

Intimacy Under Surveillance: Digital Lives and Algorithmic Control in Contemporary Global Fiction _ A Study of Selected Novels

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Abstract

This paper explores narratives of intimacy in contemporary fiction: How do algorithms and digital surveillance shape the construction of intimacy in fiction? I draw upon Shoshana Zuboff's notion of surveillance capitalism and Michel Foucault's thinking on biopolitics to focus on the novels Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), and Samanta Schweblin's *Little Eyes* (2020). Everyone delves into love, privacy, and home life, whilst everything is being monitored. By employing close reading, the paper demonstrates how our emotions are re-engineered and float beyond us towards data points. In my opinion, these novels expose a new affective politics of social media where being seen is synonymous with being good, and the human relation is always mediated. They reflect how chaotic and tricky moral matters get for the casual user of technology.

Keywords: Surveillance, Intimacy, Digital Culture, Algorithmic Control, Biopolitics, Privacy.

1. Introduction

Definition and Other Meanings of Close.

It is not the same to have an intimate relationship with a human being in the twenty-first century. The closed world which used to be safeguarded by feelings or domesticity is implemented by a group of relations of data mining, algorithmic vision and online interaction. It possesses a pattern that would translate your emotions into patterns. That is why sending a message to a person, attaching a picture or searching something on the Internet you will see that your actions are covered with a pattern. People become more visible as well as naked, controlled. It is paradoxical.

This new system and process of Zuboff is known as surveillance capitalism Zuboff, [1]. It is commodification of behavioural data. The concept of biopolitics (1976) of Michel Foucault goes further and demonstrates the way of reaching power beyond the law and force to the life, to life, its rhythms, desires and formation. Surveillance was carried out in the prisons because

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the cells were in need of guards. Nowadays, it is done in our smartphones, and it is even assigned to algorithms.

Modern fiction has reacted to this change. A writer on any continent of this world conjectures on how technology is changing our intimacies. To the extent that quantifiable civil usage is involved, the privacy acts and inner emotional existence are a commodity, as in the example of privacy, performance. The three novels, which are examined in this paper, unite the corporate, political, and domestic world. *The Circle* by Dave Eggers, *The Ministry of utmost happiness* by Arundhati Roy, and *Little eyes* by Samanta Schweblin. Both novels describe the invasion of techno-bureaucratic surveillance in the most intimate of spheres.

There are two fundamental questions to be answered in the study.

- What is the meaning of surveillance and intimacy in the digital age that these novels describe?
- What happens to ethical and emotional changes when personal life is controlled by algorithms and data systems?

The cyber presence of these novels, as provided in the paper, is not a slick one but rather a cage on display which is created of the same. It explains to us the unseen forces that rule our lives.

Literature Review

Politicians did not believe that ordinary people cared about privacy issues. Now, it's everywhere in culture, in literature. In the 1970s, Michel Foucault published *Discipline and Punish* that gave us the panopticon which reflects being seen from all sides. The power is at work when we are visible. Later, Gilles Deleuze brought a new version of similar idea. According to him, we have shifted from a society of rules and laws to one of networks, where people end up watching and controlling themselves [2].

Furthermore, Shoshana Zuboff wrote a book titled "*The Age Of Surveillance Capitalism*". That book really shook things up. According to Zuboff, our experiences are data-mined without consent in what might be called the digital economy. The strange part now is that surveillance works by enticing us. Enticing us with convenience, connection, even a care for you. It's less about force, more about luring us in. Zuboff ties Foucault's power over life to Big Tech's profit maximization; in other words, life forms subjectivity [1].

Literary critics are frequently using a neoliberal lens to analyze contemporary fiction with regards to intimacy and its changing face.

According to [3] neoliberalism changes the way people can relate to one another, and how that works politically. Analysis of Eggers' *The Circle* presents a chilling later interpretation where the whole idea of total transparency has become a metaphor for an absence of any moral sense of privacy [4]. Naomi Wood's reading of Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* [5] also gets to the crux of the issue of state surveillance and emotional uncertainty. This is particularly evident in people that are already on the margins Samanta Schweblin's novel, *Little Eyes*, may be lesser-known, but it got a lot of fame in 2022 for its unnervingly accurate representation of digital empathy and the voyeuristic tendencies of those in surveillance world.

This gap in comparative literary studies is quite known, but so far, not much research has brought all these novels together through the axis of algorithmic intimacy, so that we can see how these systems of surveillance rework our ideas of love, care and family life. Most existing studies on futuristic dystopias focus on either political control or their darker sides. We will examine how they affect our emotions, and also allow for space for that exploration of analysis.

2. Research Method

The research combines Foucault's biopolitics, Zuboff's surveillance capitalism and the cultural theory's affective turn in one study. According to Foucault, power isn't a force that simply restricts life, it's a productive one that structures life. Digital societies can exercise power by personalising, predicting algorithmically, modulating emotionally. Zuboff will broaden the discussion to encompass the data extraction economy, which makes commodities out of feelings and preferences.

