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**Desire and Surveillance in The Digital Age: a
Žižekian Reading of The Sublime Object of
Ideology in Dave Eggers' *The Circle***

**Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Master's Degree**

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Declaration:

I, Assma Djalab, hereby declare that the thesis entitled “ Desire and Surveillance in the Digital Age: a Žižekian Reading of The Sublime Object of Ideology in Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*” is my own work and all the sources I have quoted have been acknowledged by means of references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ASSMA', with a large, stylized flourish extending from the end of the name.

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Dedication:

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To the compass that always pointed me north, Mom and Dad. Thank you for being the loudest cheerleaders in my corner (and for the endless cups of coffee and tea).

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Abstract:

In the ever-expanding digital age, Technology and social media fuel our desire for connection, yet it often operate under a system of pervasive surveillance. Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*, portrays a dystopian future where a powerful tech company controls and monopolizes almost every aspect of people's lives. By utilizing this novel as a corpus, we aim to shed light on the dangers of unchecked technological control over human subjectivity. The dissertation contributes to critical discussions on technology, ideology, and the human condition by providing a nuanced understanding of the relationship between desire and surveillance in the digital age. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's concept of the "Sublime Object of Ideology," which in turn uses a range of theories including Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the dissertation argues that the corporation named "The Circle," with its pervasive surveillance and algorithmic manipulation embodies this notion. Overall, it concludes that surveillance can in fact construct desires. By constantly monitoring our online behaviour, algorithms can predict and even nudge our desires toward specific products, experiences, or even ideologies which raises concerns about free will and the erosion of our ability to form authentic desires independent of external manipulation.

Keywords: The Sublime, Ideology, Žižek, Surveillance, Objet Petit a.

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General Introduction

In the past, censorship worked by blocking the flow of information. In the twenty-first century, censorship works by flooding people with irrelevant information. [...] In ancient times having power meant having access to data. Today having power means knowing what to ignore.

— Harari, *Homo Deus*

The constant information dumping and curated experiences can erode our ability to make independent choices. Algorithms that predict desires can become self-fulfilling prophecies, limiting us to ideological bounds and ultimately shaping our reality. Dave Eggers envisions a digital world, not far from ours, where people are bathed in “The Circle's” omnipresent screens — “SeeAnyone”— flickering with the constant hum of its algorithms that posit desire at its center. In this world, an obsessive thirst for connection masks a disturbing reality. Through the ideals of transparency and connection, "The Circle " strengthens the ever-present shadows of surveillance and control, which lengthens with each piece of data collected, tightening its grasp on individuals and further suffocating their freedom and autonomy.

Exploring the core of this technological labyrinth requires a Žižekian lens through which we can closely examine the novel’s central concept, “The Circle”, as the Sublime Object of Ideology. It is a concept developed by the contemporary Slovenian political philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek in his seminal work *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), that builds upon the insights of a variety of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Lacan, Marx, Althusser, and others to arrive at his thesis on the critique of ideology in what is falsely considered, according to him, as a post-ideological world. His book is somewhat dense and requires prior knowledge of at least the basics of the previously mentioned works and the consulting of outside

sources to come to a nuanced understanding of The Sublime Object of ideology, especially with the new Hegelian-Žižekian-Lacanian specialized diction he uses.

As a starting point, understanding Lacan and Kant's perspectives on the limitations of language and subjectivity is crucial for building upon the key concepts in our Žižekian framework. According to them, in our interactions as active subjects with the symbolic, phenomenal world, language is used as the prime medium. As the French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan posits "[even] the unconscious is structured like a language" (*The Psychoses* 119). Therefore, our interaction and understanding of this phenomenal world are limited to the mediums and modes of symbolization at hand. Because of this limitation and often the paradoxical nature of our use of language, we are more open to fissures and errors of understanding and perception, which leads to errors in our self-realization and self-determination as subjects. Essentially, a subject is born into a "Symbolic network" or the "Big Other" and is expected to navigate how to act within it according to his own conceptualization of what is a life worth living. Note here that how the subject navigates his existence is something overdetermined by ideological symbolic prepositions that make use of these fissures presented because of the limitations of the subject's modes of symbolization (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 8-9), manipulating them to reinforce the existing power structures. All of which is what Žižek highlights with his analysis.

Before delving deeper into Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (from here on *SOI*) we need to address a critical theoretical intersection: the Sublime's nature and its consequences for subjectivity and the symbolic order. As Kantian and Hegelian perspectives collide, this juncture turns into a battlefield for philosophical minds, exposing a deep rift in our understanding of the limits of language and representation. In his seminal work *Critique of Judgement*, Kant explains that the sublime is the experience of encountering something so immense that evokes a sense of fear and awe simultaneously, encompassing something vast and ultimately beyond full understanding. This encounter with nature's magnificence is beyond our

power of reasoning; thus, it cannot be captured through language (79-81), or in Lacanian words: that of which is beyond the Symbolic Order. In Kant's philosophy, the thing-in-itself (German: Ding an sich) is "an element of the noumenal rather than the phenomenal world, of which the senses give no knowledge but whose bare existence can be inferred from the nature of experience" ("Thing-in-itself"). Meaning that, this experience of artistic endeavor points to a world outside the language, a sublime object that represents a "Thing" concealed from our view by the phenomenal world.

The inability of representation to reveal this underlying essence serves as proof, luring us with the possibility of breaking free from the confines of symbolization. In other words, in Kantian belief, there's an essence that is veiled to us because of the limitation of our subjective condition, the indicator of which attracts us with the possibility of breaking free from the confines of symbolization (*The Critique Of Pure Reason* 300-301). Hegel and Žižek, however, present a radical contrast. They urge us to look into this gap and face the unsettling reality that nothing exists behind the veil. They argue that the Sublime is a reflection of the intrinsic incompleteness of the Symbolic order itself rather than an indicator of a latent essence. Ideology is, therefore, based on the subject's incorrect perception of this nothingness as a transcendental presence, which obscures the subject's own essential role in constructing reality (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 25). Žižek argues in the *Sublime Object of Ideology* that the seeds of subjective freedom lie in this understanding of the "nothingness behind the veil" (222-223). The subject can break free from the bonds of ideological misidentification and express agency within the symbolic order by realizing that the Big Other is an illusion. This liberating act consists in acknowledging the subject's contribution to shaping reality, rather than in uncovering some secret truth.

Overall, the gist of Žižek's work begins with the dismantling of the self, that grand illusion of a unified and autonomous being. He exposes the cracks in this façade by revealing how we are fundamentally shaped by the symbolic order, a vast network of language and social norms

that dictates our perception and experience of the world. But this order, paradoxically, is filled with inconsistencies and fissures, leaving us perpetually misrecognizing the Real, the unsymbolizable kernel at the heart of existence. But rather than just being a case of personal neurosis, this misidentification has the capacity to cause both chaos and possible liberation. These fissures appear in anxieties, subversive artistic expressions, and societal antagonisms, much like the symptomatic eruptions in Freudian analysis.

