

“Digital Anxiety” - Examining Maslow’s Theory of
Needs in *Microserfs*, *Super Sad True Love Story*,
and *The Circle*



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Digital Anxiety: Examining Maslow's Theory of Needs in *Microserfs*, *Super Sad True Love Story*, and *The Circle*.

Introduction

This thesis will examine representations of “Digital Anxiety” in three contemporary American novels, Douglas Coupland’s *Microserfs* (1995), Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), and Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* (2013). The novels have been chosen because they offer different articulations of this phenomenon in the context of American digital culture of the 1990s and 2000s. The term “Digital Anxiety” is my own and is used in this thesis to refer to a range of cultural anxieties and negative human emotions related to the emergence of digital technology as expressed in contemporary literature. Throughout history, leaps in technological advancement have been a revolutionary force in the structuring of society. The emergence and subsequent propagation of digital technology since the 1990s has had a dramatic impact on how our society functions. By extension, the immense changes that the digital revolution has brought about, have naturally had an impact on the human individual in western societies. This effect is what “Digital Anxiety” references.

In order to explore the different literary manifestations and ramifications of “Digital Anxiety,” I draw on the established motivational theory developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper: *The Hierarchy of Needs* (1943). This will allow me to link the general term “anxiety” to an established framework in psychological research. Maslow’s theory presents a five-step hierarchy of specific human needs which motivate human behaviour. The needs

include, from bottom to top: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943). In his original paper, Maslow posited that needs lower down in the hierarchical ladder must be met before humans seek to attain needs that are placed further up. However, more modern research suggests that this is not the case. Instead, psychologists adhere to a pluralistic understanding of Maslow's needs, which means that humans can be motivated to pursue higher level needs despite lower level needs not being fully met (Tay & Deener (2011) in McLeod (2018)). With Maslow's theory in mind, I define "Digital Anxiety" as the anxiety that arises when digital technology assaults, challenges, or deprives any of the human needs as they are defined by Maslow's theory. My interest is in how such anxieties are articulated and explored in the novels at hand.

Chapter One deals with "Digital Anxiety" as portrayed in *Microserfs*, where Coupland adapts an epistolary style novel into a technological text. The protagonist, Daniel Underwood, narrates the novel through his diary entries written on his Apple Macbook. The novel is about the programmer Daniel Underwood and his group of friends, who work in the sprawling tech-startup industry that emerged in California and Silicon Valley in the early 90s. Coupland is able to express "Digital Anxiety" by mediating Daniel's reservations and the anxieties surrounding his lack of self-esteem through various computer and programming lingo, illustrating the ways in which the neoliberal tendencies that are interwoven with the rapidly emerging tech economy of the 90s deprive the characters of their "esteem needs."

Chapter Two turns to Gary Shteyngart's satirical dystopian novel *Super Sad True Love Story*. Set in "very near future" New York, where social media and consumerism dominate daily life, the story is narrated through the epistolary accounts of immigrants Lenny Abramov and Eunice Park. I argue that "Digital Anxiety" in *Super Sad True Love Story* is articulated through

Shteyngart's vision of how a Huxleyan post-typographical society, one that fully embraces social media and screen-based communication in its stead, is detrimental to human beings' ability to pursue their "love and belongingness needs."

Finally, Chapter Three examines "Digital Anxiety" in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, a dystopian novel which follows protagonist Mae Holland, newly employed by the world's largest and most influential tech- and social media company, "The Circle." Here "Digital Anxiety" is expressed by the various ways in which an ideology of transparency and disclosure challenges our notions of privacy, with privacy being integral to our "safety needs" as defined in Maslow's theory. Moreover, Eggers' vision of a future tech giant, by its uncanny resemblances to Facebook and Google, is able to reference contemporary, real-life security concerns about threats to our sense of privacy

It is important to note that I am limiting the use of Maslow's theory in each chapter to a specific need. The reason for this is that it will allow for a more in-depth analysis of how specific anxieties arise, while taking into account how the novels differ in what type of anxieties are most significant and pronounced. The alternative would be dealing with how several or all needs are challenged in each novel, which, due to the broad set of concerns that such an approach would entail, would potentially result in a more superficial and unengaged analysis of "Digital Anxiety." Consequently, the specific needs addressed in each chapter are chosen based on my own assessment of which of Maslow's needs are most pertinent. In addition, I should clarify from the offset that my thesis does not aim to constitute a Neo-Luddite condemnation of technological progress as a whole. Rather, it is a statement about how contemporary writers articulate pernicious aspects of the dramatic effect that digital technology has undoubtedly had on society, and on the individual, in general. This distinction is worth emphasising, as confusing

the two could result in two very different forms of critique: a call to halt technological progress, or a call to skeptical inquiry about the role of technology in our lives. Critical examination of the impact of technology on our lives is not tantamount to an anti-technology stance, as is the defining feature of Neo-Luddism. In fact, criticism of the societal impact of emerging technologies has been in existence for centuries. My aim is for “Digital Anxiety” to fit squarely within this long literary tradition. Finally, I want to explain my selection of secondary sources. With the exception of *Microserfs*, the novels were published quite recently, and as such, there is a lack of critical literature available, and even less written with relevance to my focus on anxieties related to digital culture. For instance, I use Nick Heffernan’s insights on *Microserfs* in his essay, *Playing with IT*, because his analysis deals with the anxieties related to the digital culture through the lens of class and capital, specifically, the neoliberal manifestation. Other critical essays on this novel, such as Graham Thompson’s “*Frank Lloyd Oop*,” tilts his focus towards anxieties about male sexuality in regards to the erosion of the binary between the workplace and the home. While this is potentially relevant in regards to “love and belonging” as per Maslow’s theory of needs, my focus lies in Maslow’s “esteem needs,” and places its focus on Daniel’s struggles to cultivate a healthy self-esteem under the neoliberal paradigm of Silicon Valley. The dearth of critical literature available provided an impetus to focus more specifically on critical book reviews as a means of garnering prominent viewpoints which I could gauge and relate to my own thesis on “Digital Anxiety.” I contend that contemporary book reviews provide a valid lens to assess the *Zeitgeist* at the time the novels were published.

Chapter One: Digital Anxiety and Esteem Needs in Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*

My discussion of *Microserfs* revolves around its social criticism, the way in which the novel conveys an experience of anxiety about existing as an individual within an emerging digital culture in its nascent stages, but also how it reflects structural realities of contemporary society. As such, the introduction to this chapter will look at Douglas Coupland as a social critic by assessing his field of interest, analysing his background as well as his methods of researching the novel. In addition, it will cover some of the critical reception, both contemporary and subsequent commentaries and reviews, focussing specifically on the type of concerns which critics express with regard to the cultural criticism in *Microserfs*. Finally, I will introduce my argument on *Microserfs* as it relates to the critical reception of the novel, as well as “Digital Anxiety” as described in the introduction.

About the Author

While *Microserfs* is set in various locations throughout California, most of it in Silicon Valley, Douglas Coupland himself is a Canadian. A formally trained visual artist, he produced visual art prior to becoming a writer – both ventures have won him many accolades. His debut novel *Generation X* became an international bestseller. Within a short span of time, Coupland published two novels before he began working on *Microserfs: Shampoo Planet* (1992) and *Life*

After God (1994). Thus, Coupland had already established himself as a relevant cultural critic by the time he was working on *Microserfs*, his fourth novel, which is a comment on contemporary work-life in 1990s high tech circles.

The Impetus for Writing the Novel

At the time when Coupland started working on his novel in 1994, he worked concomitantly at *Wired Magazine*, an outlet with a particular focus on how emerging technology affects various aspects of our lives. A further testament to his position as a social critic, with a focus on the connection between technology and culture, employment at *Wired* meant working for one of the largest growing outlets of its kind. The very first issue of *Wired* dropped in 1993, and had a circulation of over 100,000, with active readership even higher (Streeter, 2011, p.122).

Coupland's background in *Wired* could not be more apt given that *Microserfs* is equally curious about the intersection between culture and technology. In doing research for his project, Coupland moved to Palo Alto and became familiar with all things Silicon Valley through substantial immersion, including his hallmark source of inspiration-seeking technique: "four hour drives in my car." (Coupland, 2004, p.3). Eventually, *Wired* published a short story of his, *Microserfs*, about a group of friends working for Microsoft, which would later make up the first chapter in the expanded novel with the same name. The short story is available on *Wired's* website to this day (Coupland, 1994). Accruing insider-information and telltales about Silicon Valley's emerging new "cultural aristocracy", the geeks, Coupland informed the public that he became familiar with an increasing number of 'serfs' as he spent time doing research in Palo Alto (Grimwood, 1995). His hotline to 'serfs' working for Microsoft at the time was hugely

influential both in the way his novel depicts the industry, but also in the writing of its main characters: young 'geeks' working for Microsoft. For example, in mingling with Microsoft employees as part of his research, Coupland experienced first-hand the huge influence of Bill Gates even among lower echelons of Microsoft's hierarchy. In a 1995 interview with *Independent*, when asked about whether the noise around Bill Gates was warranted, Coupland replied: "Absolutely (...), Microsoft without Gates truly is nothing more than an office supply company. I didn't think this was the case when I went down there to research the novel. I thought the whole 'Bill thing' was way out of proportion. But it isn't. It's probably even more potent in real life than it's portrayed in the book" (Courtenay, 1995). Consequently, as readers will know, Bill Gates plays a substantial role in the novel.

In addition to his Palo Alto move, Coupland later made statements that suggest that part of the impetus to writing the novel stemmed from his observation that so little previous literature had sprung out of "an office," relative to the material impact of the digital revolution. The following statement, while made a few years after the publication of *Microserfs*, reveals Coupland's bewilderment at the lack of stories emerging from a computer-equipped office:

It always amazes me that 90 percent of people in the States now work directly around a PC. That's like a billion person-hours a day spent, and yet none of the stories we tell, or the books we write, take place in an office. There's just so much of the human soul and imagination in that strange environment now. I'm amazed we don't see 50 books a week on office life. (Douglas Coupland, 1998, *The Times*).

The “strange environment” of the office makes up the literary setting where Coupland situates his geeky characters, wherein they struggle with stress and anxieties from being burdened by shipping deadlines, future career options, and job security. This is, in part, how Coupland conveys digital anxiety; by drawing on his personal expertise with computer-culture, he writes a novel that is set in the hyper-digitized community meant to represent the contemporary 90s, giving the reader a glimpse into how a storm of technology serves to facilitate a new form of worker oppression. As the title *Microserfs* suggests, Coupland expresses this new and alien form of oppression by comparing it to the centuries-old totalitarian concept of feudalism, with computer programmers slaving away endless hours under the anachronistic serfdom of their employer Bill Gates.

Reviews and Critical Reception

As my thesis revolves around “Digital Anxiety” and the ways in which literature expresses concerns related to the digital revolution, it is worth taking a closer look at various contemporary reviews of *Microserfs* in order to assess how critics interpreted its scope of concerns, as well as to gauge the extent to which reviewers viewed the novel as a reflection of the times. In a review in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1995, author and contributor Jay McInerney labels Coupland as “the literary spokesman for a generation” for his insight and knowledge of “the non-natural world.” Despite reservations about narrative structure and plotline, McInerney perceives Coupland as someone who gives a genuine voice to a generation, concluding that he “continues to register the buzz of his generation with a fidelity that should shame most professional Zeitgeist chasers” (McInerney, 1995). Also from 1995, an unsigned review in *Kirkus* lauds

Coupland for his level of knowledge about pop- and consumer culture, while maintaining that his social critiques are so pronounced relative to storytelling that, to his detriment, his works are almost indistinguishable from all-out sociology (Kirkus, 1995). In this case, similar to McInerney, he points out that while weaving a captivating plotline is not Coupland's forté as a writer, his strength lies in his knowledge about contemporary culture. Further, a 2011 review by *The Canadian Book Review* lauds the novel for its prescience: "In certain parts it was almost as if Coupland had somehow peeked into the future before he wrote *Microserfs*. This novel has aged very well and I think it really is essential reading for someone looking to understand this part of the 90s" (Brown, 2011).

The general view among reviewers saw Coupland as a cultural critic, and *Microserfs* as an interpretation of the digital revolution from the viewpoint of a member of that industry. In terms of "Digital Anxiety," then, this calls for a discussion of how Coupland's novel represents this technosphere, including the high-tech workplace, and its pernicious effect on both society at large, but more pertinently, on the felt experience of the individual. The claim that the mere presence of computers is making the characters stressed, is not insightful. As we shall see, in Coupland's representation of a highly digitized society, digital technology permeates many facets of life, and its contribution to, or enabling of, "Digital Anxiety" is expressed in many ways. In light of Maslow's "esteem needs" my reading will focus on the emergence of the personal computer and its role in the computerization of human affairs, as well as neoliberalising the high-tech workplace. The examples I will use from the novel show how digital communication devices (such as email), stock trading (as enabled via digital technology), the structure of tech-companies (whose expressed interest is the propagation and promotion of digital products) connect with Digital Anxiety. One might suggest that this bleak analysis is

inaccurate given the liberal amount of humor and light-hearted witticisms that Coupland uses in his novel. The humorous diatribes and aphorisms, many of which are infantile and frivolous, suggest that the novel does not take itself very seriously. At the same time, the jokes have a dark undertone. Indeed, as one reviewer warned somewhat ominously: “read it firmly tongue-in-cheek, for if you read it any other way you’ll never go near a computer, a Barbie doll, or anyone under the age of twenty-five in that same unsuspecting way again” (Coupland, 2010, p.4).

Another reviewer for the *Sunday Times* notes that Coupland’s novel is “one long exploration for new meanings in a hollow modern world” (ibid). While acknowledging the ambiguous tone of the novel, I aim to fully engage with the “hollow modern world” and to avoid the “tongue-in-cheek” interpretation. It is not that I refuse to acknowledge the comical aspect of the novel, but I do not believe its presence disqualifies the novel as a serious critique of Silicon Valley and the 90s technosphere.

Maslow’s Esteem Needs

In Maslow’s original 1943 paper, he defines the overall notion of esteem needs as “that which is soundly based upon real capacity, achievement and respect from others.” He then expands this definition into two subsidiary categories. The first being “the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom,” and the second being “the desire for reputation or prestige, recognition, attention, importance or appreciation” (Maslow, 1943). If humans do not sufficiently satisfy these needs, they will lead to feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and helplessness, which can lead to what Maslow calls “either basic discouragement or else compensatory or neurotic trends,” which, for

our purposes, we may broadly define as symptoms of what we conventionally understand as general depression. Although any notion or concept of esteem as a basic human need was contentious at the time of Maslow's publication, esteem had by Coupland's time long since achieved consensus within the realm of psychological research (McLeod, 2018).

With Maslow's understanding of esteem in mind, we can more easily understand how in *Microserfs*, Coupland articulates how the technocratic and neoliberal structures of the Silicon Valley economy negatively impacts human beings' need for self-esteem. By utilising an epistolary narrative structure in the form of diary entries written by the protagonist Daniel Underwood on his Apple laptop, Coupland is able to explore Daniel's anxieties by mediating human complex affairs through computerised language. In so doing, Coupland connects Daniel's issues of self-esteem to the hyper-digital paradigm emblematic of Silicon Valley labor practices. Specifically, Daniel's place inside the hierarchy of Silicon Valley corporate life emerges as the root causes in challenging his esteem needs as they are defined by Maslow's theory. It is Daniel's situation as a Microserf, working under the tyrannical technocratic structure of Bill Gates and Microsoft, that produces within him feelings associated with low self-esteem, such as inadequacy, inferiority, and lack of self-confidence.

A Spectral Force: Bill Gates as the Face of Silicon Valley Technocracy

“Bill is wise.

Bill is kind.

Bill is benevolent.

Bill, Be My Friend... Please!” (Coupland, 2010, p.1)

Although Bill Gates never makes a physical appearance in the novel, he is still very much present. Referred to only as “Bill,” his manifestation in the novel is in the form of a ubiquitous presence that “keep[s] the troops in line,” foreshadowing a workplace environment with a tyrannical boss who relentlessly preys on his vassal and subordinate employees, akin to a feudal setup with serfs and lords. Dan succinctly encapsulates the role and presence of Bill in the following passage: “I had this weird feeling – of how the presence of Bill floats about the Campus, semi-visible, at all times, kind of like a dead grandfather in the Family Circus cartoons. Bill is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that molds. A force with thick, thick glasses” (Coupland, *Microserfs*, p.3). Describing the contradicting duality of Bill Gates, being a nerd on one hand, and a billionaire rockstar on the other, could hardly be better encapsulated than in describing Bill’s presence as a “spectral force.” With the ubiquitous nature of “spectral” referring not only to his power and influence in the tech-industry, it also emphasises Bill Gates’ geeky presentation, as “spectral” can be read as “specs,” referencing Bill’s hallmark geeky feature; his large glasses. This is part of Coupland’s representation of Bill Gates as the face of the tech-industry. Coupland has Bill Gates not only representing geekdom and passion for computer and technology, but also his immense power in contemporary America, and

consequently, how his power and influence have negative ramifications for those working at the lower echelons of this industry, the serfs.

