
Surveillance and Human Refashioning in *Super Sad True Love Story* and *The Circle*

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Speculative fiction has long presented nuanced and instructively creative projections on the shape of things to come, to quote the title of H.G. Wells's 1933 work, a text that purports to present 'a short history of the future'. Wells in 1933 was at the height of his fame, a writer with an international popularity and political reach difficult to find a parallel for today. A year after *The Shape of Things to Come*, for example, he had discussions both with both Joseph Stalin and Franklin Delano Roosevelt; in 1935 the film version of *The Shape of Things To Come* appeared. Nearly three decades earlier, his *A Modern Utopia* (1905) he imagined a utopian world of material plenty, freedom, creativity and technological advance. Vital to this imagined world, and to Wells's conception of the utopian genre, was the need for such speculations to build in change and innovation, to 'face towards the freer air, the ampler spaces of the things that perhaps might be'. (5) In this prospective world, new possibilities for humans were attainable. Wells required utopian thinkers not to fashion static, perfect places. Yet his ideas sparked two very different, antagonistic responses: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), both of which envisaged dystopian futures where people were under constant surveillance, whether by each other or by the state, or by a combination of both. In the past century, and increasingly in the last few decades, surveillance has changed the way we function, are perceived and controlled in a rapidly changing world. Indeed, in a world of Big Data, and social media, surveillance has transformed the way we see ourselves and operate socially, under scrutiny not only from the state, but from corporations, and from each other.

As I have argued elsewhere, in *Imagining Surveillance: Eutopian Dystopian Literature and Film* (2015), speculative fiction and films offer us ways of understanding the human impact of these amorphous, often invisible, and highly consequential forces. In this paper, I consider the depiction and assessment of surveillance in two recent novels, Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), and (especially) Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2010). I aim to trace how, in different ways, they offer us visions of the future that we might endure, or potentially resist. In David Lyon's recent evaluation of the current state of play, *The Culture of Surveillance* (2018) world authority David Lyon deals briefly with Shteyngart's novel, seeing it as part of increasing problems of

human intimacy. It is that, but it also deals with questions of border control and personal identity. This paper deals especially with border control in a pivotal early scene in the novel. Lyon sees *The Circle* as the replacement for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as the text that captures surveillance in a multi-media and data driven world that Orwell could not have imagined. Eggers' novel appears to imagine a utopian future; this is key to its satirical bite.

Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* introduces a confronting otter by the name of Jeffrey, who exists in a future where the United States is in serious political, cultural, cultural and economic decline. The protagonist, Lenny Abramov, inhabits a brave new world where everyone wears an 'apparat' around their neck, a communication cum-surveillance device in a society where information about your net worth and your desirability—or, in the argot of the novel, 'Fuckability'—rating is regularly available to public view in places such as bars and clubs. Lenny describes his apparat as 'buzzing with contacts, data, pictures, projections, maps, incomes, sound, fury.' The last two words are a literary in-joke, referencing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where the title character, near the end of this either and with his wife newly dead, declares that 'life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' By association the ubiquitous apparats are the technological idiots, endlessly spewing information, but signify nothing. Yet, as the child of Russian immigrants, Lenny must also be aware of the Russian roots of the term, an apparat being an uncritical Communist. The device, a more sophisticated version of the mobile phone that connects you to the 'real' mediated world, is a means of brutal and real time social control, its constant flow of information making each individual transparent to others. Hobbled by the lack of privacy and the freedom privacy allows, individuals are passive, conformist, complicit. In this world of publicly visible Big Data, privacy is hardly a concept with any social meaning.

Having worked in Italy trying to find rich clients who want to be immortal, Lenny needs to return to the US because a friend has told him

that if you spend over 250 days abroad and don't register for Welcome Back Pa'dner, the official United States Citizen Re-entry Program, they can bust you for sedition right at JFK.

As the schlub from Central Casting, Lenny complies, finding at the American Embassy in Rome that:

Only a few of the saddest, most destitute Albanians still wanted to emigrate to the States, and that lonely number was further discouraged by a poster showing a plucky little otter in a sombrero trying to jump onto a crammed dingy under the tagline "The Boat Is Full, Amigo".

