

Disciplinary Visibility and Social Sorting in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

م.م باسم سالم خلف الحبابي

Asst. Lect. Basim Salim Khalaf ALhababi

جامعة سامراء / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية

**University of Samarra/ College of Education for
Humanities/ Department of English**

Khalafbasim48@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article addresses how contemporary surveillance practices function as both disciplinary tools and systems of classification by analyzing Dave Eggers's *The Circle* along with empirical studies on workplace monitoring, biometric regimes, urban CCTV, and platform governance. My analysis highlights the role of narrative in demonstrating how surveillance structures everyday experience and mediates access to social goods. Literary scholars have yet to fully explore how narrative forms register the affective internalisation of surveillance alongside the sociotechnical aspects of classification. Confessional storytelling, camera ubiquity, and the metaphorical notion of invisible thresholds are key to understanding how regimes of visibility acquire moral authority in everyday life. My application of these phenomena would be to violate data privacy and protection. Opaque thresholds and platform rules categorise individuals into inclusive and exclusive groups. Thus, policy should not just regulate privacy measures but should promote procedural transparency, clarify avenues for seeking justice, and restrict the commercial usage of personal data. This article further argues that the disciplinary power and economic sorting inherent in surveillance are interlinked, and that literary narratives offer insightful, albeit often indirect, insights into the affective dimensions of surveillance that institutional and sociological research fails to convey directly.



I. Introduction

Digital technologies have restructured visibility and the language of social existence. In Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, the abstract concept of transparency is codified as institutional dogma, with slogans such as SECRETS ARE LIES and PRIVACY IS THEFT declaring the intelligibility and evaluation of all everyday actions (Eggers). Such fictionalised condense has tangible correlates in the real world; workplace monitoring, biometric identification, ubiquitous CCTV, and private data platforms enact a parallel logic of disclosure and assessment.

This article aims to explore the interplay of literary narrative, discipline (as conceptualised by Michel Foucault), and sorting (as developed by David Lyon), examining how each can shed light on how moral internalisation is mediated by surveillance and how this process differs from the sociological notion of classificatory sorting. While transparency, visibility, and data collection have dominated recent discussions of digital technology, the link between disciplinary visibility and classificatory sorting as twin dimensions of surveillance culture has not yet been thoroughly explored.

Through this analysis of Eggers's *The Circle*, which foregrounds transparency and panoptic visibility, I examine how narrative traces the impact of surveillance on the processes of moralisation via conformity, self-regulation, and internalisation. Foucault's conceptualisation of disciplinary power is placed in conversation with Lyon's concept of surveillance as sorting. This study demonstrates that Eggers's novel captures how surveillance functions not simply as an observational apparatus, but also as a structure through which participation, evaluation, and exclusion are organised according to sorting logics.

This article consists of three parts. First, the framework illustrates how disciplinary visibility and classificatory sorting work together, showing how literary analysis can illuminate affective aspects of surveillance that empirical studies often gloss over. Second, I contextualise Eggers's novel by relating it to contemporary surveillance practices. In the novel, Eggers demonstrates how individuals internalise surveillance in ways that alters their behaviour under observation and induces guilt for concealment—examples of the transformation of monitoring into self-regulation (Eggers 241, 198). Third, the article moves from explanation to consideration of effects. When read in conjunction with empirical work on monitoring, Eggers's novel highlights a set of psychological, social, and institutional effects that includes the chilling effect of visibility, which stifles dissent and changes behaviour; the impact of classificatory data practices on life chances through selective organisation; and the concentration of evaluative



authority in the opaque regimes of private, algorithmic monitoring, leading to issues with public accountability (Eggers 241; Lyon 20; Norris 249-50; Ball 201-19).

This work brings together close reading of literature with Foucauldian notions of disciplinary visibility and comparative engagement with literature on surveillance. Foucault's genealogy is central to the framework because it provides the language for understanding how regimes of visibility constitute subjectivities, while Lyon's framework offers the analytical tools for dissecting how data infrastructures sort subjects and produce exclusion (Foucault 202-03; Lyon 20). My examination of these two theoretical frames employs a reading that encompasses two literary and scholarly sources. The first source is Eggers's novel, which offers a comprehensive literary exploration of the subject-its slogans, narrative techniques, and central character Mae's internal monologues, or "confessions." This literary engagement is then contrasted with several empirical studies on contemporary surveillance (focusing on workplace monitoring, CCTV, biometrics, and private security) that exemplify the principles of the novel (Eggers; Zureik 31-56; Norris 249-70; van der Ploeg 57-73).