While Dan and other Microsoft employees struggle to attain “a life” to any degree, the adoration and worship of Bill suggests he is larger than life. Indeed, Bill is even described as non-human by Dan when he writes a short vignette about the biomass composition of living things that is present on the Microsoft Campus, listing “human beings” at 19%, and “Bill” at .0003%, suggesting that he is separate from human beings (Coupland, 2010, p.38). More than a mere face of the industry, the reverence of Bill Gates that is present in *Microserfs* reflects a prevailing ideological assumption among tech-workers of the 90s. While critics like Streeter describes the lionization of such tech-entrepreneurs as emblematic of a neoliberal ideology, I will be less specific in labelling the ideological footprint in the novel. Rather, I will identify examples from the novel that reflect the tenets of that ideology, and how the ideology provides a continuing justification for Dan, and serfs like him, to keep “slaving” and “grinding” at their computers at the behest of their cyberlords. All this work is done to the detriment of their physical and mental well-being, and thus “Digital Anxiety” is expressed by the way that the tech-industry, and the ideology of Bill Gates surrounding it, works to deprive them of their human fundamental needs, as expressed by Maslow’s Theory.

As part of the romanticized view of Bill Gates, he is both assumed to be necessary for the continued growth of the tech-industry, but also important in giving a physical representation to the geek-culture that emerged in the 90s, and thus, providing a sense of identity to the type of computer geek that Dan and his friends represent. In addition to Bill Gates’ forthright presentation as a stereotypical geek, regularly appearing in public and commercials sporting his large glasses, his workload during the founding of Microsoft in the 70s is known to be extreme.

Thus, while the discrepancy in wealth between Dan and Bill are astronomical, Bill's image as representative of geekdom further highlights the ambiguities. Paradoxically, it is Bill Gates' well-known status as a hard-working person that is addressed in *Microserfs* through the wealth discrepancies as illustrated by stock vesting. Indeed, Bill Gates' rise to success from college dropout to a god-among-geeks is not without its controversies, certainly if one is concerned with *merit*. Typical among the nerds is viewing cyberlords such as Bill Gates as *necessary* to the industry in which they work. After the group has moved to Silicon Valley, they attend a Halloween barbecue at Ethan's home. In between frivolous topics, Dan and Todd get to thinking about how "Apple people" are different from geeks that they are used to back at Microsoft, with Todd specifically describing them as "anti-coding." Ethan replies: "Hey, Pal – just goes to show you what happens without a Bill to whip people into shape." (Coupland, 2010, p.107). This image of cyberlord Bill "whipping people into shape" harkens back to feudal times, when lords used the threat of violence to make sure that serfs, their vassals, worked hard enough in order to pay their debt. More importantly, however, Ethan's comment implies the aforementioned *necessity* of a Bill to exist, as the industry would not thrive without it, but in contributing to the "lords vs serfs" rhetoric, he also strengthens the assumption that nerds *owe* Bill Gates his success – the assumed "debt," in so doing, reinforcing the justification that serfs like him tirelessly toil for their cyberlord Bill.

The necessity of Bill is affirmed throughout the novel, Coupland is consistent in this regard. For example, after moving to Silicon Valley, Dan keeps contact with Abe through emails, which he regularly shares in his diary entries. They are copied and pasted as-is, with Abe's frequent spelling errors on full display. The first email, appearing shortly after the *Oop!*-group has set up in Silicon Valley, has Abe expressing surprise over Dan's decision to leave Microsoft:

“How could you have left Microsoft so EASILY!?!? It’s such a good setup.” He also inquires “Who’s your Bill?” (Coupland, 2010, p.111). Thus, Abe makes the same assumption as Ethan in this regard, that working under a “Bill” is *necessary* in the industry – it is the assumed form of governance. For instance, when Dan informs there are “no Bills” in the Silicon Valley to rule over them, he describes it as being a “bland anarchy” (ibid, p.107) compared to his prior position at Microsoft.

It may appear contradictory for Dan and other geeks to continuously insist and assume that Bill’s existence is necessary, when the industry he represents has such a pernicious effect on their well-being. On the one hand, working in the tech-industry deprives them of their basic human needs, while on the other, they revere, and even worship Bill Gates, seemingly unaware of how his wealth and power are symptomatic of a neo-feudalist power dynamic. However, such contradictions merely speak to the influence of Bill Gates and the ideology he represents on the characters in the novel. He is evidence that the system works as it should, and that hard work pays off. They are oblivious to the fact that the extreme discrepancy in wealth reflects a systemic flaw in the tech industry that keeps the majority of its workers in serfdom. Thus, the tech-industry’s effect of depriving the workers of their human needs, the defining characteristic of “Digital Anxiety,” is one of surreptitious nature. The weaknesses in the characters’ assumptions with regard to corporate governance are exposed throughout the novel. Dan often writes about the inner-workings of “venture capitalist” industry, which include workarounds and shortcuts to profit-making. For instance: “Michael and Ethan have agreed that the best thing to do is to be an R&D company (research and development) and get another company to “publish” our products. That way we don’t have to hire our own sales and marketing people, or shell out the enormous amounts of money it takes to market software.” (Coupland, 1995, p.117). The conniving trickery

displayed by Ethan and Michael is seen as an effective means to thrive in the industry. The *quality of the product* is not the only means to rise in the venture capitalist system. The promulgation of trickery in the technocratic world represented by Bill Gates, has a connection to “digital anxiety.” Part of the self-actualization tier in Maslow’s hierarchy suggests that “achieving one’s full potential” in creative endeavors is integral to this need in human beings. The aforementioned con has Dan and his fellow *Oop!* employees diverting their attention from realising the full potential of their product. In a quest for the company to become “one-point-oh,” cutting costs by having the team focus on “research and development” becomes part-and-parcel to business frugality. On the flipside, however, fulfilling one’s creative potential while working under financial duress is a bad combination. As Dan continues: “We still need funding to build the product, though” (ibid).

In his book, *The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet*, Thomas Streeter gives a sociological account of the history of the internet. According to Streeter, one symptom of the tech industry of the 90s was one of huge inequalities between Bill Gates and the growing community of programmers looking to gain foothold in the industry. Whatever logic at work in bifurcating those employed in the tech industry into two, disparate classes, it is apparent that Coupland was tuned into this disparity, as evidenced by his “cyberlord vs microserfs” rhetoric. Coupland refutes the idea that the disparity in wealth between Bill Gates and his serfs can be sufficiently explained by his working harder than everybody else. Throughout the entire narrative, Dan and his friends already have a workload so big that they suffer mental and physical health consequences. Despite this, the difference in payoff can be exemplified by the many instances where Dan references his vesting in NASDAQ stocks while at Microsoft. We learn that employment in Microsoft is heavily interwoven with stock market speculation, with a

majority of their employees peeking at their stocks “a few times a day.” Dan compares his own stocks to Bill Gates’, and the ensuing, absurd wealth discrepancies ultimately illustrate how little Dan’s labour is valued: “The stock closed up \$1.75 on Friday. Bill has 78,000,000 shares, so that means he’s now \$136.5 million richer. I have almost no stock, and this means I am a loser” (Coupland, 2010, p.6). The candid admission that he is a “loser” is evidence that Dan and his friends view one’s stock market value as integral to one’s self-worth, an assessment made even more absurd when considering how the stock market fluctuates in seemingly random fashion and in short time spans. Dan himself describes the process of obsessively observing one’s stock changes as “a real psychic yo-yo” (ibid). This is Coupland again demonstrating the impact of digital technology on the individual, with stock market value not only denoting numerical and fiscal value within a capitalist market, but also Dan’s value as a human being. Historically, the increase in internet usage, and the concomitant rise in stock trading online, made stock market speculation of growing importance in the private economy. So important, in fact, that Dan’s self-esteem and sense of importance directly correlate to his number of stocks.

In terms of “Digital Anxiety,” then, the function of stock markets as an integrated feature of working for Microsoft, the largest software company of the 90s, is one that deprives Dan of his “esteem needs” and “self-actualisation needs.” Being a “loser” as per his stock market value, he is demonstrating the negative impact of treating the stock market as reflecting one’s worth as a human being. In addition to altering Dan’s self-esteem, the absurd discrepancy in wealth between Bill and Dan touches on that sense of unfairness which Streeter acknowledges in *The Net Effect*. The notion of not getting credit for one’s work undoubtedly challenges one of human beings’ strong motivations of behaviour – the pursuit of acknowledgement, another aspect of Maslow’s “esteem needs.” Significantly, Dan’s experiences bear out among programmers

historically. Among young programmers of the 90s, employed in the Microsofts, the Apples, and the IBMs, Bill Gates' wealth started to represent the exploitation of their work (Streeter, 2011, p.153). Thus, Coupland's expression of Digital Anxiety finds support in sociological research, and it is plausible that his accuracy in portraying this anxiety was aided by his method of research: immersion in the tech-industry (Coupland, 2010, p.3), including close contact with many of the 'serfs' working for Microsoft in real time (Grimwood, 1995). In any case, Coupland's use of the stock market highlights the tech-industry has a negative effect on the self-esteem of Dan and his friends, and so becomes functional in the novel's portrayal of Digital Anxiety.

Email make up a large part of the novel, and this is no coincidence. As mentioned, email was a novelty in the mid 90s, reserved for geeks like Dan and his kind. Dan is a self-admitted email addict receiving up to 60 emails a day, and he reveals that the "future of email usage is being pioneered" at Microsoft (Coupland, 1995, p.21). He routinely copy-pastes his email correspondences with Abe after the transition from Microsoft to "*Oop!*," and email is the hotline by which the serfs receive much of their information and reprimand from the higher echelons of their corporate cyberlords, including Bill and his "totally wicked flame-mail" (ibid, p1). More than a mere form of communication in the novel, the emergence of email has consequences for human interaction. When Dan wants to notify Susan of his Dad being fired from IBM, he opts for a telephone call over email, deeming the piece of news to be "too important for e-mail" (Coupland, 1995, p.21). This is how Dan sums up the advantages of email communication over other forms: "The cool thing with e-mail is that when you send it, there's *no possibility of connecting with the person* on the other end. It's better than phone answering machines, because with them, the person on the other line might actually pick up the phone and *you might actually*

have to talk” (ibid p.21, emphasis mine). Dan implies that email enables communication that is less personal than even telephones. For Dan, his friends, and likely the many Microsoft employees chugging multiple emails per day, such impersonality is a good thing. While email is a liberating force for socially inept and cloistered geeks, it also leads to a society where interpersonal communication is lacking. Towards the novel’s end, personal and physical interaction have redeemed themselves as a meaningful form of engagement, one that email cannot replicate.

The Non-Life of Nerds: How Technology Drives the Loss of Individuality in *Microserfs*

I feel like my body is a station wagon in which I drive my brain around, like a suburban mother taking the kids to hockey practice – (Dan Underwood in Coupland, 2010, p.4).

One is typically tempted into dividing “work” and “free-time” into a binary. Coupland depicts a hyper-technological workplace where this distinction is becoming increasingly porous, often to the point where distinguishing between the two is completely meaningless. As programmers for Microsoft, the group experience a host of stressful symptoms following the burdensome expectations of their job, including meeting impossible “shipping deadlines” (Coupland, 2010, p.2). In the pursuit of fulfilling the enormous expectations of their job, Dan and his friends routinely suffer from sleep deprivation, and long hours. These are integral to the industry and the expectation of Bill Gates, and the justification for the ongoing “grinding” and “slaving” is the promise of becoming “One-Point-Oh.” When we are first introduced to Dan, he reveals that his

“universe consists of home, Microsoft, and Costco” (Coupland, 2010, p.3). As an example, Dan and his friends later on move into “habitrail 2” – his parents’ basement. This move is due to their poor financial situation and represents a further weakening in the distinction between leisure and the workplace. Thus, in the venture-capitalist paradigm of Silicon Valley, free time and leisure is frowned upon and shunned. “Ethan and I drove around Silicon Valley today looking at various company parking lots to see whose workers are working on a Sunday. He says that’s the surest way to tell which company to invest in. ‘If the techies aren’t grinding, the stock ain’t climbing’” (ibid, p.112) Relating the digital world to the stressful workplace, Dan surmises his progress at work towards meeting a “shipping deadline” by sharing the results of a “Stress test” (Coupland, *Microserfs*, p.21). Readers who are not equipped with a programmer’s literacy, will associate “stress” the way we understand as it relates to the individual – the psychological *feeling* of pressure and strain. While this interpretation is useful, it is only half the story. The overnight stress tests has an ironic function in the novel. Stress tests merely involves testing digital systems beyond normal operational capacity in order to observe the results. Such testing is supposed to pinpoint specific areas of digital systems that are faulty or insufficient. As such, in *Microserfs*, the name refers to the deliberate, physical “stressing” of a system in order to locate flaws in programming. However, the stress tests also causes a great deal of mental stress to Dan himself, the way we colloquially and psychologically understand the term. Similar to how Dan hinted at stress in his Jeopardy categories, the pernicious aspects of their workplace is shrouded with a veneer of comedy and light-heartedness. With Bill Gates as both the tyrannical face of Microsoft and a nonpareil tech-entrepreneur embodying a geek mogul, Coupland is able to highlight the contradictions of the tech-industry; the idealized version in which computer programming is an

immense source of joy, and the corporate and tyrannical version which features the lived realities of a programmer “slaving” away up to 16 hours of work with drudging tasks.

As is typical of nerds, Dan and his friends are somewhat incapable of articulating abstract and emotional difficulties, and when material solutions to abstract problems present themselves, it is no wonder they are quick to jump on them. Coupland uses the social ineptitude of his nerdish characters and has them express complexities of human affairs in terms that they can understand – computers. When Dan’s love interest Klara opens up to him about her past struggles with eating disorders, she compares herself to a corrupted “README.txt” file. Beyond the computerized language, there is a general preference for explaining complex human dilemmas in material terms; “I learned a new word today: ‘Trephination’ – drilling a hole in the skull to relieve pressure on the brain” (ibid, p.26). Dan’s fascination with the word (fascinating enough for him to note it down in his diary) comes from the fact that it points to a material, practical solution to “pressure” on the brain. “It ended on a bad note, and this bugged me, but I didn’t know one other practical thing I could say.” This is a revealing moment in the novel when Dan is conversing with his father, who obviously needs some emotional support. Dan repeatedly attempted to offer “practical” solutions to his problems, which makes sense given that Dan exists in the rigid, binary system of computer coding. In addition, the conversation ending on a “bad note” suggests a bad input of programming, and this “bugged” him, a reference to computer bugs. This metaphor helps connect his computer engagement to its effect on his communication with other people. Coupland uses this method of highlighting the effect that non-stop exposure to computers can have on an individual. Because of his lack of emotional intelligence, Dan is having a hard time remedying the problems that his father struggles with.

Dan bemoans his position at Microsoft and thinks that they are the reason for most of his problems, including anxiety and his relationship status as single; wondering if this is “because Microsoft is not conducive to relationships.”(Coupland, p.4) At this point Dan recalls once being close to a romantic relationship which never went anywhere because, as usual: “work takes over my life and I bail out of all my commitments and things fizzle” (ibid). Having such a disclosure at such an early stage in the narrative makes it clear for the reader that Dan is under no illusion in calling out his work situation as a culprit for his personal problems. Within the first few pages, we learn that Dan is stressed, single, most likely depressed, and sleep deprived. The latter condition is what provided him with the impetus to begin writing his diary, including an attempt “to try to see the patterns in my life.” (ibid). This way of life, where work occupies your almost every waking hour, is what Dan and his friends routinely refer to as “not having a life.”

Following a discussion with Susan about the state of surrealist art, Dan gets to thinking about the subconscious. As Dan is prone to looking to computers to explain complex human affairs, he wants to know whether or not machines have a subconscious: “To this end, I’m creating a file of random words that pop into my head, and am feeding these words into a desktop file labeled SUBCONSCIOUS” (Coupland, 2010, p.45). From here, we get regular, intermittent updates with new batches of words that are supposed to reflect the subconscious “mind” of Dan’s desktop computer. They appear in the form of word clouds, similar to those appearing alongside internet search bars, where the sizes of the word reflect the frequency of that word being searched for. While Dan meant for these words to reflect the subconscious mind of the computer, it is obvious that since Dan is the one feeding “random words that pop into my head,” that the word clouds reflect Dan’s subconsciousness. As such, we get access to Dan’s subconscious as mediated between himself and a computer. This amounts to another use by

Coupland of human vs digital expressions of Dan's anxieties, illustrating the effects on a microserf's subconscious of working in the tech-industry.