To illustrate this concept further, The Sublime Object can be best understood in light of the Lacanian concept of “Jouissance,” which refers to an excess of pleasure that goes beyond the Symbolic. It represents the pleasure people seek from coming into contact with the “Objet Petit a,” that ever-desired yet unattainable object that drives our unconscious pursuits. Jouissance is more intense, even traumatic, going beyond simple pleasure. It is a powerful intrusion that can be painful. However, Lacan posits a twist where the superego, usually seen as a harsh inner critic, and jouissance are linked. He says “Nothing forces anyone to enjoy, except the superego. The superego is the imperative of enjoyment. Enjoy (Jouis)!”(*Book XX* 23). Thus, enjoyment itself becomes a strange kind of duty, not just following our natural desires. It offers a glimpse of the Real that lies outside the structured narratives of ideologies, societal norms, and even our identities. But it also highlights the limitations and fragility of the ideological framework (*Écrits* 208). However, there's a secret trap lurking behind this attractive promise.

The very excess of Jouissance that the Sublime Object offers frequently masks its innate instability and limitations. A paradoxical emptiness might result from seeking ultimate fulfillment through radical political ideology or any other thing. Continuously aiming for an unreachable objective might weaken individual autonomy and increase anxiety. Thus, we can say that there is a chance for both innovation and chaos due to the Sublime Object's inherent break with the symbolic order. Because there exist “...this point of Real in the very heart of the subject which cannot be symbolized...a hard core embodying horrifring jouissance, enjoyment, and as such an

object which simultaneously attracts and repels us - which divides our desire and thus provokes shame” (*SOI* 204), it has the power to split apart preexisting narratives, provoking critical thought and igniting resistance movements against oppressive systems. But this positive disruption resulting from Jouissance can also turn into destructive chaos when an abrupt departure from the symbolic order is desired which can breed extremism, nihilism, and the disintegration of the very institutions that provide our life with stability and meaning or what Žižek calls the “second death” in reference to the Death Drive (*SOI* 146-147). And so, the allure of the Sublime Object stems from its very excess, the way it disrupts the neat categorizations and narratives of ideology.

By utilizing the divergent themes of Hegel and Lacan, Žižek skillfully crafts a narrative that combines dialectical precision with psychoanalytic unveiling. By means of this powerful mixture, he urges us to commit an unprecedented act of “[undoing] the ultimate ‘passionate attachment’ that guarantees the consistency of his/her being, and thus to undergo what Lacan calls ‘subjective destitution’” (*The Ticklish Subject* 266), which points to the process of dismantling the illusion of a unified, self-contained subject. By recognizing the gaps and inconsistencies within the symbolic order, the subject sheds its false sense of autonomy and accepts the inherent misrecognition that defines our relationship with the Real letting go of the reassuring façade of confident identities and accepting the innate instability of our existence. The subject can only then fully rise from the rubble of this destitution, not as a helpless pawn in the symbolic system, but rather as an active agent that realizes that the task is not to wake up from the fantasy, as it is a supplement of reality, it is rather to change the nature of the fantasy.

With all that he offers to the field, Žižek is often referred to as “The Elvis of Cultural Theory”. Despite having his own “Institute For Žižek Studies”, he defies the stereotype of the philosopher and the academic, from his mannerisms to the unconventional ways he approaches his content. Žižek wrote many books most of which connect high philosophy with low culture. He illustrates his points with a wide range of cultural references, from classic Hitchcock films such

as *Psycho* and *Rear Window* to more recent films such as *Abraham Lincoln*, and *Vampire Slayer*. Thus, making his work more digestible even for those outside the field. Therefore, this research follows a precedent by connecting Hegalian-Lacanian philosophy to fiction, specifically to Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*.

Dave Eggers, a leading voice in contemporary American literature, has garnered international recognition for his thought-provoking works. Eggers tackles pressing issues of our time, weaving narratives that explore the complexities of migration, globalization, and the ever-evolving influence of capitalism and the internet. His exploration extends to philosophical fields including posthumanism and its implications for the future. The dystopian novel, *The Circle* (2013), stands as a prime example of these thematic concerns. Here, Eggers dissects the potential for technology to become a tool for centralized power. Through his sharp social commentary, he compels readers to confront societal problems and critically examine the potential dangers of unchecked technological advancements and powerful institutions. The dystopian future imagined in the novel is one where ideology and technology merge to create an all-encompassing paradise that thrives by connection and openness. Beneath the surface of this techno-paradise though is a trap that reveals the flaws and limitations of *The Circle's* symbolic order.

The tempting promise of a technologically connected society in *The Circle* masks an unsettling reality. Read through a Žižekian lens, we can observe how “*The Circle's*” search for “Completion”, a state of complete transparency and unity, becomes a Sublime Object of Ideology. It is a dangerously alluring illusion that feeds on the desire of individuals for meaning and connection. This Completionist mindset shows up as “datafication” of interpersonal relationships, surveillance analogous to Bentham’s Panopticon, and an overall reduction in personal freedom. In addition, it exposes the gaps and fissures in this apparently flawless system that indicate “the perverse kernel” hiding behind its ideal surface. Lacanian notions like “Jouissance” and the “objet petit a” can be used to analyze these cracks, in order to reveal The

Circle's deceptive strategies. Therefore, this research aims to explore how this cautionary tale exposes the dangers of technological utopias and the significance of understanding the dark side of seemingly idealistic ideologies that can arise from the pursuit of total transparency and connection which is not a far-fetched future.

The Circle explores the allure and potential pitfalls of a technologically advanced society focused on radical transparency and absolute connectivity. The story centers on Mae Holland, a young woman who ascends the ranks within the corporation, simply known as The Circle. The company promotes a vision of complete knowledge and connection, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose for its employees. However, as the narrative unfolds, Mae is caught between internalizing this ideology or living as a social outcast. Her anxiety increases as she faces a world where the boundaries between private and public life get blurred. Eggers reveals the societal impact of such a transformative vision, examining its potential benefits and drawbacks.

This being said, the dissertation will attempt to answer the following question: How does Žižek's concept of The Sublime Object of Ideology manifest in the portrayal of “The Circle” and its technological advancements in Eggers' novel? Breaking down the main question into smaller components, we can further ask the following sub-questions: How does The Circle's ideology generate desires, blurring the lines between personal longing and engineered desires? How do these desires perpetuate the existing status quo and reproduce its conditions? How does the gaze of the “Other” affect the characters' privacy, agency, and self-expression?

The choice of this corpus is attributed to the fact that today's societies are being shaped more and more by the widespread prevalence of idealist promises and the growing integration of technology into daily life. The unsettling realities of our world are what motivate us to conduct this research to objectively assess these trends' real-world implications, such as privacy violations and surveillance, by looking at their possible drawbacks in a fictitious context. Therefore, by exposing the “perverse kernel” within this utopian society we can gain insights into how to

recognize such ideological traps that manipulate human desires to reinforce its preexisting power structures, especially in data-centric societies, through this new Žižekian lens. Using *The Sublime Object of Ideology* as a theoretical framework stems from the need for a fresh perspective that, nevertheless, does not discard the famous critical theories. Žižek's critique of ideology provides just that in that it is a rereading of Hegel and Marx's ideas through a Lacanian psychoanalytical scope.

Literature Review

The Circle had long captivated readers and earned acclaim from literary critics for its frightening depiction of a technologically advanced utopia built around the promise of complete transparency and connection. This research aims to make a compelling contribution to our understanding of our contemporary relationship with technology and its influence on individual subjectivity. The novel's unsettling implications regarding technology and surveillance have already been thoroughly investigated, notably, the Panopticon-like structure of *The Circle* and its terrifying effects on personal autonomy. This concept was discussed in Hasanain et al in their work entitled "Foucauldian Surveillance In Dave Eggers' *The Circle*." In their paper, they explore how "The Circle portrays manipulative disciplinary methods and relational force aimed to convert human individuals into the docile body"(4), highlighting how the institution abuses their right to privacy and freedom of speech and subjects them to continuous surveillance. As per their Foucauldian analysis, the research shows how the practice of disciplinary power, like surveillance, transforms an individual into a compliant subject.

