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Watched Lives: Surveillance and Privacy in the Fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro, Margaret Atwood, and Dave Eggers

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Abstract

Surveillance has become one of the defining conditions of twenty-first-century life and contemporary fiction has responded by imagining worlds in which being watched shapes how people think act and understand themselves. This paper examines how three major contemporary novelists – Kazuo Ishiguro, Margaret Atwood and Dave Eggers – represent surveillance and the loss of privacy and how each shows watching as a form of power that works upon the individual from within. Reading Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Eggers's *The Circle* the paper argues that these writers present three connected models of surveillance: the quiet caring observation that secures obedience without force in Ishiguro; the harsh fear-driven watching of the total state in Atwood; and the voluntary self-imposed visibility of the digital age in Eggers. Drawing on Michel Foucault's account of power and Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism the paper shows that in all three novels surveillance is less about cameras or spies than about the way constant visibility reshapes desire, behaviour and identity. In tracing this movement from hidden control to exposure the study suggests that these novels together offer a warning about a world – increasingly our own – in which privacy is quietly disappearing.

Keywords: surveillance, privacy, disciplinary power, surveillance capitalism, dystopian fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Few themes are as central to experience as surveillance. In an age of closed-circuit cameras,

smartphones, biometric records and social media the sense of being observed – by the state by corporations and by one another – has

become a feature of daily life. Literature has long been alert to this condition and twenty-first-century fiction in particular has returned again and again to the question of what it means to live a watched life. Where an earlier tradition imagined surveillance chiefly as an instrument of political tyranny recent fiction has grown more subtle exploring how watching operates through care through fear and increasingly through consent.

This paper examines the representation of surveillance and privacy in the work of three contemporary novelists: Kazuo Ishiguro, Margaret Atwood and Dave Eggers. Each imagines a world organised around observation. Each locates the force of that observation differently. Ishiguro in *Never Let Me Go* depicts a surveillance gentle and so woven into everyday care that its subjects scarcely recognise it as control. Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* presents the extreme: a total state in which watching is explicit, pervasive and enforced by fear. Eggers in *The Circle* imagines a turn in which surveillance becomes voluntary even desired as characters willingly surrender their privacy in exchange for belonging and visibility.

Reading these three novels together this paper argues that surveillance in fiction is not merely a matter of being seen but of being shaped. In each case the experience of visibility reorganises how characters behave what they want and how they understand themselves. The paper traces a movement across the three writers—from control to violent control to willing self-exposure—and suggests that this trajectory mirrors the real transformation of surveillance in our own time from something imposed from above to something we increasingly perform upon ourselves.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method of close textual analysis, reading three primary novels—Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Eggers's *The Circle*—

against a shared theoretical framework drawn from surveillance studies. Any discussion of surveillance in literature must begin with the recognition that watching is a form of power. Michel Foucault's account of power remains the essential starting point. For Foucault the significance of surveillance lies not in the act of observation itself but in its internalisation: when people believe they may be watched at any moment they begin to regulate their behaviour becoming, in effect their own guards. Power of this kind does not need to be exercised the mere possibility of being seen is enough to produce obedience. This insight allows us to see surveillance not as a constraint alone but as a mechanism that reaches into the self shaping conduct from within.

If Foucault describes the surveillance of institutions Shoshana Zuboff extends the analysis to the digital present. In her account of surveillance capitalism the constant monitoring of individuals is no longer a means of control but a source of profit in which human behaviour is tracked, predicted and shaped for commercial ends. Crucially Zuboff shows that this monitoring often proceeds not through coercion but through participation: people willingly offer up their data, their preferences and their private lives in exchange for convenience, connection and recognition. Together Foucault and Zuboff provide a framework for reading the three novels at hand in which surveillance moves from the disciplinary to the participatory and privacy is eroded much by desire as by force. The analysis proceeds author by author before drawing the three readings together.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The gentle watch: surveillance in Kazuo Ishiguro

In *Never Let Me Go* surveillance is almost invisible. The students of Hailsham are observed, recorded and managed throughout their childhoods. The watching is so gentle so bound up with care and education that neither the characters nor at first the reader recognises

it as control. The guardians who oversee the students are not prison wardens but teachers; the institution that shapes them presents itself as a place of nurture. Yet the entire purpose of this careful observation is to produce a population that will accept its fate—organ donation and early death—without resistance.