I adopt a comparative interpretive methodology, where the linguistic strategies, narrative structure, and affective expressions in the novel are considered alongside sociological analyses of classification. My analysis attempts to bridge the realms of literature and empirical scholarship by revealing their mutual complementarity. Through the close analysis of the lived, affective experience of surveillance-how moral imperatives are internalised and language use changes when "sharing" becomes a civic responsibility-and with the help of sociological theories and empirical work, I detail the structural foundations-data commodification, algorithmic sorting, and private enforcement-that produce these phenomena (Eggers; Lyon 13-20; Marquis 227).

II. Literature Review

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power remains indispensable to studies of surveillance. His detailed account of plague-era governance in *Discipline and Punish* shows how surveillance and registration became powerful instruments of state control: "everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name" (Foucault 2). Foucault argues that plagues produced a political ideology focused on the meticulous organisation and classification of the citizenry: discipline penetrated social life through constant surveillance and segmentation (3). Instead of the exclusive banishment of certain populations, surveillance functioned as a system of difference and correction, attributing each individual with a distinct, fixed identity and position within society.



Bentham's Panopticon, later adopted by Foucault, served as the architectural model for this logic of surveillance, envisioning a space where the inspector's omnipresence, the universal visibility of everything within it, and the assumption of being observed at all times "by the watched" were central to control (Manokha 222). The result of such an architecture of constant surveillance was simultaneously external constraint and internalised inhibition: the simple act of perceiving the guard tower, or the belief that guards are observing you, is enough for people to alter their behavior and begin acting in ways they think the guards expect them to (Johnson and Regan 16). Foucault applied these principles to a number of institutional settings, including asylums and hospitals, in which the "penetrating gaze" exercised a form of clinical and social supervision (Manokha 223).

Some scholars have questioned the extensibility of Foucault's panopticism. Murakami Wood David categorises the existing critiques into three groups-application, rejection, and qualification-and notes the existence of a fourth approach, re-appropriation (235-36). Hille Koskela situate the Panopticon within Foucault's wider discourse on governmentality and biopolitics by examining a more fluidity of "control" that dances about "like sparkling water" as quoted by David Murakami Wood (237). The reappraisals emphasise that Foucault's idea must be considered within a larger system of control mechanisms.

Legal scholars have traced the dispersal of discipline outside of formal institutions: Victor Tadros notes that by the nineteenth century, disciplinary mechanisms have escaped "the closed fortresses in which they once functioned and circulate in a 'free state'" (94). This proliferation of discipline in public and private spaces brought about "isomorphism" across different institutions, including schools, families, hospitals and work places (Tadros 95). The state itself was also transformed; the judicial system began to ask "Who are you?" rather than "What did you do?" (102). Thus surveillance has come to resemble governance itself as it has moved beyond purely punitive functions to the management of the population as a whole.

Contemporary scholars use these ideas to understand the effects of digital infrastructure. For example, Manokha argued that current communication systems contribute to "more panoptic than nineteenth and twentieth-century" surveillance (220). He also discusses the commodification of data and the 'chilling effect' where self-censorship is brought about by the public nature of a situation rather than the state observing (229). These are historical turning points, requiring analytical concepts that take into account visibility, commodification and self discipline within digital capitalism. Nancy Fraser redefines discipline as



"Fordist mode of social regulation" and shows how it is dependent as much on cultural and political conditions as it is on economics (161) while Lois McNay talks about how the rhetoric of rights contributes to rendering sporadic activities visible, thus facilitating social mobilisation (72). These ideas broaden the scope of existing scholarship on surveillance, examining it not only as a disciplinary technique but within its political economy and social context.