Among the words in Dan's subconscious computer file, a group of words that occur with some regularity denote artifacts of a capitalist, corporatist, consumer culture. Being in the industry, and living in areas like Redmond and Silicon Valley, turns out to have had a profound effect on Dan's subconscious. Words like "Schroder Wagg," "Courtyard Marriott," "Wells Fargo," "Mattel," "Electronic Arts," "Oracle," "IBM," "Nokia," and "Compaq" (Coupland, 2010, p.46, 54, 68, 93, 340) all refer to brands or large corporations, and the frequency with which they appear in Dan's subconsciousness reflect the amount of power they hold in contemporary America, and especially their visibility in the high-tech enclaves of Silicon Valley and Redmond Campus. In addition to brands and corporations, words that appear in Dan's subconscious are names associated with success or entrepreneurship, like "Barry Diller," "Oscar de la Renta," "Arthur Hiller," and "Louis Vuitton" (Coupland, 2010, p.49, 52, 59). Thus, for Dan, working in Silicon Valley for *Oop!*, and in Redmond for Microsoft, carries with it the exposure to a tech-industry that is inseparable from the non-stop exposure to capitalist and neoliberal logic of corporate structures and consumerism, but also inseparable from the intense focus on successful individuals, whose wealth and success they owe to that structure. Again, Bill Gates is the ultimate symbol of the hyper-individualistic focus among geeks working for Microsoft, but Dan's subconscious continues to register extraordinary individuals even after their move from Microsoft to *Oop!*, which reveals a general trend in the tech-industry at large.

Concluding Thoughts

When one considers the neoliberal promise of increased freedom leading to better economic outcomes, *Microserfs* illuminates a particular paradox of that ideology. The feudalist rhetoric of serfdom and lordship, now revived to describe the practice of labor in a modern economy around tech, amounts to a scathing critique of neoliberalism. Indeed, as Noam Chomsky once stated, a paradoxical element of neoliberalism is that it is neither new, nor liberal (O’Connell, 2016). For Dan Underwood, the emancipation from the serf-like working conditions under Bill Gates and Microsoft leads to increased freedom at the cost of economic certainty. Seen through the rubric of Maslow’s theory, the neoliberal practice by the 90s high-tech companies routinely challenges Dan’s esteem needs, ranging from his sense of independence and acknowledgement due to the high workload that his job demands of him, as well as his sense of achievement given the low wages offered in exchange for said workload. Facets of the digital age and the neoliberal economy, such as stock markets, the chase for money, and consumerism, are all expressed by Coupland using the computer as mediator of human affairs, tapping into Daniel’s subconscious as well as his anxieties rooted in his experience as a microserf within the neoliberal economy.

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, I’ve been primarily dealing with *Microserfs* in terms of its pernicious aspects, as the term “Digital Anxiety” would suggest. It is worth noting, however, that *Microserfs* is not a screed against the prospect of digital technology. Rather, Coupland explores a *complex* relationship of computers within a neoliberal economy. The scholar Alex Goody argues that “In *Microserfs*, the computer infects discourse but also enables new forms of linguistic intimacy” (Goody, 2011, p.132). Such intimacy occurs when Daniel’s mother, towards the novel’s end, ends up on life support after a stroke, and is able to

communicate “in 36 point Helvetica on the screen of a Mac Classic” (Coupland, 2010, p.367-70). Moreover, the move from Microsoft to “Oop!” can be viewed as an effort to surmount the former’s alienation of Dan’s labor, as the “Oop!” project reveals his and his friends’ passion for computers, in part through their nostalgia for Legos. In his essay *Playing with IT*, scholar Nick Heffernan observes that the robot that cleans the pool of Dan’s parents, dubbed “R2D2,” a reference to *Star Wars*, properly encapsulates Coupland’s ambiguous writings about the relationship between technology and capital: “R2D2, as it is known, is, of course, a figure for tireless labour, a kind of mechanical slave when viewed from a certain perspective, or an ideally obedient and efficient worker when viewed from another” (ibid, p.183 and Heffernan, 2000, p.102). Thus, despite the tech-economy’s digital grip on the characters of *Microserfs*, such instances in the novel reveal the emancipatory potential of technology in the digital age. Nonetheless, present within *Microserfs* are the anxieties related to the presence of technology in our lives. As Coupland stated in a 2014 interview: “It’s been twenty years that we’ve been in this whole data revolution. Now your machines are talking to each other behind your back, and there’s a bit of menace to it” (Overton, 2014).

Chapter Two: Digital Anxiety, Love and Belonging in

Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*

Super Sad True Love Story (2010) is an American satirical dystopian novel by author Gary Shteyngart. Set in New York City in the “very near-future,” the novel explores the negative implications of the information age, and depicts a future where social media and consumerism completely dominate all spheres of life, including the economy and interpersonal relations. The plot is centered around a love story between two immigrants – one Lenny Abramov from the analog age, the other, Eunice Park, from the digital age. In a 2012 interview with Google, as part of a YouTube series titled “Talks At Google,” Shteyngart was invited to have a conversation about his latest publication. When asked to give a brief synopsis of the novel, Shteyngart replied: “A love story set in the very near future where a completely illiterate America is literally falling apart next tuesday.” (Talks at Google, 2012). The audience can be heard laughing after hearing his answer, but while a humorous summary of a satirical novel, the answer was rooted in Shteyngart’s serious concerns about the impact of digital technology on contemporary society, and his dystopia is meant to mirror our own direction as dictated by the information age. In his dystopia, every citizen routinely checks out the social media feed on their “äppärät,” the equivalent of a smartphone. The äppärät keeps the population constantly stimulated by its streaming torrents of images, projections, and sounds. The society is obsessed with rating every aspect of each other, as no aspect of an individual, including their sexual proclivities, is considered off-limits to share on their social media platforms. The visual stimuli have also led to the degradation of language, and society has become completely illiterate. Shteyngart thus

depicts a dystopian future where social media dominate all spheres of life, and have become the totalitarian means of controlling the populace.

I will revisit the totalitarianisms of *1984* and *Brave New World* as a frame of reference for understanding Shteyngart's totalitarian vision in *Super Sad True Love Story* (hereafter abbreviated *SSTLS*), arguing that it is more Huxleyan than Orwellian in its depiction. I will also use the insights of media critic Neil Postman in his influential *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) for a way of analysing how the novel portrays the detrimental effects on humanity of society's embrace of digital screens and its concomitant abandonment of print based media. Finally, my analysis will once more look to Maslow's Theory of Needs in order to articulate Shteyngart's particular brand of "Digital Anxiety." I argue that "Digital Anxiety" is expressed in Shteyngart's representation of social media as a corruptive influence on language, in that the population's adherence to images and constant stimuli in place of verbal language prevents individuals from attaining their need of "love and belongingness," as defined by Maslow's theory (McLeod, 2018).

About the Author

A second generation immigrant from the USSR, Gary Shteyngart was born in Leningrad in 1972, and came to the United States when he was seven. He took up writing at an early age, and finished a set of comics at age five. He was particularly fond of Russian literature while growing up, and allusions to prominent Russian authors, such as Lev Tolstoj and Anton Chekhov, can be found in his work. His background as a Russian immigrant serves as a backdrop to the novel, and the character of Lenny is largely created in his image. Prior to *SSTLS*, Shteyngart had published

two novels, *Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002), and *Absurdistan* (2006). The former made the *New York Times* "Notable Book" list (NYT, 2010), and was named among the best debut novels by *The Guardian*. *Absurdistan* was even more impressive, both commercially and in terms of critical reception. It was listed among the ten best books of 2010 by both the *New York Times Book Review* and *Times Magazine*, and was named book of the year by a number of notable publications, including the *Washington Post* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Columbia University, 2010). He was included among the "20 under 40" list by *The New Yorker*, a list comprising young authors of fiction considered central to their generation (*The New Yorker*, 2010). As such, Shteyngart had established himself as a promising young writer by the time he published his third novel. Not surprisingly, *SSTLS* was highly anticipated in the literary world, as can be gauged by the work that was done to promote and market the novel. As with Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*, a preamble to the novel was released some time before the full publication. Rather than publish a full chapter, or an excerpt, Shteyngart wrote an article in the *New York Times*, "Only Disconnect," where he writes about his experiences around finally getting his first smartphone, as well as reaffirming his love of printed books (Shteyngart, 2010). His publisher, *Random House*, also released a promotional video trailer for the novel, featuring Shteyngart himself. The cast of the trailer also included actor James Franco, who was then a student in Shteyngart's creative writing classes at Columbia University (Random House, 2010). Shteyngart teaches at Columbia University to this day.

The Impetus for Writing the Novel

Much of Gary Shteyngart's source of inspiration for writing this novel stems from his personal background. As an immigrant, he had already witnessed the downfall of a superpower. "I'm from a failed empire, the Soviet Union, so I have a really good sense of when things start to go downhill," jokes Shteyngart (Talks at Google, 2012). He also had to shake off his Russian accent growing up in the US, and experienced firsthand the difficulty of attending school in the United States while not being able to master the native tongue. As a result, language is also a major theme in his novel. Growing up in New York City after having immigrated there, he attended Stuyvesant High School, a prestigious institution. Here, he met a number of students with Korean backgrounds, many of whom became his friends "Most of my best friends growing up were Korean because I attended high school at Stuyvesant, and my mentor was Chang-Rae-Lee, so this was not an unfamiliar culture to me" (ibid). In reading *SSTLS*, it becomes clear that Shteyngart's immigrant background, as well as his familiarity with Russian- and Korean American culture, are central aspects of his way of shaping the novel, most obviously exemplified by the novel's protagonists, Lenny and Eunice, who are Russian and Korean immigrants respectively.

In addition to his immigrant background, as a professional writer and novelist he witnessed the influx of digital technology and social media in his industry. Unlike Coupland, Shteyngart is not equipped with a similar know-how of technology and science. Thus, while Coupland's method of conveying "Digital Anxiety" was predicated on a great deal of knowledge about computers and programmer's lingo, Shteyngart had to rely on his felt experience with the rise of digital technology and social media, as it was affecting his profession. Social media, and

the influx of such devices as Kindle and smartphones, came at the expense of the printed form. This development Shteyngart viewed as a threat to the world of literature, claiming in the interview that there are certain aspects of reading a printed book where the digital equivalents just cannot compete. He holds a religious-like adoration for the printed form, highlighting seemingly trivial joys such as the physical smell of old printed books: “They age like fine wine,” he argues passionately (ibid). However, he also contends that reading a book means quite literally injecting yourself in the consciousness of another human being, and is instrumental to developing empathy: “When you read a book, you interact with it, it becomes a part of you. Reading is basically saying ‘I’m gonna leave my own personality aside for a while, and enter the consciousness of another human being.’ That makes the novel quite advanced technology considering it is something like 500 years old” (ibid). The influx of digital technology was also felt by him through observing how his novels were increasingly being sold on digital devices, relative to the printed format: “When my book *Absurdistan* came out, 1% of its sales were electronic, this time [*Super Sad True Love Story*] it was 35%. I predict the next book will be 50% or more” (ibid). His reservations towards digital media are challenged by his being a professional author, having to undergo the task of publishing, in addition to writing his novels, Shteyngart has felt the experience of having to increasingly market and promote his books online and through social media, as his job depended on it: “Your publisher will tell you that you have to promote your book on digital devices if you want to live. I even had to make a film for the book! If you want to successfully sell many copies of your book, you have to be on every social media platform available” (ibid). The increased reading done through screens would not be a problem were it not for its role in the downfall of printed literature, and Shteyngart suspects that he is not

the only author to mourn its fate in the information age: “Some authors love and embrace the new technology, but I think most writers fall into my camp” (ibid).

Reviews

In traditional dystopian fiction; undesirable hypothetical societies are constructed as a means to mirror and reflect our own society. For this reason, it can be understood as a form of social criticism; in this chapter, the novel *SSTLS* will be treated as such. With *SSTLS* being hyped up commercially, most major publications and digital newspapers in America published book reviews following its release, including ones from the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *LA Times*, *Slate*, *NPR*, and many more. A brief runthrough of these contemporary book reviews will help illuminate the scope of concerns, and their respective interpretations. With my thesis carrying its own set of assumptions and interpretations about Shteyngart’s novel, I will relate their concerns to my own, before introducing my argument about how Shteyngart’s *SSTLS* conveys Digital Anxiety as per my definition.

A 2011 *Guardian* book review of *SSTLS* lauds Shteyngart for his ability to weave together satire and dystopia in a way that induces in the reader a sense of unease, akin to a literary equivalent of cognitive dissonance, stating that the novel is “both bruising and consoling” and “leaves you wondering whether that dull ache in your stomach is from laughter or just plain sadness” (*The Guardian*, 2011). In effect, Shteyngart’s merging of these two literary forms made it possible for him to make his book entertaining, while also having a sober undertone which helps mediate the serious concerns which he addresses in *SSTLS*. With its main focus on the sorry state of the information age and its unpromising future, the review states that

“the information age provides the novel with much to mourn, including our attention spans” (ibid), and in so doing, touches a painful vein of Shteyngart’s that comes to the fore in his novel; the death of printed literature in the wake of social media’s frantic rise.

The New York Times’ review gives glowing praise, characterising Shteyngart as “one of his generation’s most original and exhilarating writers” (Kakutani, 2010). However, it does very little to engage with the latent critique of social media that is present in Shteyngart’s novel. Focusing mainly on the “real love affair as it blossoms from its awkward, improbable beginnings,” the review overlooks how the prospect for “real” love is weakened when confined within a world of corrosive social media frenzy emblematic of Shteyngart’s dystopia. The auspicious framing of the love story appears naïve when one considers how the relationship is in tatters following the “rapture,” the calamitous downfall of the nation. The reviewer’s focus on the “fiscal collapse” has its place, but in failing to acknowledge how the economy is failing on account of being completely centered on social media commerce, the reviewer misses the mark. Indeed, in the dystopian economy of *SSTLS*, Shteyngart’s concerns are in large part the excessive focus of consumerism, where the only three career options left are media, retail, and credit, and where everyone is obsessed with online shopping.

By contrast, a *Slate* review appears much more in tune with Shteyngart’s “innumerable beefs, both major and minor, with the state of the world” as exemplified by its reading of the character Eunice Park as a “child of her time: an avid online consumer, a believer in images and sensations, a lifelong mistruster of words, written or spoken” (Rafferty, 2010). After all, one of Shteyngart’s main gripes with the digital age is its encroaching effect on the analog, printed literature, and Eunice’s devotion to her digital surroundings reflects this. Central to the novel’s post-literate dystopian depiction is how the ubiquity of social media and the worship of the

electronic image facilitate the downfall of society. The review also does a good job of spotting how Shteyngart, despite employing a satirical tone, presents an undercurrent of seriousness by way of relating the degradation of literature to its political implications: “It’s not just that the culture is shallow and crummy; the real problem is that the shallowness and crumminess contribute to enabling a toxic, even a lethal, political environment, and as the novel goes along, the seriousness of Shteyngart’s purpose becomes more and more apparent, and the tone grows melancholy” (ibid). The *NPR* review reads the novel like an omen, with Shteyngart’s dystopia a bleak augury of humanity’s fate: “This isn’t your father’s New York -- but if Shteyngart’s manic, alternatingly hilarious and terrifying vision is right, it might be your son’s” (Schaub, 2010). Overall the review is positive, describing the novel as “surprising and brilliant,” and once again, Shteyngart’s satirical acumen is central to its verdict. Troy Jollimore, writing for the *LA Times*, makes an attempt to find a sliver of hope amidst Shteyngart’s bleak sketch of America’s future, and finds it in “poor” Lenny, lamenting how his love of literature has been devalued to the point of irrelevancy among a shallow, “youth-obsessed” populace. The reviewer is critical of the depiction of the character Eunice, however, deeming her GlobalTeens chat logs “uniformly uninteresting” (Jollimore, 2010).

In acquiescence with those critics who can have a good laugh at *SSTLS*, but who nonetheless are disturbed by its more serious implications, I contend that the novel provides a kaleidoscope through which we can better understand the implications of contemporary information technologies on society and human beings. For instance, it is important to dispel the notion that the presence of satire amounts to a disqualification of serious considerations. After all, Huxley’s influential dystopian fiction is authored with a veneer of satire, and hardly anyone would argue that *Brave New World* does not make a serious contribution to humanity’s

conception of, and battle against, totalitarian societies. In addition, critics who may deem the satirist displays of *SSTLS* too hyperbolic and exaggerated, will have to reconcile this view with the following anecdote of Shteyngart's: "I started the book in 2006, at that time I wanted the Lehman Brothers, the big banks, and the auto-industry to collapse, and by 2008 that had already happened, so I had to make things worse and worse" (Talks at Google, 2012). In hindsight, then, due to the rapid downward trajectory of American culture, what may have appeared to be satire to Shteyngart back then, appeared to be less satirical than first assumed, as American contemporary society kept defying his expectations of how bad things could get. As such, Shteyngart's satire is aptly understood as meandering between the whimsical and the sincere. After all, good satire is supposed to accentuate and lay bare humanity's follies and shortcomings, both trivial *and* serious. Shteyngart's dystopia should thus be understood as an attempt to articulate the direction of contemporary society, particularly our increasing appetite for distractions and social media.

Huxley or Orwell?

