexts, there is a reduction of human complexity to data points. Mae’s burgeoning psychic numbing then, is not only brought about by the extractive rationalities (Couldry and Mejias, “Data colonialism” 340) behind data extraction, but also the normalization and endorsement of this “ethic of expediency” at the Circle.

As discussed above, Annie displays indifference towards this incident; this attitude is one of the key factors that contributes to Mae’s gradual shift in the value she places on her own privacy. Annie’s subsequent actions during this episode also introduce a reward aspect that further enables this psychic numbing. Besides Annie’s nonchalant framing of the frequency of these sorts of privacy breaches, there is the attempt to rationalize and justify such extractive practices as being an acceptable tradeoff. Completely unfazed by Mae’s run-in with HR, Annie proceeds to dazzle her with the company’s “free sample room” (112). This transition is a strategic pivot by Eggers. This room contains products of various brands that have not yet hit the

market but are encouraged to be worn/used by Circle employees as a way to advertise the products to their users. The free sample room is not a mere perk for employees but a strategic element of the company's business model. By turning employees into living advertisements, the company leverages their social influence to market products more effectively.

Annie reinforces this influencer dynamic by explaining: "We invite rotating groups in – sometimes it's programmers, sometimes CE people like you. Different group every day [...] You're an influential person working at the Circle! You're a style leader, early adopter, all that" (Eggers 112). At first glance, this arrangement appears to be mutually beneficial, with employees getting unreleased products before the general public, while the Circle advertises those companies' products to the world. Under the surface, however, this arrangement reveals a more insidious dynamic at play. The idea that trading her data is a small price to pay for gaining social clout, visibility, and the ability to shape consumer behavior on a massive scale is subtly instilled in Mae. Psychic numbing sets in as she suppresses her discomfort with the fact that her employer now has access to intimate details about her life. Mae seemingly comes to believe that the company is entitled to her data because she perceives it as a fair trade for the privilege of being in a position of influence.

Eggers effectively captures Mae's transformation, particularly in her perception towards having one's data be freely available to the public, through her changing reactions to privacy violations. When Francis, a love interest and colleague, accesses her online profile during a public demonstration of the Circle's new dating app that scans the web for information about her, she thinks to herself: "If Francis wanted any or all of that information, why couldn't he just ask her?" (Eggers 126). Mae returns to her cubicle after the demonstration and her third screen is bombarded with notifications from other employees, all congratulating her. Interestingly, Mae

never participated in giving the presentation and even left early out of fear of being “asked to get onstage to confirm the great power of this new tool” (125). The implication here is that she was being praised just by virtue of having her data be openly available. In a marked shift from her apparent unease in this scene, however, just a few pages later, Mae carries out a structurally analogous transgression to someone else. When visiting her family, she finds her ex-partner Mercer at her parents’ place. Despite his protests and clear disinterest in maintaining an online presence, she attempts to force upon him the importance of being active online (132-133). As she becomes increasingly immersed in the Circle’s culture, her perception of personal boundaries and the value of offline communication becomes distorted. What once seemed like an egregious breach of privacy gets reframed as acceptable, even celebrated, behavior that aligns with the Circle’s agenda of total data appropriation.

A pivotal shift occurs about halfway through the novel, after Mae gains celebrity status and starts believing that she is making a difference in the world. At this point, Mae begins to actively embrace the company’s philosophy of full transparency. When pondering why certain U.S. politicians refuse to go “transparent”, Mae questions “If you weren’t operating in the light of day, what were you doing in the shadows?” (Eggers 241), reflecting a growing belief that privacy is inherently suspicious. Her thinking reflects an oversimplification where transparency is equated with honesty, while privacy is associated with secrecy and potential wrongdoing. This binary thinking mirrors former Google CEO Eric Schmidt’s controversial assertion that “If you have something that you don’t want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place” (Esguerra), a comment that sparked outrage at a time it was made. This endorsement from Mae shows how she has been led to not only accept but also advocate for such a system. While her initial scrutiny is directed at politicians, the implications of this mindset extend far beyond

the political sphere. Mae's unwavering belief in the moral superiority of transparency foreshadows the eventual reality in which even average citizens, including herself, will be subject to the same relentless scrutiny.

This shifting perspective finally reaches its tipping point, when Mae's private hobby of solitary kayaking unexpectedly thrusts her into the spotlight. A defining moment occurs when Mae "borrows" a kayak from a store where she's a member (265), unaware that her actions are being monitored. Unbeknownst to her, a SeeChange camera installed by a Circle member captures her outing, prompting someone to alert the authorities. Although the police become involved (assuming she is a thief), Mae escapes formal charges thanks to Marion, the kayak rental company owner, who vouches for her (273). Predictably, The Circle becomes aware of this incident, again highlighting the company's omniscient reach into employees' personal lives. The next day at work, Mae finds herself in Dan's (HR) office again. He criticizes her for not wearing a life vest and failing to check weather conditions on SeeChange before her outing. Most disturbingly, he berates her as a "felon," despite the fact that she was never formally charged (277). In the real world, such scrutiny of an employee's personal life would be considered a flagrant violation of privacy norms and potentially illegal. The Circle, however, has normalized this level of intrusion, blurring the lines between personal and professional spheres to an alarming degree.

This isolated incident brings Mae face-to-face with Eamon Bailey, one of the top executives of the company. This meeting provides an unfiltered glimpse into the Circle's core philosophy of radical transparency. Bailey, with his characteristic charisma and conviction, articulates the company's vision:

I truly believe that if we have no path but the right path, the best path, then that would present a kind of ultimate and all-encompassing relief. We don't have to be tempted by

darkness anymore. Forgive me for putting it in moral terms. That's the Midwestern church-goer in me. But I'm a believer in the perfectibility of human beings. I think we can be better. I think we can be perfect or near to it. 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. (Eggers 293-294)

His rhetoric paints a utopian picture of human potential, framing transparency not just as a corporate policy but as a path to societal perfection. This vision reflects Jeremy Bentham's vision for the Panopticon, a prison design where all inmates could be observed by a single guard in a tower without knowing if they were being watched (Bentham 22). In his study of the Panopticon, Michel Foucault contends that Bentham's vision establishes a mechanism of power that is both "visible and unverifiable" (201): the constant presence of the central tower serves as a reminder of potential observation, while the uncertainty of whether one is being watched effectively controls their behavior. Resonating with Foucault's analysis of such a system, Bailey's philosophy rests on the belief that constant visibility has powerful consequences for shaping human behavior—he believes it leads to moral behavior and societal improvement, which comes to be eerily true.

For example, we later find that TruYouth, one of the Circle's child-tracking programs, achieved a 90% reduction in crime and a complete elimination of child abductions in states where the Circle had been testing the program (Eggers 345). Eggers presents a seemingly flawless outcome, glossing over the ethical implications of having such a system in place. He presents immediate, visible benefits, providing us with a surprisingly appealing vision of a society transformed by mass surveillance and avoids confronting the unsettling reality that radical transparency could lead to. This reluctance to explore the darker implications of this system reinforces the appeal of idealistic technological solutions to complex social problems. It is through the conclusion of Mae's story, after her transition to full transparency, that the novel

subtly foreshadows the deep unease such a system would lead to. We see this in the events leading up to her ex-partner's violent death. Mercer, a former friend and romantic partner, has always been skeptical of the Circle and its invasive practices, subsequently retreating into seclusion to escape its reach. During a demonstration of SoulSearch (a tool to locate fugitives within twenty minutes), Mae impulsively tracks Mercer against his wishes. This public hunt ends with Mercer's suicide as he drives off a cliff to escape the relentless pursuit. After this incident, Bailey dismisses any responsibility on the part of the Circle; rather than acknowledging the ethical transgressions inherent in such invasive surveillance, he frames Mae's actions as a compassionate attempt at helping a troubled individual. His response serves to downplay the incident in a seemingly tidy, palatable way, glossing over the unsettling reality of the situation.

These examples poignantly demonstrate the gradual normalization of the dissolution of the private sphere. Zuboff, towards the end of her book, argues that "the greatest danger [of pervasive surveillance] is that we come to feel at home in glass life" (492). This is exactly what happens to Mae. Through a combination of peer pressure, conditioning, and a cultish corporate environment, employees like Mae are manipulated into surrendering the most intimate aspects of their lives as data sources to be relentlessly mined for commercial gain. Occurrences such as Alistair's brunch debacle, Annie's nonchalant attitude towards these gross invasions of privacy and Eamon Bailey's flawed rationalization of the company's value system have not only undermined employees' resistance to their surveillance practices but also fostered a culture of complicity and active participation. The Circle capitalizes on this change in perception, and once Mae has fully integrated and assimilated into the organization's culture, she becomes an asset to advance their extractive, capitalistic model. The intense drive for competition, coupled with

Mae's desire to prove herself in her new role, fuels her transformation into an advocate for the Circle's mission to create a fully transparent society.

### Total transparency and the panopticon

Mae's meeting with Bailey marks a crucial turning point in the novel, as Book I of the narrative closes with her announcement that she is going "transparent" (306), broadcasting her life to the world via a camera she wears on her chest. In the beginning of Book II, right after the announcement of Mae's transition to full transparency, she is seen showcasing aquatic animals to her watchers. Eggers employs the aquarium as a strategic metaphor, showing that the tables have now turned: Mae, who was once the subject of observation, is now also an active watcher. Yet, this shift is ironic and double-edged. While Mae observes and narrates the lives of the aquatic creatures, she remains under constant surveillance herself. The scene where she searches for a seahorse and comments, "I think he's hiding, but he does seem to know we're on the other side of the glass here, and can see everything" (Eggers 315) mirrors her earlier kayaking escapade, where her seemingly harmless search for privacy got blown out of proportion and led her to where she is now.

The metaphor extends to showcase the lack of escape routes or hiding places for entities living in surveilled worlds. Just as the seahorse has no refuge from the prying eyes on the other side of the glass, Mae's life has become a spectacle. Despite the seahorse's clear discomfort—"curled with his back to [Mae], looking exhausted and shy" (315)—Mae persists, pressing her face and camera lens against the glass anyway. This scene illustrates the coercive nature of surveillance, where personal boundaries and privacy are forcefully breached in the name of observation and transparency. Much like the "glass life" that Zuboff speaks of, Mae's existence,

like the seahorse's, has become a transparent enclosure, with every aspect of her life on display for public consumption.

Unsurprisingly, Mae's behavior becomes highly performative after going "transparent", as she begins to do things that would leave a positive impression on her viewers, rather than leading a life true to her own authentic desires: "Every day she'd done without things she didn't want to want. Things she didn't need. She'd given up soda, energy drinks, processed foods [...] She was liberated from bad behavior" (331). The irony here lies in her perception that this is a form of liberation when, in reality, she is more confined than ever before. She is no different from the prisoners in Bentham's Panopticon. The only time she can have a private conversation is in a washroom stall when she can turn off the audio for three minutes, as we see in her first private interaction with Annie after going transparent (Eggers 354). Mae's awareness of her constant audience leads to constant self-censorship, no doubt a mentally taxing endeavor, since self-control is considered a finite resource (Hagger et al. 495). Without a space of refuge, her only recourse is to become the very person her audience expects her to be. There is no room left for her authentic self. As Couldry and Mejias aptly describe, "there can be no genuine self [...] without the self having a space that is its own" (*The Costs of Connection* 166). Mae's sense of liberation is therefore an illusion. The absence of private moments for self-reflection and genuine expression erodes her ability to distinguish between her true self and the expectations placed upon her.