Literary criticism approaches these discussions through Dave Eggers's *The Circle*. Derya k offers a reading of the text as a Foucauldian allegory and suggests that devices such as SeeChange cameras and slogans like SECRETS ARE LIES highlight how privacy has dissolved into visibility (156-58) while moralising surveillance and construing transparency as civility. Rana Shohel builds upon this, emphasising the economic element by describing how the technology that guarantees security and rights actually allows capital accumulation, transforming surveillance into "money that is used to make more money" (78).

Foucauldian studies continue to focus on the different areas where these concepts apply, including governmentality, biopolitics, and the politics of digital capitalism. However, many of these analyses neglect to explore the panopticon concept theoretically and instead analyse how these ideas apply to the empirical systems that inform digital governance. This research, by linking representations to practices, will therefore attempt to illustrate how literature aids understanding of the ethical and political implications of enforced visibility, bridging the study of literature with research on the sociotechnical dimension of classification

III. Methodology

This article proposes a literary-sociological comparative approach, reading Eggers' novel together with Foucauldian ideas about the disciplinary character of visibility and scholarship in surveillance studies. The theory will combine Foucauldian panopticism, emphasising the internalised gaze, with the concept of surveillance as social sorting that has been explored by David Lyon, focusing on classification and distinction (Foucault 202-203; Lyon 13-20). These approaches will guide the analysis of Eggers's *The Circle* within a larger discourse on contemporary surveillance practices in institutions.

The main object of the study will be the novel, but specific attention will be paid to Mae's confession that she "behaves differently when watched" (Eggers 241) and the slogan SECRETS ARE LIES (Eggers 198). In addition, the study will draw on some key studies concerning the notion of "Surveillance as Social Sorting" such as those by Kristie Ball, David Lyon, Greg Marquis, Clive Norris, Irma van der Ploeg and Elia Zureik.



This research will consider how classification, privacy, panopticon, biometrics and surveillance all inform social sorting and in doing so contribute to issues such as "privacy, risk and digital discrimination", as David Lyon states in his anthology on the subject. Such scholars take an integrated approach to the concepts displayed in the novel and to a broader understanding of contemporary classification practices. Close reading will be employed to develop a comparative framework, which examines institutional surveillance in an intersectional manner.

Through analysis of the moralisation of visibility, the study will explore the internalisation of the disciplinary observation and the dynamics of classification, emphasising how the implementation of the latter enables a regulation of inclusion/exclusion and participation in public spaces, in a fictional setting, while operating simultaneously at the institutional level.

IV. Theoretical Framework

Eggers's novel, *The Circle*, can serve as a foundation for theoretical exploration of disciplinary visibility in the digital sphere. In the digital realm, the system attributes a single, traceable identity to every action, embodying Bentham's principle of total visibility and Foucault's argument that surveillance denies any hidden spaces. Bailey's promise of "two billion cameras" and "ultimate transparency. No filter. See everything. Always" (Eggers) makes the invisible controller palpable through SeeChange, creating a technically constituted inspector. "every movement within *The Circle* was caught on one camera or another" (Eggers) as the phrases SECRETS ARE LIES; SHARING IS CARING; PRIVACY IS THEFT (Eggers) were etched on steel at *The Circle* and promoted a new disciplinary code that replaces established ethics. Mae's development in the novel epitomises this internalised order: not only is she sure that "all had been perfected" at *The Circle*, but she also readily admits that she alters her behavior when being observed and considers "full transparency" the only solution for "not knowing" (Eggers).

Power has transformed from external coercion to the internalised self-discipline and individuals now exercise self-monitoring based on the "gaze", according to Foucault. The novel thereby dramatises a digital version of the Panopticon, viewing privacy as something suspicious and visibility as beneficial. Today, surveillance has infiltrated public spaces, signifying a proliferation of Foucault's logic of the panopticon in digital infrastructures.