The combination of faux-folksy racism is barely mollified for Lenny when, down the hall, the

‘plucky little otter’ has been Americanised (sombbrero replaced by a red white and bandana) as Jeffrey the Otter.

Jeffrey asks ‘some friendly questions for statistical purposes only’, adding encouragingly: “‘On behalf of the American Restoration Authority, I would love to welcome you back to the *new* United States of America. “Lookout, world! There’s no stopping us now!”” These attempts to bely the parlous state into which the USA has fallen themselves fall flat. There follows a series of comic interchanges as Jeffrey mishears Lenny’s answers:

Jeffrey: “Did you meet any nice *foreign* people during your stay abroad?”

Lenny: “Yes”.

Jeffrey: ‘What kind of people?’

Lenny; “Some Italians.”

Jeffrey: ‘You said “Somalians”’.

Lenny: “Some Italians”.

Jeffrey: “You said Somalians”, the otter insisted. “You know Americans get lonely abroad. Happens all the time! That’s why I never leave the brook where I was born. What’s the point? Tell me for statistical purposes, did you have any intimate physical relationships with any *non*-Americans during your stay?”

Lenny compliantly tells the truth, potentially putting, Fabrizia, the Italian with whom he had sex in Rome, at serious risk. The information and misinformation collected here by an increasingly confronting otter exposes how border surveillance based on databases and biometrics confirms or confers identity, classifying individuals as valid or invalid, person or non-person. Lenny’s transnational sexual encounter gets him flagged as a potential subversive or degenerate. But he passes through because the programme that generates Jeffrey freezes up as the questions become increasingly invasive. As surveillance theorist Gary Marx has observed (see, for example, 2002), surveillance systems fail. They can also be circumvented. In this case, because the decline in American technological knowhow, failure *is* the option. In what Torin Monahan calls ‘the time of insecurity’ (2010), surveillance systems are increased, morph into new systems and impose new expectations and restrictions, and with them new social formations, new individual and group identities. Shteyngart takes these real-world elements and develops them for satirical purposes. But the point of this satire is not simply to propose comic extrapolations of the present; it is to warn us of the encroaching possibilities, to prompt us to think and react in order to stifle or circumvent these possibilities. *Super Sad True Love Story* is a cautionary tale as well as a comedy.

By contrast to the troubled and decaying world of *Super Sad True Love Story*, Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* appears to present a utopian space for many of its characters—a, importantly, not all. Among the many schemes advanced by the Silicon Valley company called The Circle (a hybrid of Google, Facebook and Apple) is one that aims to bear witness to tyranny, and by doing so to bring an end to

tyrannical practise. A suitably utopian goal, with all the naivete sometimes attached to that idealism. The Circle corporation is immediately coded positively but the protagonist, Mae Holland:

‘My God, Mae thought. It’s heaven.’ is its opening line.

Her words unconsciously reference connections between utopias and Christian notions of heaven, with the company a kind of Big Data Eden. I want at this point to zero in on one element that speaks to the visual trope of the all-seeing eye, rebooted for the contemporary world.

Or all-seeing *eyes*, plural, for at the Steve Jobsesque product launch/love-in, his Circle equivalent Eammon Bailey unveils tiny high-resolution cameras, cutely named ‘See Change’, that can be placed unobtrusively anywhere and then accessed everywhere by a global audience. The Circle being an unmistakably Californian company, the initial images beamed to the company’s audience are from surf beaches, before ‘the screen atomized into a thousand mini-screens. Beaches, mountains, lakes, cities, offices, living rooms. The crowd applauded wildly’.

Technological innovation clearly overrides concerns about intrusion, but Bailey’s agenda requires the breaching of national boundaries:

imagine the human rights implications. Protesters on the streets of Egypt no longer have to hold up a camera, hoping to catch a human rights violation or a murder and then somehow get the footage out on the streets and online.

Bailey then shows the audience coverage of ‘fifty cameras in Tiananmen Square and in a dozen authoritarian regimes, from Khartoum to Pyongyang’, declaring

I agree with the Hague, with human rights activists the world over. There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be and will be, documentation and accountability, and we need to bear witness. And to this end, I insist that all that happens must be known.

