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Constructing the 21st Century Dystopia: Technology as a conduit for control

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Introduction

The genre of dystopian fiction originated as a counter to the utopian fiction which defined the Victorian era (Claeys 107). This utopian fiction was founded on the “enlightenment optimism” which respected the “progress of reason and science” (Claeys 107). The Utopia is a “blueprint of the good (or even perfect) society, imagined elsewhere and intended as prescriptions for the near future” (Levitas 3). Consequently, the dystopian genre is a reversal of this blueprint. Rather than creating a utopia, the dystopian genre envisions a “fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments have the upper hand” (Claeys 107).

These negative blueprints enter the literary canon at the start of the 20th century, an era defined by the rise of totalitarianism, notably communism in the Soviet Union, and its consecutive transformation into a dictatorship by Stalin as well as fascism in multiple European axis powers. The rise of industrial nations amplified by the recent introduction of the assembly line, led to a mass and uniform system of production. These new political and economic circumstances helped to give birth to the three most well-known examples of dystopian literature: *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, written in the 1920s, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley in 1932, and finally *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, published in 1949.

These three all present the audience with a new perspective: the prospect of a bleak and dark future which mirrors the events in society of that time. Using a variety of methods to control the inhabitants of these fictional nations, the leaders of each novel concentrate power into a small, privileged group of the population. Zamyatin and Orwell focus on the idea of mass surveillance and punishment in order to oppress society. Huxley based his dystopia on the idea of passivity, the reluctance of society to revolt as long as the individuals are kept

prosperous and entertained. These three novels function as the corner stones of the dystopian tradition, providing the basis for this genre.

In the contemporary day and age, society has changed. In the era of information, society is open to knowledge at everyone's fingertips; due to the creation and popularity of the world wide web, civilisation is permanently connected to the internet. The internet has evolved far from just being a resource for information. It is now a source of entertainment for many people, from all ages and nationalities, with an unprecedented reach. Social media sites such as Facebook rank amongst the top visited pages in the world. The average level of technology has grown exponentially, as has society's dependence on it. The multitude of ways that governmental and non-governmental organisations are able to track their subjects would almost be the envy of Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty-four*. The omnipresence of security cameras and the ubiquitousness of technology have led to a society which is almost unrecognisable in relation to the Soviet Union of the 1920s. This new technocratic society has initiated an influx of media and technology driven dystopian narratives.

The narratives

The three narratives which will be analysed have been chosen as they are popular with a cross-section of audiences. The selected works all have overlapping thematic elements based on the genre of dystopia. The narratives also show a similar attitude towards technology, namely the view that technology is used to oppress.

Adult fiction has a number of prolific dystopian novels in its canon. Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985 has recently had a surge in popularity, it "soar[ed] to [the] top of Amazon Bestseller[s] List" (Mayer) in February 2017, following *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. More recently, the novel *The Circle* by David Eggers, published in 2013, is a clear cut dystopian text, primarily focusing on the movement towards a totalitarian society. This society's influence spreads by latching on to the popularity of a social network

like a parasite, depicting the power of corporations in a capitalist society. This leads to a rich text on the construction of a dystopian society in a digitalised 21st century capitalist society. In order to analyse the role of technology in the construction of this dystopic society, this thesis will be reading the novel through the lens of Agamben as he provides in the text *The State of Exception*. Agamben provides the judicial paradigm of the movement from a traditional western democracy toward a constitutional totalitarian state, offering a historical basis for the rise of a more controlling, and powerful form of government, and a theoretical foundation for the evolution of control and removal of privacy in order to create a safer, more streamlined society.

The second novel this thesis will analyse, which is also the second novel of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, *Catching fire*, embodies all the aspects of a young adult dystopian novel. It represents a classical totalitarian government which oppresses the citizens while also depicting the multitude of technological abuses to facilitate it. The panopticon as defined in *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault, which has often been compared to a dystopian society (Booker 4) provides the paradigm for the consideration of the role of power in *Catching Fire*. The basis of the panopticon, provided by Bentham in the 18th century, was de-institutionalised by Foucault, making it applicable to any form of power structure. In times of modernity, a society ruled and characterised by technology creates once again a new form of the panopticon.

On the completely opposite side of the spectrum is *The Lego Movie*. While it might not be considered a traditional dystopia, as a comedic animation of which the target audience is children, there is a clear dystopic element to the narrative. The main reason that this narrative is interesting, is that it illustrates the pervasion of the technological dystopian narrative in today's society. As well as the unique twist on the dystopian tradition *The Lego Movie* offers, due to extensive use of humour and relatable elements for the target audience, it

also manages to intertwine the adult themes of dystopian control with the easy watching of any quality animation film.

Popularity

Each of the selected narratives has been popular in their own niche. While *The Circle* itself has not been present on best-seller lists, the author has. As a prolific writer, Eggers has won many distinguished awards such as the Times Book of the Year, the New York Times Book Reviews Editor's Choice, and been a Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction finalist. He has even been named one of The Time magazine's most 100 influential people of 2005. This critical recognition of Eggers marks him as a popular contemporary author.