David Lyon argues that surveillance is "a powerful means of creating and reinforcing long term social differences" (1), based on



"codes... The invisible doors that permit access to or exclude from participation" (13), which an algorithm processes, causing "digital discrimination" (8) based on an unknown set of worth criteria. Workplace surveillance is explored by Elia Zureik who shows how computerised monitoring enhances previous forms of labour discipline: "the transition from simple to technical and bureaucratic forms of control" now reaches its peak in intensified digital surveillance (31). Call centre surveillance by Computer Based Performance Monitoring has been demonstrated by Kirstie Ball to be a "technological whip" that categorises workers via voice recordings and statistical readings (203) whereas Irma van der Ploeg describes how "surveillance is turning decisively to the body as a document for identification, and as a source for prediction" (57), with biometric identification as an information technology embedded with physical identity (58).

The privatisation of surveillance by "a multitude of private eyes [who] manage risk not for a political ideology... But for profit" (227), where surveillance of data supersedes visual monitoring, is analysed by Greg Marquis while Clive Norris suggests that "the spread of CCTV over city center streets represents the most visible sign of the 'dispersal of discipline'" (249) and how digitised systems facilitate "automated storage, processing, and retrieval by computers" (268). Collectively, these insights demonstrate a systemic implementation of digital surveillance in order to impose classificatory and disciplinary pressures, thereby restricting spontaneity and conditioning behavior, identity, employment, and participation, as represented in the intensified atmosphere of *The Circle*.

One of the crucial influences of surveillance is its psychological effects; it allows external oversight to become self-regulation. "he who is subject to a field of visibility, and knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power... He becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 202-203). Mae's statements in the novel provide a good illustration of the psychological element: 'the disclosure of her performance reshapes her sense of morality, forcing an internal self-regulation in response to the gaze' (241, 198). This operates at psychological and institutional levels since the panoptic project is a combination of inspection and classification, classification leading to "decision making... backed up by force" (Norris 249-50), where the process of surveillance is inseparable from classification and punishment. Lyon emphasises the psychological effect of surveillance with his notion of it as a means to "obtain personal and group data in order to classify people and populations according to varying criteria" (20), impacting "the choices and chances of data subjects" (20). Taken together, these observations lead us to understand Mae's embrace of transparency not as



an isolated ethical awakening but as a symptomatic response to a society that teaches its subjects how to police themselves while simultaneously placing them in increasingly refined categories of risk and value. The outcome is double movement-self-discipline at the subject level and social sorting at the institutional level-that results in conformity, estrangement, and the continued erosion of privacy as a feature of civic life.

V. Analysis and Discussion

Workplace surveillance, for instance, serves as one clear example of how disciplinary visibility becomes routinised as a form of managerial practice. Numerous studies of monitored call centres and other workplace surveillance environments demonstrate that the effect of this type of scrutiny is less about simple observation than it is about shaping conduct through continual assessment: productivity metrics, scorecards, and real-time feedback translate the worker's gestural repertoire into measurable units that are instantly ranked and categorised (Ball 201-19; Zureik 31-56). It is Foucault's observation that the subject "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (202-03) that helps us understand how employees internalise the metrics and adapt their actions accordingly. Eggers's novel heightens this notion of workplace monitoring to an almost heightened degree: whereas empirical accounts focus on how call centre monitoring reduces gestural performance to productivity scores, the novel emphasises the emotional toll of being watched and shows guilt and obligation expanding beyond mere productivity measures (241). From this expanded sense of obligation at the personal level and the organisation's newly empowered ability to sort and discipline labor via supposedly neutral performance data, Lyon describes a process of social sorting that shapes "choice and chance" (20).

Biometric technology extends classificatory power into the very body: physiological and behavioral data become proxies for human identity, generating the data that inform institutional decisions. Van der Ploeg explains how biometrics treats the human body as a document: fingerprints, facial templates, and gait signatures are extracted, analysed, and translated into data. Systems such as these extend Foucault's argument about panoptic society: now visibility implies not just an inability to escape the eyes of others, but an appearance within a database that categorises human beings algorithmically. In practice, biometric regimes create new forms of exclusion when biased training data or inaccurate algorithms misclassify individuals. Lyon's discussion of "invisible doors" (13) seems perfectly applicable here, for it is rare for those being turned away to actually know what rule excluded them.



Unlike the technical categories generated by biometric systems, however, Eggers foregrounds the moralisation process inherent in voluntarily making personal information accessible.