Another attempt to analyze such work is done by Carmen Laguarda-Bueno in her research "Transhumanism in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*: Utopia vs. Dystopia, Dream vs. Nightmare," where she explores the rise of transhumanism and how it is met with a growing unease about its potential consequences which is reflected in *The Circle*. Her paper examines how Eggers utilizes narrative techniques to shape readers' understanding of the dangers associated with transhumanism,

particularly social media and surveillance. By analyzing character development, narrative structure, and potential alternative viewpoints, her research reveals how Eggers encourages critical reflection on technology and its potential to dehumanize.

Moreover, power dynamics have been explored in works such as S. Paramagururaj, and M. Subha's "Foucauldian Power in *The Circle* by Dave Eggers" where they examine the novel from the standpoint of Foucault's theory of power. They argue that power is acquired via knowledge claiming that "knowledge constitutes power and manifests power. Power, on its part, influences knowledge" (9). Their article demonstrates how technologically advanced business revolutionizes a democratic society by using digital knowledge to seize power. Thus, the legislature, the main pillar of democracy, is impacted by this transformation where the firm manipulates the power structure in society and subjugates people globally through digital means by placing democracy under its indirect control. Therefore, *The Circle* gains control over both the virtual and physical worlds through the use of digital knowledge.

However, this research extends this conversation by employing Žižek's critical framework, offering a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms at play within this seemingly benevolent surveillance apparatus. While *The Circle*'s themes of surveillance, and technology have all been addressed in previous studies, the Sublime Object and its connection to desire have not been explored through a Žižekian reading. This study might bridge this gap by providing a thorough analysis of how "The Circle" shapes and exploits individual desires by offering an ideal life.

Accordingly, This dissertation is divided into two chapters. The first chapter entitled "The Sublime Object of Ideology," lays the groundwork for understanding how ideology functions in our contemporary world according to Žižek. It starts by examining the concept of the symptom, a term initially explored by Marx, and how it relates to ideology. Following that, the chapter delves into the concept of Commodity Fetishism, another key Marxist idea, and its relation to Freudian

and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Next, the chapter shifts its focus to the concept of Enjoyment as Jouissance and the ideological big Other. It further explores the concept of the big Other, a symbolic entity that represents societal norms and expectations. This section breaks down the big Other's role in shaping our desires through the gaze and the ideological fantasies, and finally, it examines the *Objet Petit* as the core of this discussion. The chapter concludes by potentially addressing the issue of how our awareness of the manipulative nature of ideology can lead to a sense of disillusionment and detachment from grand narratives.

The second chapter is related to the analysis of the novel using the aforementioned critical framework heavily influenced by Žižek's work. It begins with an overview of the author and the novel. Then, it establishes a traditional Marxist analysis, drawing parallels between Marx's concept of commodity fetishism and its inversion in the digital era to become data Fetishism. Furthermore, the next section will be introductory to Lacanian analysis that is through applying the concept of the split subject and exploring its relation to new technologies of quantified self in *The Circle*. More importantly, the chapter examines "the Circle" as the sublime object of ideology and the return of the Real. Moreover, the chapter will also explore the evident Big Other's watchful gaze in "The Big Other is Watching You!". Finally, we will end the discussion by investigating how Clicktivism breeds Cynicism in the digital world.

Chapter One:

Žižek's Sublime Object of Ideology

Introduction

The Sublime Object of Ideology (1989) is the first work written by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. In his book, Žižek reveals the underlying illusions that support ideology and questions commonly held assumptions about its nature. He argues that Ideology is not merely a set of beliefs but rather a powerful invisible entity that shapes our desires, identities, and even our understanding of reality. By utilizing instances such as consumer capitalism and political ideology, he illustrates how ideology functions unconsciously, presenting its rationale as obvious and natural, or in Lacanian words how “The Big Other” operates through a Sublime Object, i.e. the seductive “Objet Petit a”, to maintain the status quo.

Accordingly, the following chapter will examine the main concepts that Žižek arrived at in his critique of ideology further exploring how Ideology operates. This framework essentially explores the human subject as a being fractured and divided by a fundamental conflict or what Lacan refers to as “a split subject.” This division traced through thinkers like Hegel, Althusser, and Lacan, exposes how we experience reality and shows how ideologies function. The first two sections, titled similarly to Žižek's first two chapters, explore How Marx invented the symptom and draw parallels between commodity fetishism and the sublime object. Section three will explore the concept of “Jouissance” and its relation to the “Big Other” while providing an extensive explanation of the Žižekian concepts of the gaze, ideological fantasy, and objet petit a. Finally, the chapter concludes by examining the ideological cynicism in the digital age.

1. The Invention of The Symptom

When mentioning the word “symptom” usually the first thing to come to our minds is Freudian psychoanalysis. However, Žižek uses this concept in an untraditional way arguing that

Marx made crucial contributions, beyond the strict parameters of the economic realm, to understanding the psychic dimension of social phenomena. He suggests that “According to Lacan, it was none other than Karl Marx who invented the notion of symptom” (3), by recognizing the underlying unconscious desires, anxieties, and contradictions that shape society and individual behaviour. Meaning that there is a homologous structure between commodities and the symptom, between political economy and psychoanalysis.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud identifies two main components in the schema: The first is the latent content, which is the underlying hidden meanings and desires, the second is the observable surface-level expression of the latent content which is the manifest content (230). Žižek adds a third component to the schema which is the form. For him the first two vary; however, the formal structure that transforms the latent into manifest content is homologous. The similarities between how Marx and Freud interpreted the object of their studies are what allows us to see the formal likeness between symptoms and commodities. Though hidden meanings and desires can be found beneath the surface of commodities and dreams, the real secret is not in the content itself but in the hidden structure that forms it. Therefore, according to Žižek, Marx argues that classical economics focused on the “what” or labor as the source of value while neglecting the “how” which is the process by which social relations are hidden within the commodity-form. Analyzing a product's social construction of value or a Freudian dream's layers requires identifying this homologous process (5-9). Žižek's conceptualization of the form invites us to consider if commodities, like dreams, function partly through a hidden language. This language might be the social and economic structures that shape our desires and perceptions, influencing us on an unconscious level.

To arrive at Marx's notion of the symptom we must first have an overview of how it operates in psychoanalysis. First, Žižek argues that a basic misconception exists that equates unconscious desires with the latent content of a dream, or its hidden significance. He illustrates

that latent content is present but just beneath the surface, preconscious and reachable with a little effort, rather than being deep into the unconscious. What is even more unexpected is that it might represent a wide range of experiences and emotions rather than being limited to a primordial drive in disguise. Žižek claims that this distinction is essential because it invalidates false criticism and provides access to more in-depth dream analysis. Therefore, the essence of the dream is not its latent thought but rather the form itself which are the mechanisms of dream work: the displacement and condensation (4-5). This shift in focus is significant. Instead of deciphering hidden meanings, Žižek argues that the real meaning lies in how the dream is constructed. This approach to dreams might offer insights into how Marx might view symptoms within society

Furthermore, he argues that the true unconscious desire is carried by the latent content. Meaning that this unconscious desire is the Real of the dream since it cannot be articulated in inter-subjective communication. Žižek expresses the paradox of the dream where it conceals its true meaning:

This, then, is the basic paradox of the dream: the unconscious desire, that which is supposedly its most hidden kernel, articulates itself precisely through the dissimulation work of the 'kernel' of a dream, its latent thought, through the work of disguising this content-kernel by means of its translation into the dream-rebus.

