"Two Generations of War and Surveillance:"

On the Portrayal of Sous- and Surveillance Societies in Contemporary American

Literature

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Introduction

In the current digital age technologies are constantly changing and advancing at a rapid pace.

Through portable technology such as laptops, smartphones and tablets, people are always

connected to global networks, most significantly the Internet. While this allows for a

multitude of opportunities, it also allows for increased and new types of surveillance, for

example through GPS tracking or the recording of communication via email, phone calls and

texts. As new sur- and sousveillance technologies are developed and become increasingly

common in daily life, the possibilities and consequences of these developments are reflected

in contemporary literature. Both Dave Egger's *The Circle* and the last chapter of Jennifer

Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, entitled "Pure Language," reflect these new

technologies and discuss the effect they have on both a personal and a societal level. Both

novels were written by popular contemporary American authors and follow a trend of

critically portraying digital media. However, they both take a different approach regarding

this subject. This thesis shows the different ways in which *Goon Squad* and *The Circle*

portray increased sous- and surveillance in 21st century America, as well as how they reflect

on the role of citizenship and authenticity in a surveillance society, and the driving factors of

increased sous- and surveillance. In doing so, Eggers presents a very critical and dystopian

view of modern digital media, while Egan portrays a more nuanced perspective which

considers the danger of idolizing the past, and criticizes modern media culture.

This thesis starts with a discussion of the terms surveillance and sousveillance and the

theoretical background related to these concepts. It then considers what the driving factors of

increased sous- and surveillance in 21st century America might be and shows how these are

reflected in *The Circle* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad.* Next, this thesis discusses the

question of citizenship, specifically to what extent participation in a surveillance state or a

sousveillance culture is necessary in order to participate in American society, and how this is reflected in *The Circle* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. In the final chapter, the thesis discusses the different roles authenticity plays in these novels. It also considers the place that authenticity has in the sur- and sousveillance societies created in *The Circle* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, if it has any place at all, and how authenticity could be considered a rebellious act.

Chapter 1

Surveillance, Sousveillance and their Relation to Contemporary Literature

Ball and Webster define surveillance as follows in *The Intensification of Surveillance: Crime, Terrorism and Warfare in the Information Age* (2003):

> Surveillance involves the observation, recording and categorization of information about people, processes and institutions. It calls for the collection of information, its storage, examination and – as a rule – its transmission. (1)

They also state that in recent decades, surveillance has increased and become more thorough through innovations in information and communications technologies (ICTs). Surveillance is, indeed, a constant feature of modern-day life. Whether it takes place in the form of CCTV-cameras filming customers when entering a store, or in the more invasive form of monitoring phone calls and other digital conversations, it is ingrained in, and therefore a requisite for participating in, society (Ball and Webster 11). As Milligan puts it, "Our culture is a surveillance culture, for better and worse". However, he states that "the way to overcome that, […] is through sousveillance" (137).

Sousveillance is a term coined in 2003 by Steve Mann et al., who define it as follows in "Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments":

> One way to challenge and problematize both surveillance and acquiescence to it is to resituate these technologies of control on individuals, offering panoptic technologies to help them observe those in authority. We call this inverse panopticon

"sousveillance" from the French words for "sous" (below) and "veiller" to watch.

(Mann, Nolan and Wellman 332)

As "surveillance" is derived from the French words sur (over) and veiller (to watch), Mann et al. flip the script with the notion of sousveillance, watching from below. By instilling sousveillance, the watching is brought down to a human level, both literally, through the use of bodycams for example, and figuratively, as it is now individuals who do the watching, rather than authoritative institutions.

Both surveillance and sousveillance are often related to Panopticon, a model for a disciplinary system designed by Jeremy Bentham. This system, which was discussed by Foucault in his novel *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, works on the basis of the constant possibility of surveillance. The subjects of the surveillance cannot see the inspector or communicate with each other, while the inspector can see all of the inspected. It is impossible for the inspected to know whether they are being watched or not, and as they could be watched at any moment this threat forces them to behave according to the rules set for them (Foucault 200-201). Ball and Webster state that Foucault "took the Panopticon as a central motif of modernity itself, adding that self-monitoring accompanies panopticism, with the inspected continuously feeling that they are subject to surveillance" (6). Furthermore, they explain that the Panopticon goes beyond the physical realm for Foucault, which means that "[i]n the Foucauldian view, when surveillance is accompanied by technologies such as computerized tills and video cameras, then we have entered an era of the Panopticon without walls." (Lyon qtd. in Ball and Webster 6). Similarly, concerning sousveillance as a reaction to surveillance, Milligan states that "the gazes then only pile up, and the panopticon finds a new media distribution strategy" (137). With the use of cameras and invisible surveillance technologies, any surveillance state becomes panoptical. However, if self-monitoring

accompanies panopticism, sousveillance aids this panoptical state rather than fighting

surveillance.