The proliferation of CCTV throughout cities, combined with private security, makes clear that surveillance is increasingly a vehicle for authoritative public intervention and control. As Norris's analysis of CCTV technology and the panopticon demonstrates, camera networks integrated with analytical systems and commercial operators create a mediated public sphere in which suspiciousness and social control can be administered through technology (243-70). Ball and Marquis analyse this similar dynamic in workplace and private security contexts: surveillance becomes a market commodity and a “multitude of private eyes” manage risk primarily according to profit incentives rather than democratic accountability (Ball 201-19; Marquis 225-40). Accountability suffers from fragmentation when decisions about monitoring, the use of surveillance footage, and the criteria that trigger interventions by authorities are left to private organisations whose systems of classification and control are themselves invisible and proprietary. Eggers pushes this idea to its most extreme conclusion in his portrait of totalising platforms where transparency itself becomes an ideology and in doing so highlights the stakes involved in the privatisation of public life.

More broadly, the advent of platform-based governance and the emergence of data markets confirm that surveillance is no longer exclusively a tool of the state but rather increasingly takes shape within private markets and commerce. Lyon's characterisation of surveillance as “social sorting” rightly foregrounds how data practices “classify people and populations according to varying criteria” (20), while Marquis highlights how many contemporary evaluative systems organise people based on profit-incentive driven considerations rather than any concern for public accountability (227). With the rise of platform governance, our traces become economic assets: the data that we generate-through our every interaction-is collected, processed, and then used to shape the decisions of loan agencies, employers, and any other institution seeking to categorise us according to varying levels of risk and value. In his novel, Eggers illustrates the dynamics of platform governance within contemporary techno-capitalism, where ideas of innovation are overshadowed by demands for absolute moral obedience within institutional space. He bypasses the more technical concerns of traditional empirical research in order to focus on how transparency alters civic identity in significant ethical ways and underscore the sort of policy which governs patterns of conduct, identifies social chance within the marketplace and normalises the logics of inclusion/exclusion.



VI. Literary analysis of *The Circle*

Surveillance in *The Circle* functions not as a distant abstract or hypothetical idea, but as the reality the characters inhabit, staging a moment where privacy becomes visibility. In the central innovation of TruYou-the single account, single identity, single password, and single payment system "per person...your one identity", "the TruYou, unbendable and unmaskable" (Eggers)-any anonymity is dissolved and an illusion of authenticity performance required. This is further extended in Bailey's pledge for "two billion cameras and ultimately transparency. No filter. See everything. Always" (Eggers). Where the omnipresent observer used to be a metaphor for potential surveillance, now it has been technologised as every motion "within *The Circle* was caught on one camera or another" (Eggers).

SECRETS ARE LIES. SHARING IS CARING. PRIVACY IS THEFT. These are the fundamental axioms upon which *The Circle* operates and each one is a traditional moral tenet that has been turned on its head to serve as a new form of disciplinary rule. Mae's experience is the classic story of a subject's eventual internalisation of the system; the initial feeling that "all had been perfected" and the later admission that she "behav[es] differently when watched," culminating in her acceptance that "full transparency is the cure for not knowing" (Eggers) make the panoptic mechanism in *The Circle* function as Foucault described when individuals self-police their own behavior under surveillance.

Eggers's narrative presents a contemporary iteration of the panopticon where visibility is virtue and the erosion of privacy becomes evidence of moral failing. While the novel takes the hyperbole of total transparency to greater extreme than might exist in actual current systems, it ultimately reveals the fundamental stakes of surveillance by articulating in literary form the emotional and moral dimensions that research has identified in its more technical examination.

VII. Comparative Observations

Several dynamic trends repeat across both literary representation and surveillance scholarship from our comparative analysis. Firstly, workplace monitoring is an example of how disciplinary visibility is routinised in managerial practices. As Mae admits, she is not acting the way she normally does because she knows she is being watched (Eggers 241). Such accounts recall the call centre surveillance of which these metrics and scorecards translate into data. Such patterns indicate the operation of surveillance at the level of both subjectivity and institutional classification simultaneously. Secondly, biometric regimes further extend the classifying power into the body itself. According to van der Ploeg,



surveillance "is turning decisively to the body as a document for identification" (57), mirroring the emphasis on authenticity and TrUYou in Eggers's writing – the idea that identity becomes reducible to bodily legibility, where misclassification and opaque thresholds result in exclusion.