Any modern writer with the ambition of publishing dystopian fiction, will inevitably bear the burden of being compared to works such as George Orwell's *1984*, or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. These two novels in particular have become archetypical pieces of dystopian literature, so much so that "Orwellian," in common parlance, has become its own adjective as a means of describing his particular brand of totalitarianism. As literary scholar Simon Willmetts states, comparison to previous dystopian renditions remains an important practice: "for it is through this comparison that we can develop a diachronic understanding of the differences and development from one system to the next" (Willmetts, 2018, p,268) Willmetts is also quick to

call into question Orwell's relevance in the digital age as a means of understanding contemporary surveillance practices, deeming it to be anachronistic: "Doesn't every crystal ball have a shelf life, even the most prescient?" (ibid, p.267). Discussions around these newer, dystopian novels typically revolve around to what degree they resemble either of the two; Huxley or Orwell. The modern critic, however, needs to stay equally vigilant in assessing how modern dystopian depictions are *different* from Orwell and Huxley. Such differences obviously stems from having been written at such completely different times (ibid, p.267) For instance, Orwell, unlike Shteyngart, never got to purchase his first smartphone. As Simon Willmetts points out "*Nineteen-Eighty-Four* was written before personal computing, before the internet, before social media, and before big data" (ibid, p.267). More to the point, Shteyngart's *SSTLS* does not deal with a centralized power with a totalitarian force akin to *1984*. With much of the element of force out of the picture, it nonetheless helps to analyse how social media can act as an insidious and totalitarian force in Shteyngart's *SSTLS*, and how it serves as an instrument by which the elites control the levers of power. Indeed, Willmetts too acknowledges this: "Though *SSTLS* envisions a near-future America ruled over by an authoritarian leader (Defense Secretary Rubenstein,) whose state security apparatus (American Restoration Authority, ARA), certainly spies on US citizens and uses mass surveillance to instigate targeted waves of repression against Low-Net-Worth-Individuals, it is nevertheless a world in which surveillance is predominantly decentralised and participatory" (ibid, p.271,272). Crucial to this understanding, however, is that while the government is exonerated as a completely totalitarian force, the levers of powers are nonetheless controlled by an entity – a cadre of individuals who exist outside the framework of the social media surveillance apparatus, known as HNWI's (or High Net Value Individuals). Their absence from the ranking system of the *appärät* is evidence for this: at a party hosted by

Lenny's employer, the "Staatling-Wapachung," he observes that none of the high clientele or various individuals that comprise the upper echelons of the corporate hierarchy, are wearing the "äppärät" like all others. "The truly powerful did not need to be ranked," Lenny learns (Shteyngart, 2010, p.318). Shteyngart unabashedly admitted that Orwell's *1984* was an influence, and acted as a blueprint in creating his vision of dystopia in *SSTLS* (Talks at Google, 2012). Still, there are a number of differences that make *SSTLS* an illuminating rendition in itself, as opposed to a mere "2.0" of Orwell. Indeed, Shteyngart informs us that while Orwell provided much of the template from which he concocted his own dystopia, he has expressed one particular condition where his own novel is different from *1984*:

It is a lot like 1984 in a lot of ways because it is a love story. Winston and Julia are in love and the society is trying to pry them apart. What I wanted to try in this book is that they are in love, but there is no need for a big brother, because everyone has been so deputized to chronicle their lives at all times, the government doesn't need to do anything. Everyone shares where they are, who they are sleeping with, and what kind of sex they enjoy. And all this is being streamed everywhere around you. So in a sense the book is asking the question, what would 1984 look like without the government actually controlling things (Talks at Google, 2012).

This quote begs a discussion as to which of the two novels *SSTLS* most closely resembles, specifically in regard to its description of how power and control manifests itself. Neil Postman published his influential *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in 1985, where, in the wake of 1984, the year which Orwell's dystopian novel takes place, he makes the case that the trajectory of power

dynamics, as it has played out in history, more closely resemble Huxley's *Brave New World*, not Orwell's *1984*. In the book's foreword section, his reasoning reads as follows:

Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think (Postman, 1985, p.3)

These two passages, and their respective interpretations of *1984* and *Brave New World* as depictions of totalitarian systems, are eerily similar to one another, and moreover, Postman's quote echoes Shteyngart's, and accurately describes how the technology of social media, much like the decentralized dystopia of *Brave New World*, functions as a system of control in *SSTLS*. The *äppärät* is the quintessential example of such a technology, adored by its people, and undoing their capacity to think. This was also Huxley's idea of a "really efficient totalitarian state," one in which there exists a population which does not have to be coerced forcefully; "because they love their servitude" (Huxley, 1947). Had Huxley lived to read *SSTLS* today, he would find characters like Eunice Park, a woman with a major in "images," and who spends exorbitant amounts of time on her *äppärät*, as the type of inured citizen that reflects a totalitarian state as he saw it.

Illiteracy and Resistance to Books

“The clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools of conversation.”

Quote attributed to Marshall McLuhan (Postman, 1985, p.8)

A consequence of the citizens being wholly enveloped and entranced by their apparatus is that they have become completely illiterate. As a dystopia meant to mirror our own society, a real-life manifestation of this development from analog to digital was observed by Shteyngart through his background in the publishing industry; the increasing proportion of his book sales taking place on digital formats. These statistics are not surprising given that citizens of the first world are becoming increasingly networked, but in his novel, Gary Shteyngart was interested in demonstrating the implications of this kind of development. Media critic Neil Postman echoed similar concerns in his argument against television sets and the business industry in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, wherein he explores the implications of the “vast and trembling shift from the magic of writing to the magic of electronics” (Postman, 1985, p.12). While the television and the apparatus represent different technologies, they function similarly, as the apparatus is a progeny of television; and in addition, if we broaden such forms of technology as “screen time,” we can nonetheless use the perspicacity of Postman’s work as a means of analysing how screen time cheapens and downgrades literacy, and the ensuing, virulent effects on the populace.

Postman observes that: “What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one” (ibid, p.4) And indeed, such is also the case in Shteyngart’s *SSTLS*, but, his dystopia goes one step further; books are now detested and scorned. The intransigent Lenny is, to

our knowledge, the only person in America who still uses and adores the printed form.

Shteyngart's "near-future" dystopian America has severed itself from print, but not outright banned books, and Lenny, a character Shteyngart has created largely in his own image, is scolded by the public every time he exposes them to printed books. One example of this is when Lenny boards a plane in search of High-Net-Worth-Individuals to scan for his employer Joshie Goldman on a mission from Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation. Putting the *äppärät* on hold, he starts ruminating about how someone as old and decrepit as himself will ever be able to pursue someone like Eunice, and to "trick her youth" into a romantic relationship with him. While on the plane, browsing his roving book collection, he finds a literary parallel to his own hopeless situation in his "battered" collection of stories: the 19th century novel *Three Years* from the Russian author Anton Chekhov, which features a story about a son of a merchant, Laptev, who is in love with the more attractive and younger Julia. In Lenny's own words, the story is invoked as analogous to that of Lenny and Eunice in that there exists a "beauty gap" between the two of them. However, once a young passenger aboard the plane spots Lenny's book, he is repulsed by its presence: "Duder, that thing smells like wet socks" (Shteyngart, 2010, p.35). Lenny, in an attempt to redeem himself to his surroundings, quickly puts away his book, and in a fit of nervousness, brings out his own *äppärät* and starts "thumping" it loudly in order to reassure them "how much I loved all things digital" (ibid). In addition, when Lenny acquires the "new *äppärät* 7.5," he deems it to be a source of pride, as well as a positive step in his integrating into a digital society. His pride is compounded since his new *äppärät* has helped him abstain from his love of books and Russian literature: "I've spent an entire week without reading any books or talking about them too loudly. Shteyngart's depiction resembles Postman's reading of Huxley's *Brave New World*, where no one wants to read a book

(Postman, 1985, p.4). The people on board the plane are too much in love with their *äppäräti*, and the perception of books, even their mere presence, is wholly negative.

Another example of how social media induces illiteracy is evident from Eunice's epistolary chat logs, written on her "GlobalTeens" account, a mock social media platform where users "verbal" each other. In the first two entries, Eunice chooses to communicate using "Long-Form Standard English Text," which is immediately followed by the prompt: "GLOBALTEENS SUPER HINT: Switch to Images today! Less words = more fun!!!" (Shteyngart, 2010, p.25) and in her second chapter: "GLOBALTEENS SUPER HINT: *Harvard Fashion School studies show excessive typing makes wrists large and unattractive. Be a GlobalTeen forever – switch to Images today!*" (ibid, p.42). Here, the social media platform, presumably as tailored by the platform's algorithm, compels and admonishes Eunice to deviate from literary forms of expression and towards imagery as a means of communication. The use of capital letters, multiple exclamation marks, infantile adjectives such as "SUPER," make up an informal language that promotes visual stimuli, as "switch to images" would suggest. Furthermore, the overall impression of Eunice's barely literate epistolary accounts, is that they are peppered with spelling and grammatical errors, reflecting her as a product of the illiterate digital age. Examples include the flurry of satirical abbreviations, such as TIMATOV (I Think I am About To Openly Vomit), "LPT," and "PRGV" (ibid, p.20) which are a play on much of the real world abbreviations that can be found in contemporary digital discourse, such as "LOL" (Laughing Out Loud) and "IMO" (In My Opinion). In fact, some of the abbreviations in the novel appear to be extensions of those abbreviations that are in use today in internet and social media circles, such as: "ROFL," (Rolling On the Floor Laughing), and "JK," (Just Kidding), with Shteyngart's

satirical equivalents being “ROFLAARP,” short for “Rolling On Floor Looking At Addictive Rodent Pornography” (ibid, p.31), and “JBF,” short for “Just Butt-Fucking you” (ibid, p.20, 25).

Another resemblance to the Huxleyan type of totalitarianism can be seen in how Shteyngart has articulated the addictive nature of social media. Addictive in the way it constantly pleads for your attention, but also how it makes one passive to one’s surroundings. This state of being is also hinted at by Shteyngart in his promotional essay “Only Disconnect,” where he describes the feeling of being entranced by his new smartphone as entering into a “techno-fugue” state: “The device came out of the box and my world was transformed. (...) The first thing that happened was that New York fell away around me. It disappeared. Poof” (Shteyngart, 2010). Then, an enthralled Shteyngart too occupied with his smartphone nearly knocks down children and elders in his quest to find the taco restaurant which his phone had recommended to him. The social media manifestation in *SSTLS* is thus better understood as akin to the pleasure drug “soma” ingested by the citizens in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), which is to say, they serve the same purpose of inducing the citizens into passivity, allowing them to retreat from reality into the world of their apparatus. *SSTLS*, then, in a Huxleyan vein, shows how a Big Brother is obsolete, as the citizens through social media are now complicit in their own enslavement. This is an important aspect of Shteyngart’s dystopia, because, contrary to the belief that the effects of social media use is seemingly benign, the addictive effect helps to distract from the ongoing political upheaval that takes place in *SSTLS*, but also helps disarming the population with personal and apt language to pursue one’s needs. As Postman’s understanding of Huxley shows: “When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, (...) then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility” (Postman, 2013, p.112).

There are many passages in *SSTLS* that deal with the theme of social media addiction, and they illustrate how the denizens of New York are entranced by the images that surround them, and are lulled into constantly engaging with their screens. As such, the eerie aspect of social media prevalence is not merely the extent to which people engage with it, but also the passive, addictive manner in which they do so. Suppose that we imagine the shift from print-culture to a screen-based culture as a form of migration; In demographic and migration theory, one often employs the concept of “push and pull factors” as a means to understanding the multitudinous reasons to why people migrate. They can be understood as incentives, with “push” factors being negative factors that are in place where they emigrate from, and “pull” factors being attractive incentives within countries to which they want to immigrate to. I invoke the analogy here as a means of understanding the diachronic shift that has taken place in *SSTLS*, as well the addictive nature of screens and social media. Lenny’s reluctant embrace of the *äppärät* has presumably maintained in him an ability to more astutely perceive the nature by which his contemporaries are responsive to the allure of social media – In other words, its “pull factor.” The digital age constantly bids for your attention, and the stimulation continues nonstop. In *SSTLS*, individuals zombie-like consume the feed that the *äppärät* is providing them, and certain passages illustrate how screens seemingly put them into a de-facto state of inertia, unable to sever themselves from the captivating feed of their *apparati*. For instance, at one point when Lenny sums up the amalgamation of stimulating torrents “buzzing” from his *äppärät*, they include not only “contacts, data, pictures,” but also “sound” and “fury” (Shteyngart, 2010, p.4), which points to the manner in which the *äppärät* always bids for its user’s attention. In addition, Lenny’s parents, in his description, appear to have been induced into a state of somnambulism, doing nothing but watching mock news-shows such as “FoxLiberty-Prime and FoxLiberty-Ultra”

(Shteyngart, 2010, p.9), which alludes to the real life news channel of Fox News. Postman writes that information and news as mediated through screens and visual stimuli, is often context free, and promotes the type of passivity which Lenny's parents exhibit: "most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action" (Postman, 2013, p.50). News shows through screen-based media is also centered around entertainment, as Postman's case study shows. It is designed to keep you hooked on the medium, as evidenced by the accompanying music, attractive news presenters, and with the promise that, if you return at a later time, there will be more news in store (ibid, p.63). Thus, news as mediated through social media is not about informing the public; Lenny's parents are hooked to news shows and their stimulating images.

In an episode in the novel, Lenny is at Staten Island, now a hip bar marketed for "Media and Credit types," where he is to meet with Vishnu and Noah, two of his work associates at Staatling-Wapachung. Upon spotting them in the bar, Lenny remarks "There they were, crowded around a table, their *appäräti* out, (...) completely lost to the world around them" (ibid, p. 80). In another scene, Lenny, noticing a series of mothers tending to their children, "relishes" hearing the children uttering their first words. However, given the times that they live in, he naturally bemoans the kids' inevitable fate: "How long would it be before these kids retreated into the dense clickety-clack apparat world of their absorbed mothers and missing fathers?" This example again highlights the addictive effect, with "absorbed mothers" and "missing fathers" suggesting that they are addicts (Shteyngart, 2010, p.51). The addictive nature of social media in Shteyngart's dystopia reflects real life. A particularly insidious aspect in how contemporary social media sites are engineered, is the effort which its creators invested in making their platforms as addictive as possible. While this is a bold claim, it is not a conspiracy. Cal Newport,

a professor of computer science, has written extensively about the dangers of social media, specifically their ability to distract individuals from pursuing other, more meaningful goals. In his book, *Deep Work*, he informs us that: “These services are engineered to be addictive—robbing time and attention from activities that more directly support your professional and personal goals (Newport, 2016, p.186). In addition, the British journalist Nicholas Carr has written a 2010 Pulitzer-nominated book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), which, as the title suggests, deals with the internet and its ability to distract us. In a 2008 article of his, which was the basis for his book, he states that what “the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation.” (Carr, 2008). The effect of this mental rewiring, he explains, is that the net and social media are now becoming the only means by which one can attain information, which supports the theory that they are addictive. Tuned into this reality of contemporary social media use, it is no wonder that Shteyngart has employed it as the modern equivalent to Huxley’s drug soma.

Sex, vulgarity, and ranking: Digital Anxiety in *Super Sad True Love Story*

Sitting at a computer is a safe thing to do, but it doesn’t promote the kind of encounters where people fall in love the old fashioned way (Gary Shteyngart, Talks at Google, 2012).

“With each post, each tap of the screen, each drag and click, I am becoming a different person... With each passing year, scientists estimate that I lose between 6 and 8 percent of my humanity, so that by the close of this decade you will be able to quantify my personality.” (Gary Shteyngart, “Only Disconnect,” 2010).

We have seen how in Shteyngart's dystopia, the population's embrace of screens and social media have had the unintended consequence of creating a post-typographical and post-literate society. I will now return to my argument introduced earlier, which stated that social media's totalitarian role in degrading language and promoting illiteracy has contributed to a culture that challenges an individual's need to pursue love and belonging as defined by Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs." This will illustrate how Shteyngart articulates his particular brand of "Digital Anxiety" in *SSTLS*. In the social media realm depicted in *SSTLS*, romance is defined through the language as dictated by how it appears in the form of images and screens, most notably through the characters' interaction with the *äppärät*. By convention, everyone is expected to carry around the device around their necks, and with it, one need simply point it in the direction of an individual, and it immediately streams a flurry of private information and details about their sex life; from what their sexual preferences are, to who they like to sleep with, and how many sexual partners they have had. As such, social media strives for its users to be able to access information about their fellow citizens by having the platforms be as sexually transparent as possible. Lenny learns this lesson in the course of the digital interview he is subjected to at the American consulate in Rome, where the computer generated interviewer, in the form of a cartoon otter, asks prying and intrusive questions about Lenny's sexual affairs abroad, presumably in order to develop his social media profile: "Tell me, for statistical purposes, did you have any intimate physical relationships with any *non-Americans* during your stay?" (Shteyngart, 2010, p.7). The *äppärät* is also equipped with a number of functions that carry out statistical analyses of their users' physical attributes, and uses them to quantify sexual desires. This includes a "FACing" technology, which, based on the blood pressure of an individual, allows them to receive a

numeral value denoting how much they would like to have sex with someone else (ibid, 2010, p.86), thus enabling the possibility of providing the user with a quantifiable value of a qualitative human desire.