The two literary works on which this thesis will center, Dave Eggers' *The Circle* and

the last chapter of Jennifer Egan's *Goon Squad*, are both concerned with sur- and

sousveillance, panopticism and advancements in technology, albeit to a different extent. Both

works specifically focus on the sousveillant aspect of social media sharing and its effect on

society, culture and personal freedom. The possibilities of advancements in ICTs and

technologies that can be used for surveillance, such as cameras and bugging devices that get

increasingly smaller and easier to hide, have inspired many (dystopian) authors and novels,

most famously Orwell's *1984*. Eggers' *The Circle* is noticeably influenced by Orwell's work.

The Circle features a young woman, Mae Holland, who gets a job at a large, Google-like tech

company called the Circle. As she works there, the company grows increasingly more

successful, as well as powerful, and starts to collect more and more data from its customers.

The Circle invents gadgets such as the SeeChange, a light and portable camera that has the

ability to film and stream its footage online 24 hours a day. This invention leads powerful

people, most importantly politicians but also Mae, who becomes an exemplary person at the

company, to stream their lives 24/7, called "going transparent." Right before she announces

her decision to go transparent, Mae reveals the three slogans of the company: "Secrets are

Lies", "Sharing is Caring", and "Privacy is Theft", which echo the paradoxical slogans of

Orwell's *1984,* "War is Peace", "Freedom is Slavery", and "Ignorance is Strength"

(Pignagnoli 151). There is, however, resistance against the company's attitude towards

privacy and the sharing of personal information online with the world, for example by

Mercer, Mae's technophobic ex-boyfriend. *The Circle* illustrates the potential dangers of the

public sharing of personal data, most importantly through the public witch-hunt for Mercer,

who has gone off the grid, using SeeChange cameras, which leads to his death. However, the

sousveillance technology is also used to diminish crime and corruption by filming and streaming public areas and politicians going transparent. This creates a panoptical society in which everyone takes on the role of both the supervisor and the supervised, which is represented in the narration by focalizing through Mae, who embodies both roles through her job at the Circle. This is also aided by the narrative space of the novel, which, as Pignagnoli points out, takes place almost entirely on the Circle's campus, creating a sense of claustrophobia (155).

Chapter 13 of *A Visit from the Goon Squad,* entitled "Pure Language," features Alex, a man who is struggling to make it in the music business and is in need of money. He is hired by a formerly successful music producer named Bennie to find people who will promote a musician online in exchange for payment. These people are called "parrots", as their job is to repeat (parrot) endorsements on social media in order to generate buzz about certain topics. The parrots are chosen based on statistics concerning their need (for money), reach (how connected they are), and corruptibility (Egan 322). The chapter creates a society in which people are reduced to statistics and market value, either as consumer or product, which is reflected in the use of terms such as "parrots" and "pointers," which refers to young children. People are almost merged with their smartphone-like devices, called handsets, and the chapter is filled with text-speak. It reflects a constant connection to the handsets, as well as an immediacy and directness of communication that is expected and even preferred over face-to-face conversations: "'I just get tired of talking.' […] 'Can I just T you?' Lulu asked" (Egan 328). These handsets are connected to each other, and can be used to track other handsets down, which is illustrated when Alex finds his wife in a crowd by tracking her handset (345).

The statement made in *Goon Squad* on the increased use of sousveillance technologies is more ambiguous than it is in Eggers' *The Circle*. While it brings up ethical issues with using influence and public image disingenuously, and reflects the psychological effect of

living in a surveillance state, it is not depicting a dystopia like *The Circle* does. Pignagnoli states that "[e]choing Mark Zuckerberg's words, the Circle's mantra invites its users to be more transparent, but transparency is just the sugarcoated synonym for surveillance" (152). In *Goon Squad*, however, this issue of transparency and surveillance is secondary. It instead considers sousveillance technology from an ethical standpoint related to marketing and authenticity, while depicting surveillance as mundane. This is just as relevant to contemporary culture, especially when one considers online marketing techniques and the practice of data profiling, both of which are used by companies like Google and Facebook. *Goon Squad* shows the role social media plays in these practices and takes a critical approach in portraying them. Both Egan and Eggers open a discussion related to sousveillance in the form of social media sharing, which is ever more present in contemporary culture. In doing so, they both consider a different aspect of the effect social media sharing has on society as a whole.