In this narrative, the Circle emerges victorious in its quest to reshape society and human behavior through pervasive surveillance. The company successfully exploits human vulnerabilities — the desire for connection, validation, and a sense of purpose — to create a system where individuals willingly surrender their privacy and autonomy. By framing constant

surveillance as a path to self-improvement and social good, the Circle manipulates its employees and users into becoming complicit in their own oppression. Mae's transformation from a skeptical newcomer to an enthusiastic advocate for total transparency exemplifies the company's triumph. She does eventually come to "feel at home in [the] glass life" (492) that Zuboff warns against. Her metamorphosis is a chilling one as she becomes someone who not only willingly exposes every aspect of her own life but also expects — even demands — the same from others.

In the epilogue, Mae relishes in the fact that ten million people had gone transparent (Eggers 496), and she speculates that completion of the Circle "would bring peace, and it would bring unity, and all that messiness of humanity until now, all those uncertainties that accompanied the world before the Circle, would be only a memory" (497). Returning to Lyon's characterization of the novel as "utopian-dystopian," I propose that his assessment is certainly appropriate. Mae's world is a utopia in the sense that it is now safer, healthier (if people are to behave the way Mae does under surveillance), and likely highly efficient. The cost of this seemingly perfect world, however, is the erasure of privacy, autonomy and the richness of human experience in all its complexity. Zuboff's assertion that "if you've got nothing to hide, you are nothing" (479) is a chilling indictment of this newly formed surveillance society. Towards the end, everything Mae does is performative and calculated, with her every action shaped by the knowledge of being constantly watched. *The Circle* ends up being more dystopian than when the novel began, with the company having reshaped society into becoming a version of the panopticon where everyone is both the watcher and the watched. Because of the gradual acceptance of such tech-centered solutions to problems, facilitated by a collective psychic numbing, invasive surveillance practices have become normalized and accepted as an inevitable part of modern life.

In the following section, I turn to Megan Angelo's *Followers*, a text that, while sharing similarities with *The Circle*, presents a more hopeful narrative, suggesting the potential for individuals to escape, or at least resist, such a system. Angelo's protagonist Marlow lives in a world where certainty and safety, at least for her, is guaranteed *thanks to pervasive surveillance*, yet it proves unsatisfactory. The guarantee of certainty in her life undermines both her personal freedom and the possibility of authentic human connection, leaving her discontented and disillusioned. Angelo explores the implications of existing within a fully formed surveillance society, portraying the immense challenges and near impossibility of escaping such a system once it has been established. Marlow's growing awareness of the transgressions against her right to live freely marks a significant contrast to Mae's willing surrender to the system, offering a more optimistic perspective that challenges the inevitability of submission in a surveillance-dominated society. Her eventual escape from the surveillance state, despite its difficulties, provides a hopeful perspective, highlighting the possibility of reclaiming autonomy and authentic human connection even in a world dominated by invasive monitoring.

### *Followers: From Psychic Numbing to Heightened Awareness*

While Mae goes through a gradual shift from being a wary newcomer to becoming an enthusiastic advocate for living in a surveillance society, Angelo's protagonist Marlow is already living in one and ends up on a quest to flee such a society. *Followers* (2020) explores the lives of two characters – Marlow and Orla (who is later revealed to be Marlow's biological mother) – across different timelines, which ultimately converge in the final chapter. Orla's storyline is set in 2015 and follows a budding writer striving to make a name for herself in New York. Her narrative leads up to a significant event known as "The Spill", a massive data breach that exposes personal information of millions of Americans, leading to upwards of nine thousand

suicides as people struggle to cope with having their darkest secrets exposed publicly (Angelo 365). This event serves as a turning point, marking the transition from a largely familiar digital landscape to a hyper-surveilled future.

Marlow's story unfolds in 2051, within Constellation, a purpose-built, made-for-social-media town dominated by constant surveillance and live streaming. Her life, as well as the lives of every resident in Constellation, is broadcast 23 hours a day to millions of followers, who watch her every move at any given moment. Unlike Mae, she does not have a camera attached to her chest, but rather lives in an environment where surveillance is seamlessly integrated into every aspect of her surroundings. After the Spill, Constellation was launched as a "lure, a way to get [Americans] back online" and demonstrate resilience against cyber-terrorism (104). As a prominent figure in this hyper-surveilled world, Marlow's existence is scripted and controlled, leaving little room for personal autonomy. Mae's journey showcases a transition from relative freedom to constant observation, while Marlow has known nothing else but a life entirely defined by surveillance and public consumption. Mae's gradual immersion into the world of constant surveillance allows the reader to witness her struggle with the loss of privacy, her initial resistance, and eventual acceptance. As discussed earlier, this transition is marked by her descent into psychic numbing. In contrast, Marlow is born into a world of ubiquitous surveillance, where privacy is an alien concept and psychic numbing is deliberately (and coercively) imposed by her employer. Her story depicts the struggle of resisting an oppressive system of total surveillance that has become deeply ingrained in every aspect of society. This narrative traces her journey from being psychically numb to becoming aware of the abnormality of her situation, which eventually pushes her to fight to reclaim her sense of self.

In this section, I will focus on Marlow’s characterization and narrative arc instead of Orla’s to allow for a more detailed exploration of Zuboff’s concept of “psychic numbing” in the context of living in a surveillance society, as well as the struggle for personal autonomy in a world without privacy. Orla’s storyline, set in 2015, is set in a time already largely familiar to the reader. Her narrative serves as a bridge between our present reality and the speculative future inhabited by Marlow, whose world is set in 2051, just one generation removed from Orla’s, and is marred by the catastrophic aftermath of “The Spill”. In Marlow’s reality, the Internet is now a government-run entity, tightly controlled and monitored under the guise of national security and public safety. Much like Atwood’s definition of speculative fiction discussed in the introduction, Marlow’s storyline portrays a future that may result from today’s technologies, creating a somewhat familiar yet exaggerated version of our own reality.

### Data – The most valuable resource

Before diving into the narrative analysis, it is crucial to establish the importance of data in *Followers*. Unlike in *The Circle*, where data collection is a largely manual process with individuals like Mae being encouraged to actively “share” their experiences, Marlow’s world presents a more advanced and pervasive form of data mining. In Marlow’s dystopian future, datafication has become an automatic, all-encompassing process. Her life as a state-sponsored influencer involves being surveilled for 23 hours a day, eliminating the need for deliberate “sharing” of her activities. This constant monitoring represents a significant evolution in surveillance technology, where the collection of personal data has become so seamless and ubiquitous that it requires no conscious effort from the individual. Data is a prized commodity, aligning with mathematician Clive Humby’s 2006 assertion that “data is the new oil” (qtd. in

Couldry and Mejias 89), an appropriate analogy given how it is a resource that fuels economic growth and drives technological advancements.

Furthermore, the technology in Marlow's world has advanced to the point where microchips embedded in individuals' skin allow for direct mental interface with the internet. This process, referred to as "intuit[ing]" (28), enables users to access information, communicate, and interact with the digital world through deliberate thought alone. By simply focusing her thoughts, she can browse the internet and send messages. This process brings up "a screen inside her mind" (Angelo 27), representing the ultimate integration of technology and human cognition. More importantly, it serves as a constant source of data collection, as everything one "intuits" is stored and potentially analyzed. Marlow offers insight into the types of information collected in Constellation's data center, noting that it includes not just mundane details like dry cleaning expenses and lock combinations but also the private messages people compose within their minds (97-98). This process blurs the boundaries between mind and machine to such an extent that when Marlow reflects on her dissatisfaction with her husband, her intense focus on certain thoughts sometimes lead her device to mistakenly interpret them as actionable intentions. For example, when she thinks of her marriage as a "small price to pay" for a full and exciting social life, her intense thought causes the phrase to be misinterpreted as a search query (Angelo 55). Such technology represents the ultimate intrusion to privacy, where even internal thoughts and deliberations become part of a data stream, effectively eliminating any remaining boundary between private reflection and open expression.

Another indication of data being regarded as a highly sought after commodity in this text is the motif of aversion to paper. When Marlow sets out to uncover the truth about her family background, she escapes Constellation and arrives in New York, a city that exists outside the

pervasive, individualized surveillance system of Constellation. There, she discovers Orla's old apartment filled with letters, a medium that bewilders her. The novel's opening sentence depicts Marlow's perplexity at the continued use of letters (Angelo 11), and we later learn that she had grown up being taught that "paper [is] synonymous with secrets" (14). By the year 2051, paper had become a thing of the past. Similarly in *The Circle*, a colleague of Mae succinctly remarks that "the problem with paper is that all communication dies with it" (Eggers 187) and urges Mae to "share" everything she does online. By eliminating paper, all forms of communication are digitized, allowing for their continuous surveillance and integration into the data mining apparatus. The aversion to paper symbolizes the relentless pursuit of data as a resource in these fictional surveillance societies. Marlow's unfamiliarity with paper highlights how complete this transition has become in her world, reflecting an exaggerated version of trends already visible in our own society.

### The workings of surveillance capitalism in *Followers*

Two types of surveillance are at play in *Followers*, each serving to illustrate the multifaceted nature of surveillance capitalism in Angelo's dystopian future. Firstly, Marlow, along with other influencers employed by (and living in the town of) Constellation, is surveilled by both network executives as well as millions of public followers who "liked to feel like voyeurs [and] didn't want to be looked in the eye" (Angelo 30). Second, there is the surveillance carried out by the network on the public, mainly through data collection and analysis. This surveillance is used to target advertisements by matching the right influencer with the profile of users whom the network thinks would benefit from the products these influencers often showcase. Of course, the latter form of surveillance cannot exist without the former; Marlow's status as one of America's most watched influencers meant there was an opportunity for the

network to leverage her wide viewership for targeted marketing. In its efforts to sell a curated lifestyle, the network deploys her, as well as other influencer figures, as an intermediary that perpetuates the system of surveillance capitalism. With data being the “raw material necessary for surveillance capitalism’s novel manufacturing processes” (Zuboff, *eBook* 45), the network’s dual surveillance approach creates a self-reinforcing cycle of data generation and exploitation. The relationship between the watcher and the watched is fundamentally imbalanced, with the Constellation network and its sponsors as the primary beneficiaries, while both Marlow and her followers are subject to exploitation.

In *The Costs of Connection*, Couldry and Mejias argue that the expansion of data colonialism “[gives] way to an emerging new order, a new structuring of social relations” (102). By simply participating in social life, value is generated for the capitalist entities controlling the data infrastructure (102), as represented by the Constellation network in *Followers*. Social bonds are therefore mediated through the lens of data extraction, reducing relationships between individuals to mere commodities within the surveillance system. Zuboff, in her examination of advertising practices, takes it a step further, observing that entities like Google now mine behavioral data “to read users’ minds for the purposes of matching ads to their interests” (Zuboff 78). The act of reading minds is inherently invasive and fraught with ethical implications. A revealing passage as told from Marlow’s perspective early in the novel shows how users’ emotional vulnerabilities are mined as lucrative data resources to be exploited:

Her followers—the people who observed every move she made—were spread across the rest of America and various races and age groups. What they had in common was that they were troubled. This was how the network marketed her: as the poster child for troubled, the Constellation star who got what they were going through. The network mined public data, looking for adults whose devices clocked too much crying or eating, for kids whose heartbeats surged to panicked levels during gym class. *Meet Marlow*, went the ad the network would beam straight to their devices. *She knows just how you feel*. The sad people, glad to be talked to, would opt right in and start watching her. They

would see that she moved through her days with buoyant normalcy, and they would be reminded, every so often, that Hysteryl had made her this way. (Angelo 36)

This practice highlights how surveillance capitalism, in the context of this narrative, leverages emotional weaknesses to drive engagement and profit. Marlow's followers, drawn by their personal difficulties, become part of an exploitative system that commodifies their distress. The notion of "mind-reading" now goes beyond simple data collection. There now exists a system that provides some level of insight into individual thoughts, desires and motivations that were previously unattainable.