Part of the way in which *SSTLS* shows how social media and information technologies can redefine the way in which human beings seek to attain love and relationships, is precisely by how the *apparat* reduces complex human affairs into simple, quantifiable, and measurable rankings. Lenny, when employing the “FACing” technology on his *apparat*, receives the rating off “FUCKABILITY 780/800, PERSONALITY 800/800, ANAL/ORAL/VAGINAL PREFERENCE 1/3/2” (ibid). The tensions within the new paradigm becomes especially visible through the love story between Lenny and Eunice; and particularly through the juxtaposition between their respective autobiographical accounts – Lenny’s analog diary and Eunice’s digital GlobalTeens account. By switching between the two narratives, we see a contrast between how their desires and wants differentiate. Recall the example of Lenny checking out the novel *Three Years* by Anton Checkov, when we learn that Lenny’s desire is to fashion his potential relationship with Eunice using the love story in *Three Years* as a model. Meanwhile, Eunice is trying to shape Lenny such that he most closely resembles an ideal that is formulated by advertisements on social media platforms such as GlobalTeens. Thus, the logic and formulations as dictated by social media has become the lens through which the networked citizens in *SSTLS* try to shape their relationships. The implications of this logic constitute a damning indictment of social media, and its ability to facilitate a culture of human interaction which best allows them to pursue love and belonging as basic human needs.

An example of this indictment is how the presence of ranking, as an integral feature of the *apparat*, serves to discriminate against individuals based on how they are perceived through

the framework of social media standards. Not only do the standards define some individuals as undesirable, but some are deemed completely invisible, for example through a lack of funds, as the Low-Net-Worth-Individuals demonstrate, or by having a body type that isn't able to render properly on the *apparat*. This is exemplified by how Lenny assesses Eunice's physical attractiveness, which is based on how easily she can appear on his *apparat* screen. In contrast, when Lenny takes note of a conventionally unattractive and fat man while on the plane to New York, he notices that his profile could not be found on his *apparat*: "there was this one guy who registered nothing. I mean he wasn't there. (...) And he looked like a nothing. The way people don't really look anymore. Not just imperfect, but awful. (...) No one would look at him except me (and then only for a minute), because he was at the margins of society. (...) On my way back from the bathroom, I registered Fatty only as a pastel-colored blob in the corner, its form tickled by high-altitude sunlight" (Shteyngart, 2010, p.32). Lenny also notes that, prior to dating Eunice, "I did not exist," referring to how a High-Net-Worth-Individual had not been able to register Lenny on his *apparat*. In addition, a direct discriminatory practice can be gauged by considering the ease by which the electronic otter can render Eunice's skinny body, versus the carb-filled and hirsute body of Lenny's lover during his stay in Europe, Fabrizio deSalva (Shteyngart, 2010, p.8). As such, physical attributes such as obesity and body hair are deemed undesirable because they cannot easily be rendered and appear through an *apparat* and on social media accounts such as GlobalTeens, and on the flipside, skinny bodies that are spotless and devoid of physical and cosmetic irregularities, are objects of great beauty. Indeed, one of Eunice's social media pastimes is looking at "anorexic" supermodels (ibid, 306).

For an understanding of how a medium can rewire and redefine the motivations of its users, we can learn from Neil Postman's case study of "Sesame Street," which looked at the

feasibility of television as a means to facilitate education and learning in children. Postman argues that: “We now know that "Sesame Street" encourages children to love school only if school is like "Sesame Street." (...) sesame Street” does not encourage children to love school or anything about school it encourages them to love television” (Postman, 2013, p.103). A similar dynamic can be seen in Shteyngart’s *SSTLS*, wherein the apparatus rewires the motivation for pursuing love. Citizens in *SSTLS* are incentivized to think about love as it manifests itself in the social media realm; that is, the simple and crude language emblematic of their post-literate society, as well as the desires and wants as quantified by their apparatus. The simple physics of love that is present in *SSTLS* circumvents the need to think about love as an abstract, messy, and philosophical concept. The apparatus thus obfuscates the means by which the citizens seek to attain love and friendship. The ratings, as integral to social media and the screen, facilitate quantitative means of describing love as opposed to qualitative, and in so doing, effectively deprives the citizens of necessary means to pursue love and belongingness. For brevity's sake, I will avoid a full exposition on the philosophical concept of love, but suffice it to say, that it is fair to assume that the messiness of love is far too complicated for it to be properly encapsulated by mere numbers or other quantitative means. Yet, in Shteyngart’s dystopia, that is indeed how social media represents love. In *SSTLS*, symptoms of how social media has altered the practice of romance and relationships are too many to include here, but for our purposes, a rundown of a few particularly egregious examples sufficiently drives the point home. At one point in the novel, Sally admonishes Eunice to not “go steady” with Lenny, despite Eunice having told her that their relationship is going great. She continues to advise to avoid having children with Lenny “because you'll have really ugly children,” and reassuring her that “looking good is the new Smart” (Shteyngart, 2010, p.145). In other words, she is thoroughly unimpressed with Lenny's

“brain-smart” attributes, which pale in comparison to “some superstar Media guy or VP at LandOLakes” (ibid). We see here how social media defines individuals and the parameters by which they are romantically compatible. This is evident by how Sally, who is completely tuned into the social media frenzy, deems it more important that Eunice find someone handsome and reputable as per social media standards, despite Lenny and Eunice’s relationship showing promise. This is another obvious attack on an individual's pursuit of love and belongingness, as it leaves out the possibility of human beings seeking love and relationships for any other reason than to consider how it will alter their social media profile.

Another glaring characteristic of social media’s contribution to societal decay, is the hyper-sexualised and pornographic culture that has emerged, and the apparatus is the primary device which facilitates the intense focus on sex. With the apparatus incentivising its users to communicate with images and sounds as its primary forms of mediating information, the natural consequence is that judgments about what human beings find attractive is limited to the superficial. As Raymond Malewitz explains in his essay on Shteyngart’s novel, the “technological limitations in a given medium become the frameworks for aesthetic judgments” (Malewitz, 2015, p.113). Thus, digital media are what dictates the qualities which individuals should take into consideration when pursuing love. However, this is merely part of what is eerie and destructive about social media’s role in dictating the social sphere in *SSTLS*. As Malewitz also points out by citing the work of Grusin and Bolter in their *Remediation: Understanding New Media*: “Digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality” (ibid, p,109). As a result, the hyper-sexualised and pornographic culture emblematic of social media also purports to be

reality, as is evident by the extent to which individuals in Shteyngart's dystopia base their expectations of love and romance on how it is represented in social media.

Examples of how the prevalence and ubiquity of social media has rendered the social sphere a hyper-sexualised and pornographied place, can be found by reading Eunice's GlobalTeens account as Eunice serves as the embodiment of this extremely unhealthy and degrading paradigm, where human interactions, specifically the pursuit of romance and love, now ultimately revolve around sexual affairs. She spends an inordinate amount of her time shopping online. The major vendors that sell clothing online now seemingly market their products exclusively based on how it alters one's ranking in the sexual marketplace. The vendors typically have obscenely humorous, vulgar, and overtly sexual names such as "AssLuxury," "AssDoctor," "JuicePussy," and "TeenyBoppers." The products they sell have equally damning names such as "TotalSurrender," which is a brand of scant girl's panties, "Onionskins," a brand of jeans that are completely transparent, and "nippleless Saaami bras" (Shteyngart, 2010, p.26). Sally, Eunice's younger sister, is equally obsessed with getting hold of these overtly sexual clothes. While Eunice is in Rome, Sally routinely asks her questions about whether she can get a good price on clothing while she is in Italy (ibid, 2010, p.45, 47). Eunice's GlobalTeens interactions with her best friend "Grillbitch," or Precious Pony, also revolve around overtly sexual topics, including their reminiscing about sexual encounters with previous partners (ibid, p.25, 26), and plotting how they will be able to use sex in order to make their men of desire enter a relationship with them, for instance, Eunice's initial love interest prior to settling down with Lenny, Ben. When we first learn that Eunice has fallen in love with him while in Rome, her best friend GrillBitch gives her "patent" advice: "Go with him to Lucca, where is that exactly?, treat him like shit during the first day, let him fuck you HARD the first night, then leave him

completely confused the rest of the time. He'll fall for you pronto, especially after you let him plunder your MAGIC PUSSY!!!" (ibid, p.26). Beyond the overtly sexual language being reflective of a culture that completely revolves around sex, their correspondence also depicts love and relationships as being a strictly sexual exchange, with other, more nuanced aspects of one's personality as a secondary priority, if even a priority at all. In pursuing Ben, Eunice is worried that she is "undeserving," on account of her not being attractive enough for him, that he would rather opt for "some beautiful supermodel or some really smart but sexy Mediawhore. Someone he really deserved instead of this fucked-up girl like me" (ibid, p.32). In Shteyngart's interview with Google, he points to an example in the book that illustrates how social media's effect of pornographying culture has complicated the means by which the citizens can pursue love, which involves Eunice's relationship with Lenny: "At one point in the book, Lenny reads to Eunice Park and she begins to cry because she cannot understand what the value of this is. She is used to direct communication. She is unable to understand an intellectual, non-pornographic encounter with someone" (Talks, at Google, 2012). Shteyngart's hyper-sexualized dystopia is yet another element that aligns with a Huxleyan type of totalitarian society. For in a Huxleyan dystopia, as Postman remarked: "culture becomes burlesque" (Postman, 2013, p.113).

Concluding Thoughts

The title of Shteyngart's novel is illuminating in the way that it encapsulates my argument. Narrowing my argument of how Shteyngart's "Digital Anxiety" is an expression of how digital technology challenges humanity's basic need for "love and belongingness" is alluded to in the title, which in no uncertain terms, foreshadows a "Love Story." However, the title also promises

the love story to be “Super Sad” and “Super True.” My aim was that, in my analysis, my comparisons to the influential dystopias of Huxley and Orwell would encapsulate the “Super Sad,” whereas the insights drawn from media critics such as Neil Postman and Marshal McLuhan would encapsulate the “Super True.”

With the “Digital Anxiety” of Shteyngart involving the slow death of his profession, it helps to consider some of Shteyngart’s insights as to how humanity should face the influx of digital technology, and the inevitable growth that goes along with it. One can easily imagine Gary sitting alone on a porch with his Russian, modernist literature, bemoaning the fact that he, unlike his predecessors such as Tolstoj and Checkev, has been forced to deal with the digital age and the consequences it poses for his profession. “Tolstoj never had to worry about the latest killer app,” he explains, “the problem with writing fiction these days, it moves so fast that there’s no way anyone can write about the present” (Talks at Google, 2012). This concern of his is closely linked to what other authors have identified as a unique feature of the information age, and its rate of growth. Our surroundings and technological development seem to “defy representation” (Clark, 2014, p.50). In what way does the “porous social membrane” (ibid) between a private user and a corporation pose a challenge to contemporary novelists? According to Clark, the ubiquity of social media presents novelists with “a social landscape that is changing so much and so rapidly that it seems to defy representation” (ibid).

Facing the death of print, Shteyngart articulates what a sort of paradigm of resistance might look like. Firstly, he believes that any Luddite condemnation of digital technology is a futile endeavor, deeming it tantamount to standing in front of a moving train while yelling for it to stop (Talks at Google, 2012). Indeed, as Postman stated, “who is prepared to take arms against a sea of Amusements, (...) what is the antidote to a culture's being drained by laughter”

(Postman, 2013, p.113). Nevertheless, we should acclimatize as best as we can, and Shteyngart finds some promise in Japan, where a sort of compromise between the analog print and the digital screen has appeared in the form of “cell phone novels,” which are novels simply written via text-messaging on the phone; “they have become extremely popular over there, on the best seller lists” (Talks at Google, 2012). However it is not fair to expect Shteyngart to have all the answers. Postman, in accordance with Huxley, was equally concerned with the effect that technology has in our lives. They believed along with HG Wells that “we are in a race between education and disaster.” Perhaps then, as Willmetts wrote in his essay on *SSTLS*, we should take to heart his encouragement to keep reading dystopian fiction: “For those who believe that privacy and autonomy are worth defending, and that personal liberty and social justice are not mutually exclusive values, reading dystopian fiction can and does have great social value” (Willmetts, 2018, p.271).

One deeply personal method of coping with the invasion of the digital can be ascertained from Shteyngart’s article “Only Disconnect,” where he tenaciously reaffirms his dignity as human in a posthuman world: “I dream of leaving, too. Heading upstate in the summer-time with a trunk full of books, watching Roosevelt Island sweep by in a rainstorm, I wake up from the techno-fugue state and remember who I am, the 37 analog years that went into creating this particular human being.” Here, Shteyngart romanticizes the idea of escaping to a lone cabin in the woods, accompanied only by his beloved Russian literature, as well as his group of close friends, present in physical form, as opposed to Facebook. Shteyngart, then, believed that we can all benefit intermittently from these sorts of digital sabbaticals every now and then. The novel’s end also alludes to this, where Lenny has emigrated from the United States, as well as the storm of technology. He finally proclaims how he has found solace in a less social media crazed world:

“For a while, at least, no one said anything, and I was blessed with what I needed the most. Their silence, black, and complete (Shteyngart, 2010, p.329).

Chapter Three: Digital Anxiety and Safety Concerns in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*

The Circle (2013) is an American dystopian novel written by Dave Eggers. Broadly speaking, it is very similar to *Super Sad True Love Story* in many ways. Both are pieces of dystopian fiction that deal with the effects and implications of the information age, and both are set eerily close to our own times, in the “very near future,” in Shteyngart’s words, and “about five years in the future – so about now,” according to Eggers (Laity, 2018). More specifically, they both deal with what has become typical symptoms in the literary vein of dystopias meant to critique aspects of the digital age: the connection between social media and consumerism, and their ensuing virulent effect on humanity and society. Shteyngart’s love story explores these symptoms through social media addiction and its connection to a crisis in interpersonal relations. *The Circle*, on the other hand, explores this phenomenon through the chronicles of Mae Holland, a young and aspiring girl who has been fortunate enough to have landed a job at “The Circle,” the world’s largest and most dominant tech-firm, which runs the biggest social media platforms, accounts for most of the traffic that travels over the internet, and is a general source of admiration from all over the world. The company of the Circle subscribe to a world of complete transparency and mass surveillance, being self-proclaimed humanists who view transparency as directly linked to the quality of democracy and the ability of citizens to fulfill their potential.

In this chapter, I will analyse how aspects of “The Circle” company in Eggers’ novel resemble contemporary Facebook, both in terms of its practice on how social media is used to gather data from its users, but also the ideology and philosophy espoused from the figureheads that serve as the public image of those companies: Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg and the triumvirate “Wise Men” that manage “The Circle.” I will be using some insights gained from Jose Marichal’s *Facebook Democracy: The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life* as a means to shed light on how Eggers articulates his dystopian Facebook, including its pernicious aspects.

Readers who possess a modicum of technological savviness, and a shred of experience using social media platforms, will not have to read Eggers’ novel for long in order to connect the company of “The Circle” with real-life tech companies such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter, nor has this connection eluded the myriad of prominent book critics and literary scholars that have written book reviews of Eggers’ novel; Featured on the 2013 hardcover edition by Penguin Books are a series of quotations from such book reviews, which include descriptions such as “Google-gone-wrong” and “social media gone mad” (Eggers, 2013, foreword). In addition, a review from the *LA Times* interprets the company of “The Circle” as “a post-Facebook, post-Google behemoth” (Kellogg, 2013). What these types of interpretation suggest, is that Eggers in his novel has concocted his own dystopia with the premise that a real-life company such as Facebook has become even more powerful, to the point where it has monopolized entire industries and established a de-facto mass surveillance society. Similar to Shteyngart, then, archetypal aspects of our contemporary information age, such as the astronomical rate of growth of social media and the tech-conglomerates that run them, are portrayed and articulated in dystopias as forms of totalitarianism in order to convey critiques of contemporary digital culture.

Eggers thus uses the company of “The Circle” as a representation of real life firms such as Facebook and Google, and illustrates their potential for detrimentally affecting society.

About the Author

Dave Eggers grew up in Chicago. He attended the University of Illinois where he studied journalism, but dropped out on account of his parents’ death, both of whom died within a short time span due to cancer (LitLovers, 2019). The loss of his parents are chronicled in his first book *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, an award-winning memoir and his most critically acclaimed work to date. He has written several books, both fiction- and nonfiction. In addition to his profession as a writer, he works in publishing, and is the founder of *McSweeney’s*, an independent publishing company from San Francisco that produces books (McSweeney’s, 1998). Finally, he has made philanthropic contributions, and has helped found a number of nonprofit organizations, most notably the *826 National*, an organization aiming to promote writing skills among children around the world (826 National). He has been nominated for many awards of literature, including the Pulitzer, The National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award (Eggers, 2013, appendix). His 2013 *The Circle* was nominated for “Book of the Year” by many reputable critical outlets, including the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *NPR* (Eggers, 2013, foreword). In 2017, a film adaptation of the novel was released, and featured Emma Watson and Tom Hanks among its cast.

The Impetus for Writing the Novel

I think the thing that created the real impetus was one day I saw a friend on the street who said — he'd emailed me a few days before — and he said, "Hey, how come you haven't answered my email?" And I did the usual white lie, "Oh, I haven't gotten it yet. I didn't check my email." And he said, "Oh, I happen to know that you did get my email and that you opened it at 4:13 last Tuesday, and I have software that allows me to know when my mail has been opened, and I want an answer, why you haven't answered my message." And I thought, well, you know that among so many things indicated a real sort of change in what I think we saw as the pure ideals of a connected world ... sort of how it alters our, I don't know, our moral fiber in a way.

