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The geography of privacy: digital surveillance and the transformation of space in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

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Abstract

Dave Eggers's *The Circle* primarily deals with digital surveillance and the erosion of online privacy and has been a source of frequent examination for its critique of surveillance, corporate power, technological dependence, and the advocacy for transparency in the digital domain. The novel presents a technologically advanced society in which digital platforms increasingly become ingrained into everyday life, resulting in the continuous collection, monitoring, circulation, and trading of personal information. Through these developments, spaces that were traditionally reserved for private affairs are transformed by the presence of digital technologies. This paper approaches these concerns through the concept of space, arguing that *The Circle* represents surveillance not simply as the observation of individuals but as a process that transforms the spaces in which privacy can exist. It draws on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to examine how spaces are socially produced and transformed, while Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism is used to understand the economic structures that enable the extraction and utilisation of personal data. Through these theoretical frameworks, the paper examines how the novel represents the transformation of private and public places into digitally monitored spaces. It argues that privacy is represented in the novel not merely as a legal right but as a spatial condition requiring areas of opacity and minimal visibility.

Keywords: feed, privacy, surveillance, data, space, transparency

1. Introduction

For decades, discussions of surveillance in literature have found focus mainly in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this dystopian novel, surveillance is presented as a form of control exercised by an authoritarian state. The state uses a centralised system of surveillance that depends on coercion, ideological control, and the fear of punishment to control people (Herman, 2018). It maintains power by constantly watching individuals, thereby forcing them to control their own behaviour. However, contemporary speculative fiction has presented a significant transformation

in the ways through which surveillance operates. Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, in particular, moves away from the conventional representation of surveillance as a practice imposed by an authoritarian state and presents a technological corporation that exercises control through connectivity, convenience, voluntary participation, and the promise of technological progress (Laguarta-Bueno, 2024). Rather than forcing individuals to submit to surveillance through direct political coercion, the corporation encourages people to willingly participate in systems of continuous monitoring by presenting transparency and connectivity as necessary components of modern life.

This change in the nature of surveillance can also be understood through the concept of space. Traditional representations of surveillance usually focus on the relationship between the observer and the observed. In *The Circle*, however, surveillance becomes part of the spaces in which people live, work, communicate, and interact. As a result, these spaces are transformed by digital products that make people's activities increasingly visible and accessible to the corporation. Therefore, surveillance in *The Circle* is not simply the act of watching individuals. It is also a process that changes the spaces in which privacy can exist. Rather than treating space as a passive setting in which surveillance occurs, this paper examines how surveillance itself participates in the production and reorganisation of space. This approach allows the novel to be read not only as a critique of digital surveillance but also as a representation of the changing geography of everyday life.

2. Objectives

1. To examine the representation of digital surveillance and the erosion of privacy in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*.
2. To analyse how surveillance transforms private and public spaces within the digital environment represented in the novel.
3. To apply Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to examine the social and technological production of digitally monitored spaces in *The Circle*.
4. To examine the role of surveillance capitalism, through Shoshana Zuboff's framework, in the extraction and utilisation of personal data.
5. To analyse privacy as a spatial condition that depends on opacity, limited visibility, and the existence of spaces beyond continuous digital surveillance.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theoretically informed close-reading methodology. Dave Eggers's *The Circle* serves as the primary textual corpus, while selected scenes concerning the Circle's corporate architecture, SeeChange, Mae's livestreaming and PartiRank, Mercer's cabin, SoulSearch, and Annie's hospitalisation are analysed through Lefebvre's spatial triad and Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism. The analysis examines how surveillance technologies and corporate practices transform the spatial relations through which characters experience privacy and social life. Secondary scholarship on surveillance, privacy, and *The Circle* is used to situate the interpretation within existing literary and theoretical debates.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism to examine how digital surveillance transforms the spatial conditions of privacy in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*. Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism complements Lefebvre by explaining the economic logic underlying these spatial transformations. Bringing Lefebvre and Zuboff together therefore allows the study to examine both how surveillance produces and reorganises space and why such increasing visibility becomes economically valuable.

5. Discussion

Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced rather than existing as a neutral background to social life. His spatial triad consists of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. Representations of space, associated with conceived space, refer to the conceptual and institutional systems through which space is planned, organised, and controlled. These include maps, plans, models, and other forms of knowledge used by experts and institutions to structure space (Lefebvre, 1991). Spatial practice refers to the material and everyday practices through which social space is reproduced. It includes the physical networks, routines, movements, and relationships through which people use and experience space. Representational spaces, associated with lived space, refer to space as experienced through symbols, emotions, images, memories, and imagination.