Thirdly, both urban CCTV and privatised security contribute to the transformation of public space. The notion of the dispersion of discipline (Norris 249) is similar to Eggers's use of SeeChange cameras, which render the ordinary citizens' life-worlds visible to corporate platforms. Fourthly, both state apparatus and commercial architecture are integrated in the governance practices through the platform structure. Lyon's explanation of invisible doors (13) and Marquis's emphasis on motives of profit (227) are evidence of how these data practices reorder social opportunity. Eggers's slogans - SECRETS ARE LIES; PRIVACY IS THEFT - perfectly illustrate this dynamic as moral imperative.

Finally, psychological dimension of panopticism echoes in both literary and empirical work: Foucault's assertion that "he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202-03) echoes Mae's guilt at the prospect of not sharing the correct data. All of these factors result in behaviors that are aligned with those dictated by surveillance and, eventually, leads to detachment and privacy as a civic dimension.

VIII. Conclusion

Mae's admission that she is not acting the way she normally does because she knows she is being watched reveals the routinisation of surveillance in the mind, while biometric regimes and Lyon's invisible doors exemplify how classification leads to exclusion. At the same time, SeeChange cameras by Eggers symbolise the privatisation of the civic space, and transfer the authority over social accountability from public institution to private company. Further research should perhaps address how to better delineate the conceptual boundary between the metaphor of the panopticon and its materiality, and explore how literary works may serve as the nexus where theory and sociotechnical practices meet. Very little research has been done on the relation between the literary works of surveillance and sociotechnical practices, e.g. *The Circle* by Eggers. The aforementioned analyses show clearly that Eggers's novel translates into clearer evidence of that which the scholarship typically describes more abstractly. Eggers's novel thus shows that these data practices are not only technical ones, but have everyday moral and political consequences. The study suggest that economic categorisation and disciplinary authority closely interact with each other through digital monitoring: visibility is not neutral and determined by processes of classification and differential access.



Surveillance practices are employed as a method of enforcing discipline and categorising individuals, a practice which gives rise to many moral and policy issues. The concept of surveillance itself is not simply a set of techniques, but rather system of interests and incentives: As Greg Marquis pointed out, a "multitude of private eyes" currently monitor risk "not for a political ideology, but for profit," by which meaning the traditional role of public accountability shifts to a calculation made according to the market (227). David Lyon's work on surveillance as social sorting frames the moral problem explicit: When systems "obtain personal and group data in order to classify people and populations according to varying criteria," they reconfigure an individuals' access to social goods and benefits (20). Thus, there exist a double injustice. Firstly, personal data is commodified, whereby intimate trace is turned into valuable information in market that creates an inequality of knowledge and power. Secondly, classification process is obscure—a phrase such as "invisible doors" in Lyon's terms, which prevent those who are subject to such process from questioning the reason or justification of such classification. The policy responses have not kept pace, as frameworks designed for state-centred surveillance struggle to address the particular challenges and implications of algorithmic decision making, corporate data markets and privatised enforcement, etc. (Norris 249-50; Ball 201-19). From a moral standpoint, such problems are not just about privacy, but also involve dignity, equality and accountability: the sorting and monetising practice carried out through the mechanisms of surveillance reshapes individual's life world and thus 'choices and chances' in every aspect of social life and require collective responses.

This suggests that responses in policy level cannot only rely on data protection measures to justify the inappropriate categorisation that leads to exclusion or marginalisation; what matters most is remedies in policy such as transparency in algorithm decisions, constraints of commercial exploitation of private data, and the implementation of fair processes for individuals who are unfairly categorised by the existing technical systems. Future research could extend these literary-sociological frameworks to include other kinds of texts and address more specifically how representations in literary works may clarify moral issues that are not necessarily transparent in the technical/empirical analyses. The visibility of the ethical dimension is contested in surveillance scholarship; furthermore, integrating literary representation into surveillance studies offers an insight into the visibility and its relevance to the modern digital age at theoretical and practical levels.



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