Chapter 2

Driving Factors of Surveillance

As chapter 1 of this thesis shows, sous- and surveillance are facts of life in contemporary

society. However, the question remains why surveillance has increased this rapidly in recent

years, and why people are allowing this increase. While 9/11 has certainly played a role in the

increase in surveillance during the past two decades, there is some discussion on the extent of

its influence on modern surveillance. For example, Ball and Webster argue in *The*

Intensification of Surveillance that "[t]he attack on the Twin Towers has accelerated

surveillance, but its steady progress was well developed before then" (9). However, in the

next chapter, David Lyon states that he "think[s] it safe to suggest that the intensity and the

centralization of surveillance in Western countries is increasing dramatically as a result of

September 11" (17). After 9/11, there was indeed a visible increase in surveillance. Airport

security was increased, and the USA PATRIOT Act was signed in October 2001 as a response

to the attacks. In February 2003, the T.I.A. program was established, which stands for Total

Information Awareness and was renamed to Terrorism Information Awareness in May 2003,

and was dismantled later that year following backlash because of its invasive nature.

However, according to a 2012 *New York Times* article by Shane Harris, the program's data

mining system was appropriated by the N.S.A. and the system continues. In this article, Harris

states that

> Many Americans seem willing to give up their digital privacy if it means the
>
> government has a better chance of catching terrorists. Consider the revealing
>
> intelligence that millions of us give to Facebook — willingly. These days, we are

more likely to be outraged by airport screening, and its public inconvenience and

indignity, than by unseen monitoring. (*New York Times* 2012)

It appears that people are willing to accept surveillance, as long as it does not present a

noticeable inconvenience to them, especially if they appear to gain something from it, which

is illustrated in the following quote from *The Intensification of Surveillance*: "Dennis (1999)

reports that 70 per cent of Britons are happy to let companies use their personal data, on the

condition that they receive something back" (qtd. in Ball and Webster 9). People are willing

to accept surveillance and the collection of their personal data, as long as there is a tradeoff.

In this case, the tradeoff comes in the form of "a personal service or other benefits", but after

9/11, as the War on Terror developed, it became the promise of safety.

This exchange is what drives the American citizens in both *The Circle* and *A Visit*

from the Goon Squad to accept the increasing surveillance in public spaces, as well as the

infringements on their personal data and lives. As Alex puts it in "Pure Language," it is "the

price of safety" (Egan 339). Alex considers the constant presence of police officers,

helicopters, the "visual scanning devices affixed to cornices, lampposts, and trees" (339), all

simply inconveniences that make up for the assurance of safety. The impact of September 11

can be felt throughout *Goon Squad* and it is central to the mood set in "Pure Language." The

climax of the chapter comes in the form of Scotty Hausmann's concert, which takes place at

the "Footprint," the World Trade Center memorial, and which is heavily surveilled by the

aforementioned helicopters. Scotty's paranoia, visible in his trailer and audible in his songs,

represents the fear that has creeped into society after 9/11. Scotty is described as "a word

casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished" (341), and later, as he takes the

stage and comes alive, as "a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile

[…], who was part of no one's data" (344). Scotty is himself a footprint of an age before data

profiling or the surveillance state described in "Pure Language." However, the concert is temporary, and while "Scotty has entered the realm of myth," the age he is reminiscent of is over and the paranoia he exudes is ever-present. Though surveillance is presented as a solution for this culture of fear and paranoia within society, it is also a cause. The constant presence of cameras and police creates a claustrophobic panopticon. This is symbolized by the rising buildings and the wall next to the Hudson river, both of which block out the sun. By closing in the city and depriving it of sunlight and a view of the sky, these structures cause the enclosed space of the panoptical surveillance state to take on physical dimensions in *Goon Squad*.

In *The Circle*, the Circle creates a technological panopticon by reasoning that if you have nothing to hide, you have no reason to oppose to being watched. Unlike the surveillance society in *Goon Squad* however, the panopticon is mainly created through sousveillance. The Circle encourages its members, especially politicians, to go transparent and wear a bodycam 24 hours a day, every day. As increasingly more people do, and more SeeChange cameras are being placed in both private and public spaces, America turns into a panoptic society. A pitch meeting toward the end of *The Circle* shows how these cameras can be applied to create security systems. In this scene, a woman demonstrates her prototype for a system called SeeYou, through which police officers would be able to see through color coding which civilians have previously been convicted of crimes and what the nature of the crime is, violent or non-violent (Eggers 418). The system would, "ideally," work through the installment of a chip in the offender, as "it would be permanent" (419). This shows a progression of the disregard for privacy to the realm of permanent body modification. A founding member of the Circle present at the meeting states that "it's the community's right to know" (419). However, it appears from the way in which SeeYou operates, invisible and unavoidable, that the

"community's right to know" rises above the individual's right to not be known in this society.