The Hunger Games trilogy has spent 200 consecutive weeks in the New York Times bestseller list, and has sold more than 50 million copies by 2012 in the United States alone ("Scholastic announces"). The popularity is reinforced by multiple New York Times bestsellers such as *Maze Runner* and *Divergent* series ("*The Maze Runner*", "*Divergent*"), which are both part of the young adult dystopian genre. This genre "explore[s] the effects of technologically driven, surveillance-ridden societies" and "the consumerist nature of the media-saturated world, or the infringements of personal liberties in the United States after passage of The Patriot Act" (Ames, 9).

The Lego Movie surpasses even the popularity of *The Hunger Games*. Moving far away from the traditional niche market of dystopian narratives, grossing a total of almost \$469 million as of October 2014 on the worldwide market ("*The Lego Movie*" (2014) – Box office), it is clear that the film has had a far-reaching global popularity.

Statement

These three narratives offer new and exciting insights on the twists and turns that the 21st century has brought to the genre of dystopian literature. With a definite shift towards the

technocratic society of today, these three contemporary narratives tailored towards disparate audiences all exhibit similar dystopic elements and show the extent to which the technological dystopia has infiltrated contemporary literature.

1. *The Circle*

This chapter will attempt to establish a discourse between the novel *The Circle*, published in 2013, and *The State of Exception*, a text from 2005 by Giorgio Agamben. Agamben is a political philosopher, focused on biopolitics, which considers the “the application and impact of political power on all aspects of human life” (Foucault “Security” 1), an ideology which Agamben expands on in *The State of Exception*, and is mirrored in *The Circle*. *The State of Exception* focuses on the judicial and governmental framework leading up to a totalitarian society while *The Circle* rather, enacts the role of technology as a conduit through which the appropriation of governmental powers functions. Both these texts approach the similar conclusion by utilising different forms of societal control. However, the manner in which this societal control proliferates is analogous. *The State of Exception* offers a historical perspective, and *The Circle* builds upon this historical perspective by presenting a fictional reimagination of the ideology as presented by Agamben.

The Circle follows the story of Mae Holland. She is a young, naïve woman who manages to become employed at her dream company, the titular Circle. The company, an internet giant, modelled after the likes of Google and Facebook which gives the novel a foundation in reality. The headquarters, aptly named the campus, have every imaginable resource available for the workers. On the surface this workplace seems to be perfect, with Mae even referring to it as Utopian, conforming to the definition that Levitas provides: a “blueprint of ... the perfect society”(3). Mae’s utopian vision of the world does not fade.

However the audience recognises what Mae is “wilfully blind”(Bex et al. 551) to; the gradual formation of a dystopian society.

Mae begins as a customer experience agent, CE for short, which is a customer service job. The work is fast paced, with hardly any respite between the certain deluge of queries. As the novel progresses Mae is moved up the hierarchy of the company, gaining more privileges and becoming increasingly buried in the convoluted world of the circle. While gaining these privileges she gradually loses her personal freedom and privacy.

1.1 *The State of Exception*

This gradual erosion of privacy and freedom can also be found in Agamben’s text *The State of Exception*. In the text the state of exception is defined as “a suspension of the juridical order itself” (Agamben 4), which is exemplified by the shift of power from the legislative to the executive branch. As a result of this shift “the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” (Agamben 3). While the state of exception finds its roots in wartime, Agamben argues that these temporary power shifts have ended up becoming the norm for several modern day governments, most notably the American and Italian governments (17-22). In American history, the state of exception was first reached during the Civil War. During this period the president, “in fact acted as an absolute dictator” (Agamben 20), with as the climatic act, the declaration of freedom for all slaves, bypassing both houses of congress entirely. The arrival of World War One brought with it a regression into the state of exception. Between 1917-1918 “Congress ... granted the president complete control over the administration ... [and] even made it a crime to ‘willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal ... language about the form of government of the United States’”(Agamben 21), showing a clear erosion of personal freedom, and arguably breaching the first amendment of the constitution.

While the past iterations of the state of exception were confined to wartime, this would cease to limit emergency powers. In 1933, Roosevelt was granted emergency powers by claiming he would need “broad Executive power to wage war ... as if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe” (Roosevelt qtd. in Agamben 22) to cope with the Great Depression. In World War Two, the state of exception was once again the new norm for the American government. In contemporary times nothing has changed. Agamben argues that the new identity Bush created by referring to his function “constantly as the ‘Commander in Chief of the Army’ after September 11, 2001” (22) can only be seen as an attempt to blur the lines between war and peace, to “produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule” (22). While the government of the United States has been reverted to a constitutional democracy after every iteration of the state of exception, it is important to note that the laws which passed by presidential decree have not been repealed, impacting the rights of the subjects. The apex of this, the USA Patriot act, enacted under the emergency powers which Bush invoked, is a clear erosion of rights of the American constituents (Surveillance), while being presented as benign to civilians.

