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The Self Under Surveillance in Twenty-First-Century Dystopian Fiction

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Abstract:

This paper examines how contemporary dystopian fiction has evolved from its Cold War preoccupations with totalitarian states toward a subtler, more intimate anxiety: the erosion of selfhood under algorithmic surveillance. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power, Shoshana Zuboff’s concept of surveillance capitalism, and Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the control society, the study reads Dave Eggers’s The Circle (2013) and The Every (2021), Margaret Atwood’s The Testaments (2019), and Naomi Alderman’s The Power (2016) as texts that interrogate the relationship between digital visibility and personal identity. The argument is that these novels collectively constitute what might be called a ‘critical digital dystopia’: fiction that not only warns against technocratic control but traces the psychic cost of living under conditions in which selfhood itself becomes data. The paper concludes that 21st-century dystopian fiction performs a diagnostic cultural function, articulating anxieties about personhood, power, and consent that political and philosophical discourse has been slower to name.

Keywords: contemporary dystopian fiction, digital surveillance, surveillance capitalism, identity formation, selfhood, control society, algorithmic governance

Introduction

The Circle (2013) contains a moment that crystallises the central anxiety of contemporary dystopian fiction. When the protagonist Mae Holland discovers that her every movement inside the Circle’s campus is being recorded and made accessible to her colleagues in real time, she does not recoil in horror. What she feels, instead, is something closer to relief , as though the uncertainty of being unobserved had been a burden she was finally permitted to set down. This inversion of expected emotion, surveillance experienced as comfort rather than violation, is one of the most unsettling gestures in twenty-first-century dystopian writing, and it captures something that older dystopias, with their jackboots and telescreens, could not quite manage: the possibility that the most effective forms of social control are the ones we actively invite.

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Dystopian fiction has always been a literature of the present wearing the mask of the future. Orwell's Oceania was Stalinist Britain pushed to its logical extreme; Huxley's World State was Fordist consumer capitalism stripped of its restraints. What distinguishes the dystopian imagination of the twenty-first century is not a change in the form of the threat but a change in its location. The dystopia of our moment is no longer a government that storms through the door; it is a platform that arrives, free of charge, on your phone. As Zeb et al. observe in their survey of the genre, contemporary dystopian fiction has pivoted its critical attention toward 'authoritarianism, environmental harm, and technological advancement' as the defining anxieties of the present, with the technological axis generating the most sustained literary energy (78). Within that field, a distinctive subgenre has emerged that this paper terms the digital dystopia: fiction organised around the corrosive effects of algorithmic surveillance on the possibility of a coherent, autonomous self.

This paper argues that texts such as Eggers's *The Circle* and *The Every*, Atwood's *The Testaments*, and Alderman's *The Power* constitute a coherent body of critical digital dystopia, fiction that maps the mechanisms of what Foucault called panoptic power onto the architecture of the contemporary internet and finds there a surveillance apparatus more pervasive and more psychologically penetrating than Bentham ever imagined. The theoretical scaffolding of this argument draws on Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, Deleuze's account of the control society, and Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, three frameworks that together illuminate what is genuinely new about the dystopian imagination of the present moment.

Life Inside the Surveillance Society

Any sustained engagement with surveillance in literature must begin with Michel Foucault's reading of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Bentham's prison design, a circular building with a central watchtower from which any cell could be observed at any moment, interested Foucault not as an architectural curiosity but as a diagram of power. The panopticon worked not because inmates were always watched, but because they could never be certain they were not. Uncertainty of surveillance became the engine of self-discipline. The crucial operation of panoptic power is therefore the internalisation of the watching gaze: the prisoner polices himself because the possibility of observation is perpetually present. Foucault writes that the panoptic mechanism 'arranges things so that the exercise of power is not added on from the outside, like a rigid, heavy constraint, to the functions it invests, but is so subtly present in them as to increase their efficiency by itself increasing its own points of contact' (206-207). It is a power that works best when it has been made to feel like conscience.