The question remains, however, what drives the construction of these surveillance systems in the first place. While they are being sold in the name of safety, there is also money to be made from information. Data profiles can be sold to marketing companies, and virtually every website you visit currently uses tracking cookies to create personalized advertisements. Facebook is perhaps the most famous, or infamous, social media platform for selling its users' personal information to advertisers, and became notorious for its involvement with Cambridge Analytica (*The New York Times* 2018). It is not just the marketing industry, however, that benefits form data mining and profiling. As the Cambridge Analytica case shows, data profiles can be used to influence voters during elections, which was the case during the 2014 Midterm elections in the USA according to a 2018 *New York Times* report.

Data profiles are therefore very valuable information. In the context of personalized advertising, online users have become both the consumer and the product. While they consume the services of the internet, their data profiles are being sold, which comes back to the tradeoff Ball and Webster mentioned (9); websites provide 'free' services, for which they receive customers' data. This selling of data profiles is clearly illustrated in "Pure Language." In order to set up the blind team, Alex ranks his friends and acquaintances, profiling them and selling this information to Lulu and Benny. This blind team makes the structure of online marketing visual. Alex creates data profiles from a pool of people he is connected to, and based on these profiles they are selected to advertise Scotty Hausmann's concert. All the while, Alex himself remains invisible.

In *The Circle*, this data collection is conducted more openly. People are expected to give up their personal information willingly, after which it is stored in the Cloud and will never be deleted. Circle users know their data is being stored and that they are being watched,

leading them to monitor their own behavior, while believing it will increase their safety. *The Circle* relies heavily on the concept of the panopticon in this respect. It is reminiscent of Orwell's *1984* throughout the novel, but instead of Orwell's governmental Big Brother, it is now a corporation that watches. Egan's form of data collection and profiling, on the other hand, is less grand and all-encompassing. Instead, it draws on "the disturbing banality of being watched. It's not conspiracy – it's capitalism" (Johnston 157). In both of these novels, the capitalist aspect of surveillance technology plays a leading role. Corporations and marketing take the lead in gathering data using techniques that are being sold to the public in the name of safety.

Chapter 3

The Role of Citizenship in *The Circle* and *Goon Squad*

As surveillance and sousveillance have become inherent parts of modern life, it has also become more difficult to participate in modern society without your movements being watched and recorded. In order to escape surveillance, people go 'off the grid,' and even after spending effort removing themselves from the internet and moving to a distant corner of the earth, or to Oregon as Mercer does in *The Circle*, the fact remains that you might show up in the background of someone's holiday photos and end up back on Facebook. Additionally, civil duties and rights are increasingly being digitalized, such as filling out tax forms, online ID's and, in an increasing number of American states, voter registration. While all of these things can still be done analogically, digitization offers advantages such as speed and accessibility. Similarly, there is the rising concept of cashless societies, and while cash is not likely to disappear soon, electronic payment is on the rise (*The New York Times* 2017). This raises the question to what extent digital presence, and thereby subjection to sur- and sousveillance technology, is necessary in order to participate in society. *The Circle* and *Goon Squad* present different views on the role that citizenship plays in their imagined futures, with *The Circle* creating a more forceful sousveillance society. However, both relate to subjects such as peer pressure, social media presence and the 24-hour economy, in which workers are expected to be available at all times.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, being subject to surveillance is not presented as a choice, but rather as a fact of life and is therefore largely accepted. Similarly, participation in the newly developed sharing culture and 24-hour economy, which Bennie's student-assistant Lulu is representative of, is not necessarily mandatory, but it is becoming the norm. Lulu is a paragon of how society has developed, "a living embodiment of the new 'handset employee':

paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent" (Johnston 325). However, as Johnston points out, the paperless quality of Lulu's work "actually means that there is more of it, even (or especially) as it is rendered less visible" (161). Because Lulu is able to work from anywhere at any time, this means her work is never over. She is on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and is a child of the digital age to the point that she prefers texting over talking, claiming that she "get[s] tired of talking" because "'[t]here are so many ways to go wrong'" (Egan 328) after she accidentally insults Alex. This preference for texting and the striving for perfection and efficiency, as well as Lulu's physical exhaustion, are symptoms of the 24-hour economy, which shows that while progress may lead to more effective marketing practices in this case, it also takes a toll.