The excerpt above also captures the workings of surveillance capitalism in an America that, despite having witnessed one of the biggest data leaks and cyberattacks in history (Angelo 358-359), still insists on online participation from its citizens (104). The determination of both the government and corporations to keep citizens online, even after a major data breach like the Spill, highlights the value they place on maintaining constant surveillance. Moving from a semi-surveilled state to one where citizens disengage completely from online platforms would pose a significant threat to the very systems that depend on data extraction for profit and control. In one of Marlow's flashbacks, we learn the justification for such pervasive surveillance. The post-Spill government had claimed that surveillance was necessary to ensure public safety while also generating revenue through internet ads, thus supplementing its limited federal budget (Angelo 192); it becomes clear in the novel that only one of these justifications (i.e. the economically oriented one) reflects their true intention.

While the post-Spill government claims that constant monitoring is essential for public safety, the text provides no concrete evidence of these security benefits in action. Instead, the focus is overwhelmingly on the economic motivations behind surveillance. The need to generate revenue through internet ads, particularly via influencers like Marlow, becomes the true driving

force behind the system. For instance, Marlow herself is relentlessly pursued when she attempts to escape Constellation (Angelo 157), highlighting how the system is more concerned with control and profit than with actual security. Furthermore, those who opposed the government-run internet after the Spill were forcibly relocated to Atlantic City, which was effectively cut off from the rest of the country (358-359), further illustrating the lengths to which the government would go to maintain this surveillance system, prioritizing control over the well-being of its citizens.

### The right to privacy

In the surveillance state depicted in *Followers*, Marlow's "space of the self" is nonexistent. As I will lay out in this section, Marlow is unable to live an authentic life as her every action is monitored, leaving no space for personal exploration or even self-discovery. What is at stake here is also what Zuboff refers to as the "right to the future tense", which is "the right to act free of influence of illegitimate forces that operate outside our awareness to influence, modify, and condition our behavior (194). Both concepts speak to the fundamental requirements for human autonomy and self-determination threatened by the extractive practices of surveillance capitalism. Unlike Mae, however, Marlow's escape from Constellation will come to represent her reclaiming of this space. While Mae's story in *The Circle* progresses from a degree of privacy to an invasive, all-encompassing surveillance state, Marlow's journey is characterized by a movement in the opposite direction: from a pervasive, controlling form of surveillance to a reclaiming of her personal life and autonomy.

Like Eggers's approach to *The Circle*, Angelo illustrates the lack of a private space, not only in the physical sense, but also the psychological, by inhabiting the first-person point of view of characters who have their "space of the self" violated. The protagonists are often presented in

ways that evoke a sense of claustrophobia that reveals the suffocating effects of constant surveillance on individual autonomy. For example, Marlow's introduction in chapter two depicts a highly mechanical and deliberate behavior, a sort of self-censoring in response to her being watched:

Then she sat up and took three deep breaths, opening her eyes on the last one. She blinked four times, unhurried. Smile twice. The first smile was meant to look sleepy, to hint at consciousness emerging. The second was meant to look spontaneous, giddy, as if she had just remembered that she was alive and felt unspeakably blessed (29)

In this description, readers see how Marlow's actions are deliberate and highly performative. The passage establishes her self-censoring and lack of spontaneity as an effect of the surveillance state she inhabits, all for the goal of presenting a pleasing façade for viewers. None of her behaviors are done for her own authentic expression or satisfaction. Every move, every smile is meticulously calculated for the manipulation of the invisible audience. Her actions here mirror those of Mae, who, after going transparent, chooses every action and every word carefully to make sure she presents an idealized image of herself to her viewers. Both depictions of individuals under intensive surveillance bring to light a life dominated by performance rather than genuine self-expression. In this context, neither woman is a unique individual, but rather a curated version of herself, echoing Zuboff's profound one-liner I cited earlier—that "if you've got nothing to hide you are nothing" (479).

Besides this lack of a private space, Angelo's narrative also vividly illustrates the loss of autonomy that characterizes Marlow's existence. Every aspect of her life is pre-planned and controlled by the network, leaving her with little to no agency over her own destiny. Marlow's marriage, for instance, is not a matter of personal choice but a narrative construct designed for public consumption. She resents her husband but cannot even contemplate divorce, as such a decision is not hers to make. One evening, while waiting for her assignment from the network,

Marlow prays silently for a divorce narrative: “*Divorce c ’mon divorce*, Marlow begged silently. *Divorce, with temporary relocation to Anguilla and personal fitness trainer. Male*” (Angelo 57). The fact that she prays for this narrative shift, only to be given a “pregnancy” storyline instead, brings to attention the complete lack of control she has over even the most intimate aspects of her life. This narrative manipulation is driven by the need to keep her story engaging for the audience and, by extension, profitable for Constellation. Since Marlow is constantly under surveillance and her life is a continuous spectacle, the network demands that her experiences remain captivating to sustain viewer interest and, consequently, ad revenue.

Zuboff’s concept of the “right to the future tense” provides a useful lens for understanding this dynamic. She argues that surveillance capitalism asserts control over not just individuals’ present actions but their future potentialities, effectively taking over their “right” to their own future narratives (Zuboff eBook 216). As Marlow’s future is dictated by the demands of surveillance capitalism, autonomy is completely stripped from her life. By presenting such an extreme scenario, Angelo is criticizing the trajectory of our own society’s relationship with technology and surveillance as she explores the potential consequences of surrendering too much of our personal data and decision-making power to external entities, whether they be corporations or governments. However, unlike *The Circle*, which concludes with a dystopian reality where millions of people are constantly filming each other, Angelo’s narrative offers a more optimistic perspective, given Marlow’s resistance and her eventual escape from the constraints imposed by Constellation’s surveillance systems.

### From psychic numbing to heightened awareness

The psychological surveillance carried out by the Constellation network led the organization to choose Marlow as the face of Hysteryl, a mood-stabilizing drug. This drug serves

as an apt metaphor for Zuboff's concept of "psychic numbing", a psychological defense mechanism that occurs when individuals are overwhelmed by constant intrusion into their private lives. When Marlow is forced to take Hysteryl (after a childhood incident that ends with her biting another teen who is visiting Constellation), its effects are described vividly: "Hysteryl kept her emotions like clothes in a neat dresser drawer: stored where they belonged, unfolded only when appropriate, and put back with ease, in order" (Angelo 54-55). This description shows how Hysteryl manages her emotions, not only by suppressing them but also organizing and compartmentalizing them, effectively distancing her from authentic emotional experience. However, this state of emotional detachment is not permanent, as the network eventually decides to get Marlow off Hysteryl in preparation for her pregnancy.

In contrast to Mae's trajectory in *The Circle*, Marlow moves away from a state of psychic numbing to becoming more aware and more in tune with who she is as a unique individual. When she stops taking Hysteryl, Marlow's awareness heightens, as she experiences an emotional awakening:

And she was feeling good, at first. Then she began to feel strange, as if she was expanding, taking on new acreage too rapidly to keep up with her own topography. Feelings were returned to her like toys she hadn't seen since childhood, and she held them awkwardly, unsure of what to do with them as an adult (Angelo 57)

Marlow goes through a moment of emotional rediscovery. The adjectives used to describe this change, such as "expanding" and "taking on new acreage", all carry positive connotations of growth and renewal. The effects of Hysteryl before this kept her experiences dull and detached, reducing her emotional capacities to being very limited and superficial. This dull and detached emotional state induced by Hysteryl reflects Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism, which seeks to suppress authentic emotional engagement and maintain a controlled, predictable subject (eBook 334). Marlow's experience brings out Angelo's critique of modern systems set in place

to flatten or reduce human awareness so that predictability and control can be maintained. Her experience here is in direct contrast to Mae's, who slowly suppresses her authentic self to the demands of a corporation that benefits from her transparency.

Where Marlow goes through a process of emotional and psychological expansion, Mae, as discussed earlier, goes through a trajectory of self-limitation and shrinking individuality. The pervasive monitoring and constant connectivity demanded by The Circle gradually corrupts Mae's sense of privacy and personal boundaries. She internalizes the company's ideology of radical transparency, ultimately surrendering even her most private moments to the watchful eyes of the corporation and its users. By the end of the novel, she is no longer recognizable as her former self but has instead become an extension of the corporation she works for. She succumbs to psychic numbing and loses all sense of self by the end of the novel. Marlow, on the other hand, is liberated when she escapes and disconnects completely from the systems of control that have dictated her life since childhood. Her bodily and emotional response after discontinuing Hysteryl (57) serves as an analogy for breaking free from the state of psychic numbing that permeates the society she lives in.

In their analysis of *The Circle*, Couldry and Mejias aptly assert what I believe can also be applied to Angelo's *Followers*: "At risk is not just the ability of these characters to direct their lives but their basic sense of themselves as selves: the minimal integrity without which they fail to be selves at all" (*The Costs of Connection* 165). Both texts prompt their readers to consider aspects of our humanity that may be at risk when we allow external entities access to various aspects of our lives. The contrasting paths of Mae and Marlow offer nuanced explorations of resistance and/or surrender to these forces, inviting readers to reflect on their own relationships with technology in an age of increasing surveillance and data collection.

Mae and Marlow's journeys in their respective storylines offer contrasting yet complementary insights into the effects of invasive surveillance systems on individuals and society. Initially skeptical, Mae becomes increasingly desensitized to the constant monitoring, eventually succumbing to a state of psychic numbing. This psychological defense mechanism is what allows her to cope with the Circle's demands for total transparency. Ultimately, she comes to embody the very ideals of a surveillance-driven society. In contrast, Marlow's narrative is one of awakening. Initially oblivious to the unnatural nature of her constantly surveilled existence, she gradually comes to realize that true freedom and authenticity lies in being unwatched and scrutinized every second of her life. Ultimately, the psychological impact of surveillance emerges as the central theme in both texts: Zuboff's concept of psychic numbing allows us to better understand some of the key factors that shape the protagonists' experiences and responses to invasive monitoring. Their narratives highlight how being watched can fundamentally alter an individual's perception of privacy, freedom, and self, ultimately shaping their behaviors and values in ways that serve the surveilling system rather than their own authentic desires.

### The Watched and the Watcher

My analysis in this chapter has focused on the experiences of Mae and Marlow as subjects as surveillance, and not so much the shadowy corporate entities and individuals who wield the true power in these surveillance ecosystems. On the path to total transparency, the hegemonic corporate forces in these narratives systematically dismantle any notion of a protected private sphere for all their users, starting with those who work for them. What we see here is an inherently asymmetric dynamic between the watched and the watcher. In *The Circle*, Mae slowly loses all semblance of privacy, going from having some personal boundaries early in her tenure to becoming completely transparent and surveilled by approximately three billion users.