Scholars have long recognised both the utility and the limits of applying this model to digital contexts. As a recent study published in the American Scientific Research Journal confirms, contemporary surveillance regimes have evolved well beyond physical architecture: states, major technology corporations, and social media platforms have developed monitoring systems that operate through algorithmic mechanisms and AI-based technologies, producing a regime in which individuals participate in their own surveillance through self-disclosure, self-quantification, and social media behaviour (Khurelbaatar et al., 2025). This participation is the key point of departure from the classical panopticon. Bentham's prisoner did not choose to be in the tower's sight line; the digital subject, by contrast, typically installs the watchtower on their own device and pays a monthly subscription for the privilege.

Gilles Deleuze recognised as early as 1992 that the disciplinary society Foucault described, organised around enclosed institutions such as the prison, the factory, the school, and the hospital, was giving way to what he called the control society, in which power no longer operates through confinement but through continuous modulation. Where disciplinary institutions are analogous to moulds that shape discrete subjects, Deleuze argues, the mechanisms of control are analogous to a sieve whose mesh transmutes from point to point (4). The digital panopticon is, in this sense, a Deleuzian refinement of the Foucauldian original: a panopticon without walls, whose power circulates not through physical enclosure but through the continuous, invisible modulation of data flows. One is never inside or outside the digital panopticon; one is always already within its network, perpetually visible regardless of location.

Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism provides the economic architecture that Foucault and Deleuze together lack. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), Zuboff argues that the dominant digital corporations of the present era have discovered that human experience, rendered as behavioural data, is a raw material of extraordinary commercial value. The result is what she calls a 'global architecture of behaviour modification' that threatens human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism disfigured the natural world in the twentieth. What makes Zuboff's analysis particularly productive for literary criticism is its insistence on the psychic dimension of this regime. Surveillance capitalism does not merely observe its subjects; it models them, predicts them, and ultimately seeks to render their futures as a product to be sold. The self, in this framework, becomes a data profile, not the subject of experience but its raw material. This is precisely the condition that contemporary dystopian fiction has set out to narrativize.

The Corporate Panopticon: Eggers and the Erosure of Privacy

Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) remains the most sustained literary engagement with surveillance capitalism in contemporary Anglophone fiction. The novel follows Mae

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Holland, a young woman who joins the Circle, a thinly disguised amalgamation of Google, Apple, and Facebook, and progressively surrenders her privacy, her personal relationships, and finally her sense of self to the corporation's ideology of radical transparency. The Circle's governing motto, 'All that happens must be known,' is not merely corporate branding; it is a metaphysical claim about the relationship between visibility and value, between being seen and being real. In the Circle's worldview, the unobserved life is not merely suspicious; it is, in a meaningful sense, incomplete.

Scholars have analysed *The Circle* through multiple critical lenses, but the Foucauldian reading remains the most illuminating. Davison-Vecchione (2025), writing in the *Sociological Review*, demonstrates that the Circle's ideology is built on the systematic elimination of what Georg Simmel identified as the secret: the irreducible zone of privacy that is constitutive of individuality and of genuine social relation. The Circle dismantles this privacy in stages that precisely mirror the internalization of the panoptic gaze. Mae first accepts being watched, then discovers she enjoys it, then advocates for it, and finally becomes its most effective evangelist. What is notable about this arc is that coercion is absent at every stage. The novel is at pains to show that nobody forces Mae into transparency; she chooses it, repeatedly, because the social and professional rewards of visibility are real and immediate, while the costs to her selfhood are slow and diffuse.

Wrobel (2023) identifies what she terms 'lateral or participatory surveillance' as the most formally distinctive feature of the digital dystopia, arguing that it differs fundamentally from the top-down surveillance of classical dystopian fiction. In Orwell's Oceania, the telescreen is an instrument of state power; in the Circle, the equivalent apparatus is social. Employees watch each other, rate each other's performance, and reward visibility with the social currency of approval metrics. This gamification of surveillance transforms it into something resembling a social norm rather than an imposition, which is, of course, precisely how the most effective forms of social control have always operated. The Circle does not need a Ministry of Love because it has something more powerful: the desire of its subjects to be liked.