The plan to infiltrate other countries with mini-surveillance cameras is born of at least two impulses: i) global capitalism; ii) imperialism. As Silicon Valley companies show, technical innovations can be mass-produced and mass-adopted in immensely profitable ways, in fantastically short periods of time. See Change combines the portable, groovy product design of an iphone with the supposed community-building capacity of Facebook. Despite the hype, though, it is still primarily a product manufactured for profit. Indeed, without the profit, can there be a product?

See Change combines people power, regime change and Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon scheme, traditionally a key trope for surveillance theorists. And it reflects imperialist confidence that liberal democracy, too, is a product that sells internationally. The history of *actual* American military

interventions in foreign fields is one of high-minded ideals brought to earth with brutal and often long-lasting consequences. Think Vietnam and Desert Storm and Afghanistan. Liberal democracy is not simply another product. I'm not arguing against liberal democracy *per se*, but against demagogic chutzpah *masquerading* as liberal democracy, confident that such rule is the hidden desire of *all* people and the inevitable end point of *all* social evolution. The regime-changing premise of See Change, that media visibility is a form of instantly efficacious moral power that brings tyranny to heel, is dangerously naïve. The images from Tahrir Square or Tiananmen Square, powerful as they undoubtedly were, did not lead inevitably to democratic transformations in Egypt or China. Media visibility is not the fast track to democracy.

Visibility can be *used* as part of military or terrorist strategy. The televisual impact of the 'Shock and Awe' tactic in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when live pictures of the attack were beamed around the world, functioned to celebrate American power and to warn the watching global audience. Think, too the searing psychological damage of the 9/11 attack, massively enhanced by it being broadcast in real time. Images replayed over the following days, and months and years, justified the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Al Qaeda and ISIS *want* people in the 'West' to see mass destruction in their own backyards, to see beheadings, understanding them as a graphic taunt and as recruiting and propaganda tools outside (and potentially inside) the West. Visibility, then, is not of itself a political cure all. Being scrutinised does not guarantee right action on the part of bad actors.

In the supposedly utopian world of *The Circle*, we never find out whether the See Change cameras have the transformative effect predicted. But Bailey foretells in his initial pitch that as a result of their introduction, "We will become all-seeing, all-knowing". It's another literary reference, this time to the Book of Genesis, where Adam and Eve are offered the same promise. As Eggers no doubt intended his knowing readers to recognise, the fabricator of that seemingly utopian assurance is the serpent, and result is the expulsion of humanity from Eden.

Eggers also addresses more generally the place of social media and the Internet in the exponential rise of monitoring in contemporary lives, of a sort that connects not so much to fears of state oppression or violence, but with the utopian attractions of instant access, virtual sociability and prosperity that social media and modern technology promises. One of the many casualties of a world consciously similar to the one we inhabit today is privacy. While cameras play some part in the types of surveillance carried out in *The Circle*, the novel is as much the child of Big Data as of Big Brother. Eggers explores the complex and often impossibly blurred junctures between information and identity, agency and complicity, the individual and larger groupings in an age in which it is possible to have thousands of 'friends' and millions of co-users. Mae's entry into the 'vast and rambling campus' of the hi-tech, high profile company, The Circle, marks her introduction to a world that bears obvious resemblances to the hip work environments associated with Google. (To avoid confusion, I use the words The Circle to designate the eponymous company and *The Circle* for Eggers' text. Mae's immediate response is awe, and while her enthusiasm for The Circle as an institution wavers occasionally, it is vital that for the most part she maintains a definite sense

that the company is a utopian *space* constructing a far better world well beyond the confines of the campus itself.