Additionally, texting is represented in *Goon Squad* as a Simulacrum of conversation. The abstract nature of its form, specifically its spelling conventions, has lost its bearing on actual speech. Despite the efficiency and the straightforward approach to content texting allows, the spelling of text-speak makes it difficult to comprehend messages like "*only Ets chInEs*" (Egan 334). Additionally, the lack of emotional value and use of aspects like metaphors, which are common in speech and whose absence Lulu considers an advantage of texting over talking, distance texting from conversational speech, making it an empty form of communication. This emptiness is aided by the physical distance that texting allows.

While Lulu represents the new norm in "Pure Language," Alex lags behind. He is stuck between the past and the present. The way he is raising his daughter Cara-Ann with his wife Rebecca, refusing to let her use technology until the age of five, goes against the norm, as is exemplified by the popularity of "Starfish, or kiddie handsets" (Egan 320), as well as by Alex's reaction when Lulu texts Cara-Ann, feeling "unable to explain to Lulu the beliefs he shared with Rebecca about children and handsets" (329). This interaction with Lulu also illustrates the pressure to participate in the digital culture. However, Alex also feels a moral

pressure coming from his peers and wife not to conform, both on a moral basis and regarding

how he raises his kids. While Alex sees himself fitting in with these peers, rather than Lulu,

and shares their values, it does not take much for him to change his mind and set aside his

moral objections. This can be seen in the narration by the increase of text-speak throughout

the chapter, which is focalized through Alex, whose thoughts eventually emerge in text-speak,

which he calls "a brain-T" (338), a thought composed in the form of a text, or T as they are

called in *Goon Squad*.

Alex's inability to find his place in this changing society is symbolized by the

architectural changes in the city. Alex is both an insider, working with Lulu as a data profiler,

and an outsider, morally opposed to what he is doing, which makes it impossible for him to

tell his wife about his new job. He takes on both the role of inspector, watching over his blind

team without them knowing, gathering their data, and of the inspected, living in a surveillance

state, being and feeling watched. As the new buildings rise in the city, they draw a shadow

over it, in the form of the wall by the Hudson river, which deprives the city of the sunset, and

over Alex's apartment, in the form of the rising skyscraper "seal[ing] off their air and light",

and "fill[ing] Alex with dread and doom" (321). A side-effect of these shadows looming over

the city is a renewed appreciation for the sunset, as well as for the sliver of sky visible from

Alex's apartment, showing that progress and nostalgia go hand in hand. However, the

nostalgia also entails an idealization of a past Alex has never really known:

Before them, the new buildings spiralled gorgeously against the sky, so much nicer

than the old ones (which Alex had only seen in pictures), more like sculptures than

buildings, because they were empty. (339).

The new buildings, representing innovation, progress and change, are beautiful, but they are

empty, rendering them "more like sculptures than buildings." However, Alex has never seen the old buildings in person. He is stuck between the past and the future. The old buildings are gone, and are only visible in pictures, while the new buildings are unoccupied, leaving them sculpture-like, which means neither the old nor the new buildings register as real. This creates an empty future, a state in which form takes precedent over content, which can be related to Baudrillard's ideas on Simulacra and simulation. The image, in this case the buildings, is no longer dependent on function, but takes on a life of its own. The building no longer has to function as a building, it just has to look like one, which creates a society focussed solely on the external, the image one projects. Alex's struggle to navigate his place in this empty future and relate it to a past he has never really known can be seen in his conflicting emotions: while the rising skyscraper fills him "with dread and doom", his renewed appreciation of the light simultaneously fills him with "a vertiginous sweetness" (321).

In *The Circle*, on the other hand, joining the Circle is a deliberate choice. It means signing up to the company and willingly giving up your personal information, which the Circle requires users to enter when signing up. However, one cannot simply escape their sousveillance by refusing to sign up, as throughout the novel the SeeChange camera's spread until they are virtually unavoidable everywhere on earth. Additionally, the Circle starts interfering in politics and government practices, until it becomes expected of politicians to "go transparent", or they will be suspected of corruption, and eventually the company attempts to take control over voting. During the meeting in which this idea is pitched, Mae proposes "'why not *require* every voting-age citizen to have a Circle profile?'" (Eggers 388). This would make participating in the Circle and its sousveillance culture a legal requirement for citizenship and the ability to exercise your civil rights.