In Italy, after multiple reinstatements of the state of exception “legislation by law-decrees has become the rule in Italy. As they have become so common, “they have been described as ‘bills strengthened by guaranteed emergency’” (Agamben 18). Accordingly, the trias politica is no longer the form of function in Italy; the legislative government has been confined to ratifying decrees issued by the executive state. This transformation can be seen, to a certain extent, in all western democracies (Agamben 18). While the appropriation of power is “perfectly well known to jurists and politicians” (Agamben 18) the constituents remain blind to this. These states of exception constantly build upon the previous iterations, decreasing the rights of civilians and increasing governmental control and power.

1.2 *The Circle and The State of Exception*

This gradual erosion of privacy and increase in power is mirrored in *The Circle*, enacting a technological state of exception. While *The Circle* focuses on a corporation rather than a governmental body, both texts offer insights into the gradual creation of a totalitarian society, which is formed on a step-by-step basis and is largely ignored by the citizens. The theoretical analysis which Agamben provides of the governmental rise to totalitarianism is fictionalised and reconceptualised in the capitalist, corporation led world of *The Circle*.

In order to function as a state of exception, there must be a form of war or crisis. The Circle is in fact at war; a war against privacy. This becomes clear when Mae attends “Dream Friday” (Eggers 100), an event where new projects of the Circle are unveiled. Mae first becomes aware of a project named SeeChange which consists of omnipresent micro-cameras the size of a “big thumb” (Eggers 105). These cameras can be accessed by anybody, placing individuals under constant corporate and societal surveillance. Throughout the novel, the Circle continues to enact new policies, which can be compared to the gradual creation of a constitutional dictatorship. Each new policy reduces the privacy of the subjects, and expands the previously granted powers.

While the Circle already has a tracking system which gives the location of each employee at any moment on campus, this becomes integrated with the SeeChange system. The interaction between the two is clear; the tracking of people, and consequently, the ability to easily observe them. Later Mae becomes acquainted with the health bracelet. During her first obligatory medical examination, Mae ingests a sensor which will track and send her biological data directly to the cloud. The Circle claims to be doing this for the prosperity of humanity, just as Bush claimed to accomplish with the patriot act, while the inverse is true.

An important aspect to the functioning of a state of exception is the complacency of its inhabitants. The “unnoticed” (Agamben 18) expansion of powers are mirrored in Mae’s

complacency, which is promoted by Mae's increasing responsibilities. These responsibilities entrench her in work, leaving no opportunity to consider the impact of the Circle's policies.

The control of the Circle is limited to its employees. In order to escape the surveillance ecosystem, the employee needs only to resign. However, later in the book, the designs of the Circle manifest themselves. The Circle wishes to saturate the world. The Circle must make use of the same tactics which governmental organisations have abused to achieve this. Following the footsteps of Roosevelt and his war on the Great Depression, the Circle conjures the enemy of privacy.

The Circle attempts to fight privacy in several manners, one of which is by having politicians "go clear" (Eggers 374). This requires that they wear a camera, which broadcasts every moment of their lives. In accordance to Nissenbaum's "tyranny of the normal" (160) theory, which entails that due to the changing technological circumstances, people's expectations of privacy change. With cameras so commonplace, a person cannot reasonably expect not to be filmed while in public (Nissenbaum 160). The next reduction of privacy is introduced, which then also becomes normalised. The politicians who go clear normalise this act. If a politician does not conform, their constituents wonder what they have to hide, thus invoking the "tyranny of the normal" (Nissenbaum 160), resulting in astronomical numbers of politicians going clear.

It is heavily implied that the Circle has coerced the first politicians into going clear, pushing the corporate control over both the individual and the government. "What do you think happened to Williamson" (Eggers 764). Williamson was a senator who threatened to split up the Circle. Soon after Williamson announced this, searches of criminal and despicable nature were found on the senators computer. "That's about the hundredth person [the Circle has] done that to" (Eggers 764).

The term “going clear” (Eggers 374) implies an unprecedented ensuring of the government’s democratic functioning. However, as sole proprietor of the data together with the refusal of the Circle to go clear, gives it ample opportunity to control the information which is broadcast. The epitome of this control over the government is in legislation being pushed through, at the behest of the Circle. This legislation would allow being registered to the Circle to become synonymous with being registered to vote.

However, controlling the government is not enough for the Circle. Control must extend to the population, control as powerful as the Circle has over its employees. This is embodied in ChildTrack, a chip implanted in the ankle of a child, which would track the location and entire academic history of the implantee. “By the time a student is ready for college, we have complete knowledge of everything the student has learned” (Eggers 535). This chip is the basis for a “totalitarian nightmare” (Eggers 763) in which “[e]veryone will be tracked, cradle to grave, with no possibility of escape” (Eggers 764).