This study uses interpretive qualitative textual analysis as theoretical foundation. Every book is analyzed for its portrayal of surveillance systems, whether they be corporate, governmental, or interpersonal; and for the aesthetics it uses to depict emotional life under watch. By looking closely at how literature is written, the essay encounters focalisation, free indirect discourse, paratextual fragments and other narrative techniques mimicking digital media. Through a comparison of global literatures from the West to South Asia to Latin America, the essay traces a common anxiety over control of intimacy.

3. Results and Discussion

1. Transparency and Affective Discipline in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*

The Circle Eggers presents a worrisome milieu devoid of ethic and morality. Mae Holland is a Mae Holland is the character of The Circle, she is a worker of a powerful tech company. Their slogan - "Secrets are lies, sharing is caring" - claims that becoming visible is becoming a good. In an era of relentless surveillance and data generation, everything you do, say, and think is monitored by the 'smart' corporate campus. Foucault's idea of surveillance becomes an ability to have joy [6].

The hero and other characters display affective discipline in the novel. Mae's growing loyalty to the "SeeChange" cameras and the approval of their followers demonstrates how power seduces, not coerces. The language of community masks total control. Our private lives are a data source from which The Circle extracts profit had one of its characters said. Zuboff's concept of "behavioural surplus" is given a narrative form. Love and friendship feed the machine [1].

Through repetition and the use of a flat tone Eggers imitates the speech of the digital age. Corporate slogans hide feelings; your actual feelings show otherwise. The way humans interact with each other is slowly becoming like a feedback loop. The book illustrates how surveillance not only empowers but is also something we impose upon ourselves, a new kind of asceticism..

2. State Surveillance and Emotional Resistance in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Eggers focuses on corporate control; however, Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness takes surveillance further into the political and social power structures that shape it. It's almost as though the book itself is fractured different voices, timelines colliding just like society which is fragmented and ever-watched, by not only the state but also plain folk. Surveillance is everywhere: in old state folders, police papers, and in the seemingly endless click of news. Nevertheless, Roy pressed us for something more intimate a way to push back against this [7].

Take Anjum, for example. She's a transgender woman making a home out of a graveyard. Roy creates areas of love and solidarity in these places of loss. We could think of "ministry" as a counter-government, an area around which empathy sticks. In essence, the

state here cannot get rid of empathy easily, as it can't do otherwise. Foucault's idea about modern power (how it works through our bodies and in our everyday lives) is all over the place. The state wants control over gender, religion, dissent. It even tries to sneak into people's private lives [8].

But Roy refuses to let that control be absolute. At times, her writing takes a lyrical turn or adopts an ironic register, as a way to avoid easy answers. The story is told in letters, news scraps, and secrets between characters. The result? A noisy book, full of different voices, that never lets surveillance win. Within those moments, Roy creates what Lauren Berlant refers to as 'intimate publics' – small feeling-centred groups that contest the state's narratives, as they simply care for one another. In Roy's world, intimacy is not just soft or sentimental, it bites back.

3. Remote Empathy and Algorithmic Voyeurism in Samanta Schweblin's *Little Eyes*

Samanta Schweblin explains the situation of individuals being exposed to technology which allows them to reach out to one another. A Freequent User Account allows an individual to peep in with a *kenutki* one of the eyes of another of their lives. There are very fuzzy robots in the book similar to a mouse. It is strangely personal and weirdly disturbing. Connection and privacy get wronged. The two individuals are in agreement of that, and all of a sudden, being under surveillance, and being in the company of somebody appears to be the same thing [9].

You will have an emotional rush when listening to the story of a stranger and you will end it satisfactorily. People that date with their phones gradually begin to slack their guard [10], [11]. Everything is more unpleasant because Switzerland is styled cold and minimalism. She does not smack you with negativity the way that Eggers does. Rather, she demonstrates the way that surveillance and intimacy may be combined. Caring is almost the same as watching [9], [12], [13], [14], [15].

Schweblin applies the theories of Foucault and brings them into the sphere of affect. She also takes comfort in the surveillance and is therefore the one that the characters in her works are embracing. Here the idea of the so-called surveillance capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff can also be applicable: the urge to fit in becomes traffickable and quantifiable resources generated by the technology. But Schweblin makes it complicated. She does not simply say that everything is bad. It can be the fake, but it provides people with something to hold on to. Do we ever have such a thing as full surveillance? Is the world being reinvented to suit digital technology?

4. Conclusion

The three novels expose the fact that intimacy can be perverted into power. Eggers transforms business spying into a religion of the transparency. Roy uses the subject of political spying to infiltrate even our personal lives and penetrate even our most basic and minor acts of love. Schweblin does not merely create the impression of us being watched but rather makes us always feel that we are under observation. In them all, invisibility substitutes privacy and exposure is the sole way of belonging.

However, that appears to be interesting as a current fiction appears to serve as an examiner of the biopolitics of the modern world. The disjointed plot of these stories and the multitude of voices in them, and that weird sense of numbness all attest to the data-filled life. It is via surveillance that these authors remind us of the authority of literature - to show what is not written: what we experience, how we recall and how we relate.

Subsequently, scientists can examine additional novels and even conduct the analysis of the movie versions depicting the life under algorithms. Since technology is only becoming unclear on the differences between real and mediated connection, it is in the stories where we get to experience what has been lost because they are still touchable.

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