(Eggers, in an interview about *The Circle* (Ryssdal/Marketplace, 2017))

Dave Eggers has given numerous interviews online where he has shed light on why he chose to write a novel such as *The Circle*. To help determine what form of "Digital Anxiety" is present in *The Circle*, much can be learned from reading the interviews, as Eggers offers his sources of inspiration, as well as his concerns and reservations regarding the information age, and which his novel is created to explore. In a 2013 interview with *The Telegraph*, he explains that his main inspiration comes from having lived in California for many years, where he "watched the internet rise and fall and rise again" (Wood, 2013). Thus, from having experienced the boom and bust cycles emblematic of the highly speculative Silicon Valley economy, Eggers was now in a position to see the writing on the wall, and his dystopian novel can be interpreted as yet another Silicon Valley "boom" inevitably responsible for its own "bust." The types of "rise and fall" that Eggers alludes to include, but are not limited to, the rapid growth of the internet in the 90s,

following the huge amount of speculative investment that poured into the tech-industry, and the subsequent “dotcom bubble” that happened in the early 2000s (Hayes, 2019). California and Silicon Valley has remained a tech-haven ever since its 1990s nascent stages, and major companies involved in technology and social media are still situated there. Eggers’ lived experience as a California resident thus plays an important role in the shaping of his novel, and in this respect, it reads similarly to Douglas Coupland’s work-situation leading up to the publication of *Microserfs* in the early 90s. However, Eggers is clear that he did not actually visit the campuses of Google or Facebook in real life while doing research for his book. In a Q&A article from his publisher McSweeney, he states: “There was a point where I thought I should tour some of the tech campuses, but because I wanted this book to be free of any real-life corollaries, I decided not to (...) But I’ve been living in the Bay Area for most of the last twenty years, so I’ve been very close to it all for a long time” (McSweeney’s, 2013). In view of the difference in content between a novel like *Microserfs* and *The Circle*, this is perhaps not surprising. Coupland’s digital savvy appears less necessary for Eggers’ purpose, as he “tried to write a book that wasn’t so much about the technology itself, but more about its implications for our sense of humanity and balance” (ibid). Eggers and Coupland, despite writing at such different stages in the information age, both also used as their protagonists young people working in the industries that they wanted to depict. As Eggers also explains in his *Telegraph* interview: “A few years ago it occurred to me that the best way to do it would be through the eyes of a young person going to work at a company that had more or less overtaken the internet. That was the Circle, and that gave me the freedom to speculate about what might come next.” As the response implies, *The Circle* is Eggers’ illustration of what the next tech giant monopoly might imply for humanity, and as the interview goes on to show, a major area where Eggers is

particularly concerned, is the effect that tech-companies will have for security, surveillance, and privacy. When asked by the interviewer what Eggers deems to be the biggest threat to freedom today, he replies: “Our feeling that we’re entitled to know anything we want about anyone we want” (Wood, 2013).

Other interviews make it ever more evident that Eggers’ reservations about tech-companies lie in the threat that surveillance poses to privacy as a human right. In an interview made in connection with the release of the 2017 film adaptation, Eggers ponders: “So, many of my friends, you know, did well in technology and created some amazing tools. What I didn’t see coming, and I think what was very disturbing, is that surveillance part that was baked in. Who’s collecting data on who? And who’s monetizing it? And who has control of it? And who’s storing it?” (Ryssdal/Marketplace, 2017). Here, Eggers touches on one of his main concerns about the danger of the information age, and one that has flown under most people’s radar: The latent insistence that one is forced to accept that the rise in digital technology and social media inevitably means accepting the loss of privacy along with an increased level of public surveillance. This amounts to the “creepy” side of information technologies (ibid), according to Eggers. *The Circle* is partly about this concept, and illustrates how public apathy and tolerance of mass surveillance enabled by social media will have a detrimental effect on humanity’s security. This means that Eggers believes tech-companies bear particular responsibility in imposing a culture of transparency, seeing as how human want for convenience can leave us a little blind: “People have a high tolerance for being surveilled,” observes Eggers (Laity, 2018).

Reviews

As in the first two chapters of this thesis, a brief runthrough of critical book reviews is helpful in order to understand to what extent *The Circle* was perceived and functioned as a piece of social criticism. In my runthrough of critical reviews in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, I made the connection between dystopian fiction and social criticism, arguing that they amount to hypothetical societies that mirror and reflect our own society based on the author's perception of contemporary society. The impetus behind Eggers' writing *The Circle* made it evident that the novel is concerned with the implications of our digital Zeitgeist, hypothesizing one possible pernicious trajectory. The brief runthrough will therefore illuminate the scope of concerns as interpreted by book critics, which I will then relate to my own interpretation of *The Circle* as a social commentary on security, surveillance, and privacy.

Overall, critical reception of *The Circle* was mixed (iDreamBooks, 2013), as exemplified by the *New York Times* review from notable book critic Michiko Kakutani, who sums up her review by stating that "It's not Mr. Eggers's best work, but it draws upon enough of his prodigious talents to make for a fun and inventive read" (Kakutani, 2013). Other examples of mixed reviews include one from the *LA Times*: "The nagging trouble with the book is the superficial way it presents the main character (...) Despite that, the ideas behind *The Circle* are compelling and deeply contemporary" (Kellogg, 2013), and one from the *Washington Independent*: "Parable or no, Eggers' fear that we're shedding our privacy wholesale seems a tad alarmist. There will always be pushback. On the human side of the equation, though, he manages to perfectly capture the sort of hubris that demands the whole world become more 'open'" (Kolakowski, 2013). Among the critics that gave the most praise were critics from outlets such

as *The Scotsman* and *The Boston Globe*, the former stating that “The ending is truly shocking. The Circle is intelligent and quirky, engaged and affecting and confirms Eggers’ place as one of the most interesting novelists currently writing” (Kelly, 2013), and the latter: “‘The Circle’ is biting, even vicious at times. Despite the polemics, Eggers raises timely questions about transparency, privacy, democracy, and the sinister side of the Internet (Ciabattari, 2013).

The most negative reception came from outlets such as the tech magazine *Wired*, *Financial Times*, and *Forbes*. The verdict from *Wired* is very much on-the-nose, as can be ascertained by its title: “*What the Internet Looks Like if You Don't Understand It.*” What the title points to, is that Eggers’ shortcomings stem from his lack of insight and knowledge about the technology that surrounds us, and about the inner-workings of Silicon Valley tech companies. Considering the type of outlet that *Wired* is, it should come as no surprise that they would hold Eggers’ lack of technological knowledge against him. After all, *Wired* published Coupland’s first chapter of *Microserfs* back in 1994, and Coupland is undoubtedly a lot more savvy about technology compared to Eggers. They sum up his novel as follows: “Ironically, *The Circle* comes across like one of the Internet trolls that Eggers promises no longer exists in his fictional world: Entirely convinced of its righteousness, unafraid to use straw man arguments to ‘prove’ its points, and completely disinterested in dialogue when polemic is easier” (McMillan, 2013). The magazine *Forbes* published an equally critical review of *The Circle*. It also calls into question Eggers’ knowledge about tech, and states that much of the technology depicted in *The Circle* more closely resembles the present, rather than the future. Because of this, it suffers as a piece of dystopian fiction, appearing as: “A view of the future so obvious and creepy that you can't imagine smart people will let it happen” (Rosenbaum, 2013). The hardcopy of *The Circle*, published by Penguin Publishing, is covered with excerpts from critical reviews. However, they

are superlatives and adjectives that are cherry-picked from longer reviews. They include buzzwords and slogans such as “Marvellous,” “Prescient, important and very funny,” and “A must-read” (Eggers, 2013). They make up the design on the book’s physical cover, placed there in order to promote the book, making it look physically appealing to readers browsing a bookstore. For our purposes, not much can be learned from such distilled and simplified assessments over the vast amounts of content put forth by book critics. Many of them, however, point to one specific attribute which Eggers demonstrates in having written his novel: Prescience. In terms of “Digital Anxiety,” this is one of the more important and relevant points to consider when assessing the stakes and concerns that emanate from the pool of reviews. Unlike both Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* and Coupland’s *Microserfs*, *The Circle* depicts a dystopian vision that most closely resembles our own in terms of contemporary technological feasibility, corporate paradigm, and social media manifestation. Because of the near-future presage of the information age at display in *The Circle*, its cultural weight, as interpreted by many critics, lies in its timeliness, prescience, and cautionary elements.

Another observation from many critics is the unambiguous similarity of The Circle company to contemporary tech giants such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. Examples include characterisation of The Circle as “A Google-esque super-company” (Kolakowski, 2013), and “a slightly futuristic amalgam of the social-media and personal-tech companies that have emerged over the past decade, from Google to Facebook, Twitter and Square” (Ciabattari 2013). It is this allusion that helps convey “Digital Anxiety” in *The Circle*, as it illustrates and communicates the ways in which tech companies have a connection to contemporary issues concerning mass surveillance, security, and privacy. The similarities are not limited to them merely being tech companies. On closer inspection, elements such as the idyllic and bucolic workplace settings of

their headquarters, as well as the ideology of transparency as championed by their managerial class, are uncanny resemblances as well. These will be explored in detail later; of relevance here is that the real life parallels are not lost among the critics that have published book reviews of *The Circle*.

Maslow's "Safety needs" and Notions of Privacy

In analysing how "Digital Anxiety" manifests itself in Eggers' *The Circle*, it is prudent to explore the notion of "safety needs" as they are defined by Maslow's theory. In Maslow's original 1943 paper, he expands upon each of the needs within his hierarchy. Under "safety needs," he explains the safety need through the eyes of children: "we can approach an understanding of his safety needs perhaps more efficiently by observation of infants and children, in whom these needs are much more simple and obvious." Broadly speaking, the most salient and relevant element to consider in terms of "Digital Anxiety" is when Maslow states: "We may generalize and say that the average child in our society generally prefers a safe, orderly, predictable, organized world, which he can count on, and in which unexpected, unmanageable or other dangerous things do not happen" (Green, 2000). One thing that is important to note here, is that "safety needs" are met when an individual *perceives* themselves to be in a safe environment, which is to say that "safety needs" can be met irrespective of what actual threats there are present in one's surroundings. Another important thing to note is the scope of how safety is perceived. A rather obvious example of a safety need is to be free from dangers imposed by the elements, such as natural disasters, toxic air, and climate. But danger can be imposed on an individual in a myriad of ways. A safe environment is an environment that

maintains the perception that one is safe from harm, devoid of threats to one's security, which can be violated by people looking to harm you. In this sense, a safe environment necessitates living in a stable, secure and reliable setting. Examples of an unsafe environment, then, are not merely immediately threatening scenarios such as a burglar entering your house, a wild animal attacking you, or a hurricane or an earthquake. Unsafe environments also mean politically unstable countries, such as totalitarian regimes or dictatorships, which also represent threats to many individuals. We may also speak of economic security, which means that safety needs can for instance be violated by one's not having access to a stable job with sufficient pay, or for instance when one does not have access to healthcare, or insurance on their property. However, more overlooked and less obvious forms of safety threats may be of an emotional or psychological nature. For instance, to exist in environments where one is routinely subject to racism, sexism, homophobia, or any broad form of abuse or judgment, also poses threats to one's safety needs. As such, having access to privacy, a space where one is free from judgment and where one is protected from scrutinizing and invasive measures from the people around us, however well-intentioned and harmless they may be, is also a fundamental element of safety needs. This means that "safety" as it is defined by Maslow necessitates a sufficient amount of privacy. Considering that privacy is integral to establishing safety, mass surveillance thus poses a threat to one's safety needs.

In his 2015 book *Data and Goliath*, security expert and technologist Bruce Schneier gives an account of how digital technology has helped facilitate the creation of a paradigm of unprecedented mass surveillance, with tech-firms such as Google and Facebook playing major roles. Schneier offers insight not only to the technical makeup of modern surveillance, but does it while operating with a notion of privacy as a human right, and thus integral to our safety needs.

My purpose in including his insights is not merely to draw on his understanding of mass surveillance as a threat to privacy; in addition, his analysis of the forms of surveillance that occupy contemporary society can be compared and likened to those that appear in Eggers' *The Circle*. As earlier mentioned, the way in which Eggers depicts mass surveillance and their resemblance to real life tech firms is one way by which "Digital Anxiety" manifests itself in his novel, and *Data and Goliath* offers insight in demonstrating this resemblance.

Schneier contends that "we are living in the golden age of surveillance," and that much of this surveillance are enabled through voluntary transactions (Schneier, 2015, p.3). This is a paradox of modern surveillance; given that privacy is deemed to be such an important human right, we nonetheless make transactions with companies that allow them to increasingly gather more and more data from our user profiles, and thus relinquish our right to privacy. Schneier lays it out like this: "The bargain you make, again and again, with various companies is surveillance in exchange for free service. Google's chairman Eric Schmidt and its director of ideas Jared Cohen laid it out (sic) in their 2013 book, *The New Digital Age*. Here I'm paraphrasing their message: if you let us have all your data, we will show you advertisements you want to see and we'll throw in free web search, e-mail, and all sorts of other services. It's convenience, basically (ibid, p.4). On closer inspection, however, the voluntariness of using various information technologies today can be scrutinized. Indeed, today's economy compels us to use them, lest we lose access to a myriad of services. The bottom line regarding modern mass surveillance, according to Schneier, is this:

Today's technology gives governments and corporations robust capabilities for mass surveillance. Mass surveillance is dangerous. It enables discrimination based on almost any criteria: race, religion, class, political beliefs. It is being used to control what we see, what we

can do, and, ultimately, what we say. It is being done without offering citizens recourse or any real ability to opt out, and without any meaningful checks and balances. *It makes us less safe.* It makes us less free. The rules we had established to protect us from these dangers under earlier technological regimes are now woefully insufficient; they are not working (ibid, emphasis mine).

In *The Circle*, the company namesake advocates for a mass surveillance apparatus with unprecedented reach, and does so with philanthropic purposes. At various times in the novel, the company's transgressions of privacy induce a sense of anxiety and skepticism in the characters, including the protagonist Mae, who is one of the novel's biggest advocates of transparency and a stalwart defender of The Circle. Though Mae's character arc is meant to illustrate the power of ideology in convincing her of the benevolence of transparency, Mae's reservations regarding privacy is exposed on many occasions in *The Circle*.

During one of the Dream Friday innovation talks, a guest speaker, named Guz Khazeni, presents a dating app of his called LuvLuv. The app purports to be able to screen a potential dating partner for "relevant information" by undertaking a thorough sleuth of information on the web. The app goes through "everything Mae's ever posted," (ibid) including old Facebook archives: "now notice that the mentions of the horse allergy were way back in 2010, from Facebook of all places. For all of you who thought it was silly of us to pay what we did for Facebook's archives, take heed!" (ibid, p.123). In presenting the app, Guz has made a clandestine arrangement with Francis, Mae's love interest, staging a volunteer session wherein Francis is asked to name his love interest in order to test Guz's app. In front of thousands of Circlers, including the many users worldwide who are streaming the event, Mae's personal information is being sifted through, to her visceral embarrassment and discomfort: "Her face was in her hands, her eyes peeking from under her trembling fingers" (Eggers, 2013, p.122). Mae

ends up sneaking her way out of the presentation before Francis and Guz have a chance to bring her onstage. She expresses rage and disappointment with Francis, with “no intention of talking to him again” (ibid, p.125). The event illustrates Mae’s notion of privacy being violated, but also taps into the paradoxical nature of internet disclosure mentioned earlier. Indeed, the information that Francis and Guz have exposed was not “private” per se, it was all information that Mae had willingly posted over many years. The paradox is not lost on Francis, who attempts to comfort her by reassuring her that “everything that had been onscreen was publicly available, none of it embarrassing, all of it culled from things she’d posted herself, after all” (ibid, p. 125). Mae, having vowed to embrace the Circle’s ideology of full transparency, is forced to question the source of her discomfort during the LuvLuv ordeal. A short paragraph of introspection proves paradoxically illuminating in its ambiguity: “Was it the pinpoint accuracy of the algorithms? (...) Having a matrix of preferences presented as your essence, as the whole you? Maybe that was it. It was some kind of mirror, but it was incomplete, distorted. And if Francis wanted any or all of that information, why couldn’t he just *ask* her?” (ibid, p.125). This section is evidence of Mae’s notion of privacy being violated, with the central aspect of transgression being LuvLuv’s compromising of Mae’s ability to disclose information about herself of her own volition and discretion.