Using crime and the opaqueness of cash transactions as the measure of emergency in order to enact the goal of financial regulation, the Circle will create their own digital currency, to replace cash, which would fall solely under their control. All of these aspects lead towards a democratically created totalitarian state, verging on the dystopian, precisely as Agamben describes in his text.

1.3 Technology and nature in *The Circle*

The influence of technology is not just limited to the creation of a dystopic state. Eggers also uses certain linguistic elements in his narrative which concur with the idea of technology as a tool of oppression, and the juxtaposition of technology with nature as its respite. Mae rents a kayak and visits “a body of water so seldom used that [it] had confounded her” (Eggers 133). These kayaking expeditions function as her escape from the surveillance oriented world. However, due to the pervasion of technology, even Mae’s respite

becomes a place under the scrutiny of technology in the same incremental steps that define the narrative. During her first visit there is no technology present. The introduction of an internet based reservation system defines her second visit, replacing the logbook. On the third and final visit, Mae steals a kayak which was left outside, and is caught on camera. Mae, sensing that technology has become inescapable, does not try to flee and never returns.

Eggers' description of the intimacy between man and machine closely mirrors this incremental expansion. The tracking bracelets have undergone a modernisation, the older generation of bracelets were made to fit more loosely, while Mae's newer generation is made to fit snugly, implying a closer connection between the human and the technological. While the intent of the Circle to view employees as humans is clear "[y]ou're not just a cog in a machine ... [w]e consider you a full, knowledgeable human being" (Eggers 287), people are referred to as "machine[s]" (Eggers 161, 183). If there is an issue in the workplace between people that must be resolved, it is called a "glitch" (Eggers 176), which has a clear technological connotation. Stewart, who is the first person to go clear, has his archive referred to as Stewart. "This is actually a machine ... It's a storage unit ... 'This is Stewart'" (Eggers 344), which literally equates the man with the machine. When talking about future Stewarts, the storage units will soon be "people-size" (Eggers 348). Stewart is described as "bending slightly, as if from the weight of the [camera] resting on his chest" (Eggers 323). When Mae goes clear, the camera is located "with the lens worn over her heart" (Eggers 481), a distinct juxtaposition of humanity and technology. Technology has even invaded the most intimate of human affairs, romance. "Mae got up to turn off the lights, allowing the grey luminescence of the monitor to remain, casting Francis in a ghostly light" (Eggers 319). The bracelet, showing the heartbeats of each person functions as a technological aphrodisiac. "Mae looked down at her bracelet, and saw that her heart rate was at 134 ... his was at 128" (Eggers 319). "Mae was thrilled at her power, the proof of it, right before her and

measurable” (Eggers 319). Mae, coaxed on by the technology; ““Want me to try something?”
 ... She rubbed its tip with her index finger, and together they watched the numbers rise to
 152” (Eggers 319). This passage implies a clear link between the erotic and the technological,
 evidencing the pure pervasion of technology in *The Circle*.

2 *Catching Fire*

The focus of this chapter will lie on the second novel of the bestseller trilogy, the Hunger Games. Written by Suzanne Collins, this incredibly popular young adult dystopia series has lifted the genre as a whole into unprecedented heights of popularity (Hintz, Basu & Broad 1). This popularity is the reason for analysing this text, as clearly some aspect of the narrative has resounded with its intended and unintended audiences. The narrative of the *Hunger Games* seems to almost be a trope in the genre of contemporary young adult fiction; the trope is that of a pubescent young adult trying to define their role in an adult society, competing with and playing on the insecurities of other pubescent young adults (Lantham & Hollister). While Collins may be guilty of conforming to this trope, she has also managed to project the genre into the mainstream.

In order to clearly define the role of technology in this dystopian society the second novel *Catching Fire* was chosen, rather than the more critically responded to text, part one of the trilogy, *The Hunger Games*. As the second novel of the trilogy, *Catching Fire* inhabits a transitional phase in the plot. The plot of the first novel revolves around the Hunger Games themselves, an annual event which exist in order to make ensure the continuing suppression of subjects by showing the results of a failed rebellion. In this novel Collins strives to create a dystopian world in which children are forced to fight to the death for the entertainment of the upper class. This novel ends with an act of rebellion against the ruling powers, which Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist, survives only due to an “unfortunate sentimental streak” (Collins

32). Her act of rebellion sets the scene for the second novel, which involves the ignition of the spark of rebellion to a full scale uprising. This rebellion then takes place in the final novel, eventually leading to the overthrowing of the status quo, and the construction of a normal society in which Katniss ends up happily married with two children. The preference for the second part is as *Catching Fire* describes more about the society, and the role of the ruling body while also offering insight into the most important event and namesake of the series, the Hunger Games.