(6)

According to Lacan and Žižek, the unconscious is a linguistically sophisticated agency that expresses itself in the organization of its signifier. In the quote, Žižek explains how the unconscious desire is carried within the visible elements which is the manifest content. However, this concealment is not accidental, it uses condensation and displacement to both hide the message and reveal the desire indirectly, that is hiding the truth through giving away clues. In other words, the paradox of the dream is that unconscious desire shows itself in how it conceals the latent content in the manifest content. Therefore, the true essence of the dream, which is the

unconscious desire or the dream work, must be explored in order to move past its latent content, which we often mistake for the dream's central essence.

Upon this rediscovering of the dream analysis a question raises itself which is how does this relate to political economy? to which Žižek answers: “The crucial thing to note here is that we find exactly the same articulation in two stages with Marx, in his analysis of the ‘secret of the commodity form’” (7), which suggests that both dreams and commodities have a surface level and a deeper one. Analyzing the form is what reveals the hidden structures beneath the two. For commodities, Marx challenges us to dig deeper than the surface price of a product. He argues that the true value (latent content) of a commodity is not determined by supply and demand, but by the amount of socially necessary labor (hidden meaning) that went into making it (*Capital* 9). However, we must not take a classical analytical stand and stop here. He argues that just knowing the amount of labor is not enough either. The essence lies in the commodity form itself (dream-work). This form, like a mask, transforms the labor into the price we see on the shelf.

Therefore, Žižek postis that, just like Freud delves into the dream work to understand the hidden desires, Marx urges us to understand the labor behind a product is important. However, the real key lies in how that labor is presented and valued in the market. It is this analysis of the form that reveals the deeper truths about power, society, and the creation of value (*SOI* 8). This suggests that the way things are presented, in dreams or markets, shapes our perception of their true nature and that the analysis of the form allows us to understand how value is created.

In the dream work the latent content turns into the manifest content through condensation and displacement. The unconscious suppressed desire is the real secret of the dream, and it is contained inside both of these systems together (Freud 394). All of this applies to the commodity in which labor force or socially necessary work time is converted into exchange value. Exchange value is created by converting the commodity's actual value utilizing displacement and condensation, but Marx referred to this process as Commodity Fetishism (*Capital* 77). Thus, the

price of a product hides a complex web of labor. A simple bar of chocolate that is put on a market shelf, for example, is the end-product of the contributions of people working in various industries, from the cocoa bean planting to the creation of the machines used in production. This intricate social labor gets condensed into a single price tag. This complexity disappears by Commodity Fetishism. Instead of recognizing the human connections involved, we see only the object, the chocolate bar, holding value.

Social relations get displaced onto the commodity itself, making it seem like things have intrinsic value instead of reflecting the work behind them. Therefore, the unconscious repressed desire to be hidden within the commodity is the capital itself, the desire to exploit workers for maximum profit which conceals the web of labor and the exploitive nature of the system. That is why capitalism appears to be a system of freedom. It creates an illusion that keeps us fixated on the product and its price rather than the human cost behind it and portray itself as an “Eden of the innate rights of man” (110-111). This critique exposes capitalism's dependence on maintaining an illusion of fairness and freedom, while obscuring the power dynamics and exploitation that fuel the system. This suggests that the very foundation of capitalism is built upon an unsustainable and unethical core, masked by a seductive consumer culture.

Žižek further argues on the same matter, drawing on Sohn-Rethel, that the way we exchange goods is not just about capitalism, but shapes our very ability to think critically and objectively. Meaning that the structure of how we understand commodities holds a key to understanding the Kantian "transcendental subject" (*SOI* 10-11). In Kantian philosophy, the transcendental subject is not an individual mind but a set of pre-existing categories that shape our experience and knowledge. These categories, like space, time, causality, are considered "a priori" .i.e existing before any experience (*Critique of Pure Reason* 167). Žižek tries to convey that the commodity form or the structure of assigning value in markets acts like a hidden psychological force. By making us think in abstract categories, similar to the a priori categories

of Kant's transcendental subject, this market mentality of abstraction might then influence how we approach other areas of knowledge, including science; thus, shaping our framework of seeking truth.

2. Commodity Fetishism

Marx's analysis of the commodity in *Capital*, particularly the concept of commodity fetishism, holds a special appeal across diverse disciplines in the humanities beyond just economics. This concept describes a situation where the social relations and human labor that underpin the production and exchange of goods become obscured. As explained before, the focus shifts from those involved in creating and exchanging commodities to the commodities themselves. Market forces, like supply and demand, are seen as natural phenomena dictating value, rather than human creations reflecting the complex web of social relations within production (85). This mystification of the labor theory of value has significant consequences. Workers become alienated from their labor and the products they create, potentially leading to exploitation.

Furthermore, focusing on commodities and their exchange value encourages a consumerist society where people define themselves and their worth through what they consume. Thorstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” in his foundational text *The Theory Of The Leisure Class* (1899). It refers to the act of purchasing and displaying goods and services not necessarily out of need but for the sake of showcasing wealth and social status (43-62). Altogether, it is using commodities to signal your place in the social hierarchy. In this regard, Jean Baudrillard argues that consumption is not based on natural, asocial needs. Instead, consumption becomes a social exchange of signs and values, where objects are produced as signs that hold meaning in relation to other objects (75). He sees objects as signs in a system, with their value shifting between functionality and conspicuous consumption.

Unlike Marx's focus on exchange value as a distorted reflection of labor, Baudrillard argues that use value is just as fetishized. Therefore the object that appears to have a use value, for him, is "nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves and twist around it" (63), objects are not things that naturally exist to satisfy human needs but are produced as a sign in a system of relations. In addition, Baudrillard exemplifies this via television which ventures beyond its function as a mere screen. In cultures where televisions are scarce, even a broken one holds prestige, acting as a "pure fetish" symbolizing wealth (55). For Western audiences, however, the fascination lies within the rituals surrounding watching television. The act of viewing itself, not just the content, becomes a social practice that signifies belonging (56). Television functions as both a communication device and a consumable object, granting a minimal level of social status in exchange for our dedicated viewership and the "laborious patience" it demands (55). The value of the television transcends its practical use. Following Baudrillard's concept of sign value, objects like televisions gain meaning through their relationship with other objects within a social system, forming a "hierarchical code of significations" (64). In essence, he argues that television has become more than technology; it is a cultural token that shapes how we interact and define ourselves within the broader social sphere.

For Žižek, Marx's key discovery is the transformation of social relations between people into seemingly objective interactions between things which is known as reification (*SOI* 59). The fascination with this concept lies in the idea that it reveals a failure to transcend traditional pre-modern societies' object-oriented tendency to worship deities. It reveals how Commodity Fetishism is parallel to totemism, where humans create objects meant to symbolize their power, yet through a dialectical-fetishistic inversion they start worshipping these objects as if they possess the power instead. Similarly, a commodity conceals the social relations involved in its production, of capitalists and laborers. Therefore, instead of recognizing our interconnectedness, we experience our interactions as an objective relationship between things, namely the commodity and its price

(12-13). This further highlights the failure to recognize our interconnectedness in a capitalist society that uses reification to mask the human relationships behind production and exchange.