Marlow's storyline, on the other hand, already begins with her living in a pervasive reality where she is always being watched, with much more sophisticated technology that also tracks her thoughts. What both these scenarios have in common is the juxtaposition between the hyper-visibility of the surveilled and the deliberate obscurity of those in control. The high-ranking executives and the entities that orchestrate the surveillance systems in these texts remain elusive figures. Characters like Eamon Bailey in *The Circle* and the shadowy figures behind the Constellation network in *Followers* are shrouded in mystery. This lack of transparency when it comes to the ones perpetuating these surveillance systems only serves to intensify the power imbalance within these narratives, reinforcing the idea that surveillance, far from being a neutral tool, is ultimately about power and control.

The next chapter will analyze the power imbalances inherent in surveillance practices, focusing on Rob Hart's novel *The Warehouse* and Anthony McCarten's *Going Zero*. Unlike *The Circle* and *Followers*, which explore surveillance from the perspective of its victims, these novels also provide first-person perspectives of corporate figures, like Cy Baxter and Gibson Wells, who exploit their power for personal gain. Building on Zuboff's concept of asymmetries of knowledge and power (81), the chapter will also draw from Neil Postman's idea of Technopoly, to illustrate how unchecked technological adoption often centralizes power and control among a select few, which not only exacerbates existing inequalities, but perpetuates further exploitation.

## Chapter Two

### **“Ultimately, it’s all about control”: Visuality and Authority in a Modern Technocracy**

The Snowden revelations in 2013 marked a turning point in public consciousness regarding government surveillance, exposing the vast extent of data collection conducted by American intelligence agencies. Edward Snowden, an employee at the United States’ National Security Agency (NSA), became a whistleblower when he leaked classified information about the agency’s mass surveillance programs, revealing that the NSA had the ability to “intercept the metadata of three billion phone calls and interactions recorded by Facebook, Google, Apple and other tech companies” (van Dijck 197). His leaks revealed the existence of programs such as PRISM, which enabled the agency to tap into the servers of these companies without the need for court-sanctioned warrants (Theoharis 515). The agency was thus able to directly access a wealth of user data, including “baby pictures, risqué photos from webcam chats, medical records, and conversations about sexual liaisons” (Theoharis 520). The fallout from these disclosures has prompted users and citizens to critically reassess the intimate relationships between (mostly American) tech companies and governmental entities.

Perhaps what is even more surprising about the Snowden whistleblower event is that, despite the fallout surrounding these revelations and the growing public outcry over privacy violations, the American government continues to aggressively pursue partnerships with companies that specialize in surveillance tech and data analytics. In 2017, the Pentagon launched Project Maven with the goal of integrating artificial intelligence into military operations to enhance the analysis of drone surveillance footage, with Google initially providing the tools necessary for the project. However, Google’s involvement soon sparked considerable backlash as many employees expressed concerns that their work could contribute to the loss of innocent

lives, and the company eventually backed out of the partnership as a result of employee protests in 2018 (Wakabayashi and Shane). Yet, Google’s decision to withdraw has not deterred other companies from pursuing similar contracts with the military. Palantir—a data analytics firm known for its controversial role in surveillance and intelligence gathering—has continued to expand its government contracts, providing data mining capabilities to agencies ranging from the Pentagon to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Macmillan and Dwoskin). Its software platforms are not only used for military applications but also for law enforcement and counterterrorism efforts, often extracting data from social media, public records, and other surveillance methods (Iliadis and Acker 346).

This intrusive surveillance infrastructure—embedded within national, and even international, government systems— has become the foundation of tech moguls’ unprecedented power, enabling them to penetrate what Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias term “the space of the self” (*The Costs of Connection* 156) for ordinary citizens of developed countries. Like the characters in Eggers’ *The Circle* and Angelo’s *Followers*, citizens today find themselves stuck in surveillance systems that are increasingly difficult to escape or resist. As discussed in Chapter One, a form of “psychic numbing” develops in response to this constant observation, which, paradoxically, strengthens these systems of control. As people become desensitized to increasingly invasive forms of surveillance, tech leaders accumulate even more intimate data about their users’ lives, thoughts, and behaviors. This chapter will examine how these technocratic visionaries, driven by purportedly utopian visions of a better world, often end up creating dystopian realities through the systems of surveillance for which they advocate. While presenting their monitoring systems as necessary tools for progress and security, they at the same time carefully exempt themselves from the very oversight they impose on others. This hypocrisy

reveals how surveillance becomes not just a tool for data collection but a mechanism for consolidating power through asymmetric visibility.

These real-world dynamics between surveillance and power have become preoccupations in contemporary fiction, as authors not only explore the implications of unchecked tech authority and examine the complex figure of the tech visionary—i.e., the leader who genuinely believes his surveillance systems will create a safer, more efficient world, even as they accumulate unprecedented personal power and use that power for ethically suspect ends. This chapter looks at two examples of this type of fiction— Rob Hart’s *The Warehouse* (2019) and Anthony McCarten’s *Going Zero* (2023) —to explore how contemporary fiction tackles questions of power and accountability in surveillance systems.

Both novels feature tech leaders who abuse their surveillance power: in *Going Zero*, Cy Baxter, founder of the surveillance company Worldshare, claims to protect public safety while using his technology to silence opposition, which results in the death of a whistleblower. In *The Warehouse*, Gibson Wells, CEO of the company “Cloud” comes up with a system where workers are constantly monitored through CloudBands (wearable devices that track every movement and break, and generates a productivity metric) while he keeps his company’s true operations hidden from view. Though Wells cites Bentham’s panopticon as inspiration, claiming surveillance creates a crime-free environment (Hart 328-329), the novel exposes this stance as merely a cover for a system designed primarily to maximize worker productivity through constant monitoring; the surveillance system proves more effective at tracking worker efficiency than preventing abuse of power. Ultimately, though promoted as solutions to society’s problems, the surveillance technologies on display in both novels instead primarily become tools for maintaining power and control.

To examine the significance of how these figures are portrayed, I draw from the complementary lenses of several critical frameworks: Neil Postman’s critique of “Technopolists” (61), Shoshana Zuboff’s analysis of the “asymmetries of knowledge and power” that pervade surveillance capitalism (11), and Nicholas Mirzoeff’s theory of how power operates through controlling who can see and who can be seen (xiv). Postman’s observation that computer technology has primarily served to make private matters “more accessible to powerful institutions” while leaving people “more easily tracked and controlled” (10) resonates strongly with how today’s tech leaders position surveillance tech as progress while using it to consolidate their power. This dynamic is similarly highlighted in Zuboff’s more recent analysis of how tech companies accumulate power through asymmetric access to information, while Mirzoeff’s framework reveals how this surveillance authority becomes naturalized through systems of visual control. Together, these perspectives illustrate how tech leaders maintain their power: through unequal surveillance systems, by normalizing their authority, and by marketing more surveillance as the solution to societal problems, even though this surveillance primarily serves to reinforce existing power structures.

The novels I have chosen paint a troubling picture of power where the “watchers” (i.e. the tech CEOs who appear as the primary “villains” in each text) remain largely immune to accountability. For example, Cy Baxter, whose surveillance firm WorldShare operates like a fictional Palantir, escapes legal consequences despite orchestrating a murder. Similarly, when Gibson Wells, a Jeff Bezos-like figure who transforms American commerce through his Cloud facilities, dies, his daughter simply inherits—and commits to continuing—his Amazon-esque empire, demonstrating how surveillance systems can persist and evolve regardless of who is in charge. Through these narratives, we see how tech leaders have created systems of dependency

that shield them from meaningful oversight. In *The Warehouse*, Wells builds his empire by exploiting a world that has become so unlivable that people have no choice but to seek refuge in his Cloud facilities. In *Going Zero*, Cy's surveillance technologies become too valuable—and seemingly necessary—for the government to seriously challenge his authority. This chapter examines how these fictional portrayals shed light on the disturbing reality of our digital age: tech leaders can effectively sidestep accountability by positioning their surveillance systems as indispensable to modern society, whether through economic necessity or promises of security and efficiency. The question, then, is not just how these systems should be regulated, but how to challenge the notion that surveillance technologies—and the asymmetric power relations they create—are necessary for national safety and/or social progress.

These novels, with their clear parallels to existing tech companies and industry figures, offer a compelling lens for examining how the surveillance systems we have in place often end up serving those in power rather than the public good they claim to protect. My approach in this chapter, therefore, draws inspiration from the work of critics such as media and cultural studies scholar Sherryll Vint, who argues that:

[precisely] the point of fusing sociotechnical practice with speculative fiction is that technologies will influence social life based on the political and social structures and values attendant on their emergence. Narratives foreground such cultural forces and often enable us to see how otherwise neutral or even beneficial technologies may have undesirable consequences if issues of equity are not addressed in how they are implemented (8).

This power of narrative to highlight the consequences of surveillance tech gains additional significance when we consider David Lyon's observation that "novels are an important source of metaphor and simile [...] [which] help to alert us to significant dimensions of surveillance as well as helping the reader imaginatively to get inside the characters who are either the surveillers or, more frequently, the surveilled" (*Surveillance Studies* 145). By exploring these surveillance

dynamics in fiction, we can better understand both the mechanisms of control and the human cost of automated systems that often escape scrutiny in technical or policy discussions.

In a similar vein, legal scholar Frank Pasquale asserts that “accountability requires human judgment, and only humans can perform the critical function of making sure that, as our social relations become ever more automated, domination and discrimination aren’t built invisibly into their code” (213), providing a more practical framework for addressing the concerns that Vint raises through speculative fiction. The later part of this chapter will examine how these novels suggest that meaningful accountability requires what Pasquale terms “human judgment,” shown through protagonists Paxton and Kaitlyn’s decisions to resist automated surveillance systems by choosing human ethical judgment over algorithmic control, even as their uncertain futures highlight the challenges of escaping surveillance society entirely.

### The New Surveillance Elite

The ancient Roman poet Juvenal’s question— “quis custodiet ipsos custodes,” or “who will watch the watchers?” (Cerf)—becomes particularly pressing in the context of normalized surveillance and concentrated tech power. This surveillance operates as what Zuboff refers to as a “one-way mirror” (81): users’ lives exist in a state of near-total visibility to the tech companies that collect and mobilize their data for commercial (and potentially more sinister) ends, while those same companies remain opaque to users, shrouding their own operations. These asymmetries, which Zuboff describes as “asymmetries in knowledge and power” (11), where the watchers maintain opacity about their own operations while demanding total transparency from their users, reinforce these corporations’ power.

These power dynamics become even more complex when considering questions of public trust and corporate accountability. Media studies scholar José van Dijck notes, “embattled

notions of ‘trust’ and ‘belief’ are particularly relevant when it comes to understanding dataveillance as an increasingly preferred way of monitoring citizens through social media and online communication technologies” (204). The growing entanglement between corporate and state surveillance operations has created powerful new mechanisms of control, where private companies’ data collection capabilities not only enhance, but also extend government surveillance reach. This alliance has not only sparked global debates over privacy and civil liberties (Connor and Doan 53), but it has also inspired fictional characters that closely embody our real-world tech visionaries, such as Cy Baxter and Gibson Wells, whose carefully crafted public personas often mask their roles in expanding surveillance systems. The works emphasize visibility and information asymmetry to shine light on these shadowy figures and organizations wielding immense power and influence over global affairs from behind the scenes. These narratives also often critique the cult-like veneration surrounding tech moguls (like we see with Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg) who embody a troubling combination of data control and surveillance reach. This public admiration complicates efforts at oversight, as these individuals’ status as technological visionaries often deflects criticism of their growing surveillance power.