The forcible nature of the Circle-community to convert others to their cause is also illustrated during the launch of a system called SoulSearch. The system utilizes SeeChange

camera's and community participation to hunt down fugitives. During the demonstration, a photograph of a known fugitive is projected, after which Circle-users around the world immediately release any and all information they have on the whereabouts of this person. Meanwhile, there is a countdown running, as a deadline of 20 minutes has been set to demonstrate the efficiency of the program. This has the effect of gamifying the manhunt, which allows the participants to gloss over the serious implications of this program. It demonstrates the way in which the publicly available SeeChange footage allows anyone to find anyone, anywhere on earth. Aside from the mob-mentality the system instils, exemplified through the crowd's reaction when the fugitive is found: "'Lynch her!' someone outside the laundry yelled" (Eggers 451), the system can also be used for personal gain, facilitating stalking and harassment. This can be seen in the second half of the SoulSearch demonstration.

> "Okay," Mae said to the audience. "Our second target today is not a fugitive from justice, but you might say he's a fugitive from, well, friendship."
>
> She smiled, acknowledging the laughter in the room.
>
> "This is Mercer Medeiros. I haven't seen him in a few months, and would love to see him again. Like Fiona Highbridge, though, he's someone who is trying not to be found. So let's see if we can break our previous record. Everyone ready? Let's start the clock." (452).

Not only does this passage show a complete disregard of Mercer's wish for privacy, the language itself is dehumanizing. Mercer is called a "fugitive" and a "target," and hunting him down is again presented as a game, even more than before with the suggestion of "break[ing] our record." When Mercer is eventually found in Oregon, he runs, but despite his clear anger at being followed and filmed Mae continues the hunt. She considers this breach of privacy a

game and a performance for an audience: "Mae […] knew they had the SeeChange camera, which was offering a view so clear and cinematic that it was wildly entertaining" (456). The fact that Mae is watching Mercer through a camera allows her to disconnect from the reality of the situation. The performance aspect is again illustrated by Mae's way of speaking: "'Release the drones!' she roared in a voice meant to invoke and mock some witchy villain'" (457). As the hunt continues and Mercer refuses to submit, the register of the people speaking to Mercer through the drones becomes more authoritative and, despite retaining a sense of irony and humour, angrier.

While from the watchers' perspective, the manhunt appears like an action film with audience participation, Mercer's panic increases exponentially. This eventually leads him to kill himself by driving off of a bridge. Throughout *The Circle*, Mercer is a strong opponent of the Circle, and his actions are driven by his refusal to participate in its sousveillance culture. By live-streaming Mercer's death, the Circle stops him from fulfilling his ultimate goal, which is to remain invisible. Though Mercer retains his autonomy, by choosing death over joining the Circle, it is made clear that not joining is not an option.

While both *The Circle* and *Goon Squad* portray the effect of either the refusal or the inability to join in with these changing societies, the way the Circle operates is much more forceful than the society created in *Goon Squad*. *The Circle* presents the result of this externally by focalising Mercer's death, the death of an outsider, through Mae, an insider. Additionally, Mercer is making a conscious choice not to submit to the Circle's sousveillance culture. *Goon Squad*'s Alex, on the other hand, is open to participating in the changed field of marketing and interpersonal communication despite his moral objections, and has gotten used to increases in surveillance with little to no resistance. However, he struggles to let go of the past and feels nostalgia for an idealized 'before,' leaving him emotionally conflicted. In the end, both novels show that refusal or inability to join into the changing societies has

consequences, either in the shape of practical issues such as the ability to vote or even go outside without being filmed, or of mental and emotional difficulties.

Chapter 4

Authenticity in a Digitally Shared World

In both *The Circle* and *Goon Squad*, the societies that have been created through these

technological developments are largely artificial, experienced through and performed for a

screen. In "Pure Language," for example, the main marketing strategy is the use of parrots,

who create fake 'authentic' accounts of why a person or product is good. Similarly, in *The

Circle*, Mae is constantly repeating sentiments to her followers that are being fed to her by the

higher-ups. This is most apparent in Mae's meetings with Wise Man Bailey, who asks leading

questions that allow Mae to jump to conclusions as if they are her own. These are then

presented to an audience as an authentic conversation between Mae and Bailey, even though

it is a repetition of the one they have already had: "'Just be natural. We're just re-creating the

conversation we had last week'" (Eggers 293). Both novels consider how social media

sharing and digitality influences authenticity, as well as whether creating or participating in

authentic experiences can be seen as a form of rebellion against or freedom from their

respective sharing cultures and surveillance societies.