This is surveillance in its Foucauldian form. The clones are not compelled by force to submit; they are formed, through years of oversight into subjects who regulate themselves. They do not rebel because they have been shaped never to imagine rebellion. Kathy H., the narrator looks back on her life at Hailsham with fondness than horror and it is precisely this fondness that reveals the depth of the control exercised over her. The novel's quiet power lies in showing that the effective surveillance is the kind that feels like kindness—that secures obedience not by watching people into fear but by watching over them into acceptance. Privacy in such a world is not violently taken away; it is something the characters never learn to want.

3.2 The total watch: surveillance in Margaret Atwood

The *Handmaid's Tale* presents surveillance at the extreme. In the Republic of Gilead watching is explicit, constant and enforced through fear. The Eyes, the regime's police may be anywhere; the Aunts monitor and discipline the Handmaids; and the women are set to watch one another so that no glance or word is ever safe. Privacy is not merely reduced but abolished: the Handmaids are denied private space, private thought and even private names. Offred's own name—of-Fred—marks her as the property of the man she serves her identity dissolved into her function.

Where Ishiguro's surveillance works through care Atwood's works through terror. Yet the two share a feature: both aim to reshape the inner life of the watched. Gilead does not simply observe the Handmaids; it seeks to remake them to make them accept and even internalise the regime's account of their

purpose, and as Howells observes, Atwood's dystopia repeatedly links the control of women to the control of their bodies and voices (Howells). The constant possibility of being reported forces Offred to police her thoughts and expressions enacting exactly the self-regulation Foucault describes. Atwood also shows the limits of such control. Offred's private memories—of her husband, her daughter, her life—remain a space the regime cannot fully reach and it is in this preserved interior life that a fragile resistance survives. For Atwood privacy is not a luxury but the last refuge of the self and its abolition is the deepest violence the state can commit.

3.3 The willing watch: surveillance in *Dave Eggers*

The Circle imagines a surveillance that neither hides like Ishiguro's nor terrorises like Atwood's but is instead openly embraced. In the world of the Circle a technology company devoted to total transparency being watched is not a punishment but a value. The company's slogans—that secrets are lies that privacy is theft—capture an ideology in which visibility is equated with honesty and goodness. The protagonist, Mae Holland comes to accept this ideology completely eventually livestreaming every moment of her life and experiencing constant observation not as a loss but as belonging, purpose and success.

This is Zuboff's surveillance capitalism rendered in fiction. Mae is not forced to surrender her privacy; she volunteers it. She does so because the system has taught her to want visibility. Her worth becomes inseparable from the ratings, comments and audience that watch her. Eggers thus dramatises the unsettling form of surveillance of all—one that requires no secret police and no hidden cameras because its subjects willingly watch themselves and one another. Where Atwood's Offred clings to an inner life as a form of resistance Mae surrenders hers entirely until the very idea of a self that is not on display comes to seem

shameful. In this The Circle holds up a mirror to the present in which the erosion of privacy proceeds less by force than by desire.

3.4 From control to willing exposure

Read together the three novels trace a clear and troubling movement. In Ishiguro surveillance is hidden, gentle and accepted through ignorance; in Atwood it is total, violent and endured through fear; in Eggers it is voluntary celebrated and embraced through desire. Yet across all three the essential insight is the same: surveillance is powerful not because it observes behaviour but because it transforms it. Being watched, in these novels changes what characters do what they want and who they become. The camera, the Eye and the livestream are all finally instruments for reshaping the self.

The three writers also agree on the importance of privacy by showing what happens when it is lost. For Ishiguro the problem is that his characters never have privacy to think about a different life; for Atwood privacy is the weak place where resistance and memory can stay alive; for Eggers giving up privacy is the same as giving up the self. In every case privacy shows up not as being alone but as the key to having a life that is on your own. The change from Ishiguro's watch to Eggers's choice to be seen shows a real change in history—from being watched by groups to being watched by people themselves—and this change is why the three books feel so important today.

4. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro, Margaret Atwood and Dave Eggers when read together give a different look at the life that is watched. Their books go from the hidden watching that makes people follow without being forced through the complete and scary watching by the government to the choice to be seen that comes with the internet age. With these differences the writers all agree on one thing: that watching is a kind of power that works best not by seeing but by changing things and that privacy is the main

place where a free inside life can be. When they show how this place is being taken away—by not knowing by being scared and by wanting to be seen—these books do more than imagine bad futures. They show what is happening now when privacy is given up more and more and they remind us of what's quietly lost when the life that is watched becomes the only life we know.

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