Money and commodities appear to hold inherent value, independent of the people who created them. This inversion is dialectical because it represents a transformation into the opposite. What starts as social connections between people changes into seemingly objective relations between things. Sohn-Rethel's main thesis in *Intellectual and Manual Labour* shows that analyzing the commodity form allows us to understand how abstract thinking emerged in human history since "The formal analysis of the commodity holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labour which came into existence with it (33). This shows that analyzing the commodity form allows us to understand how abstract thinking emerged in human history. This very structure of valuation led to the separation between those who think and those who do. Žižek connects the commodity form to the Kantian transcendental subject. He suggests that we can uncover the hidden structure that enables us to think objectively by analyzing how we assign value in markets (*SOI* 10). This seemingly pathological aspect, rooted in specific historical and economic conditions, provides access to the transcendental universally valid conditions of knowledge; which challenges Kant's strict separation of the empirical and transcendental, offering a Marxist critique of his idealism.

Furthermore, Žižek agrees with Sohn-Rethel's identification of a double abstraction inherent in commodity exchange. The first is abstraction from change, perceiving commodities as something that does not change with time, and the second is the abstraction from use value which disregards the specific qualities and usefulness of a commodity, focusing solely on its exchange value based on market factors. These abstractions transform the commodity into a purely abstract entity defined solely by its exchange value; which allows for two seemingly different items to be considered equivalent for exchange because they share the same abstract value, not necessarily the

same use value (10). Unlike Baudrillard who explores value as a web of signs and meanings that objects hold, Žižek focuses on reification as a deception hiding reality. The double abstraction that Sohn-Rethel explains, strips away both the historical context of an object and its specific usefulness.

For Žižek, value has the character of “a postulate implied by the effective act of exchange - in other words, that of a certain 'as if'”(12). We act or do as if a commodity is unchangeable even when we know full well that it is, indicating that the ideological illusion is a result of our actions rather than our knowledge. For instance, we treat money as though it were some sublime object that is immune to the laws of nature, even though we are aware that it is only one material object among others, which is what Žižek explains:

The easiest way to detect the effectivity of this postulate is to think of the way we behave towards the materiality of money: we know very well that money, like all other material objects, suffers the effects of use, that its material body changes through time, but in the social *effectivity* of the market we none the less *treat* coins as if they consist ‘of an immutable substance, a substance over which time has no power, and which stands in antithetic contrast to any matter found in nature. (12)

This implies that in order to behave as though money is sublime, we do not need to genuinely believe that it is. Traditional psychology, which maintains that all beliefs are personal internal processes that are a part of the interiority of the mind, is at odds with Žižek's philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Some beliefs, according to Žižek, exist outside of our mental faculties. He also points out that Marx was unable to understand the sublime materiality of money fully. It is a pre-phallic, pre-symbolic object that depends heavily on the Name of the Father (13-14), meaning that it is the Symbolic order that supplements objects for it to gain its value.

Reality for Žižek and Lacan is a coordination of the symbolic and imaginary order. Therefore, reality itself is of an ideological construction in that the stability of a capitalist society is dependent on the subjects not knowing how exchange works. As he mentions,

This is probably the fundamental dimension of ‘ideology’: ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness’, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’... Thus we have finally reached the dimension of the symptom...a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject’: the subject can ‘enjoy his symptom’ only in so far as its logic escapes him... (15–16)

Through the concept of the commodity form, Žižek connects Marx's theory of capitalism to Lacan's psychoanalysis. He argues that both commodities and symptoms share a similar structure marked by the subject's unawareness of the true underlying processes, which allows him to enjoy these formations. In commodities, this means ignoring the exploitative labor relations behind their production and value. In symptoms, it means remaining blind to their unconscious roots. This connection allows us to apply psychoanalysis in broader fields in that symptoms are not limited to the psyches of individual people; rather, they might be societal. The proletariat as a symptom is not a reflection of the individuals who happen to occupy this social position or even of the capitalists as individuals; rather, it is a symptom of the capitalist social order, the vast Other. Thus, it is demonstrated by Žižek that the symptom functions at the level of the Symbolic order.

Furthermore, Marx challenges the seemingly emancipatory promise of capitalist freedom, particularly the right to sell one's labor where “these new freedmen [become] sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production” (*Capital* 503). This ostensible freedom, masks a fundamental contradiction: the very act of selling labor power leads to wage slavery, ultimately undermining the notion of freedom itself. This inherent tension, where a supposed right becomes a trap, constitutes the "symptom" within the ideology of

capitalist freedom. Thus, Žižek argues that Marx employed a symptomatic hermeneutics in his critique of ideology. By focusing on this paradoxical element on how this exact freedom leads to enslavement, Marx reveals a fundamental flaw at the heart of the capitalist system (*SOI* 16-17). This means that Marx did not simply criticize the ideology of capitalist freedom, he revealed its underlying contradiction, unveiling the exploitative nature of the system that hides behind the language of freedom.

In the end, the universal of fair exchange negates itself in the shape of one of its species: the wage-equivalent and exchange of labor. There is no equivalency in this instance (17-18). Žižek's method of analysis and his approach to interpreting symptoms are fundamentally dialectical i.e. Hegelian. It also uses the Hegelian mechanism of quantity to quality. The theory is that a quantitative change might result in a qualitative change. For example, if sand is continuously added, this will eventually result in a mound of sand changing its shape: a qualitative change. The proletariat, a social symptom, is the result of this Hegelian system.

Utopian socialism, however, presents a different challenge for Žižek. While it offers a vision of a perfect, harmonious society free from exploitation, he argues that "...' utopian' conveys a belief in the possibility of a universality without its symptom, without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation"(18), it overlooks the inherent contradictions and tensions that exist within any social order. Therefore, every ideology, even a utopian one, inevitably produces a symptom, an internal inconsistency or flaw that disrupts its idealized image. This symptom is not merely a random glitch, but rather a crucial element that shapes the social order itself, because " the only alternative to the symptom is nothing: pure autism, a psychic suicide, surrender to the death drive, even to the total destruction of the symbolic universe"(81). Utopian socialism, in its attempt to create a symptomless universality, meaning a social order devoid of these internal tensions, ventures into the realm of the absurd. Perhaps, Žižek might argue, that these symptoms are the engine that drives social change and prevents stagnation.

Without them, there would be no impetus for progress or improvement. In essence, Žižek suggests that a perfectly harmonious society might be not only undesirable but fundamentally impossible.

3. Enjoyment as Jouissance and The Ideological Big Other

4.1 The Gaze of The Ideological Big Other

In our endeavor to understand the Žižekian concept of the ideological “Big Other,” it is important to walk through the Lacanian conceptualization of subjectivity and desire. Lacanian psychoanalysis posits that the development of subjectivity in an infant is not a linear process but a dialectical one, shaped by the interplay of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders. While the Real represents the unstructured chaos of initial sensory experience and the Imaginary offers a unified, albeit idealized self-image through the Mirror Stage, it is within the Symbolic order that the child truly begins to construct a social identity.