In *The Circle*, conceived space is designed by the company's founders, known as the Three Wise Men: Ty Gospodinov, Eamon Bailey, and Tom Stenton (Eggers, 2014). Together, they construct an ideal social vision in which secrecy and privacy are gradually removed. By turning human behaviour into data, algorithms, and systems of measurement, and by use of transparent architecture, the leaders of the Circle create a space in which complete visibility is presented as the highest moral and social value. When Mae Holland first arrives, she finds a workplace dominated by transparent materials. The campus has floor-to-ceiling glass walls, glass elevators, and communal glass dining areas, which allow employees to observe one another constantly. This architectural design reflects the company's main slogans: "SECRETS ARE LIES," "SHARING IS CARING," and "PRIVACY IS THEFT" (p. 305). The open glass offices and communal spaces turn the workplace into a kind of panopticon. Employees become aware that they are constantly visible to others and therefore begin to control their own behaviour. According to Virginia Pignagnoli, "transparency is just the sugarcoated synonym for surveillance" (Pignagnoli, 2017, p. 152). Similarly, Pramod K. Nayar (2022) argues that this constant visibility regulates behaviour at a subconscious level. Employees change their posture, work habits, and online behaviour because they know that their actions are always visible. Eamon Bailey further presents this idea of transparency as a moral principle. During his public speeches, he describes the new age of complete visibility as a "Second Enlightenment" (Eggers, 2014, p. 68). He argues that secrecy creates crime, corruption, and dishonesty, while complete visibility creates morality and trust. He states, "In situations like this, I agree with the Hague, with human rights activists the world over. Tyrants can no longer hide . . . ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN" (p. 68). According to this logic, privacy is no longer treated as a basic human right.

In *The Circle*, SeeChange represents the main physical element of perceived space. These are small, wireless, solar-powered cameras that can be placed almost anywhere in the world without being easily noticed (Eggers, 2014). Eamon Bailey introduces SeeChange during a "Dream Friday" keynote. He

presents the technology as a means of promoting humanitarian freedom, political accountability, and crime prevention. By showing live footage from different locations around the world, Bailey claims that SeeChange can reduce political oppression and street crime by creating a global system of constant observation. The significance of SeeChange, however, extends beyond its capacity to watch. The technology transforms physical environments into continuous sources of behavioural information. Spaces that were previously experienced through limited and intermittent forms of observation become environments from which information can be continuously captured, transmitted, stored, and analysed. A location is no longer simply a place in which events occur. It becomes a potential source of continuously available data. This transformation can be understood through Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism. For Zuboff, surveillance capitalism depends upon the appropriation of human experience as behavioural data and its subsequent processing for predictive purposes. The value of surveillance therefore lies not simply in knowing what individuals are doing but in converting their activities into information that can be analysed and potentially used to anticipate future behaviour. SeeChange embodies this logic by extending the Circle's capacity to capture events as they occur across physical space. Its cameras turn locations, movements, interactions, and activities into continuously available informational resources. SeeChange therefore demonstrates the relationship between Lefebvre's production of space and Zuboff's surveillance capitalism. From a Lefebvrian perspective, the technology alters spatial practice by reorganising how physical environments are observed and accessed. From a Zuboffian perspective, the same transformation enables the appropriation of behavioural information generated within those environments. Surveillance consequently becomes more than an act of observation. It becomes a process through which physical space is converted into a continuous source of data.

Representational spaces, or lived spaces, refer to spaces as they are personally experienced through symbols, images, memories, emotions, and psychological states (Lefebvre, 1991). Unlike conceived space, which is based on ideas and plans, and perceived space, which consists of physical structures and everyday practices, lived space concerns subjective experience and imagination. It is the part of everyday life in which people experience feelings of belonging, fear, safety, or alienation. Traditionally, lived space could provide some protection from economic and social pressures. It could function as a private space where personal thoughts, intimate relationships, and emotions could develop without constant public observation. However, when considered alongside Shoshana Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism, this private dimension of lived space begins to disappear. Instrumentarian power attempts to reduce the distance between a person's observable behaviour and inner subjectivity, making the individual increasingly knowable through their actions and data (Zuboff, 2019). In *The Circle*, Dave Eggers presents this process by showing how personal experience is gradually transformed into public digital performance. As Pramod K. Nayar (2022) argues, acceptance and self-recognition in *The Circle* become dependent on sharing one's life publicly through digital platforms. As a result, Mae Holland's personal value becomes increasingly dependent on digital approval. Her worth is constantly measured through metrics such as her PartiRank and the thousands of digital "smiles" she receives every day (Eggers, 2014). Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of the "Look of the Other", Ajeesh A K (2026) argues that constant awareness of being watched makes the individual see herself as an object of judgement and evaluation. Mae gradually internalises this corporate gaze. She even ignores her basic physical needs, such as eating chocolate or taking pain relief, because she fears receiving negative reactions from viewers of her live feed (Eggers, 2014). Consequently, Mae's lived space loses its spontaneity and privacy. The significance of this transformation is that surveillance no longer requires a physical observer to be present. Mae has internalised the possibility of observation to such an

extent that she regulates herself even when the regulation conflicts with her physical needs. Her everyday experiences are transformed into performances for an audience, while self-censorship becomes a regular part of her life. Mercer Medeiros, Mae's former boyfriend, recognises the dangers of this demand for complete visibility. He argues that human beings need a balance between what is known and unknown:

Did you ever think that perhaps our minds are delicately calibrated between the known and the unknown? That our souls need the mysteries of night and the clarity of day? You people are creating a world of ever-present daylight, and I think it will burn us all alive. There will be no time to reflect, to sleep, to cool (Eggers, 2014, p. 434)

Mercer's statement directly challenges the Circle's attempt to eliminate privacy. As John Masterson observes, Mercer's decision to escape to a remote cabin in the northern forests represents a modern version of the American wilderness tradition associated with Henry David Thoreau (Masterson, 2016). Mercer seeks a private space beyond the Circle's surveillance and mapping systems. However, within the system of surveillance capitalism, even remote wilderness cannot remain outside surveillance. The episode demonstrates how technological systems can overcome geographical distance and make even remote locations vulnerable to observation. Physical separation is therefore no longer sufficient to guarantee privacy when technological networks possess the capacity to locate and monitor individuals across space. This becomes clear when Mae demonstrates the company's real-time SoulSearch tool during a live broadcast. Users locate Mercer's cabin within minutes and send autonomous drones to follow his vehicle. Mercer eventually drives off a cliff and dies (Eggers, 2014). Mercer's retreat therefore demonstrates the relationship between physical distance and privacy. The wilderness traditionally represents a space of withdrawal from society, but *The Circle* suggests that geographical remoteness does not necessarily provide protection from technological observation. His death demonstrates the extreme consequences of complete spatial surveillance. When technology can map and monitor every physical location, escaping surveillance becomes increasingly difficult. Physical space therefore loses its capacity to provide privacy and protection. The novel therefore extends the logic of surveillance from physical and social environments towards psychological internalisation.

The hospital scene represents the ideological extension of the Circle's demand for transparency into domains of human experience traditionally understood as private. Mae's close friend Annie Allerton initially represents an alternative to Mae's complete acceptance of the Circle's technological culture. However, when the Circle's PastPerfect programme publicly reveals Annie's family history, she suffers a psychological collapse and falls into a catatonic coma (Eggers, 2014). In the final part of the novel, Mae visits Annie in hospital and observes the medical monitors displaying her neural activity. Instead of recognising Annie's unconscious mind as a private domain, Mae regards its lack of transparency as an "affront" and a "deprivation" to the wider world. As Peter C. Herman (2018) argues, this moment represents the final expansion of corporate control over private space. Orwell (2017) famously describes the "few cubic centimetres inside your skull" as the final domain threatened by totalitarian power (p. 27). The significance of the comparison is not that Orwell presents the mind as permanently secure. Rather, the invasion of mental privacy represents the ultimate aspiration of totalising surveillance. In *The Circle,* Eggers similarly presents the demand for complete transparency as extending towards forms of human interiority that have traditionally been understood as private. The distinction between public and private space therefore disappears. The novel presents a world in which neither physical locations nor the human mind can provide a secure space beyond observation.

6. Conclusion

The combination of Lefebvre's spatial triad and Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism show how corporate algorithms transform different levels of social space. Conceived space is reorganised through transparent architecture and systems of corporate governance. Perceived space is transformed through technologies such as SeeChange and SoulSearch, which extend systems of observation into everyday physical environments. Lived space is also transformed through behavioural self-regulation and the increasing intrusion of surveillance into psychological and cognitive life. A major finding of this study is that individual attempts to escape surveillance have limited effectiveness within a highly connected technological system. Mae's temporary escapes through kayaking and Mercer's retreat into the wilderness both fail because they remain individual responses to a wider structural system. The novel's treatment of failed individual attempts at withdrawal suggests the limitations of purely individual strategies of resistance when surveillance operates as a broader social and technological infrastructure. Privacy must therefore be understood not only as an informational or legal condition but also as a spatial one. Ultimately, preserving human autonomy in the digital age requires understanding privacy as a spatial condition. Protecting privacy therefore involves preserving physical, social, and psychological spaces in which individuals can remain free from continuous corporate observation and control. In this sense, *The Circle* presents surveillance as a transformation of the geography of everyday life. The novel's dystopian condition emerges not merely because people are watched, but because the spaces that once allowed them not to be watched are progressively reorganised. Surveillance becomes embedded in architecture, infrastructure, social interaction, personal behaviour, and psychological experience. The erosion of privacy is therefore also an erosion of the spaces through which individual autonomy can be maintained.

Conflict of Interest: *The author declares no conflict of interest.*

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