Catching Fire will be read through a Foucauldian lens, particularly reliant on the text *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault was an extremely influential French philosopher from the 20th century, a social theorist whose work is debated up to today. The theory of a panoptic society as presented in *Discipline and Punish* has previously been linked to dystopian fiction (Booker 4), as well as *The Hunger Games* (Wezner). Rather than focusing on a singular book, Wezner applies the Foucauldian theory to the entirety of the trilogy. As Wezner astutely observes the political paradigm as defined by Foucault and the dystopian society as created by Collins have much in common (149). However, the society in *The Hunger Games* warps and evolves this theory by using technology, and offering a reinterpreted panoptical society based on the ubiquitousness of technology.

2.1 Power in Panem

In Foucault's text the idea of power plays a central role. Power, in the eyes of Foucault, is not a hierarchy. Power is rather a relation between two entities, a relation which is constantly in flux and which can define or direct the behaviour of the other. This functioning however, can reverse, as every entity has their own degree of power. Knowledge and power coexist in a circular relation, power defines what knowledge is and knowledge reinforces power by producing truth. This truth then in turn affects the power relations. The interaction between power and knowledge becomes clear in *Catching Fire*.

The city-state of Panem is divided into 12 districts, and the Capitol. In the Capitol the upper, controlling class resides together with the President, President Snow. Preceding the *Hunger Games* trilogy, there were 13 districts. A revolution by this thirteenth district led to its alleged destruction. The Capitol's power over the inhabitants of the districts enabled it to manufacture a truth, in the Foucauldian sense of the word, which is dependent on the use of technology. News items produced by the Capitol function as proof that District 13 is still uninhabitable and subservient to the Capitol. While watching one of these news reports Katniss notices that "the reporter has simply been incorporated into the old footage. She's not in District 13 at all. Which begs the question, *What is?* (emphasis Collins)" (228). With this new evidence a shift in truth occurs, and following that a shift in power. The power relation between Katniss and President Snow approaches an equilibrium.

Throughout the entire novel the use of technology is linked with power. This becomes evident by analysing the role of technology, and how the rebels are able to reverse this technology on the Capitol for their own gain. Katniss is witness to a television report meant only for the political leaders of Panem, the subject of which is the uprisings in other districts. The viability of a rebellion becomes higher due to this knowledge. On top of this, District 13's continued existence is safeguarded as the district specialised in the development of nuclear weaponry. This advanced technology puts them on par with the Capitol, as such the Capitol has no power over 13 and visa-versa.

The rebels appropriate technology and in tandem, its inherent power. Katniss's mentor Haymitch killed a tribute in his Hunger Games by utilising a forcefield, reflecting an axe thrown at him, killing the aggressor and turning it into a weapon. "Not just against the other tributes, but the Capitol, too" (Collins 281) Katniss remarks, as it shows a lack of oversight on the Capitol's behalf. The night preceding the games, each tribute is subjected to an interview. Following the interview, rather than the customary individualistic attitude, the

tributes stand hand in hand. This united front is then broadcast over the entirety of Panem, and seen by all. This appropriation of technology to suit the rebellion's needs continues into the Hunger Games itself. A tribute uses the surrounding forcefield by skewering meat, and touching it to the forcefield leaving "the chunk of meat blackened on the outside but well cooked inside" (Collins 404). This reversal reaches its epitome at the end of the narrative. The tributes come up with a plan to use the arena as a weapon. In order to realise this, the tributes would run a length of conducting wire from a tree struck by lightning every 12 hours, at the behest of the gamemasters, to the lake in the centre of the arena in order to electrify everyone in contact with the water. However, the plan changes as the tributes use the charge to blow up the forcefield, literally turning the technology of the Capitol into their tool for freedom.

2.2 Panopticism

Technology plays a continuing role in my Foucauldian analysis of *Catching Fire*. The "Panopticism" chapter of Foucault's text discusses the ideal form of prison as created by Bentham. Bentham's vision of the panopticon consisted of a circular building with a singular guard tower in the middle. By making use of backlighting, the guard is able to view each prisoner and most importantly, the prisoners have no way to confirm if they are being observed at any given moment. This construction was according to Foucault the perfect architectural embodiment of power, which functions by "induc[ing] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault "Discipline" 201), resulting in self-surveillance by the subject.

While Bentham designed the panopticon as a prison in the 18th century, Foucault later argued that "the panopticon is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use" (Foucault "Discipline" 224). This philosophy is reinforced by Foucault's sentiment of the modern society becoming carceral (Booker 8), due to the

extensive control and surveillance in contemporary society. The rise of a panoptic society is reinforced by technology as evidenced by *Catching Fire*. In the panoptic society, knowledge of other people is key. In Panem, the President is aware of even the most intimate aspects of Katniss's life. He is aware of her transgressions of the law. He is also aware of the fact that her so-called cousin Gale is rather a friend, which acts in contrary to the President's plans for Katniss and the nation. He is even aware of the kiss Gale and Katniss shared, to which no one was eye witness. Katniss has a conversation in a secluded place, while reminiscing on the conversation she notes "no one would have been monitoring the dusty dome where we talked. Although I bet they are now" (Collins 100).