In the chapter called “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function” in *Écrit* Lacan describes the subject’s developmental process. Starting from birth, the infant confronts a chaotic and unsymbolized realm known as the Real. This overwhelming world consists of raw sensory experiences devoid of any inherent structures or meaning. It is rather a confusing and fragmented state for the newborn (78). Therefore, the primary caregiver, often the mother, becomes the initial “Other”. In a basic form of communication, the infant attempts to decipher the Other's desires and actions (94). This early interaction with the mother becomes crucial as it provides a primary sense of structure and meaning within the overwhelming Real.

Between the ages of 6 and 18 months, Lacan describes a developmental stage where an infant recognizes their own reflection in the mirror as belonging to themselves. It is a turning point for the subject’s identification which initiates the formation of the Imaginary order. He calls this the Mirror Stage (75). This act enables the child to identify himself as a coherent subject,

despite the fragmented nature of the infant's own body experience, through an external gaze. This initial identification with the unified mirror image lays the foundation for the ego, the conscious sense of self. However, this formation is predicated upon a misrecognition, as the infant mistakes the external image for its true fragmented self. This image is idealized and represents a desired wholeness, forming the Ideal-Ego, a perfect version of themselves they strive to become. This misrecognition introduces a fundamental alienation within the subject, forever separating them from their authentic being by the symbolic order and the limitations of perception (76). The mirror stage is a crucial stage in that it consequently contributes to the formation of the unconscious, where desires and experiences remain veiled from conscious awareness.

Moreover, the child's sense of self does not exist solely in the realm of the Imaginary. As the child interacts with others, “ It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (230), Lacan uses the phrase "the Name of the Father" symbolically to refer to the Symbolic Order. This realm encompasses language, social norms, and cultural rules. Through these interactions, the Ego ideal further develops. It incorporates societal expectations and ideals alongside the initial idealized self-image from the Imaginary. The child's sense of self becomes a blend of their own desires and the expectations of the world around them. Consequently, we can say that the ego itself functions as a type of symptom, a defense mechanism against the Real.

Thus, the true subject, according to Lacan, resides within the realm of the unconscious. This process of socialization demands a relinquishing of certain aspects of the initially conceived imaginary ideal-ego, the perfect, unfettered self envisioned in the Mirror Stage. Lacan employs the concept of the "split subject" (or "barred subject," often symbolized as $\$$) to represent this necessary fragmentation of the self (696). It signifies the tension between the desires of the individual and the constraints of the social order. This split is analogous to entering a new social structure, such as a workplace, where one must conform to specific policies and power dynamics.

And just as a new employee represses unfulfilled desires to act freely in the interest of work etiquette, the child entering the Symbolic order learns to manage their impulses and desires to navigate social interactions effectively. This negotiation between individual needs and social constraints is a fundamental aspect of human experience and shapes the development of a mature sense of self.

Much like social structures, language functions with its own set of rules i.e. grammar, syntax, lexicon. Therefore, engaging with language becomes a filtering process for the subject and “by being filtered through the sieve of the signifier, the body is submitted to castration, enjoyment is evacuated from it, the body survives as dismembered, mortified” (*SOI* 136). Meaning that language casts certain aspects of the initial, boundless Imaginary ideal-ego that must be sacrificed to construct the ego ideal within it. In *Seminar II The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Techniques of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan described language as “constituted in such a way as to found us in the Other, while radically preventing us from understanding him.” (286). This implies that language occupies a paradoxical position. It is the very foundation that constitutes subjectivity, grounding us in a shared symbolic order through social interaction. However, this foundation is inherently flawed. Language, by its very structure, prevents us from achieving a complete understanding of the “Other”. Thus, the limitations of language contribute to the formation of the unconscious, as it fails to fully capture the totality of our experiences or the “Other”. The ego as explained, recognizable through language, becomes a symptom of the split subject. It is a filtered version of the ideal-ego, shaped by the limitations of language.

In the same sense, society itself can be viewed as a symptom, a product of the collective splitting necessitated by communication and social interaction.

Correspondingly, the most challenging aspect is that the split subject's relationship with their lack can only be understood through the filtered ego, which is itself a product of language. This is why Lacan states that “the unconscious is structured like a language.” (*Écrits* 737). The

ego, our sense of self, becomes a symptom revealing the repressed desires housed in the unconscious, which can only be imagined but never fully accessed. We can only ever glimpse the unconscious through the lens of language, a language that itself is a product of the split. Therefore the unconscious desires, though repressed, can unknowingly reveal themselves through language, acting as a symptom of the repression because "... a symptom is language from which speech must be delivered" (223) . The Freudian slip best exemplifies this, which is a seemingly innocent phrase that betrays a deeper, hidden thought. For instance, mistaking someone's name with another's. The slip reveals a repressed desire or thought that bypasses the ego's censorship.

The famous joke of Slavoj Žižek about coffee without cream tells us that coffee without cream and coffee with milk is the same yet are regarded as different because of what the said coffee lacks. The joke is about an incident where a person went to a coffee shop and ordered coffee without cream. The waiter told him that there is no coffee without cream but they have coffee without milk. The word "without" signifies a missing element, yet by uttering it, the lack is no longer truly "without." It becomes a signifier within the symbolic order, representing something absent. This paradox mirrors the concept of "with-without", the missing element, that is the cream or milk, becomes part of the coffee's identity, shaping how we perceive it (*Trouble in Paradise* 24). Similarly, the subject's speech always carries the weight of this inherent lack. This unconscious lack manifests in language, not directly, but through the cracks in the symbolic order itself. The subject's articulation, filtered through the limitations of language, becomes a symptom of the repressed desires that fuel object petit a.

This lack, however, is what allows for the very concept of self-awareness. Rene Descartes' famous line, "I think therefore I am," is possible because of this lack. Lacan, however, offers a more nuanced perspective: "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking" (*Écrits* 430). This challenges the Cartesian notion by delving into the essence of the self, questioning its location within the realm of thought. Lacan argues that the self is not simply the

product of its fleeting thoughts, but rather exists in a space of observation distinct from the constant stream of consciousness. The true self, according to this metaphor, is the observer, akin to someone watching a projector displaying thoughts. This observer has the ability to detach and critically evaluate the content being presented. However, the observer remains unseen, highlighting the inherent limitations of self-knowledge. Overall what Lacan argues is that we are not simply who we appear to be, but a product of the interplay between language, desire, and the fundamental lack that shapes our very being. The split subject is therefore an impossible subject: a fragmented self perpetually seeking meaning through the language that both conceals and reveals its true nature.

On the other hand, what Žižek argues is that the mirror in the Mirror Stage is a metaphor for the Other's gaze, an internalized conceptualization of identity, which is crucial for determining subjectivity meaning that there is no "I" without the "other" (*SOI* 20). This Other for Žižek is the big Other, that provides symbolic instructions. It does not exist as a physical entity but rather as a symbolic structure that defines what is appropriate and what is not in a given social context (*How to Read Lacan* 8-9). The big Other, therefore, acts as an external source of authority and meaning, shaping our identities and desires. Language structure is part of the big Other and the master signifier, at the heart of it, is what makes language a coherent whole for the subject because it acts as a central reference point.