Their rise represents a fundamental shift in how power operates in the modern world, as authority increasingly derives not from traditional sources of wealth but from the capacity to monitor, collect, and control information. The rise in the prominence of these tech moguls with billions of dollars in corporate assets also underscores how the economic landscape has transformed radically. According to Viktor Mayer-Schonberger and Thomas Ramege, “[it’s] no longer oil barons or bankers sitting on top of the economic power pyramid but Tim Cook, Satya Nadella, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg” (8). As we shift our focus from traditional power holders to the new elite of tech giants, we see the transformation in how power operates and is

represented. Unlike their industrial age predecessors, who derived power from physical resources and tangible assets, our industry leaders today wield influence through their unprecedented control over digital infrastructure and user data. These data, which encompass everything from browsing habits to purchase histories and social connections, have become the new oil of the digital economy, fueling predictive algorithms which reinforce existing power imbalances.

Since the source of power has transformed, what matters now is not who owns the most resources, but who possesses the greatest ability to gather and analyze information. Media theorist and cultural critic Neil Postman observed, even back in the 90s, that despite the problems brought about by “information chaos” (11), “the Technopolist [one who views technology as the ultimate solution to all problems] stands firm in believing that what the world needs is yet more information” (61). This perfectly describes today’s tech leaders like Zuckerberg, Bezos, and Pichai, whose influence derives from “[the] ability to collect and analyze digital information, to keep exclusive control over it or dole it out if and when it suits them” (Schönberger and Range 8). The key word here is “exclusive,” as it highlights how these tech giants derive their influence not just from the sheer volume of data they accumulate, but from their ability to gatekeep this information. Postman’s prophetic critique of the Technopolists resonates deeply with Zuboff’s later analysis of the “asymmetries of knowledge and power” (19) inherent to surveillance capitalism. These asymmetries illustrate not only how information is hoarded by a select few but also how this concentration of data ultimately shapes societal structures, influencing everything from consumer behavior to political discourse.

The modern tech mogul perfectly embodies Postman’s Technopolist, claiming the right to see all while ensuring their own operations remain hidden from public scrutiny. This dynamic—where power comes from the ability to see while controlling one’s own visibility—calls for a

theoretical framework in the realm of visual power relations. To better understand these power relations, I turn to Nicholas Mirzoeff's engagement with the concept of visibility, which illustrates how power operates through the control and organization of what can be seen and known. In comparing modern forms of visibility to historical power structures, Mirzoeff provides a relevant framework for understanding how such authority becomes normalized. Looking at visibility as it was founded in the plantation practice (Mirzoeff 3), he defines visibility as "both a medium for transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority" (xv). It encompasses not just what is seen, but the entire framework through which seeing and being seen are structured and controlled by those in power. He further argues that "visibility sutures authority to power and renders this association 'natural'" (7); in the context of the highly invasive surveillance platforms we have today, tech companies normalize their control by presenting surveillance as an inevitable and necessary part of modern life, making their right to watch appear natural.

As Mirzoeff explains, the way surveillance power becomes naturalized in contemporary culture reveals disturbing parallels with historical systems of control: the Technopolist's authority appears inevitable and justified, much like traditional power structures throughout history. This dynamic mirrors historical power structures, particularly those rooted in plantation practices, where authority was maintained through the control of visual and informational narratives (Mirzoeff 3). Just as plantation owners categorized and surveilled labor to sustain their dominance, today's tech companies reinforce existing social hierarchies and power imbalances by implementing sophisticated data collection and surveillance techniques. We see this type of hierarchically organized system of visibility in *The Warehouse* as Wells explicitly embraces his role as watcher, even citing Bentham's panopticon as his model for Cloud facilities, positioning

himself as the overseer while maintaining absolute control over his workers' visibility. Similarly, Baxter in *Going Zero* exemplifies this asymmetric power: while his surveillance system tracks citizens' every move in the name of national security, he uses his position and resources to conceal his own illegal activities, including foreign trade with rival nations. Justin Amari's words before his death— "They win. In the end, they win. They always do" (McCarten 356)— reflect the inevitable outcome Postman warned about: that "eventually, the losers succumb" (11) to technologies that primarily serve their masters' interests.

### The One-way Mirror: A paradox of visibility

A striking paradox emerges when considering the surveillance architecture in these texts: while the general public becomes increasingly transparent through ubiquitous monitoring, those who control the surveillance systems carefully curate a *very* limited set of data that others can know about them. In short, these novels expose the fundamental asymmetry of modern surveillance power through their juxtaposition of hyper-visible "watched" subjects and strategically opaque, tech-elite class of watchers. For example, McCarten's protagonist Samantha Crewe is forced to undertake extreme measures to erase her digital existence, completely taking on the identity of Kaitlyn Day just to have a shot at truly "going zero." This drastic step is necessary because Samantha's own identity leaves her vulnerable to Cy's relentless surveillance and control. It is not until later that readers realize the protagonist Fusion has been following under the name Kaitlyn Day is actually Samantha Crewe the whole time. She serves as a foil to the deliberately inscrutable Cy Baxter, whose wealth and power allow him to shield his illicit activities from government oversight as well as the very surveillance apparatus he controls. Similarly, Hart's dystopian Amazon-like corporation, the Cloud, subjects its employees —like paired protagonists Paxton and Zinnia—to constant monitoring through

mandated wearing of wrist “CloudBands” while Wells maintains complete control over his public narrative through carefully curated blog posts. This section will examine the stark contrast between protagonists forced into extreme transparency—Kaitlyn having to erase and reconstruct her entire identity, Paxton and Zinnia living in a Bentham-like work-live facility—and their antagonists who maintain careful control over their own visibility.

In both texts, the antagonists share a striking commonality: the tech they have designed and incorporated into their operations take on extreme approaches to watching and collecting all that it sees, while its “masters” (the Technopolists) are deliberately exempt. Postman notes how these so-called pioneers “would allow their tools to be presumptuous, aggressive, audacious, impudent servants, but that tools should rise above their servile station was an appalling thought” (48). The irony is clear: while Baxter and Gibson present their surveillance systems as mere “tools” serving society, the technology has in fact risen far above any “servile station,” becoming instruments of power and control. Both men know how far-reaching these systems are and fiercely guard their own privacy, ultimately creating a two-tiered society: one of watched subjects and unseen watchers. This dynamic of asymmetric visibility manifests not only in their surveillance systems but also in how they strategically control information about themselves, a pattern that becomes evident when examining the narrative structures of both novels.

### *Information asymmetry as a strategy*

The asymmetric dynamic of surveillance power is reflected not only in the content but also in the very narrative structures of both novels. In *The Warehouse*, Hart portrays Gibson Wells exclusively through his blog posts. This choice of medium allows Wells to present a polished narrative not only to his followers, but also to us as readers of the novel. In contrast, Paxton and Zinnia, who are portrayed through third-person narratives, offer a different

perspective. Their actions and motivations are laid bare for the audience, and readers are granted direct access to their inner thoughts, motivations and struggles living in a surveillance society. In *Going Zero*, we first learn about Cy Baxter through Justin Amari, one of the CIA officials overseeing the FUSION Initiative. By introducing Baxter first through another character's very *limited* perspective before allowing readers access to his own narrative, McCarten structurally reinforces this idea of asymmetric visibility. These narrative choices amplify the sense of disparity between the watcher and the watched, the powerful and the powerless.

In the first chapter of *The Warehouse*, Hart immediately establishes a sympathetic persona for his antagonist. The novel starts off with Gibson's stark admission of his terminal diagnosis in his blog post— "Well, I'm dying!" (3). He immediately positions himself as vulnerable and relatable, using this personal revelation to frame Cloud's success story:

"We gave people jobs. We gave people access to affordable goods and health care. We've generated billions of dollars in tax revenue. We've led the charge in cutting carbon emissions, developing standards and technology that will save this planet. We did that by concentrating on the only thing that matters in this life: family."  
(Hart 4)

His use of the "family" metaphor is a calculated rhetorical move that helps mask the work culture at Cloud behind the appearance of an intimate community. This public image is further reinforced through carefully chosen disclosures of his personal life. He expresses gratitude for his wife and shares mundane details, like walking the dogs, which humanize him. His dismissal of flying in favor of bus travel— "Flying is for the birds. And anyway, have you seen how much it costs to fly nowadays?" (Hart 5) —further positions him as being relatable and down-to-earth. This strategic sharing of personal details exemplifies Zuboff's idea of the "one-way mirror" (81) of surveillance power; while he has the ability to carefully control what others can know about him, no one else is afforded the same right to manage their own visibility.

As we learn more about the company's operations, we see how Wells uses his blog platform to justify and normalize the way he runs Cloud. He eventually starts responding to unseen criticism—we never actually hear directly from critics or workers, but their concerns are implied through Wells's defensive justifications of the five-star rating system (measured via CloudBands) (Hart 79-82) and automated terminations (143-144). His rhetorical strategy is notable as his statement that “[a] herd is only as fast and strong as the slowest members” (79) reveals a dehumanizing view of workers. He proceeds to use inclusive language like “And don't we all want to be five-star people?” (82) to appear relatable while attempting to normalize invasive monitoring practices. Even in seemingly addressing criticism, he maintains complete control over the narrative; we see only his responses, never the original complaints, as he casts worker monitoring not as a controversial practice but rather an accepted necessity for his business.

He further frames his surveillance infrastructure as empowering, claiming “I'm giving employees the tools they need to be the masters of their own destiny” (Hart 82), but this rhetoric of autonomy proves hollow. Through CloudBands tracking every movement, Gibson implements a system where workers are reduced to their efficiency ratings—a process where algorithms automatically terminate those who fall below performance thresholds. Workers live in a state of constant anxiety, with their every movement monitored and quantified, and their job security dependent on maintaining arbitrary performance metrics that reduce complex human labor to simple numerical scores. For example, in orientation, when her supervisor demonstrates the CloudBand's tracking system, he explains that “[the watch] tracks your progress. Green means you're making rate. If you're lagging behind, you drop into yellow. You hit red, your employee ranking plummets” (Hart 123). This color-coding system reduces workers' complex tasks to a

simple color rating, removing all human elements from their work. Before he ends his orientation, his last words to her are “Don’t linger. Never linger” (67). The ominous warning reveals how the surveillance system controls every aspect of movement, where even a moment’s pause can put workers at risk. Through these examples, Hart calls to attention this “one-way mirror” (Zuboff 81) that renders workers visible while shielding the watchers from view and questioning, showing how these efforts fall short as, ultimately, nobody besides Wells has “the right to look”, which could also be defined as “the right to the real” (Mirzoeff 26).