Another example of Mae’s notion of privacy making an appearance is during her kayaking trips. In the early stages of her employment at the company, as a means of venting frustration with Mercer and her parents, Mae decides to visit “a kayak and paddle-board rental operation” (Eggers, 2013, p.79). Her kayaking excursions are narrated in a pensive manner, reflecting the activity as inducing in Mae a sense of introspection and meditation: “She often did this when she was far from any shore – she just sat still, feeling the vast volume of the ocean

beneath her” (ibid, p.83). Reading of her voyages in her kayak, it becomes clear that Mae’s fascination lies in the “mysterious” and unknown, and she relishes the gap in her knowledge about her surroundings, exemplified by her perusal of the sequestered wildlife that surrounds her kayak: “There were leopard sharks in this part of the bay, and bat rays, and jellyfish, and the occasional harbor porpoise, but she could see none of them. They were hidden in the dark water, in their black parallel world, and knowing they were there, but not knowing where, or really anything else, felt, at that moment, strangely right” (Eggers, 2013, p.83). Eggers juxtaposes Mae’s mysterious kayaking excursions with her climbing the corporate ladder of the Circle campus, associated with complete transparency. The vastness of the sea, a representation of a private sphere, brings a sense of comfort to Mae. It is an example of Eggers appealing to Mae’s sense of humanity, and in so doing, reaffirming our need for privacy as fundamental to humanity.

As the novel progresses, and the ambit of the Circle’s surveillance apparatus “SeeChange” continues to expand, various characters experience their notion of privacy being under attack. One of Mae’s enduring predicaments is her inability to help her father with his multiple sclerosis disease. Eventually, however, she learns that through the Circle, she has an option to enroll her parents under the Circle’s complete healthcare plan, ensuring that her father can afford the medicine he needs. Eventually we learn that a condition of her father’s treatment was that their house would become “transparent,” meaning that it had been outfitted with SeeChange cameras (Eggers, 2013, p.323). Later, Mae finds out that her parents’ cameras have stopped working, in a confrontation with them about the situation, “during which Mae’s parents agreed readily with all of Mae’s arguments about transparency”, Mae is taken aback by their conciliatory tone, noting that “they were being far too cooperative” (Eggers, 2013, p.363). In truth, the mass surveillance imposed on their domicile led them to adjust their behaviour, and

once Mae leaves, they leave her an envelope written by Mercer wherein he explains that her parents felt burdened and insecure by the level of surveillance: “If you saw your parents, and your mom gave you this note, then you saw the effect all your stuff has had on them, both of them strung out, exhausted by the deluge you unleashed on them. It’s too much, Mae. And it’s not right. (...) They don’t want to be smiled upon, or zinged. They want to be alone. And not watched. Surveillance shouldn’t be the tradeoff for any goddamn service we get” (ibid, p.367). Central to these excerpts is that they highlight the tension between transparency and privacy, specifically the challenge that the former imposes on the latter, and they illustrate human beings’ natural instinct to oppose meddling into our private realm.. Thus, Eggers articulates the idea that a notion of privacy, and a sense that one has access to it, constitutes an integral part of humanity's need for safety.

Benefits of Anonymity to Political Organization and Effective Dissidence

There is a sound argument to be made in favour of anonymity as a necessity to maintain the possibility of a dissident class capable of holding totalitarian forces accountable. In *The Circle*, Eggers demonstrates ways in which the compromise of anonymity hampers the ability of political dissidents to thwart the increasingly totalitarian power of The Circle, the most glaring example being the implementation of a worldwide mass surveillance apparatus. The intransigent characters in the novel that oppose the ideology and influence of The Circle are represented by Mae’s ex-boyfriend Mercer, as well as founder of The Circle Ty Gospodinov, who surreptitiously defects from the Circle under the name of Kalden, arguing that the company is a totalitarian state in the making. The pernicious fate of these characters is a consequence of The

Circle's growing power, but also enabled by their nonymous state allowing for The Circle to quash their rebellious influence.

Mercer is Mae's ex, but remains a friend of her parents, regularly spending time with them, and taking an active role in caring for her father's multiple sclerosis. Presumably, their relationship did not end amicably, and Mae routinely displays frustration and jealousy with Mercer: "He liked to be considered kind, but he made sure everyone knew it, and that drove Mae mad" (Eggers, 2013, p.128). Mercer's defense of privacy in the hyper-connected world of Eggers dystopia provides the rebellious and prophetic voice in *The Circle*. He demonstrates lucidity when ranting against the invasive and noise-laden world typified by The Circle, and resents Mae having been employed by them. The two of them clash over the various symptoms brought about by an increasingly networked and less private world. When Mercer displays frustration at hearing Mae recite user reviews of his antler-business, he complains: "It's always this third-party assault. Even when I'm talking to you face-to-face you're telling me what some stranger thinks of me. It becomes like we're never alone. Every time I see you, there's a hundred other people in the room. You're always looking at me through a hundred other people's eyes" (Eggers, 2013, p.131). Mae defends her stance by informing Mercer that, "you run a business. You need to participate online. These are your customers, and this is how they express themselves, and how you know if you're succeeding" (ibid, p.132). Then she starts proselytizing by showing Mercer examples of how tools offered by The Circle can help grow his business. Mercer, unswayed, engages in more broad criticisms of social media prevalence: "That's the vast majority of this social media, all these reviews, all these comments. Your tools have elevated gossip, hearsay and conjecture to the level of valid, mainstream communication" and on the addictive nature of social media: "It's not that I'm not social. I'm social enough. But the tools you guys create

actually *manufacture* unnaturally extreme social needs. No one needs the level of contact you're purveying" (ibid, p.133). Mercer's feeble attempt at resisting the influence of The Circle amounts to an attempted escape from the purview of the Circle's technologies, specifically the utilization of SeeChange camera drones as a means of catching criminals. Given that Mercer can be quickly identified and tracked down, Mercer realizes the futility of trying to escape the encroaching power of The Circle, and their persecution of him leads to him taking his own life. This is one example of how Mercer's nymous state renders him completely powerless to affect meaningful resistance to the Circle. Because he can be quickly identified, his potential for meaningful political dissidence is negligible.

Ty Gasparov is the other rebellious presence in the novel, and he appears intermittently as Kalden, attempting to draw Mae out of the intoxicating ideology of transparency advocated by The Circle. Unlike Mercer, Ty Gasparov has the advantage of anonymity until the novel's end, and wants to circumvent the expectation of transparency within the Circle by taking on the identity of Kalden. As the technologies of The Circle are becoming ever more intrusive, Kalden wants to act as a whistleblower and eventually reveals his identity to Mae after they have witnessed Tom Stenton's shark tank experiments. He warns Mae that the "completion" of the Circle needs to be avoided at all costs: "Mae, the Circle can't close (...) Mae, once the Circle is complete, that's it. And you helped complete it. This democracy thing, or Demoxie, whatever it is, good god. Under the guise of having every voice heard, you create mob rule, a filterless society where secrets are crimes" (Eggers, 2013, p.480, 483). Mae gets increasingly frustrated, and is quick to liken Kalden's defence of privacy to Mercer's rantings, upon which Kalden reminds her that Mercer's fate is exactly the reason why anonymity and privacy are worth defending "Don't you see that's just one of the consequences of all this? There will be more

Mercers. So many more. So many people who don't want to be found but who will be" (Eggers, 2013, p.481).

In his book *Facebook Democracy*, José Marichal argues that there is a social and political benefit to "creating a fog around ourselves" (Marichal, 2012, p.2). Such political benefits include the possibility of maintaining an anonymous presence even as an active participant in the political process. He continues: "The popularity of social networking sites (SNS), particularly the popularity of Facebook, makes it increasingly difficult to develop a contingent self that embraces and exhibits doubts, flexibility and uncertainty about the world around us. Facebook encourages us to lift this fog around ourselves through an architecture of disclosure that compels us to provide more and more information about ourselves" (ibid). In *The Circle*, the vindication of an anonymous presence, or "contingent self," is represented by characters such as Mercer and Kalden. The compromise of their anonymity effectively quells any meaningful resistance to the surveillance apparatus imposed by The Circle. As Marichal writes, "Part of the success of a movement in the face of a hostile regime is the protection that anonymity provides. (...) protest activism requires the formation of a collective civic consciousness that can only occur in totalitarian states *if a level of anonymity is afforded to its citizens*" (Marichal, 2012, p.134, emphasis mine). This condition is completely eschewed by the ideology of radical transparency championed by The Circle, and thus Eggers' novel becomes an articulation of a dystopian vision where tech-giants, through challenging anonymity and privacy, are the culprits in rendering the citizenry politically impotent. Though Eggers' novel is a fictional articulation of this phenomenon, there are real life parallels that demonstrate the political benefits of anonymity in forming an opposition to totalitarian forces. Marichal cites the examples of the offline and

anonymous political mobilization that preceded the revolution of Egypt in 2011. Once members of that political movement were made known to the state of Egypt, they were arrested.

Transparency as Ideology in *The Circle*

“Secrets are lies

Sharing is caring

Privacy is theft”

(Mae Holland’s revelations and “The Circle” motto (Eggers, 2013, p.303))

With an understanding of privacy as an integral part of our safety needs, locating “Digital Anxiety” in *The Circle* means analysing the ways in which Eggers’ dystopian vision enunciates concerns regarding its threats to our sense of privacy and safety. In *The Circle*, the tech-company namesake and its triumvirate managerial class, the founder Ty Gospodinov, “Uncle” Eamon Bailey, and “Capitalist Prime” Tom Stenton, are represented as an uncanny parallel to the personality marketing delineated after the contemporary leadership styles of Facebook, Twitter, and Google. Indeed, when Eamon and Tom are first presented in the novel along with how they managed to grow the company into the dominant tech-corporation of the world, we learn that “it

was they who grew the company into the force that subsumed Facebook, Twitter, and finally Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe, and Quan” (Eggers, 2013, p.23). Thus, Eggers has in his dystopia sketched a trajectory of historical tech-development where The Circle alone now dominates the tech-industry, having replaced our corporate contemporaries prior to replacing the fictional companies of “Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe, and Quan”. A short glance at the history of tech-companies in the 90s and the early 2000s demonstrates that such a shift in corporate paradigm is not inconceivable. Companies like IBM and MySpace are shadows of their former selves, but were once one of the leading companies of their time, exemplified by the former playing an important role in Coupland’s *Microserfs*, set in the 90s. MySpace was also a predecessor to social networking sites like Facebook, similar to how Facebook is portrayed as one of the predecessors to The Circle in Eggers’ novel (Marichal, 2012, p.3). Thus, the subsumption by The Circle of former tech-giants resemble historical developments in the economy. Though the corporate structure has changed, the ways in which The Circle manifests itself resemble contemporary tech-companies in other ways. Ultimately, they serve to propagate and facilitate an ideology of disclosure, one that Marichal calls an ideology of “radical transparency.”

Like Facebook, The Circle is described as a company that grew rapidly following the implementation of a technology that offered its users *convenience* over its competitors. As Marichal explains, Facebook overtook MySpace as the dominant social networking platform: “The key advantage Facebook had over its competitors was the ability to build applications that could expand the range of ways individuals could connect with those in their network (Marichal, 2012, p.4). The rate of growth changed the paradigm of the internet, and its impact on contemporary internet practice was no less revolutionary than how The Circle is portrayed in Eggers’ novel. Such a paradigm shift adjuvates ways in which privacy is challenged. When

Facebook experienced significant growth, one of the significant changes involved the conception of the internet as an increasingly nonymous space: “Rather than see the Web as an anonymous site where folks could try on different identities, Facebook linked the public and the private. Users were encouraged to use their real names and shares real facts about their lives” (Marichal, 2012, p.4). Part of the growth of Facebook also attests to human beings’ need for community and personal contact (Marichal, 2012, p.5). The pertinent point to consider is that in creating a company so similar to contemporary tech-companies, Eggers references contemporary security concerns regarding their increasing level of influence and control.

In *The Circle*, Eggers articulates the power of the Circle in imposing an ideology of disclosure. In short, the ideology espouses the beliefs that transparency is wholly and always good, and that privacy is criminal. The manifestation of this ideology is evident through the various axioms and adages that are touted and espoused by those loyal to the Circle agenda, which include the triumvirate Wise Men, but also those employed by the company. As an example, one axiom repeatedly stated is the opposition to deleting old information. At one point, after Mae has had a sexual encounter with her love interest Francis, he insists on saving the information on his TruYou account. Initially, Mae objects to what seems an obvious transgression of her rights to privacy, and demands that he delete it, to which Mercer replies: “Did you say ‘delete’? he said, jokingly, but the meaning was clear: *We don’t delete at the Circle*” (Eggers, 2013, p.203, emphasis mine). Mae ends up pleading that her best friend Annie override Francis’ uncompromising stance, but Annie, equally committed to the Circle’s values, replies: “You know I can’t. *We don’t delete here*, Mae. Bailey would freak. He’d weep. It hurts him personally when anyone even considers the deleting of any information. It’s like killing babies, he says. You know that” (ibid, 204, emphasis mine). An auxiliary belief to the anti-

deleting stance is the attempt to chronicle and document the gaps in historical knowledge. One of the Circle's experimental technological projects include "PastPerfect," which attempts to trace the lineage of people and document the history of one's ancestors. Annie, initially excited about the prospect, partakes as a volunteer during the developmental phase. As the revelations about her past are increasing made public, Annie feels the guilt of being beholden to her past, feeling a sense of complicity of the crimes of her pedigree, eventually deeming herself to be a "intergenerational slave owner (ibid, p.434). Unable to deal with the discoveries made by the algorithmic sleuth into her past, Annie breaks down into a comatose state, prompting Mercer to warn Mae of her role in advocating for the growing influence of the Circle, and reassuring her that "We are not meant to know everything" (ibid, 430). Schneier writes that "forgetting is an important enabler of forgiving" and that maintaining the "ephemeral" sense of memory is worth defending in an age where technology has enabled us to store insurmountable amounts of information about ourselves (Schneier, 2015, p.128). Schneier's sentiments echo those of Mercer, suggesting that there is a sensible limit to the amount of information humans are capable of processing, as is evident when Mercer informs Mae that "Did you ever think that perhaps our minds are delicately calibrated between the known and the unknown?" (Eggers, 2013, p.430).

Coupled with the opposition to deleting information, the ideology of transparency touted by the Circle affirms that, through the information technologies they develop, harnessing new information with no limits to privacy is a positive thing. Certainly, the axioms espoused are reflective of this, however, the technologies themselves are exclusively designed to service the need for more information, and to eliminate privacy. SeeChange is a mass surveillance apparatus that provides users of TruYou with live footage captured by small inconspicuous "lollipop" cameras (ibid, 63); Francis' child safety program "ChildTrack" would place all parents and their

children under constant surveillance; and during one of the “Gang of 40” technology expos, where Circlers pitch their latest developments and ideas to more prestigious members of the Company, they invariably attempt to solve some problem by increasing the level of surveillance. For example, “NeighborWatch,” which would allow users of TruYou to profile convicted criminals entering certain neighborhoods. As insidious and intrusive such technologies seem, the ideology of transparency does not frame the pernicious aspects, nor the precedent which the implementation of such technologies would imply. On the contrary, they merely articulate how such technologies would service their benevolent intentions. When Eamon introduces SeeChange to the world, he posits scenarios where having surveillance would be beneficial, including the potential for oversight to spot and reduce crime, as well as how surveillance would be beneficial to helping his ailing mother: “The point is that I know she’s safe, and that gives me a sense of peace. As we all know here at the Circle, transparency leads to peace of mind. No longer do I have to wonder, ‘How’s Mom?’” (ibid, p.68).

As the novel progresses, we see the influence of the ideology of transparency steadily rising, and the ambitions of the Circle develop from being a mere social media company into influencing the political sphere. As self-proclaimed humanists who see transparency as directly linked to the quality of a democracy, they encourage politicians to “go transparent,” which means being under constant surveillance through a pendant around their neck, the purpose being that it would demonstrate to the world which politicians are respectable. They test the prospect on a politician named Stewart, who presumably volunteers to exonerate himself from corruption (ibid, 205). The novel reveals that the Circle acts so as to pressure citizens to conform to the ideology of transparency: “The pressure on those who hadn’t gone transparent went from polite to oppressive. The question, from pundits and constituents was obvious and loud: If you aren’t

transparent, what are you hiding?” (ibid, 239). The old adage of “if you aren’t doing anything wrong, then you have nothing to hide” is apparent here. Eggers reveals how this adage forces upon citizens an expectation that shifts the burden of proof to the citizen, who is now expected to exonerate and prove his innocence, rather than being assumed to be innocent until proven guilty. Such an expectation is fruitful for the Circle’s ambitions, as, regardless of how citizens react to such an expectation, its presumed logic would always prove that more surveillance is always the answer – put differently, the old adage posits that, “regardless of whether or not you are doing anything wrong, we want to know, so therefore mass surveillance is positive.” Intuitively, the logic of such an adage can be compelling, which is why it is touted so often by the Circle, and in turn, why it has compelled so many citizens to adhere to the ideology of transparency. Schneier, however, specifically addresses the old saying, and argues that it “is a dangerously narrow conception of the value of privacy” (Schneier, 2015, p.7). Similar to the Circle, Schneier also argues from the position of humanism, but arrives at another conclusion, stating that mass surveillance is fundamentally dehumanizing.