Moreover, subjects for Žižek perceive themselves as objects under the gaze of the big Other by internalizing its standards which is unescapable as he mentions "imaginary identification is always identification on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other" (*SOI* 117). Because of this gaze, subjects cannot return to a pre-social, natural state where instincts reign supreme. Certain enjoyments, those that do not fit the socially acceptable self-image, are rejected. Thus, they become associated with the Real which represents everything that the symbolic order cannot fully integrate. Therefore, desire in itself is subjected to these structures that mediate and mold it rather

than being an innate thing that we possess (191). This internalized gaze is unconscious; therefore, the subject cannot access its viewpoint, which makes him oblivious to the reasons of why he desires what he desires. Overall, the big Other does not simply bestow pre-defined identities. It offers images and narratives that shape our desires and aspirations since “man's desire is the Other's desire”(*Écrits* 525) . Therefore, we learn to desire what the big Other presents as valuable and desirable.

The concept of the big Other in Lacanian psychoanalysis, a symbolic order shaping our desires and identities, finds an exceptional parallel in the architectural concept of the panopticon. Bentham's panopticon, a circular prison with a central watchtower, creates a constant state of uncertainty for inmates. They never know if they're being observed, leading to self-regulation. In 1975 the French philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term “panopticism” in *Discipline and Punish*, which is a mode of social control where individuals are aware of the possibility of constant observation, even if they are never certain when or if they are actually being watched. This internalized sense of surveillance leads them to self-regulate their behaviour to conform to societal norms or rules. By analyzing the panopticon, he emphasizes the power dynamics at play (288-264). The unseen observer holds all the power, while the observed are constantly under scrutiny. This mirrors the big Other's influence. We can never fully access or understand the symbolic order, but its presence shapes our actions and desires. We strive for its approval, modifying our behavior to conform to the social norms it represents. We perceive choices within the symbolic order, but those choices themselves are often limited by the very system we seek to navigate since “.. the more we live as “free individuals with no Master,” the more we are effectively non-free, caught within the existing frame of possibilities” (“Can One Exist” 492), the illusion of free will reinforces the power of the big Other, just as the inmate's uncertainty reinforces the panopticon's control.

In the age of consumerism, the big Other can be altered. Marketing and advertising utilize the panoptic gaze to manipulate desires. Products are presented as gateways to happiness and social validation, mimicking the big Other's authority. We internalize these desires, seeking approval not just from the symbolic order but also from the market itself. This commodification of the gaze further reinforces the panopticon's grip on our desires. Therefore, the panopticon, originally designed as a prison, becomes a metaphor for the big Other's manipulative gaze in the age of surveillance. However, despite the likenesses of the panopticon overall concept, Žižek's big Other remains more relevant to Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's idea of "Liquid Surveillance". In their book titled similarly, they describe the latter as a form of monitoring in the digital age that differs significantly from the classic panopticon model popularized by Michel Foucault which has thus evolved into a post-panoptic style that contrasts "the mobile, pulsating signals of today's flowing forms with the fixity and spatial orientation of solid modern surveillance" (15). In other words, surveillance in the digital age is much more liquid in that it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, it is woven to the very fabric of our lives.

In this era, surveillance differs in that the distinction between observer and observed can be blurry. We may participate in our own surveillance by sharing data online. It is also a soft type of surveillance according to Bauman and Lyon in that it occurs in pleasant activities associated with entertainment and consumerism. As Bauman says, "everything moves from enforcement to temptation and seduction" (53). This refers to the shift from control to seduction. Targeted ads and social media create desires, not enforce rules. PR campaigns replace laws, shaping our wants indirectly. We feel empowered with choices, but those choices are shaped by hidden forces of 'temptation'. The illusion of freedom masks a new kind of control, one that manipulates our desires.

Žižek's idea, in link to commodities, states that a subject would buy a certain object not because it possesses an inherent value but rather because it signifies or represents a desire that is

embedded in his unconscious. This commodity is given a luring aspect by the big Other which denotes it as desirable which in turn helps in perpetuating the system that bestows this sublimity on it. Žižek gives an example in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* saying:

It is the same for all so-called 'mass-media symbols' of America – Coca Cola, for example: the point is not that Coca-Cola 'connotes' a certain ideological experience-vision of America [...] the point is that this vision of America itself achieves its identity by identifying itself with the signifier 'Coke' [...] The crucial point to grasp is that this device - 'America [the ideological vision of a land in all its diversity], this is Coke [this signifier]!' - could not be inverted as 'Coke [this signifier], this is [this means] American. (106)

Here Žižek argues that American symbols like Coca-Cola are often seen as simply reflecting American identity, meaning that a can of Coke often reminds you of freedom and sunshine. This passage challenges that view. It argues that the relationship goes deeper. America, as a set of ideas and values, actually defines itself through these symbols. Coca-Cola is not just a product that evokes America; America uses Coca-Cola, and similar symbols, to help shape what America means. The reason you cannot simply say "Coke equals America" is that the brand itself does not have an inherent meaning. On the contrary, it is America's identity that gives Coca-Cola its power as an American symbol. Accordingly, products like Coke become symbolic of a desired national identity, shaping how America perceives itself and how others perceive it, making it imbued with symbolic value beyond its practical use.

4.2 . The Ideological Fantasy

The word ideology is mentioned multiple times within the text, in fact the title itself promises a critique of ideology which brings forth the question: what is ideology according to Žižek? The answer is that for him ideology “in its basic dimension ... is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself””, he adds “The function of ideology is ...to offer

us the social reality as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.” (45). The social reality that he mentions refers to the phenomenal realm that is constructed through the big Other while the “traumatic, real kernel” refers to the Real within the Symbolic structure. Thus, ideology, for Žižek, is the concealment of the void, a lack in the big Other through fantasy. Fantasy therefore, “... functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the desire of the Other” (128), it is a defense mechanism used to conceal the inconsistency of the Symbolic order by creating a coherent and consistent narrative that allows the subjects to navigate the Symbolic order and make sense of the world around them when they are “incapable of translating this desire of the Other into a positive interpellation, into a mandate with which to identify” (128), offering a sense of closure and stability. Shared fantasies can also constitute and maintain social order. By providing a common ground and a sense of shared reality, they enable individuals to function within established social structures and the norms dictated.

To illustrate this concept further, Žižek makes an analogy between fascist fantasy and the 2016 viral game “Pokémon Go” in his book *Incontinnence of the Void*, by clarifying how fantasy functions. The game is augmented-reality based, that overlays digital content onto real-life environments and objects. The goal of it is to find different Pokémons using your screen to identify them in real-life locations (114). There is a fundamental difference between this game and other PC games, which Žižek explains saying:

Instead of taking us out of the real world and drawing us into the artificial virtual space, it combines the two; we look at reality and interact with it through the fantasy frame of the digital screen, and this intermediary frame supplements reality with virtual elements which sustain our desire to participate in the game, push us to look for them in a reality which, without would leave us indifferent. (114)

just like the players of the game Pokémon Go use their phone to catch Pokémons, fascists wear spectacles that allow them to identify what one has to fight against which in turn allows them to make sense of their identity in relation to the big Other's desire.

When a society is sunken in some structural problems, which are far too complicated to understand and process, subjects are still in need of dictation, of knowing what the big other wants from them or what Žižek and Lacan refer to as the question “Che vuoi?” or “What do you really want from me?” (*SOI* 123-124). The Big Other fails to provide a clear solution for the group's problems, which reveals the gaps and the inconsistency that it possesses. Therefore, “ideology is the primordial version of “augmented reality.”” (*IV* 114), this means that it uses the same approach. For fascist ideology, scapegoating becomes the solution by simplifying the situation and identifying one main enemy as the source of all problems. This transforms frantic confusion into a perceived precise understanding (*IV* 116). Thus, a complex web of issues is reduced to a single, blameable target for example: the Jew in Nazi Germany, or the Muslim in post 9/11 West, which unites the subjects and provides a sense of purpose, or the immigrant figure to explain economic inequality.