The parallels to a panoptic society do not end there. The actual Hunger Games exist within a panopticon. The arena is a perfect circle, with a domed forcefield encasing it. As the Hunger Games are the central reality television show of the year in a media obsessed society, everything is on camera, and is visible to all. This results in the tributes acting differently, as Katniss's behaviour illustrates. Katniss has been taught to see the forcefield which entraps her in the arena. However, when asked how she knew where the forcefield was, she replied "I don't know. It's almost as if I could hear it" (Collins 392). The idea of constant surveillance acts on the tributes and censors them. Several of the tributes are part of a plan to escape and free Katniss from the hold of the Capitol. Due to complete non-existence of privacy these plans must remain unarticulated. This complete surveillance almost ends up in foiling the escape attempt as Katniss has no inkling of events which will transpire, causing her to mistrust and almost kill her co-conspirators.

The construction of Panem also reflects a panoptic architecture. "The Capitol's location elevates it over the districts it controls, mirroring the warden's raised watchtower" (Wezner 149). The inhabitants of the surrounding districts are trapped in their district by

electrified fences with raised barbed wire, mirroring the cells which function to isolate prisoners from each other, once again enforcing the optic of a panopticon on the mind's eye.

2.3 Technology and Nature in *Catching Fire*

Throughout the novel, just as in *The Circle*, there is a contrast between nature and humanity, and technology. In the districts Katniss and the other inhabitants are oppressed by the use of technology. By escaping to nature, Katniss and to a certain extent Gale temporarily alleviate the pressure of this oppression. "I think of Gale, who is only really alive in the woods" (Collins 9), implying that Gale is only really himself when released from the grasp of technology.

Katniss's escape from the society of her discontent is also the woods. "The woods have always been our place of safety, our place beyond the reach of the Capitol, where we're free to say what we feel, be who we are" (Collins 36). Katniss and Haymitch retreat into the natural world for uninhibited communication, by disembarking a Capitol train for fear of bugs. This fear of being overheard plays into the imagery of a panoptic society. Upon arrival at District 11, Katniss notes that the armed guards look "so out of place among the fields of wildflowers around them"(Collins 81). Katniss regularly has nightmares of mutts, animals which are created and genetically enhanced by the Capitol. These nightmares can be interpreted as her fear of the invasion Capitol's invasion into her sanctuary of nature.

This conflict between nature and technology reaches its apex in the design of the arena for the games. The circular arena consists of 12 unique partitions. Each partition corresponds to an hour, and each hour brings with it a trap manufactured by the gamemakers. The design of the arena is reminiscent of both the panopticon and Panem. The jungle area of the arena offers safety as it seems natural. However, for Katniss "the jungle has quickly evolved from a place of protection to a sinister trap" (Collins 444). Once again the technology of the Capitol has invaded Katniss's refuge. The reintroduction of mutts qualifies

this. The mutts, called jabberjays, can recreate pitch perfect renditions of loved ones being tortured, bringing the juxtaposition of nature and technology to its climax. This has the added irony of being closely related to the symbol of the resistance, which is a mockingjay.

This consistent abuse of technology by the Capitol and the physical structure of the Panem intertwine to create a dystopia resting on the theoretical foundation of Foucault's panopticon. This reinforces the idea of a surveillance society, based on technology, as a prerequisite for the construction and continuing functioning of a dystopic world.

3 *The Lego Movie*

The third chapter of this thesis will focus on *The Lego Movie*, and attempt to place it within the framework of dystopic narratives, by arguing that it exhibits many aspects which define dystopic narratives. By placing *The Lego Movie* within this framework, the full extent of the "dystopic impulse" (Booker qtd. in Fitting 274) which characterises contemporary fiction can be seen. Further parallels such as the physical structure of the world, the dichotomy between spaces away from technology and areas within its grasp can be found.

The Lego Movie, while not a dystopia in the traditional sense, can offer insights into the extent of the dystopic influence on contemporary narratives. The film has been critically well received boasting a score of 96% on Rotten Tomatoes, and the certified fresh medal, which requires a "steady [rating] of 75% or higher after a set amount of reviews (80 for wide-release movies, ...), including 5 reviews from Top Critics" ("*The Lego Movie* (2014) - Rotten Tomatoes"). The target audience of the film is a far cry from the average audience of modern day dystopian narratives. As an animated movie based on Lego, the target audience is clearly young children. The colourful characters, fast jokes and fable-like story structure all conform to this. The dystopic impulse has found enough traction in modern day society to

exert its influence over unrelated genres. In order to utilise this text, it must first be argued that this text can be analysed as a dystopic narrative.