In *The Circle,* authenticity comes most notably in the form of Mae's nocturnal

kayaking trip. After a visit to her parents ends in a fight with Mercer, Mae angrily drives

home past a kayak rental business where she is a member. While she passes the shop, despite

it being late at night which means it is past closing time, she decides to drive over and finds a

kayak outside of the fence. As she paddles over to a far-off island, Mae's anger disappears

and she thinks less about her work and Mercer, and becomes more introspective, at first

focussing on her direct surroundings and, when she reaches the island, becoming acutely

aware of her solitude and isolation. The island is remote, deserted and not meant to be visited,

however, all of these factors add to Mae's enjoyment of visiting it: "There was no path, a fact

that gave her great pleasure – no one, or almost no one, had ever been where she was"
(Eggers 268). The uniqueness of the experience makes it pleasurable, and sharing it would
take away from that experience. It is not just the singularity of her adventure, but also the
secrecy that makes it special and authentic. Mae is not supposed to be on the island, however,
"it was dark, no one could see her, and no one would ever know she was here. But she would
know" (268). She has sole ownership of the experience and the memory, which amplifies her
enjoyment of it. Ultimately, it is this aspect of Mae's actions that angers her superiors at the
Circle, rather than the illegality of it. While the Circle wants to know everything, Mae realises
on the island that there is also comfort to be found in knowing that you never will know
everything (270).

Furthermore, not sharing her experience makes it authentic because when Mae knows
she is being watched, everything she does is a performance. Not sharing it is considered
criminal according to the standards of the Circle, while filming her experience would turn it
into a performance and take away from the authenticity, making it artificial. This artificiality
is aided by the fact that seeing something through a screen distances the watcher from what is
happening. Similar to watching through a window, the person watching it is a spectator rather
than a participant in what is going on.

In "Pure Language," people are searching for authentic experiences, which for Alex
results in a very strong feeling of nostalgia. The people of New York appear to get this
authentic experience in the form of Scotty's concert. Scotty is described as

> a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a
> handset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these
> years, forgotten, and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure. Untouched.
> (Egan 345).

Scotty is a symbol of a past that has been lost, especially for Bennie, who has known him during their shared youth. He represents a time before social media and handsets, which is now being idealized. This is what makes the concert feel authentic, and what makes Scotty feel pure. However, Johnston points out that "Scotty's purity is heavily produced, promoted, and protected, so that living off the grid becomes a fashion statement or publicity stunt that is itself advertised *through* the grid" (170). While Scotty's concert appears to be authentic, it was promoted through the use of parrots, who create artificial 'authentic' posts to advertise it and are thereby involved in the creation of simulacra, creating an image without relation to reality. The entire concert is a performance, not just in the sense that Scotty is performing his music, but also in that he is performing an idealized version of himself that is reminiscent of the magnetism he had in his youth and thereby reminiscent of the past.

Cazeaux states, in relation to Baudrillard's concepts of Simulacra and hyperrealism, that

cause and effect become 'scrambled'. Representation, that which traditionally *follows* reality as its impression or after-image, begins to impinge upon and change the world. Our condition is one of 'hyperreality': representation creates the world or, rather, creates worlds. (477)

The image of what Scotty is "supposed to be," "'he's supposed to be really good live'" (Egan 337), becomes reality when he enters the stage. While Scotty's music was created underground, without recognition, when he finally gets this recognition it is initially based on marketing rather than on substance. The crowd visits his concert on the basis of his image created by the parrots, rather than for his content, as he is virtually unknown and has not

played live since his youth until the concert. Scotty himself is marketed as a concept, a name representing a lifestyle that can be sold and bought. However, when he enters the stage and plays his music, Scotty becomes "strong, charismatic and fierce" (344). He becomes 'real' and whole, aligned with his image. Furthermore, if, as the narrator states "two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar" (344), Scotty's disconnection and the artificiality through which the concert was created only add to the authenticity of the audience's experience. Through Scotty, who embodies the nostalgia for an analog past as well as the surveillance-induced paranoia, the audience is temporarily relieved from the surveillance society they live in. However, as Cowart states,

> In the precession of late capitalist simulacra, only the image of musical purity survives, and Egan intimates that Bennie is too late to rescue the kind of authenticity he tries to affirm in a resurrected Scotty Hausmann. (250)

Despite the authenticity of the experience, the relief is really only temporary, and as Bennie states after the concert is over, "'it happens once in your life, if you're the luckiest man on earth, […] an event like that'" (Egan 345). While this temporality adds to the authenticity of the experience, as it is inimitable, it also contrasts with the inescapable artificiality of *Goon Squad'*s society.