In a later blogpost/chapter, he justifies his other, equally questionable decisions, such as sponsoring the “Red Tape Elimination Act,” claiming that streamlining regulations is essential for fostering growth and innovation, while portraying bureaucratic hurdles as unnecessary obstacles to progress (Hart 103). On the surface, his arguments appear logical and compelling, promoting a narrative of progress and efficiency. However, Zinnia’s perspective exposes the deeper, more sinister implications of these policies. While trying to breach the company’s defenses, she reflects on how in the past, extensive paperwork was required to build a facility like Cloud’s (Hart 78), ensuring that environmental and community impacts were considered:

Environmental impact studies. Business records. The local department of buildings. The way it used to be, in order to build a place like this, you needed to file endless reams of paperwork. But thanks to something called the Red Tape Elimination Act, sponsored by Gibson Wells, large corporations were excused from having to file all that, because it was an “impediment to creating jobs.” (Hart 78)

Now, due to Gibson’s influence, such regulations are seen as “impediments” rather than necessities. Another controversial decision is the “Harassment in Construction Act” (Hart 103), which Gibson characterizes as necessary to address inefficiencies caused by union activities. All these decisions share one thing in common: they make it much harder for external accountability and transparency, as the company has to disclose less information to the public than it did previously. This allows Gibson to operate with greater autonomy and consolidate his power,

essentially allowing him to do whatever he wants without having to answer to scrutiny or criticism from workers, regulators, or the broader community. Ultimately, this information asymmetry strengthens Gibson's position of dominance, leaving those impacted by his policies with limited recourse to challenge his actions or the surveillance regime he has erected.

In *Going Zero*, McCarten takes on a different approach to introducing his antagonist, but the surveillance dynamics presented parallel to that of Hart's. Unlike Hart's portrayal of Gibson, whose character is revealed solely through his distanced blog posts, McCarten's antagonist, Cy Baxter, is introduced through the skeptical lens of the narrator, Justin, who notes the "opaque" nature of Cy's biography and the "scarce" details about his personal life. As a result, there is an emphasis on the opacity and inscrutability of those who wield technological power:

Just how rich is this guy? No one is quite sure. His biography is opaque. Details scarce. Born where exactly? Even over this there is confusion. Cy says Chicago, but no birth certificate has been offered to answer rumors that his Slovakian mother brought this only child to the United States at seven [...] And not just a workaholic, he makes time for his private life: plays bass guitar in an indie four-piece and sweats at his local Palo Alto public tennis court twice a week. He has never been romantically linked with any other woman than Erika Coogan. He told *Men's Health* he finds much-needed balance in meditation. He can endure the lotus position for hours, and perform 'the plank' exercise for well over fifteen minutes [...] He has emerged, ultimately, a cult hero: head and heart in twin good health.

Quite an act to pull off, concedes Justin, that in this unadmiring age a billionaire can acquire and achieve so much and yet engender so little disdain. Further proof, he is forced to conclude, of the abiding benefits of keeping whatever the hell you actually do way, way, way under the radar." (McCarten 11-13)

By presenting only favorable details—Cy's wealth, influence, and accomplishments—McCarten creates a character with an air of invincibility. While McCarten eventually grants readers access to Cy's perspective, this initial presentation through a skeptical intermediary establishes a critical distance that encourages readers to question the trustworthiness and intentions of those who control surveillance technologies. Similar to Gibson, Cy maintains control over the public narrative surrounding his background. By withholding direct access to the antagonist's point of

view, both McCarten and Hart highlight the imbalance of power at play. Just as Gibson is able to subsume any criticism of his surveillance practices into his own defensive justifications, Cy enjoys the “benefits of keeping whatever the hell [he] actually [does] way, way, way under the radar.”

This opacity, maintained through narrative distance, brings to mind what Foucault identifies as an inversion in modern surveillance: while traditional forms of visibility enabled mass observation of centralized points of authority, contemporary surveillance architectures facilitate the observation of the multitude by an elite few (Foucault 126-217). This dynamic becomes particularly significant when Kaitlyn later uncovers Baxter’s involvement in illegal trades with China and Russia, as well as plans to roll out “statewide surveillance systems” in these countries (McCarten 305). The contrast between his public persona and the hidden realities of his actions again highlights this danger of unchecked power in a surveillance-driven society. By obscuring the more troubling aspects of his dealings, Baxter exemplifies how powerful figures manipulate public perception to avoid scrutiny, reinforcing the idea that those in control are better able to thrive while operating in the shadows.

Unsurprisingly, we later find that both Gibson and Cy have self-serving reasons as to why they keep information about themselves tightly guarded and ensure that their operations remain opaque to public scrutiny. Both men operate under this assumption that their technologically driven models for social organization are superior to the existing norms and expectations of privacy. Their willingness to hide the unethical, even unlawful, aspects of their practices stems from a conviction that the ends justify the means. Gibson conceals the truth about CloudBurgers (Cloud’s popular and acclaimed burger), which are made from human waste, rationalizing his decision by assuming “people wouldn’t understand” (Hart 330). He argues that

using human waste for the CloudBurgers is actually good for the environment, as it reduces methane emissions (330), but he keeps this rationale hidden from the public. Cy too defends his vision of a hyper-surveilled world with chilling conviction: “People don’t want privacy, not anymore. Privacy is passé. Privacy is a prison. People can’t wait to give it away [...] Because what they crave is to be known, not unknown... to be transparent, watched, as if they matter, as proof they matter” (McCarten 240). The irony of Cy’s admission is, of course, the fact that he strongly opposes being watched himself, as evidenced by the length he has gone to hide so much of his own biography.

Evidently, this conviction serves as the basis for Gibson and Cy’s belief that they are entitled to “the right to look”. From the perspective of these self-appointed visionaries, their ability to shape the social and economic landscape according to their own beliefs outweighs any considerations of the broader concerns and requirement of gaining consent of the general population. This mindset reflects Mirzoeff’s idea that “violence is the standard operating procedure of visibility” (Mirzoeff 292). By claiming the “right to look” and using surveillance to shape society according to their own goals, Gibson and Cy carry out a type of structural violence that undermines individual autonomy and democratic accountability in favor of their technocratic agendas. As the storylines unfold, we also see how these figures abuse their power and position of authority, completely disregarding the ethical considerations for their tech.

### Surveillance as a tool for Compartmentalization in *The Warehouse*

The abuse of surveillance power manifests clearly in Hart’s novel, as we see Cloud’s systematic approach to control through segregation. Like colonial systems of control, surveillance depicted in *The Warehouse* functions through strategic segregation and restricted movement. At Cloud, surveillance serves multiple forms of exploitation—not only extracting

maximum labor for minimum compensation but also enabling the concealment of unethical practices through careful compartmentalization. The CloudBurger operation exemplifies this: workers in different departments are strictly isolated from one another, forbidden from discussing their roles, while their own activities are meticulously tracked. This compartmentalization is visually enforced through a color-coded uniform system, not for the workers' benefit, but for those monitoring from above to easily identify and track different operational sectors. When Zinnia, during her investigation, encounters workers in pink uniforms (a color she's never seen before), she stumbles upon the CloudBurger operation and finds the truth behind why the facility is hidden from everyone else:

“Where is here?” Zinnia asked. “What is this?”  
The man twisted his neck, to look up at her. “You...you don't know?”  
“Know what?”  
“Nothing. It's nothing. It's just a...this is processing. You're not supposed to be here.”  
“Processing. Processing what?”  
The man paused, so Zinnia applied a little pressure to his throat. He croaked out,  
“Waste.” (Hart 300)

The worker's hesitation and broken speech “You...you don't know?” suggests both fear as well as shame at his own participation. However, it is quickly learned why these workers would subject themselves to working in this sector. They “get paid better” and have “nicer apartments” (301), revealing how Cloud employs these strategies to keep people quiet.

This visually enforced compartmentalization also works on a hierarchical level, allowing those monitoring to easily identify and control what's going on. This comes in the form of the men in black polo shirts, whom Zinnia realizes are not security personnel that she is used to seeing around the facilities, but “something much worse than the goobers in blue roaming the promenade” (Hart 312). It is implied that they have a higher degree of authority and a more sinister purpose than standard security guards. On top of denying inter-departmental access through the CloudBands, Gibson also deploys an additional in-person security presence to

reinforce the segregation. As Mirzoeff discusses, this “visuality separates and segregates those it visualizes to prevent them from cohering [into a unifying group]” (3), weakening their ability to advocate for a shared interest.

This example also brings to attention Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson’s observation that surveillance in industrial settings has never been solely about efficiency: “The panopticon was not just about efficiency or the common good... Surveillance in factories implied inducing workers to labor harder, and without the need to pay them higher wages to motivate greater effort” (eBook 8). This aspect of compartmentalization is evident when Zinnia undergoes training her first day at Cloud, and her supervisor types out “Don’t even SAY the word union” (Hart 66) on his phone before showing it to her. The irony here lies in how workers’ experiences are completely juxtaposed with Gibson’s earlier proclamation that he regards Cloud employees as his “family at work” whom he “loves with all [his] heart” (Hart 4). Workers, like Zinnia, are constantly monitored and controlled, with their autonomy stripped away to ensure compliance and productivity. Meanwhile, those in positions of power, like Gibson, have the luxury of not only keeping their lives private, but also effortlessly implementing policies and practices that prioritize their own interests under the guise of corporate efficiency or care. This, in turn, reinforces the “one-way mirror” that Zuboff refers to; while those at the top of the hierarchy, accumulate extensive knowledge about their workers through pervasive monitoring, the workers themselves are left in the dark, with no reciprocal visibility into the decision-making processes and motivations of management.

Hart also illustrates surveillance-enabled compartmentalization through the Cloudbands’ navigation feature, a system that extends beyond simple worker tracking to being a tool for spatial control. For example, the CloudBand “[buzzes] against [Zinnia’s] wrist” (58) to guide her

along determined routes using arrows displayed on the screen. This automated direction system removes even the basic autonomy of choosing how to move through space, as workers follow the CloudBand's guidance. Furthermore, the system actively constrains their movement to authorized areas, which becomes apparent when Zinnia, despite successfully stealing a colleague's CloudBand to infiltrate the CloudBurger processing facility, discovers that security clearance is limited as she remains locked out of the energy processing facility (311). She is denied entry to this room, which we later find out to be a nuclear powering facility (330-331). This system of access control reveals Gibson's goal of segregating his workers: by restricting knowledge of Cloud's nuclear power capabilities to a select few, he hides his goal of ultimately "[putting] the lumbering beast of government out of its misery" (331) by monopolizing the energy sector. This system therefore operates on multiple levels simultaneously, which is by controlling physical movement, restricting the flow of information and preventing most of its employees from understanding the full scope of Cloud's operations.

### Abuse of Technocratic Authority

Gibson and Cy represent what Neil Postman warns about in his critique of a Technopoly: they are figures who present technology (surveillance tech, in this context) as a necessary tool for efficiency and progress while obscuring its role in maintaining power hierarchies. Postman maintains that the technopologists "tell [the people] that their lives will be conducted more efficiently, but discreetly they neglect to say from whose point of view the efficiency is warranted or what might be the costs" (Postman 11). This system inevitably creates a winner-loser dynamic, as evidenced in both texts. Focusing on Cy Baxter in this section, we see how he emerges victorious in *Going Zero*, despite his blatant disregard for the law and the tragic death he causes.