3.1 *The Lego Movie* as a dystopian narrative

Booker claims that “dystopian literature is not so much a specific genre as a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit” (qtd. in Fitting 272). By oppositional energy Booker means that “virtually any literary work that contains an element of social or political criticism offers the possibility of such readings” (qtd. in Fitting 272). In the text Booker attempts to argue that this “dystopian impulse manifests itself in ‘virtually any literary work that contains an element of social or political criticism’”(Fitting 274). However, Fitting, in his review of Booker, states that “if the dystopian were truly an energy ... one would expect to be shown this impulse at work in texts other than the same familiar dystopias”(Fitting 274). While Booker argues that dystopian narratives are not limited to a certain genre, Fitting rebukes this by claiming Booker mostly limited his research to the dystopian canon. While it is clearly not enough on its own to support the argument of Booker, dystopian energy can easily be found in *The Lego Movie*. The narrative follows the story of Emmet, a blank slate of a character as described by a multitude of his colleagues. In the world created by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, two critically acclaimed filmmakers, Emmet comes to represent the oppositional force against the dictator who take the form Lord Business. As his title suggests, Lord Business is a CEO. He is CEO of Octam, a company which controls all commercial aspects in *The Lego Movie*. However, Lord Business also has an alter ego by the name of President Business, as whom he makes his debut. President Business is the unequivocal ruler of the world in *The Lego Movie*. As this conjoining of names implies, Lord Business is both in control of the political and commercial aspects of life in *The Lego Movie*; corrupting the civilisation, which becomes abundantly clear in the opening sequence of the film.

The film opens with an upbeat song by the name of “everything is awesome” (*The Lego Movie* 00:04:58-00:06:42). This song, created and promoted by Lord Business, is on the surface “a stream of inane pop culture” (Brown). The lyrics however, promote conformity. “What the words are really saying is: Don’t focus on your problems because everything is great. Stay in line with other people just like you” (Brown). The visuals accompanying the song only reinforce this message. The first action Emmet undertakes after waking up is reaching for an instruction book which, in the exact fashion of the Lego instruction books, delineates step by step what must be done to achieve the envisioned result. The instruction book contains instructions ranging from exercise in the morning, to purchasing \$37 coffee, which is of course is produced by Lord Business. The corruption of being both the CEO of Octam and president does not end there. Octam also, conveniently, produces the electronic voting machines, implying an unfair electoral process in order to maintain control over the nation.

This misuse of technology is a trend that can be seen throughout the narrative, which presents a certain irony. Almost the entirety of *The Lego Movie* take place in the Lego universe. Lego, which is a symbol of freedom, of creativity, a medium through which anyone can express their creativity, is in danger of becoming a ritualised, instruction based experience. This becomes clear in the dichotomy of the orderly, perfect world which Lord Business envisions, and the individual creative freedom the Master Builders, societies’ rebel force, picture. The ultimate end goal of Lord Business is to subject the world to the “kragle”, a superweapon which is in fact crazy glue, and referred to as an ancient relic or artefact with godlike power. This kragle would then literally stagnate civilisation by gluing the inhabitants in place and making the world conform to the President’s singular vision of perfection, with no chance of societal change. Taking into account the context of a Lego based world, which by definition is should be dynamic and fluid, offers a stark contrast to the controlled and rigid

world Lord Business envisions. The Master Builders must join forces in order to prevent this demise of society.

The Master Builders are unique and individualistic. Characters such as Cleopatra, Unikitty and Batman all have their own building style. For example Batman claims to only “work in black. And sometimes very very dark grey” (*The Lego Movie* 00:47:22-00:47:25). Unikitty, a fantastical mixture of a unicorn and a cat, builds in baby-blue and pink. These Master Builders are free to build whatever they envision. In contrast, the builders of Lord Business are subjected to strict instructions, with no room for personal touches. In order to ensure the subjects follow the instructions as proposed, the President makes use of an extensive surveillance network. This becomes clear from the very beginning of the film. One of the first scenes consists of a billboard, depicting President Business with the text “I’ve got my eye on you” (*The Lego Movie* 00:06:20-00:06:25), which cuts to a surveillance camera, rotating toward the viewers. The camera becomes the focal point of the shot, blurring the background and foregrounding the idea of a surveillance culture.

The surveillance culture of *The Lego Movie* has not remained unnoticed. Throughout the film “*The Lego Movie* satirises surveillance culture” (Walters). This first becomes apparent when Emmet first interacts with the so-called “piece of resistance” (*The Lego Movie* 00:09:29-00:09:31), the counter for the kragle, which is in fact the lid for the crazy glue. This lid has been prophesised as the catalyst for a successful uprising. Emmet, reawakening after coming into contact with it, finds himself in an interrogation cell of Lord Business’s secret police. The piece of resistance was buried deep underground, yet somehow the secret police possesses footage of Emmet’s contact with the fabled piece. This extensive surveillance continues throughout the narrative. When Wyldstyle, the love interest of Emmet, attempts to convince the civilians to revolt against the oppression of President Business, she transmits security footage of Emmet, and his actions against the reigning government, to screens