The Every (2021), Eggers's sequel, intensifies this analysis by imagining a corporate monopoly so total that opting out of its digital ecosystem is effectively impossible. The protagonist Delaney Wells attempts to sabotage the company from within by pushing its totalizing logic to the point of absurdity, proposing ever more invasive surveillance features in the hope that users will finally rebel. They do not. The novel's bleakest insight is that there is no threshold of intrusiveness that the user base will refuse, provided the service remains convenient and free. What Eggers suggests, in a manner consistent with the Deleuzian

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analysis, is that digital control has achieved a degree of social integration that renders conventional resistance not merely dangerous but conceptually unavailable. The Circle's subjects cannot imagine a world outside the network, because the network has become the medium in which their social existence takes place. To refuse it is not rebellion; it is disappearance.

Gendered Surveillance and the Fragmentation of Identity

If Eggers's fiction focuses on the corporate mechanisms of surveillance and the dissolution of individual identity within them, Margaret Atwood and Naomi Alderman are more directly concerned with the gendered dimensions of control, and with how technological and ideological power work through and upon the body. Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) is structured around the question of what it means to possess an identity under a regime that has systematically stripped women of legal personhood, literacy, and the right to self-narration. Gilead's power is explicitly panoptic in its architecture: women are watched by the Aunts, by the Eyes, by the structural arrangement of the household itself. Every relationship in Gilead is a surveillance relationship, and the maintenance of ideological conformity depends on the internalisation of the watching gaze by those who are most directly subjected to it.

What distinguishes *The Testaments* from its predecessor is its sustained meditation on the dynamics of complicity. The Aunt Lydia of the novel's present tense is not simply a collaborator; she is a woman who has survived three decades of Gilead by becoming its most effective watcher, internalising the regime's logic so completely that she has achieved a position from which she can observe everything. Atwood's insight here is characteristically sharp: in a panoptic system, knowledge flows upward toward those who watch, and the watcher therefore possesses both the greatest power and, paradoxically, the greatest capacity for subversion. Aunt Lydia's resistance, her decades-long accumulation of compromising information about Gilead's leadership, is made possible precisely by the surveillance apparatus that she operates. The novel suggests that resistance to panoptic control may require, as a prior condition, a mastery of the panopticon itself, a conclusion that sits uncomfortably close to the logic it purports to oppose.

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) approaches these questions from a formally inventive direction, imagining a world in which women develop the biological capacity to generate and discharge electrical current, thereby reversing the gendered power structure of the contemporary world. The novel has been widely read as Swiftian satire: the reversal is designed not to advocate for female domination but to defamiliarise existing arrangements, to make visible the extent to which the present-day hierarchies of surveillance, control, and bodily violation are naturalised as the inevitable expression of biological difference. As

feminist literary criticism has consistently argued, Alderman's novel is ultimately less interested in the content of power than in its structural logic. The forms of surveillance, humiliation, and identity erasure that the novel depicts in its imagined matriarchal order are structurally identical to those that operate in the world outside the book. The dystopia is ours; Alderman has merely changed the pronouns.

Taken together, Atwood and Alderman suggest that the digital panopticon is not a gender-neutral technology. Recent empirical scholarship confirms this literary intuition. Henshaw (2023) demonstrates that digital surveillance functions as a tool of patriarchal state-building in authoritarian contexts, while research on gendered internet control in the Middle East has shown that the intersection of digital surveillance and gender produces qualitatively distinct and acutely harmful forms of oppression that differ in kind, not merely in degree, from the surveillance experienced by men (Aljizawi et al., 2024). Contemporary dystopian fiction has been quicker than political theory to recognise and articulate this intersection, exploring the ways in which surveillance is always already a gendered practice, not merely in its targets but in its rationale and its pleasures.