Ultimately, it is perhaps the development of the character Mae that best articulates the power of the ideology of transparency. I’ve already established that Mae initially appears apprehensive to some of the more intrusive elements at the Circle. Thus, there is a looming redemption arc which the reader expects to appear as the dangers of mass surveillance are beginning to unravel around her, from Mercer’s suicide, Kalden’s warnings, and her friend Annie’s breakdown. However, as the ultimate testament to the power of ideology, Eggers ends the novel with Mae ever more dedicated to the Circle agenda: “It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing. It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world. She would bring this up with Stenton and Bailey, with the Gang of 40, at the earliest opportunity. They

needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserves nothing less and would not wait" (Eggers, 2013, p.491). A redemption arc would have included the realization that her complicity in propagating the mass surveillance apparatus of *The Circle* has been a damaging force to the safety needs of her close ones. However, such a realization in Mae is absent from the novel.

Cult of Personality

Another glaring similarity to contemporary high-tech companies is the form of cult of personality which the tech-managers propagate among the public in order to associate and represent their brand, which includes not only presentation, but primarily the ideas espoused and the ideology they champion. We saw in Coupland's *Microserfs* how Bill Gates was one of the first big tech celebrities to cultivate an image that would help promote his brand. Similarly, more modern versions of such CEO celebrities include Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, and Eric Schmidt of Google (though he stepped down from Google in 2015), and the late Steve Jobs of Apple. What is significant about their style of leadership and brand building, is that they are public about their advocacy of such digital technologies that challenge our sense of privacy, including the notion of privacy as a human right. Scott McNealy of Sun Microsystems stated back in 1999: "you have zero privacy anyway. Get over it" (McNealy in Schneier, 2015, p.4). Such statements reveal that the information age threatens to redefine our notions of privacy. In *The Circle*, there are many similarities between the statements uttered by Eamon Bailey during his talks and those of Mark Zuckerberg regarding privacy in the digital age. Consider these statements:

You have one identity... The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly... Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity (Zuckerberg in Kirkpatrick (2010, p.36)).

I'm a believer in the perfectibility of human beings. I think we can be better. I think we can be perfect or near to it. And when we become our best selves, the possibilities are endless. We can solve any problem. We can cure any disease, end hunger, everything, because we won't be dragged down by all our weaknesses, our petty secrets, our hoarding of information and knowledge. We will finally realize our potential (Eamon Bailey in Eggers, 2013, p.292)).

In particular, morally loaded phrases such "lack of integrity," and "petty secrets" suggest that the information age, of which CEOs like Zuckerberg and Eamon Bailey are major figures, demand that we let go of our right to privacy for ethical reasons. In *The Circle*, such sentiments are made conspicuously visible by slogans such as "privacy is theft," criminalizing the very idea of privacy as a right.

In *The Circle*, Eamon Bailey is the one that everyone, including the "Circlers", associate with the Company. He is described as "earnest," "accessible," and "genuine" and is held in great admiration for these qualities (Eggers, 2013, p.24, 25). Among the "Three Wise Men," Eamon is overtly dissimilar to the braggart Tom Stenton, a self-described "Capitalist Prime," referencing the Transformers. He is an aggressive venture-capitalist who is unafraid of flaunting his money and power in the public sphere. Deemed by Circlers as "anachronistic" to the company's values, Tom Stenton's demeanor and values are what has made the public disaffiliate his involvement in regards to the company's outward appearance. Eamon, on the other hand, is considered a

member of the hoi polloi, whose background is so normal as to be totally unsuspecting and unnerving among the Circlers: “He had come from Omaha, from an exceedingly normal family of six, and had more or less nothing remarkable in his past” (ibid). His ubiquitous presence and genuine demeanor earned him his nickname “Uncle Eamon” (ibid). Mae first encounters him in person during one of his “Dream Friday” events, which are weekly talks held to roughly 3,500 circlers at the “Great Hall” of the Circle campus. The talks are designed to promote and create excitement around the latest technologies which are under development by the company, however, they are also a display of personality– and brand development from Eamon Bailey (Eggers, 2013, p. 60). During the first talk, Eamon shares the story of one of his favorite pastimes, surfing: “I love to surf, and when I want to surf, I need to know how the waves are” (ibid, p. 60). Eamon then explains how his want for information about “the waves” has been hitherto insufficiently serviced through various generations of information technologies in the past. He explains the unreliable, laborious, and meddlesome process of having to phone local surf shops and friends for information: “Seriously, though. It’s not practical to make twelve calls in the morning, and can you trust someone else’s take on the conditions?” (ibid, p. 61). He finally ends with a screen descending behind him, where he demonstrates how streaming technologies in the past were too “primitive” and low quality: “A poorly designed site appeared, with a tiny image of a coastline streaming in the middle. It was pixelated and comically slow” (Eggers, 2013, p. 61). After this public display on the inferiority of previous technologies in servicing his problem, he reveals his big finale: the latest technology planned by The Circle, now juxtaposed with previous technologies to appear even more superior: “Now the page was refreshed, and the coastline was full-screen, and the resolution was perfect. There were sounds of awe throughout the room” (Eggers, 2013, p.61).

As the “Dream Friday” talks are public events available through streaming on the Circle’s social network, TruYou, they are a massive platform, and an avenue through which Eamon can cultivate The Circle brand. Part of it means stating things such as “Secrets are the enablers of antisocial, immoral and destructive behavior” (289). The charisma of Eamon Bailey, both his ingratiating, seductive manner of speaking, as well as his disarming and meek “regular-guy-in-the-neighborhood” persona, resemble the practice and charisma of other such contemporary tech-CEOs. The most glaring example is the late Steve Jobs, mentioned by name in the novel (Eggers, 2013, p.101), co-founder of Apple Inc, which later became the largest company of its kind, and where he served as CEO for many years. Apple is the largest tech-company in the world to this day (Fortune, 2019). Jobs was famous for overseeing the company during the growth and popularization of smartphones, and was a pioneering force in the development of microcomputers in the 1970s. Part of his disarming presence was his informal and congenial attire, his signature piece of clothing being the black turtleneck (Olivarez-Giles, 2011). In utilizing Steve Jobs’ style of leadership, his ability to compel crowds, to market products, and to woo large groups of people that his company is a force for good, Eggers is able to demonstrate the dangers of such cults of personality in popularizing and implementing technologies that jeopardize our sense of security and privacy. Such personalities, as exemplified by the growth of The Circle following the hiring of Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton, demonstrate how they act as purveyors of surveillance technologies, and as complicitous in the dissemination and legitimizing of ideologies that champion radical transparency to the detriment of privacy.

One particularly insidious aspect of those who tout the benefits of radical transparency, is the hypocrisy that emerges when one looks more closely at the discrepancy between stated and practiced beliefs. Schneier points this out by looking at examples from Mark Zuckerberg and

Eric Schmidt. The latter has often publicly reiterated the old adage of “if you haven't done anything wrong, you have nothing to hide”, and yet, Schmidt has banned employees from talking to reporters. As for Zuckerberg, he “declared in 2010 that privacy is no longer a ‘social norm,’ but bought the four houses abutting his Palo Alto home to help ensure his own privacy” (Schneier, 2015, p.125). Moreover, even Zuckerberg is compelled to tape over the webcam of his laptop computer (Hern, 2016). This hypocrisy is hardly lost on Eggers, who portrays such hypocrisy in the Circle in no uncertain terms. They surreptitiously research new and invasive technologies, such as the ominously named “Project 9”, which would enable the Circle to store information within human DNA, and thus allow for intergenerational transference of information (Eggers, 2013, p.218). In addition, Eamon Bailey has secrets of his own within the Circle campus, including his hidden library, accessed through a bookcase passage, a known literary and television trope for disguising secret rooms (ibid, p.27). Thus, the Circle, who purport to adhere to axioms such as “all that happens must be known” (ibid, p.67), are found to violate such principles on a routine basis. The real life parallels provide evidence for how such hypocrisy is relevant to our own time, both through the practice of tech-companies, as well the discrepancy between preach versus practice found among their managerial figureheads.

In juxtaposing notions of personal privacy and the ideology of radical transparency as disseminated by tech-companies and their charismatic managerial class, Eggers is able to demonstrate and tap into how contemporary security concerns regarding mass surveillance can potentially be a facilitating force in establishing a totalitarian force and attack human beings' safety needs. Thus, “Digital Anxiety” in *The Circle* is expressed through Eggers' ability to articulate the breaches of privacy committed by the company namesake, and referencing them to

contemporary security concerns associated with the increasing influence of tech- and social media giants such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

Concluding Thoughts

My argument on Eggers' 2013 novel lends credence to an interpretation of *The Circle* as depicting a future more imminent than is usual for dystopian fiction. Absent are the fantastical and grandiose extrapolations of current digital technology typically associated with science-fiction literature, and in truth, the technology depicted in the novel appears to be quite contemporary, albeit with a more grand-scale and centralized implementation. It is indeed the contemporaneousness that make it difficult to fully classify *The Circle* as a piece of science-fiction literature. Writing for *Forbes Magazine*, the critic Steven Rosenbaum commented on the novel that "It's hard to call it science fiction. Science fiction is fun, in part, because the futuristic tales of space travel and runaway robots are happening a few generations from now. Eggers' future is way closer than that" (Rosenbaum, 2013). In contrast, then, understanding *The Circle* as an attempt to articulate the inevitable consequence following the contemporary assault on privacy spearheaded by tech-giants and their managerial mouthpieces makes it evident how "Digital Anxiety" manifests itself in Eggers' novel. The pervasiveness of the cult of tech-personalities can be traced through the flagrant parallels found between the fictional character of Eamon Bailey and our own tech- and transparency advocates such as Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, and Eric Schmidt. The analysis demonstrate the most significant parallels to be the cultivation of their public persona, with a particular focus between Eamon Bailey and Steve Jobs, as well as their ideological statements as reflective of an ideology of transparency that challenges our notions and access to privacy in the information age. The latter element was brought up in a

2017 interview with Eggers that was done in the aftermath of the release of *The Circle* (2017) film that was based on the novel. Eggers was questioned about Mark Zuckerberg's recent comments where he had stated that privacy was no longer a social norm (Johnson, 2010), to which Eggers, fully aware of Zuckerberg's comments, adamantly asserted: "I have to say, it has no basic basis in human history. We've always had privacy, and it's always been integral to what makes us individuals" (Ryssdal, 2017). Such a candid defence of privacy under the threat of information technologies make the author's position unmistakable. However, what is more germane in regards to "Digital Anxiety" is how Zuckerberg's statements reflect the escalating challenge to privacy inherent within an ideology of transparency akin to how it is represented within the fictional company of "The Circle." In addition, the plot and character developments is how Eggers is able to demonstrate the power of such an ideology. Mae's looming redemption arc, her increasing level of devotion to "The Circle" and their ideological agenda, and the company's ability to quell opposing figures represented by characters such as Kalden and Mercer, are all evidence of the influence of ideology. That same interview, as it was made four years after the publication of the novel, has Eggers doubling down in his view, asserting that the real-life manifestation of such an ideology is equally significant in its ability to compel masses to not accept a notion of privacy as a human right: "Yeah, it's moving a lot faster than I thought. And there's not really a lot of speed bumps along the way" (ibid).

Coupled with such an ideology are the powerful information technologies of the digital age allowing for ever-increasing levels of mass surveillance. Eggers confirms that the novel is an exploration of the intersection between security, safety, and mass surveillance (ibid). In particular, it is the contemporary security concerns that have sprung up in concurrence with the rapid rise of real-life tech-giants that Eggers wants to criticise in *The Circle*. By having the

company of The Circle function as a “worst-case scenario” (ibid) of companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter, Eggers articulates how they can challenge our sense of privacy, and as I argue, understanding privacy as integral to Maslow’s “safety needs” lays bare the “Digital Anxiety” manifestation in *The Circle*.

Conclusion

Thesis Revisited

In this thesis, the aim is that a literary analysis of *Microserfs*, *Super Sad True Love Story*, and *The Circle* will illuminate the type of challenges that are made towards our basic human needs as depicted in contemporary literature dealing with the digital age. In turn, this constitutes a form of “Digital Anxiety” as I have defined it using Maslow’s established theory of human needs as a basis. At stake is a framework for understanding how digital technology is culpable for exacerbating a wide spectrum of anxieties among humans. As purveyors of literary fiction to the masses, authors such as Douglas Coupland, Gary Shteyngart, and Dave Eggers can be understood to act as messengers and cultural critics. While some may argue that these authors do not possess the technical acumen akin to writers of hard science fiction, their ability as writers to articulate the human experience in the midst of the information age is valuable. Technology permeates many facets of daily life, and in a discussion about the uses of digital technologies, everyone is entitled to influence the public discourse.

In concluding this thesis, I wish to return to the phenomenon of “Digital Anxiety.” As I have examined three separate needs in the three novels *Microserfs*, *Super Sad True Love Story*, and *The Circle* respectively, I want to utilize the analyses of the three chapters in order to provide a comprehensive notion of “Digital Anxiety.”

In reading these novels, the perturbation that the reader can glean in regards to the relationship between technology and humans stems from the fact that they carry relevance into our own times. While the novels *Super Sad True Love Story* and *The Circle* feature imagined technological elements within dystopian fantasies, as the analysis shows, they mirror our own society in the way that their dystopias reference contemporary technological developments. *Microserfs*, on the other hand, is a prototypical example of modernist literature, exploring life in the rapidly expanding and technology-based Silicon Valley economy that emerged in the early 90s.

In *Microserfs* Coupland is able to express “Digital Anxiety” by mediating Daniel’s reservations and anxieties of self-esteem through various computer and programming lingo, exploring the neoliberal tendencies emblematic of Silicon Valley economy, such as consumerism, privatization, and private speculation within the stock market. Central to the narrative structure; Daniel Underwood’s diary entries, appropriately in the form of a technological text as written on an Apple laptop, are the play on digital vs human language, allowing Coupland to relate the digital Silicon Valley paradigm with Daniel’s issues of self-esteem as defined by Maslow’s theory.

In *Super Sad True Love Story*, Shteyngart’s vision of how a Huxleyan post-typographical society, demonstrate the role of social media frenzy in complicating the pursuit of genuine human relationships, primarily explored in the novel’s central love story between protagonists

Lenny Abramov and Eunice Park. As the story progresses, we see instances of the rigid parameters created by social media platforms now heavily dictates how citizens define a “viable” or “acceptable” relationship. Specifically, they are heavily skewed towards prioritising how visually stimulating potential partners can appear on a screen, encapsulated by the statement “looking good is the new smart” (Shteyngart, 2010, p.145). The new parameters, as arbitrated by social media platforms, poses a specific challenge to love and belonging needs as per Maslow’s theory.

Finally, *The Circle* is an exploration into a potential, corporate subsumption of contemporary tech-giants such as Facebook and Google. Eggers’ vision, by his articulation of the uncanny and current resemblances to a future tech giant, is able to reference contemporary security concerns. Demonstrating how such corporations challenge our notions of privacy by both devising technologies allowing for mass surveillance, as well as advocating an ideology of transparency and disclosure, I argue that “Digital Anxiety” is present by how this dystopian future challenges our notions of privacy, with privacy being integral to our “safety needs.” In broad terms, then, “Digital Anxiety” constitute a broad, psychological framework that is appropriate in articulating reservations and anxieties as it manifests itself in literary theory. Part of its strength, I argue, lies in its utilizing an established psychological theory for understanding basic and *universal* human motivation and behaviour.

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Summary in Norwegian

Digital teknologi har endret samfunnet vårt dramatisk. Mange av endringene er utvilsomt positive, men hvis vi ser på de ulike teknologiene som *verktøy* blir det enklere å stille seg skeptisk til bruken av disse. Analogier til fysiske verktøy som hammer og skrujern er klassiske forklaringsmodeller på hvordan verktøy brukes til å tjene spesifikke oppgaver. Digitale verktøy og bruken av disse er derimot langt mer komplekst, da teknologien er mer avansert, og nytten de tjener er mer omfattende og sammensatt. Mange karakteriserer de enorme samfunnskonsekvensene knyttet til den digitale teknologien de siste årene som en "revolusjon," som i følge Store Norske Leksikon betyr "en endringsprosess som er grunnleggende og foregår i løpet av meget kort tid." Denne oppgaven har likevel størst fokus på hvilken konsekvens dette har for mennesket som individ, der øvrige samfunnsspørsmål blir trukket inn dersom det er relevant til analysen. Skjønnlitteraturen spiller en viktig rolle i å hjelpe oss å forstå menneskets erfaring av disse samfunnsomveltningene. Denne masteroppgaven omhandler hvordan aktuell

skjønnlitteratur fremviser menneskers angst knyttet til ulike aspekter ved den digitale kulturen. Jeg har valgt tre amerikanske romaner; *Microserfs* (1995) av Douglas Coupland, *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) av Gary Shteyngart, og *The Circle* (2013) av Dave Eggers. For å konkretisere «angst» som et psykologisk fenomen som kan gjenkjennes i litteraturen, har jeg valgt å definere «Digital Anxiety» ved å bruke Abraham Maslows kjente teori kalt «behovspyramiden.» Denne teorien forklarer menneskers atferd- og motivasjon basert på våre universale, grunnleggende behov. «Digital Anxiety» er fenomenet der litteraturen viser hvordan den digitale kulturen utfordrer og/eller angriper våre primære behov slik de er definert i Maslows behovspyramide.