everywhere. This security footage includes footage from his living room, implying that the inhabitants of *The Lego Movie* have no aspect of privacy. This theme is further expanded on by the following footage of Emmet. Entire scenes ripped from the film are presented as security footage, including scenes that, logically, could not be recorded. For example, a scene is defined as security footage which shows Emmet and his crew surviving an attack by President Business. If the President had knowledge of the survival, as the surveillance footage implies, Emmet would have been hunted further. This leaves the viewers with two possible interpretations. Either the government has so much security footage that it is impossible for even the robotic army of Presidents Business to parse all the footage, or it is a deliberate satirical aspect included by the writers. Either way, the footage speaks for itself; *The Lego Movie* clearly embraces the society of surveillance, and does not shy away from focalising it.

Surveillance is not the only technological abuse that President Business is guilty of. The robot army that he controls, the voting machines and the extensive surveillance system are all symptoms of a structured abuse of technology as an institutional system of oppression. The apex is embodied in the technology of the micromanagers. These micromanagers are employed by the President in order to micromanage everything into perfection. The first depiction of this of technological overpowering of individualism occurs when the President threatens the captain of his secret police. In order to confirm the captain's total obedience to the President, he uses the kragle to freeze the captain's parents in place. The President is not pleased with the final tapestry that he created. He then employs a micromanager to force the disabled bodies to stand in the position the President wants, stating "all I'm asking for is total perfection" (*The Lego Movie* 00:25:11-00:25:15). Further on in the narrative the micromanagers are utilised in different manners. They are shown as being a jack of all trades, employed to clean up messes, search for bodies, and once again force the President's idea of

perfection on the civilisation. During the climax, the kragle is used to hold society still, and an army of micromanagers is employed to perfect the final control over the citizens.

3.2 Spaces away from technology in *The Lego Movie*

As was a point of interest in both *The Circle* and *Catching Fire*, spaces away from technology play a role in the formation of the narrative. In order to actualise the Master Builders plan, Emmet and his party must travel to a part of the world called Cloud Cuckoo land. This land is the literal anti-thesis to Emmet's home. There are no rules, and every building is absurdist and colourful. All aspects of the world are unique, as are its inhabitants. For example, in order to reach Cloud Cuckoo land, the party must drive up a rainbow, which traditionally is aligned with good rather than evil. The meeting of the Master Builders takes place in a conference room which takes the shape of a puppy. The visual design of this part of the world creates an almost utopic vision; how the world could be without the interference of the President. The vision of utopia in *The Lego Movie* is defined as being the opposite of the dystopia. In Cloud Cuckoo land "there are no rules. There's no government, no babysitters, no bedtimes, no frowny faces, no bushy moustaches and no negativity of any kind" (*The Lego Movie* 00:39:20-00:39:32). To which Wyldstyle responds "You just said the word no like a thousand times" (*The Lego Movie* 00:39:32-00:39:34). To which the retort sounds: "And there's also no consistency" (*The Lego Movie* 00:39:34-00:39:36). Consistency, which is the one thing that the President is after, the reason he wishes to order the world under his command. The chaotic energy, upbeat dance soundtrack, and the creational freedom all reinforce this contrast.

This utopic world is short lived. The secret police find their way into this utopia of creation by a tracker which is attached to Emmet's ankle. This invasion of technology is explicitly depicted by a large robotic police force, dressed mostly in black, armed with lasers flying in on police helicopters, and Star Wars like troop carriers, providing a stark contrast

between the idyllic world of Cloud Cuckoo land and the technologically contaminated world of the President. The technological oppression eventually endures as Cloud Cuckoo land, which is literally built on a cloud, sinks into the ocean and is submerged under the pressure of the technological invasion.

Another interesting aspect of *The Lego Movie* is that it take the form of a frame narrative. Nearing the end of the film the audience becomes aware that the world presented is a figment of the imagination of a young boy. The Lego world is created by his father. The perfect structures, the rigid control over the placement of each minute detail and the complete lack of individualistic elements are all reflected in the father's character. The most interesting aspect of this frame narrative is however, the idea that in the child's imagination, technology functions as a purely oppressive factor. The child, with the unbridled power of his imagination, envisions a fictional world in which technology purely serves to oppress and to control, serves as a statement about the powerful role of technology in this kind of cultural critique of society.

Conclusion

These three narratives, while dissimilar, offer a powerful commentary on the role of technological in societies created in the 21st century. The ubiquitous abuse of these technologies presents the audience with a critical view on the contemporary technocratic society, and offers a warning as to the complacency of society in general. While, thankfully, we are not at the point of the abuse as described in these narratives, it would do society well to pay attention and act on these warnings before it is too late. The function of dystopian fiction therefore, has not changed. It has rather broadened its ideological vision to include the prevalent pervasion of technology into the public and private spheres.

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