Cy, in trying to market the FUSION Initiative, positions surveillance technology as merely a servant of public good: “our almost ridiculous aim has been pretty simple: make things a whole lot tougher for the bad guys and a whole lot easier for the good guys, using the best technology we have to do it” (McCarten 18), obscuring how it actually serves to expand corporate control over personal data and individual privacy. Like Eamon Bailey in *The Circle*, Baxter has a techno-utopian vision of creating a perfect world through total surveillance, believing that comprehensive monitoring will lead to a more secure and efficient society. However, beneath Baxter’s carefully crafted public image as a visionary tech leader lies a ruthless figure who will eliminate any threat to his power, as demonstrated when he orchestrates Justin Amari’s murder by labeling him a cyberterrorist (357), and then skillfully evades accountability through the very systems of influence he has built. As Postman warns, in a Technopoly, “those who have control over the workings of a particular technology accumulate power and inevitably form a kind of conspiracy against those who have no access to the specialized knowledge made by the technology” (Postman 9). Justin’s death is a symbolic representation of this dynamic — the Technopologist’s willingness to do whatever it takes to advance their vision, even if it means undermining the rights and autonomy of the very citizens they claim to be serving. Disappointingly but unsurprisingly, Cy does end up winning as he “emerges largely unscathed” at the end of the novel (McCarten 381), despite going to trial for his crimes.

### Too big to dismantle: The Inescapable Power of Technopologists

The speculative scenarios in these texts demonstrate how accountability becomes increasingly difficult to maintain in societies dominated by Technopologists. Tech moguls Gibson and Cy are able to sidestep accountability with remarkable ease largely due to an effectively

curated public image, as well as having strategically developed surveillance systems to ensure they are in full control. For instance, as a result of successfully creating this heroic public image for himself, many deify Gibson for providing jobs and building an empire, painting him as a savior of sorts. When he visits the facility, crowds of people congregate to meet him; his popularity is obvious as crowds chant his name and even made homemade signs for him, which read “We love you, Gibson”, “Thank you for everything”, and “Don’t leave us!” (Hart 297). He is the benevolent innovator who has taken it upon himself to tackle societal issues and has effectively reframed his monopoly of commerce as salvation. By portraying himself as a champion of progress and drawing attention away from the negative ethical implications of his policies, he effectively sidesteps accountability. This careful manipulation of public image is representative of how powerful figures leverage narrative control to maintain their positions. The relationship between economic success and public perception creates a self-reinforcing cycle where wealth generates influence, which in turn helps accumulate more wealth.

Consequently, Gibson’s company has grown so large and indispensable that it has become almost essential to the functioning of the nation and its citizens. This is possible in part due to Cloud’s predatory practices and legal maneuvering to consolidate power. Early on there were hints at this, with the first being Zinnia’s observation that Cloud “hoovered up businesses so fast that there wouldn’t be anyone left who needed to spy on someone else” (Hart 49). One instance is how Cloud gradually squeezed out smaller competitors like Paxton’s Perfect Egg operation through predatory pricing demands. Before joining Cloud, Paxton had his own business selling a popular kitchen gadget that made preparing hard-boiled eggs easier and had Cloud as the biggest distributor. Initially, he was able to maintain profitability through efficiency measures, but Cloud’s increasingly aggressive discount requirements eventually made the

operations unsustainable. When Paxton refused further price cuts, Cloud simply withdrew their business, effectively shutting down Paxton's business (Hart 19). Perhaps what is even more sinister is that fact that Cloud eventually went beyond simply strong-arming Paxton's small business and resorted to legal appropriation as well. It is revealed towards the end that Cloud has essentially stolen the "Perfect Egg" concept by creating their own "CloudEgg" and is now using the patent system to block the original inventor (Hart 344).

Gibson's rise to power, driven by his ability to dominate markets and put small businesses out of operation, creating a company where countless people seek employment for survival, marks him as the ultimate Technopolist. Early in the novel, upon learning about Gibson's terminal illness, Paxton thinks to himself: "Now he was dying. *The Gibson Wells*. It was like being told New York City was going to remove Grand Central Terminal. Just pick it up and toss it out. How would things function without it?" (32). Gibson has become such an emblematic figure in this world that his mere name evokes a sense of awe, even to Paxton, whose business Cloud swallowed up. The comparison to removing "Grand Central Terminal" from New York City further reinforces the idea of Gibson as an unmovable, irreplaceable entity. Paxton's apprehension at the thought of Gibson's absence is very telling. The idea that this man could be "pick[ed] up and toss[ed] out" is unfathomable to him. His question—"how would things function without it"—or, more accurately, "him"—suggests that Gibson's very existence is inextricably tied to the basic workings of society. He has gained such immense influence that he has become essential to the functioning of this dystopian society, creating a significant divide between himself and the ordinary citizens dependent on his technological control. This stark asymmetry in power relations captures the dangers of the Technopoly, where a select few accrue

such extraordinary authority that they become exempt from the constraints of democratic accountability.

The same trope can be observed in *Going Zero*, with Cy Baxter escaping meaningful accountability despite his ruthless actions. McCarten portrays the fundamental weakness of current accountability mechanisms through Cy's Senate hearing performance. After causing Justin's death, Baxter faces the Senate Committee where he sits "eyes wide, defensive, with so much he doesn't recall but promises to look into, pledging to be helpful, pledging his fealty to America, deflecting all criticism" (McCarten 380). Mirroring critique raised by an NBC News analysis of real-world tech hearings, which notes that such hearings are "not useful spaces for the kind of nuanced discussion that needs to happen ...[as] CEOs are perfectly trained to deflect the questions" (Zadrozny), this excerpt similarly highlights how traditional oversight mechanisms fail against tech moguls who control this system of information asymmetry. The performance of accountability—the theatrical nature of these hearings where tech leaders engage in carefully prepared displays of cooperation while revealing nothing substantial—underscores this power imbalance at play.

Both novels suggest that without meaningful intervention, society risks what Postman describes as "the submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology" (52), which is what we see happening in Hart's *Warehouse*. Wells, exemplifies this technological sovereignty through his near-total control over American society. Through Cloud, his company has monopolized not just commerce but life itself—people now live where they work, in corporate facilities that also function as self-contained cities. His careful cultivation of a public persona that allows him to be viewed as a "job-creating visionary" of sorts helps deflect criticism of his methods, particularly the invasive CloudBand system that constantly monitors

employee performance. His influence even extends to legislation, as we see from the “Red Tape Elimination Act” (Hart 103) that exempts large corporations from regulatory oversight under the guise of job creation. Gibson’s dismantling of accountability mechanisms, combined with the control he has over information flows, allows him to maintain power through automated surveillance.

This system exemplifies what Mirzoeff critiques in his analysis of visibility, where the “right to look” is systematically denied to the surveilled while being exclusively claimed by those in authority. Through these complex surveillance systems, Cy and Gibson claim the right to observe, track, and evaluate their subjects while simultaneously denying them any reciprocal “autonomy” (Mirzoeff 1) or ability to evaluate the system that monitors them (Mirzoeff 2). Evidently, the right to look becomes not just unequally distributed but also monopolized. However, this extreme imbalance of power pushes people to resist. The total control over visibility and movement, combined with the systematic denial of basic autonomy, ultimately pushes characters in both novels to find ways to reclaim their right to look and their capacity to challenge these surveillance systems. The next section will examine how the surveilled subjects in both novels begin to reclaim their right to look, challenging and subverting the systems that seek to control them.

## Depictions of Speculative Resistance

The conclusions of both novels offer open possibilities of resistance in the face of Technopolistic control. While the antagonists seemingly triumph—with Cloud’s system remaining intact and Gibson and Cy’s surveillance apparatus continuing to operate—neither ending submits to the total domination of such a system. Furthermore, despite the deaths of Justin and Zinnia, whose sacrifices embody the immense challenge of resisting such systems, the

endings suggest that such loss does not preclude future opposition. Instead, they present protagonists who choose active resistance by stepping into the unknown, inviting readers to imagine possibilities for resistance. Both endings showcase protagonists who embrace what Couldry and Mejias define as true resistance to data colonialism: not merely symbolic gestures, but fundamental rejections of the systems that normalize technological exploitation. True resistance is “saying no to practices that normalize the order of data colonialism in everyday life” (Couldry and Mejias 205). Through these acts of defiance, the novels propose that even within these seemingly insurmountable systems, there is still potential for meaningful disruption.

In *The Warehouse*, Paxton’s decision to leave Cloud and join the resistance fighters represents a moment of awakening, one that Hart may be suggesting as a possible first step towards potentially challenging and dismantling systems of oppression. In the final few pages, Paxton encounters Ember, a resistance fighter he and Zinnia had met during their day trip outside the Cloud facilities. This chance meeting prompts Paxton to take decisive action, resolving to help Ember plant a virus that would “cripple [Cloud] for a good long time” (352). This final act of sabotage represents Paxton’s eventual rejection of the Technopoly and its stronghold on society. The difficulty in extricating oneself from such a system is clearly illustrated earlier in the novel when Paxton, confronted about resilience efforts, professes “What good will [resistance] do? I can either buck up and do my work, or go live in squalor and starve to death. Thanks but no thanks. I choose a roof over my head and food in my stomach” (Hart 248). At this stage, his dependency on the system and fear of the unknown prevented him from being able to imagine a path of defiance. Zinnia, upon getting caught as a corporate spy, challenges him to think about the possibility of “just walk[ing] away”, but his defeated response “and go where?” (Hart 324) reveals the depth of his entrapment in this system. His response perfectly captures the

relationship many have with our very own tech giants today. Just as Paxton struggles to imagine a life outside Cloud, many today find it nearly impossible to imagine a life without at least one of the Big Five, whether it be Google's search engine, Amazon's convenient delivery service, or Facebook's promise of connecting people. The systems have become so deeply embedded in our daily routines that the prospect of their absence creates a kind of paralysis. These dependencies have evolved beyond mere convenience and entertainment into a form of psychological captivity.

The potential for dismantling Gibson's technocratic system of control is ironically articulated by Gibson himself when he confronts Zinnia after her capture. In this moment, where the mask of the seemingly benevolent innovator disappears, he reveals what he believes to be the psychological manipulation that takes place as a result of the way he runs Cloud:

When elephant trainers catch a baby elephant in the wild, they tie it to a tree. That baby elephant fights and thrashes to break free, but it's not strong enough. Within a couple of days, it gives up. So even as the elephant gets bigger, it doesn't believe it can break the rope. And then you get a full-grown elephant tied to a tree with a piece of rope it could snap with a simple swing of its leg. It's called learned helplessness. Everything here is built on people who don't think the rope will break. Which means the most dangerous thing in the world for my business model is someone who recognizes how fragile the rope really is. (Hart 333)

Despite the overwhelming technological and economic power he has amassed, the foundation of his "business model" rests on everyone's perceived powerlessness. Furthermore, this concept of "learned helplessness" ties into the previous discussion of Zuboff's "psychic numbing," as many simply accept their role as passive subjects within this surveillance system. Eventually, technology's role as ringmaster becomes normalized as an unavoidable feature of modern life. Just as the elephant stops fighting against its restraints, the surveilled often cease to question or resist the increasingly invasive forms of surveillance they encounter, and instead adapt their behaviors and expectations to accommodate these systems.