For Mae, kayaking to the island was an authentic act, which makes it, though unplanned and unknowingly, an act of rebellion against the Circle. Mae acted purely out of self-interest, and the kayaking trip goes directly against the Circle's ideas about sharing and privacy. By going to the island and leaving the bounds of society, she breaks free from the borders of the Circle's control, which can also be seen in the fact that "the narrative space

trespasses the limits of the Circle's campus" (Pignagnoli 155). There are no SeeChange-cameras on the island. This loss of control over their employee is what fuels the anger of Mae's Circle-superiors after this episode, and what leads them to convince her to go transparent.

Scotty's concert, on the other hand, is experienced by the audience as authentic. However, due to the artificial nature of the marketing and the promotion of his purity and his 'off the grid' lifestyle, this authenticity also benefits the sharing culture and social media marketing that is so prevalent in "Pure Language". Additionally, there is an abundance of security at Scotty's concert in the form of helicopters, government agents and "a gauntlet of security checks" (Egan 340) on the way to Scotty's trailer. However, while the concert does not offer any actual escape from the surveillance state, it does briefly fulfil an escapist, nostalgic desire for the audience. Though it aids the marketing business, the temporality of and the emotional response to the concert help it gain the status of a myth, a shared cultural experience in which emotion takes precedent over fact, which does set it apart from the surveillance culture in which the factual and accurate recording of information and events is so important.

Conclusion

Both *The Circle* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* reflect on the way social media sharing and surveillance manifest in and affect 21st century American society. They react to the increasing disregard for privacy in American culture by tech companies, as well as surveillance agencies such as the N.S.A., in the name of either safety or money. While the desire to create a safe environment is usually what leads people to allow increased surveillance, internet companies such as Google and Facebook also gather their users' personal information. These companies create data profiles which they sell to advertisers. Both Eggers and Egan reflect this increase of corporate data mining in their novels, Eggers by creating a clear parody of Google-like tech companies, and Egan by focalising "Pure Language" through Alex, who is involved in the creation of data profiles in order to promote Scotty's concert. However, while *The Circle* is a dystopian novel which presents a cautionary tale, focussing almost solely on the negative aspects of technology and social media and creating a panopticon of sur- and sousveillance, the surveillance society in *Goon Squad* paints a more nuanced picture. While the negative aspects of living in a surveillance society in which social media sharing and data profiling are very prevalent are shown clearly in the novel, for example through the paranoia and nostalgia Alex feels, it is also shown that these technologies have the power to bring people together, like at Scotty's concert.

The different perspectives on the influence of sur- and sousveillance technologies and social media on society can be further investigated in other types of contemporary media, for example the Netflix series *Black Mirror*, which concerns itself with the potential implications of technological developments both in content and form, as it recently released an interactive episode called "Bandersnatch." Additionally, it would be interesting to further consider the relation between sur- and sousveillance and Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality.

The differences in nuance between *The Circle* and *Goon Squad* can best be found in how these novels each represent citizenship and authenticity. *The Circle* shows that opting out of the panopticon of sousveillance technology is not an option through the death of Mercer, and through the Circle's slow taking over of governmental duties like voting, despite it being a privately owned company. In order to be an American or even a global citizen, as the Circle has members and cameras around the world, one has to subject oneself to constant sur- and sousveillance at the end of *The Circle*. This ever-present awareness of possibly being watched causes self-monitoring and turns life into a performance, which makes authenticity, the refusal to be watched or care that you are being watched, an act of rebellion, as illustrated by the kayaking episode. In *Goon Squad*, on the other hand, the surveillance is portrayed as a fact of life, mundane rather than dystopian, and on a smaller scale, localized in New York City. Off the grid living and refusal to participate in social media are not punished, in fact, they are glamorized. Scotty is idolized because he is "pure," he lives on the fringe of society. However, this glamorization of living off the grid leads to the marketing and selling of authenticity itself through creating 'authentic' experiences like Scotty's concert. Authenticity benefits the social media society in this case. It is not rebellious; it is simply in danger of becoming obsolete. However, Scotty's concert also shows that even amidst artificiality, authenticity is not impossible, and authentic experiences can still be created, even if they slowly start entering the realm of myths.

While *The Circle* offers quite a dark perspective on the influence of social media and advancements in sur- and sousveillance technologies, and *Goon Squad* presents a more nuanced view, both novels reflect a sense of claustrophobic paranoia, as well as the increasing power corporations have in society and the amount of personal data they are able to mine. Egan credits this increase in surveillance to 9/11, which a large part of the novel is centred around and which is amplified by the setting of "Pure Language," Ground Zero. Eggers'

surveillance society, on the other hand, appears not to be influenced by 9/11, though he does reflect a desire to create a safer society. However, while *The Circle*'s view of the future is bleak and dystopian, Egan's *Goon Squad* ends with a sense that, despite everything, life goes on.

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