Eggers the author clearly is antagonistic to the ideology The Circle and actual companies like it propound, but he does not make his protagonist a rebellious loner along the lines of Orwell's Winston Smith. Those characters do exist, in the form of Mae's former boyfriend, Mercer, or the mysteriously Circle employee Kalden, with whom she has a sexual relationship. But the overwhelming number of Circle employees, including Mae's adored friend, Annie, are conscientious spruikers for the company's activities and aspirations. Quite what the real motivation is driving the company's leaders, the so-called 'Three Wise Men' – Ty Godspodinov, the Mark Zuckerberg like boy-genius behind the company's early innovations; Eamon Bailey, the company's avuncular spokesman, and Tom Stenton, the predatory CEO – is not clear. Yet the sheer commercial and social success of The Circle generates its own momentum, one begun by Ty's devising of a 'Unified Operating System, which combined everything online that has heretofore been separate and sloppy'. The Circle's phenomenal growth and influence as a company derives from the Internet, which provides the key to what Mae recognises as its ever-expanding influence for good.

Its power comes from the very twenty-first century use of social media and the consequent comfort with which individuals function and come to socialise online, the rise of Big Data and the breakdown of physical boundaries across a virtual planet. Ty's great advance had been to 'put all of it, all of every user's needs and tools, into one pot' and to invent TruYou:

One account, one identity, one password, one payment system, one person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity – the TruYou, unbendable and unmaskable – was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this tied you to your credit cards, your bank, and thus paying for everything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online . . .

Once you had a single account, it carried you through every corner of the web, every portal, every pay site, everything you wanted to do. (21)

TruYou reconfigures identity in terms of economic transactions. The notion that 'your devices [know] who you are' requires stretching the definition of the terms 'you' and 'know' to breaking point.

While the Internet offers amazing access to portals and pay sites, the implicit idea that 'everything you wanted to do' was available online is included, as Thomas More included slaves in the original *Utopia*, to test the reader's acceptance of contentious proposals or states of affair. Mae's naivety functions as another prod for the reader to go beyond some of her sporadically teetering confidence in the larger project that The Circle promotes. Were she merely positive, the novel's satirical bite would be muzzled, so her willingness to break rules occasionally by maintaining a clandestine

relationship with Kalden, constitutes a small protest against the drive to conformity.

She also recognises the oppressiveness of the constantly positive attitude the company promotes. Or at least the appearance of such, so that when she sees Annie's assistant watching her she knows 'her face was betraying something like horror. Smile, she thought. Smile' (7). The scene is an eerie reminder of facecrime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but where Winston's masking of his emotions is logical and necessary in the dystopian world of Oceania, Mae's own version on the supposedly utopian campus of The Circle is equally troubling. A social mask is necessary to conceal private thoughts and emotions in both novels. Mae's innocence also blinds her to the reality that most of her work on the Web is inconsequential, responses to parallel activities that have little reality beyond the screen. They feed into information loops that constantly monitor her actions, giving largely empty rewards and virtual applause when she achieves or exceeds arbitrary targets:

The Circle was everywhere, and though she had known it for years, intuitively, hearing from these people, the businesses counting on The Circle to get the word out about their products, to track their digital impact, to know who was buying their wares and when – it became real on a very different level. Mae now had customer contacts in Clinton, Louisiana, and Putney, Vermont; in Marmaris, Turkey and Melbourne and Glasgow and Kyoto. (54–5)

Mesmerised by a faux reality that only exists in the virtual world and through Big Data, Mae fails to see that the supposedly private 'contacts' entail no physical contact, no knowing of people except as data or as emails.

Technology refashions spaces and identities, and the novel promotes the critical and multifaceted concept of visibility as the guiding principle enabling The Circle. Eamon Bailey is certain of the moral benefits of monitoring:

What if we all have behaved as if we were being watched? It would lead to a more moral way of life. Who would do something unethical or immoral or illegal if they were being watched? ... we would finally be compelled to be our best selves... In a world where bad choices are no longer an option, we have no choice but to be good. (290)

These dubious propositions recall Bentham, suggesting that the internet in some ways is the contemporary version of the Panopticon. Yet the emphasis on watching provides what might establish the possibility of monitoring totalitarian regimes through tiny portable movie cameras that can be placed in great numbers anywhere and then accessed by an infinite number of viewers around the globe. The cameras act as portable Panopticons; Bailey places them in his mother's house to ensure that she is safe. 'Transparency' he tells the audience 'leads to peace of mind' (68).