The Question of Resistance: Critical Dystopia and Its Limits

It would be reductive to read the digital dystopias examined here as uniformly pessimistic. Tom Moylan's influential concept of the 'critical dystopia' is useful here, though it requires qualification when applied to digital contexts. In Moylan's formulation, critical dystopias like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Butler's *Parable of the Sower* combine the dark warnings characteristic of dystopian fiction with 'an insistence on the possibility of resistance and transformation,' retaining within their bleakest visions a utopian remainder that refuses total closure (198). The texts discussed in this paper inherit this structure, but they subject it to a distinctive pressure that reflects the specific character of digital power: the possibility of resistance is present in all of them, but the conditions under which resistance becomes viable have been radically narrowed.

In *The Testaments*, resistance is possible but requires a prior sacrifice of everything that makes the resistant subject worth saving. Aunt Lydia has survived by becoming, in every outward respect, the regime's most devoted servant; the decades of complicity that make her eventual betrayal possible have also, irreversibly, made her complicit. Atwood does not allow her reader the comfort of an uncomplicated hero. Similarly, in *The Every*, Delaney's failure is not a failure of courage or intelligence but a failure of imaginative reach: she cannot conceive a mode of resistance adequate to a power that has made itself coextensive with social life. The novel implies, though it does not state, that effective resistance to the digital panopticon would require not a clever act of sabotage but a collective refusal to participate ,

and that such a collective refusal has become, under present conditions, essentially unthinkable.

The question these texts collectively pose, whether resistance remains available within the logic of the control society, is not one they answer definitively, and this refusal is itself significant. The classical dystopia, from Orwell to Huxley, typically forecloses resistance entirely: Winston Smith is broken; Bernard Marx's rebellion is revealed as vanity. The critical dystopia, as Moylan defines it, reopens this foreclosure, restoring a dimension of contingency to the narrative. The digital dystopias examined here occupy a more uncomfortable position between these two modes. They refuse the classical foreclosure, but they do not offer the hopeful remainder that Moylan identifies in the canonical critical dystopias. What they offer instead is something closer to a diagnosis than a prognosis: an account of how power operates that is sufficiently clear and precise to constitute, at minimum, the precondition for any resistance worth the name.

Conclusion

What the texts examined here share is a conviction that the most important questions raised by the digital age are not technical but anthropological. The problem is not what these technologies can do but what they do to us: to our sense of self, to our capacity for genuinely private thought and feeling, to our ability to act without an audience. Contemporary dystopian fiction has positioned itself as the cultural form best equipped to explore these questions, not because it predicts the future with any accuracy but because it renders the present analytically visible. As the sociologist who analysed *The Circle* as a work of critical theory observes, the novel is 'not a book about tomorrow: the dangers the novel illustrates are too familiar to be ignored today' (Sommer qtd. in Davison-Vecchione, 2025).

The critical digital dystopia does not offer solutions; it offers diagnoses. It shows us what it looks like when the panoptic gaze has been internalised to the point of desire, when surveillance becomes self-surveillance, when privacy becomes suspect, and when the self is reconstructed as a behavioural profile to be mined, modelled, and monetised. These are not imaginary conditions. The normalisation of continuous tracking, the gamification of social interaction, the commodification of personal behaviour and attention: all of these are features of the world in which readers of Eggers, Atwood, and Alderman actually live. The particular power of these novels lies in their capacity to make that world strange again, to restore to visibility what familiarity has rendered invisible, and to make available for critical reflection arrangements that ordinarily pass beneath the threshold of conscious awareness.

In doing so, contemporary dystopian fiction performs what Zuboff identifies as a vital democratic function: it insists that the structures of surveillance capitalism can be

named, analysed, and refused. Whether that refusal is practically possible, whether there remains an outside of the network from which resistance can be coherently mounted, is a question these texts leave deliberately open. That openness is itself a form of critical commitment, a refusal to decide, on behalf of the reader, that the answer is already determined. In the digital panopticon, the most politically significant act may be precisely the refusal to be certain that nothing can be done. Dystopian fiction, at its best, manufactures that refusal and places it in the hands of its readers.

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