Paxton's eventual choice to resist therefore serves as a compelling rebuttal to Gibson's technocratic rule. His decision is likely catalyzed by Zinnia's death, which illustrated to him the brutality of such a system, as well as the corruption that it inevitably breeds. Before her death, she gives him a summary of Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Left Omelas" to explain why she took on the operation, only to be met with "I don't care about a story" (323). However, one of his final thoughts, right before leaving Cloud after he had planted the virus, suggests that it had resonated with him as he thinks to himself "Maybe it was as simple as walking away" (Hart 354). Another telling moment is when Paxton thinks to himself "Could anything so big be so fragile" (355), tying back to Gibson's assertion earlier that "the most dangerous thing in the world for [his] business model is someone who recognizes how fragile the rope really is" (333). The parallels between Paxton and Gibson's concluding thoughts provide an element of hope; the system, that has thus far been portrayed as monumental and impenetrable, is inextricably dependent on the cooperation of those it surveils. Resistance, taking the form in the mere act of refusing to participate, proposes an existential threat.

In *Going Zero*, Samantha Crewe's resistance takes on a more direct and confrontational stance. She makes the choice to expose Cy Baxter, even though she had already signed an agreement with Fusion and the American government (CIA, FBI and U.S. Attorney General) for complete immunity for hacking the NSA, in exchange for her freedom and getting her husband back (McCarten 386). While she physically "walks away" from society by "going zero" again, her final decision to leak data about Cy Baxter's illicit activities represents active opposition rather than mere escape. Samantha's actions embody what whistleblowers like Snowden argue is necessary: not just personal withdrawal but active exposure of surveillance mechanisms to public scrutiny.

To counter this system of extreme visibility and control, countervisuality emerges as a meaningful form of resistance. Countervisuality, Mirzoeff argues, “is the claim for the right to look” (24), not simply the passive action of looking, but the active right to determine and potentially challenge what is visible to the public. This idea of reversing the role of the watcher and watched is explored in Justin’s, and eventually Samantha’s insistence on exposing Cy. As Torin Monahan argues, “rather than merely opposing visibility or seeking to substitute it with different totalizing regimes, countervisuality would instead challenge forms of violence and oppression” (Monahan 352). We see this countervisuality manifested through Justin’s efforts to expose Cy as he transforms data itself into a weapon against those who typically weaponize surveillance. Justin’s metaphor of leaked data as a “nuclear bomb” and resistance fighters as “nuclear power” (McCarten 353) shows how information exposure could function as a formidable form of meaningful deterrence against surveillance overreach. His assertion that “they can’t allow that. Us holding all the secrets” reveals how the possibility of exposure threatens surveillance systems that depend on asymmetrical power relations to maintain control (353).

McCarten alludes to the ancient story of the Iranian queen Tomyris defeating Cyrus the Great, a conquerer (Herodotus 1.214), to emphasize the gravity of these transgressions committed by self-proclaimed tech visionaries like Cy. Just as Tomyris fought to protect her people from Cyrus’s attack, Samantha fights to protect individual privacy from Cy and the government’s expanding surveillance empire. Fittingly, she uses “Tomyris” as a password for Cy to access her video message explaining why she is participating in the Fusion beta test (239), as the narrative starts centering on resistance against overwhelming power. The password serves as a symbolic barrier as Cy must first confront this historical symbol of resistance before he can

access Samantha's truth, perhaps foreshadowing how his own surveillance system will ultimately be challenged by similar acts of resistance by others like Samantha. McCarten returns to the same allusion in the final pages of the book as Samantha prepares to "go zero" once again: "inside this [burner phone], long since prepared by Justin, a link—one that owes its name to an Iranian queen who, in response to a very great treachery, led her armies to defend against the attack of a corrupt king." (388) This repeated reference to Tomyris casts Samantha's actions in the light of historical resistance against tyranny, positioning her data leak as a necessary defense against Cy's abuse of surveillance power. By ending the novel this way, McCarten reinforces the idea that what is at stake is nothing less than fundamental human freedoms: whether in ancient history or the modern digital age, the story remains one of defending individual autonomy against systems of control and oppression.

Ultimately, both Hart and McCarten's texts invite their readers to ponder this complex role of "the watcher" in contemporary society. These narratives explore the tech visionaries, or "Technopolists", who claim to improve lives through increased efficiency and technological progress, only to end up creating surveillance-driven dystopias that serve to primarily benefit themselves and further concentrate power in the hands of a privileged few. Postman aptly states that "The god [technopolists] serve does not speak of righteousness or mercy or grace. Their god speaks of efficiency, precision, objectivity" (90). This idea is even more troubling when we consider that, as we see in these texts, figures like Cy and Gibson share the common trait of believing that their technology is inherently beneficial for all and using that conviction to justify decisions that violate individual rights. Gibson's rationalization that "people wouldn't understand" the truth about the CloudBurgers being made from human waste (Hart 330), and Baxter's misplaced belief that "People don't want privacy" (McCarten 240) epitomize this idea.

Not only are these two texts useful for thinking about our own relationship with technology surrounding us, but they are also useful in the legal setting. Just as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became a well-known text cited even in Congress because the public could readily understand its warnings, Hart and McCarten's texts, given their close resemblance to real-life developments, possess a similar capacity to resonate within legal and political spheres. Kieran Tranter, in his examination of speculative and science fiction that were alluded to in legal discourse, brings up the importance of stories in legal writing: "Not only were science fiction texts cited, but lawyers delved more deeply into the texts, extracting images, narratives and tropes to sketch the promises and perils of technological futures" (833). In this light, Hart and McCarten's texts can be seen as powerful tools to expand perspectives and inform legal discussions around the governance of surveillant technologies.

Moreover, the resistance narratives in these novels, where characters like Paxton, Zinnia, Justin and Samantha challenge the Technopolists' hegemonic control, suggests a path towards reclaiming autonomy in an age of pervasive surveillance. As they confront the overwhelming surveillance infrastructure created by the Technopolists, they fight to reclaim the "right to look," therefore attempting to disrupt the asymmetries of knowledge that enable such concentrated authority. It is interesting to note that neither Hart nor McCarten shows us the full consequences of these transgressions; we don't know how badly Paxton cripples Cloud by planting the virus, and we're left uncertain about the outcome of Samantha's final decision to release Cy's information into the world. Perhaps, it is not the outcome that matters most, rather it is the very act of resistance.

In both novels, resistance begins with a reclamation on the right to look. In *The Warehouse*, the watcher blocks potential paths of resistance by segregating all workers and

preventing collective organization. In *Going Zero*, Cy's surveillance tech turns out to be so desirable that the American government compromises on the degree to which they persecute him; he ends up getting a contract with them even though the beta test failed as Samantha Crewe/Kaitlyn Day successfully evades capture. These outcomes reveal how surveillance systems persist and evolve despite their ethical implications or failures, as long as they serve the interests of those in power. Hart and McCarten construct these fictional Technopolists in such a way that mirrors their real-world counterparts, not only to critique those figures, but to also highlight our own complicity as users who have normalized and accepted increasingly invasive forms of corporate surveillance in our daily lives. As Brunon-Ernst notes, speculative fiction “[holds] a satirical mirror to society, crystallizing with biting clarity surveillance phenomena which we perceive confusedly” (8). By creating parallels between their fictional scenarios and contemporary developments, Hart and McCarten are able to facilitate critical examinations of modern-day surveillance practices.

## Conclusion

Motivated by the pervasive surveillance culture that defines the era we are living in, this thesis examines fictional representations of surveillance power and resistance in recent novels. Speculative literature proves particularly valuable for this investigation since it enables us to focus on “individual subjectivity and experience, on singularities of voices, narratives and expression, and on the role of culture and representation in how those unique subjects and experiences are understood and remembered” (Brunon-Ernst et al. 4). By extrapolating from current technological trends to imagine possible trajectories, these novels offer what Kristin Loftsdóttir describes as a tool “not necessarily [for] prediction of the future but [...] to think about the present” (248). Through intimate character portrayals and carefully crafted narratives, these works shed light on the human dimensions of surveillance that often get overlooked in more technical discussions; they allow us to examine how the psychological burden of being watched impacts individual autonomy and identity, as well as the motivations of the entities conducting these observations, who stand to amplify the power they have from maintaining asymmetric systems of visibility.

The first chapter examined how *The Circle* and *Followers* depict the psychological impact of pervasive surveillance on individual autonomy and identity. Through the lens of Zuboff’s concept of “psychic numbing” and Couldry and Mejjias’s notion of “the space of the self”, I analyzed how surveillance capitalism deeply impacts individuals’ capacity for authentic self-expression and autonomous decision-making. The contrasting trajectories of Mae Holland and Marlow Cadden highlight different facets of this erosion and potential resistance.

Mae’s transformation from a privacy-conscious individual to an advocate of radical transparency demonstrates how surveillance systems can gradually reshape one’s values and

perception of privacy. Her journey illustrates what Zuboff warns us against — the danger of coming to “[feeling] at home in glass life.” (491) Through a combination of corporate pressure, peer influence, and the promise of social validation, Mae willingly surrenders her privacy and autonomy, eventually becoming an extension of the very system that originally made her uncomfortable. In contrast, Marlow’s journey from acceptance to resistance offers a more hopeful perspective on human agency in the face of surveillance capitalism. Born into a world where privacy is already extinct, Marlow’s awakening — catalyzed by her liberation from the emotion-suppressing drug Hysteryl — represents the possibility, and more importantly the necessity, of breaking free from psychic numbing. Her eventual escape from Constellation demonstrates that even in a society built on pervasive surveillance, individual resistance remains possible, though it takes great courage to do so.

While Chapter One examined the psychological impact of the surveilled through the perspective of those being watched, Chapter Two shifted its focus to the watchers themselves — the tech leaders who build and control these systems of surveillance. Unlike *The Circle* and *Followers*, where the architects of surveillance remain distant figures, *The Warehouse* and *Going Zero* grant us direct insight into characters like Gibson Wells and Cy Baxter, revealing how modern tech leaders maintain power through strategic control of visibility.

Drawing from Neil Postman’s idea of the Technoplist, Zuboff’s analysis of surveillance capitalism’s “asymmetries of knowledge and power”, as well as Nicholas Mirzoeff’s theory of authority through visibility, I demonstrated how surveillance power operates in these novels through careful control of who can see and who can be seen. The characters Cy and Gibson perfectly embody what Postman warned about: Technoplists who present surveillance as a solution to societal problems while obscuring its role in consolidating their own power. Their

careful curation of public personas — Gibson through his carefully crafted blog posts and Cy through his strategically limited biographical details as well as steps taken to hide his illicit trades done with rival nations — demonstrates how modern tech leaders maintain power through asymmetric visibility. While subjecting others to constant monitoring, they carefully shield themselves from scrutiny, creating what Zuboff terms a “one-way mirror” of surveillance power.

These fictional, surveillance-driven worlds are largely familiar to readers, who can draw clear parallels to real-world examples of pervasive monitoring and data extraction. News reports of Amazon’s unethical practices of monitoring employees (Greene), the UK’s upwards of four million CCTV cameras installed in public spaces (Shenk), Palantir’s controversial data-mining operations (Iliadis and Acker 334-335), and other such developments have become all too common. Furthermore, the close resemblance between the fictional tech moguls depicted in these narratives and real-world figures like Zuckerberg, Bezos, and Musk and so on amplifies the critique these authors are making about our own society. These figures are not mere caricatures for generic corporate greed or technological ambition, but rather representations of the very individuals who hold disproportionately large amounts of power and influence upon deploying technologies that end up reshaping societal norms and expectations. Considering what is at stake — the gradual erosion of private space, personal autonomy, and authentic self-expression, as witnessed through the experiences of the protagonists in these novels, these works expose our entanglement as both victims and enablers of surveillance systems that increasingly constrain human freedom.

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