The utopian mindset that creates dystopian consequences permeates the novel. What is billed as ‘the ultimate search tool’ and which goes by the name of SoulSearch, allows the company to track down fugitives from justice. But because of faulty recognition, a woman nearly is lynched. Mercer, who wants to be anonymous but is discovered, kills himself by driving his truck off a cliff (461). Cameras at Mae’s parents’ home publicly broadcast them having sex, while the dating site LuvLuv exposes Mae herself to general ridicule. Annie volunteers for the PastPerfect project on family history as a means of re-establishing her status in the company, confident that her renowned ‘blue blood’ heritage will enhance her standing further. Instead, she finds out dark secrets about her family history that push her to a mental breakdown. Kalden finally reveals himself to Mae as Ty Godspodinov, and makes the most sustained critique of *The Circle*, arguing that Stenton has ‘professionalised our idealism, monetised our utopia’ (484). Kalden proposes ‘The Rights of Man in a Digital Age’, rights that include anonymity and the understanding that ‘The ceaseless pursuit of data to quantify the value of any endeavour is catastrophic to true understanding’ (485). Rather than bringing these truths to the world, though, as he asks, Mae rejects what she calls his ‘bizarre claims’ and betrays him. As Winston Smith will do, Mae ultimately supports the power the reader is encouraged to abominate.

The novel’s penultimate paragraph carries Mae’s assurance into the future *The Circle* promises, in which the existing world is

replaced by a new and glorious openness, a world of perpetual light. Completion was imminent, and it would bring peace, and it would bring unity, and all the messiness of humanity until now, all those uncertainties that accompanied the world before the Circle, would be only a memory. (491)

The new glorious openness requires the elimination of privacy, but the novel ends not with messy humanity and earthy uncertainty now just a memory, but with Mae sitting next to the now-catatonic Annie in hospital, fuming that ‘They needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn’t they know them?’ The novel ends with her frustrated demand, ‘The world deserved nothing less and would not wait’ (491).

For all the public and publicised scrutiny, Annie’s thoughts remain unknown, something Mae finds ‘exasperating’, adding that ‘It was an affront, a deprivation to herself and to the world’. In what I take to be a conscious echo of Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Circle* ‘can’t get inside you’.

Despite the undeniably twenty-first century aspects of the novel, not least the centrality of Big Data and computer-based social media, in many ways Eggers work intersects with earlier utopian texts such as Bentham’s Panopticon writing and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The company’s edicts—‘SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, PRIVACY IS THEFT’—sit in ironic counterpoint to Orwell’s ‘WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH’. Mercer warns Mae at the end of their relationship that:

I've never felt more that there is some cult taking over the world... It's the usual utopian thing . . . like everything else you guys are pushing, it sounds perfect, sounds progressive, but it carries with it more control, more central tracking of everything we do.

The novel reworks the trope of individual dissent and mass compliance common to utopias, Eggers having the protagonist, Mae, consciously and actively supporting the dominant ideology. Characters who resist pay the price of resistance: Mercer suicides, Kalden is neutralised, Annie has a mental breakdown and Mae's parents disappear. Mae plays a crucial role in their respective downfalls. There is no happy ending here.

Subverting generic codes by having a protagonist who complies through most of the text and then does not rebel at the end gives the novel a freshness and vitality that requires interpretive creativity on the part of the reader. It undermines smug complacency or lazy despair. It is a misreading of dystopias and utopias generally and generically to think that they depict static or complete societies. By offering estranged representations of our own world, the genre, right back to Thomas More, remains fundamentally provocative, a challenge to thinking and a call to action.

Eggers' proposal for 'The Rights of Man in a Digital Age' updates to the 'Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man', allowing us to chart some of the distance travelled since 1948, as well as to contemplate the shape of things to come. It should not surprise is that HG wells was a driving force behind the thinking that produced that text. Like all such forward looking texts, they encourage us to strive for better futures and to resist those that are worse. Writing about the world he had imagined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell advised his readers: 'Don't let it happen. It depends on you'. His words have lost none of their potent relevance.

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