4.3 Objet Petit a and Jouissance

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, he explains the primordial stage where the infant experiences drives directly through primary functions like breastfeeding (oral drive), visual engagement (scopic drive), vocal interaction (invocatory drive), and elimination (anal drive). This initial state is significant in that it is pre-symbolic, meaning it exists before the introduction of language, law, and social norms. The infant, at this stage, is not yet a fully formed social subject. Rather, it exists as a concentrated bundle of unmediated jouissance (Evans 48). Thus, the Real is a realm of unbounded desire and unmediated experience that precedes the limitations imposed by language and social structures

This exploration of Jouissance in the infant lays the groundwork for understanding the development of the Lacanian subject. The introduction of the Symbolic order disrupts the initial state of unmediated jouissance, fostering the emergence of desire and shaping subjectivity. Jouissance, as distinguished from mere need fulfillment, signifies a complex experience characterized by pleasure interwoven with pain (Lacan, *Seminar VII* 209). Unlike basic satisfaction, Jouissance embodies an excessive and disruptive form of enjoyment, similar to overeating to the point of discomfort. Lacan further posits a connection between Jouissance and repetition compulsion. This compulsion manifests in the tendency to repeat actions that bring both gratification and discomfort, exemplified by someone compelled to wash their hands excessively. This repetitive behaviour embodies the insatiable demand of the drive, which Lacan, in *Seminar XX: Encore*, characterizes as perpetually seeking "More! Again!". Crucially, Lacan differentiates Jouissance from desire. Desire, he argues, serves as a defense mechanism against the overwhelming nature of Jouissance (*Écrits* 699). By mediating Jouissance through desire, the subject avoids giving in to its destabilizing effects.

The subject cause of desire or what is referred to as "Objet Petit a" is a recurring concept both in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Both explain it as a primordial loss or lack that the subject is structured around, however, Freud's "Das ding" stems from a specific experience of separation, like weaning, and can be a concrete thing we yearn to replace (*SOI* 146). In contrast, Lacan's "objet petit a" is a more abstract concept. It is "... a pure void which functions as the object cause of desire"(184), arising from the limitations language. Lacan sees objet petit a as the very engine that keeps the cycle of desire going (Evans, 128); it is the animating principle of subjectivity itself, manipulated by culture and ideology. Because subjectivity is predicated around this loss, finding this lost object means losing our subjectivity.

Drawing on Lacan, Žižek argues that "The sublime object is 'an object elevated to the level of das Ding'" (*SOI* 221). It is an ordinary object that we elevate to signify something

more—believing or acting as if it had greater qualities behind its surface level. Lacan highlights the paradoxical nature of objet petit a within his psychoanalytic framework as he describes it as a "paradoxical, unique, specified object" (*Seminar XI* 268). The crux of the paradox lies in the very emergence of objet a being contingent upon its simultaneous loss. Žižek emphasizes this by stating that objet a "emerges as being-lost" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 15). It is basically a lack that we seek to fill a lack. It is a paradox that keeps us engaged in the world and constantly searching for meaning, even if that meaning may ultimately remain elusive

All of this constitutes the object's deception, we have never truly experienced a state of perfect drive satisfaction or in Lacanian terms "Jouissance". However, upon the introduction of limitations on our initial connection to the maternal body (das Ding), a retroactive production of this illusion occurs, resulting in objet a. These limitations, imposed by the Law or the symbolic order, retroactively create the very thing they forbid: the insatiable desire for the lost jouissance (*SOI* 69). The Law, with its inherent restrictions, plays a pivotal role in the formation of objet a. The Law acts as a symbolic castration, severing the infant's primordial connection to the mother. This severance creates a lack, which "objet a" serves to represent. It functions as a concentrated reserve of jouissance, a mere fragment left over from the original Jouissance sacrificed during the process of becoming a socialized subject (167). In essence, "objet a" embodies the lack we experience due to the limitations imposed by the symbolic order. This lack fuels human desire, prompting it to constantly seek something that can never be fully attained. objet a becomes the elusive object of desires, guiding human actions and shaping their unconscious.

5. Ideological Cynicism in the Digital Age

The technological boom has, indeed, ushered in a golden age of information access. Citizens now possess an unprecedented power to acquire knowledge and share information. In theory, this should foster a more efficient democracy. After all, an informed citizenry is crucial for a healthy political system. But in reality, this brought about a paradox: despite this information

abundance, we increasingly witness political apathy and a sense of powerlessness among citizens. Liyan Gao discusses these phenomena in her article “Ideological Cynicism in the Modern Information Age with Sloterdijk and Žižek”. In her research, she refutes the idea that the proliferation of new media and information in the digital age has fueled optimism about consciousness-raising or activism as a tool for social change. Instead, she argues that uncritical enthusiasm for technology can be counterproductive.

For Marx, false consciousness is a state of being characterized by a lack of awareness. The proletariat does not fully grasp how the capitalist system exploits them. This ignorance allows the system to continue functioning and to perpetuate itself. In Marx's view, education and critique could spark a revolution as workers gain class consciousness: a realization of their oppressed state. However, Sloterdijk introduced the concept of “the enlightened false consciousness”: a state where people are aware of the oppressive structures yet fail to take action. This awareness breeds cynicism and a sense of powerlessness since knowledge alone does not automatically lead to action (*SOI* 25-26). Here Žižek highlights Marx’s critique of the proletariat's unawareness of exploitation and contrasts it to Sloterdijk's additional layer of the "enlightened false consciousness.” This suggests that people see the system's flaws but feel paralyzed. Knowledge failing to translate to action breeds cynicism.

While Marx's perspective holds merit, the modern cynical attitude of suspicion gives people a false sense of superiority that is fueled by expecting the worst or being one step ahead of the traditional false consciousness. Because of these expectations, cynics become paralyzed against any change. By doing so or by "not doing", they are unconsciously affecting the social system and hindering any potential for change, which in turn confirms their expectation. This results in preserving the status quo in this closed circuit of pessimism and inaction. Therefore, cynicism itself is deemed as an ideology, according to Sloterdijk, in that it both provides a framework and is deceptive in nature (Gao 5). The gist of this argument is that cynicism in

today's world makes us paralyzed by negativity. This "enlightened false consciousness" that we hold traps us in a loop, hindering change and ironically reinforcing the status quo which in itself is an ideology.

Similarly, Žižek argues that ideology is no longer to be seen as naïve consciousness. It knows it is lying; nevertheless, it is not an external veil obscuring a pre-existing reality, rather "ideological distortion is written into its very essence" (*SOI* 25). Therefore, he argues that ideology works at the level of doing, making the core of the issue not in the lack of knowledge but rather in a deeper fetishistic illusion that guides behaviour. Žižek refers to Marx's formula: "They do not know it, but they are doing it," which gives the assumption that we live in a post-ideological world and suggests that cynicism, characterized by a rejection of ideological truths, signifies a step toward the objective understanding of the world. Instead, Žižek's inversion is: "They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (25). This implies that people might intellectually grasp the problematic nature of their actions; for instance, how their pursuit of freedom reinforces an exploitative system. Yet, they remain trapped within the parameters of this ideology, continuing to chase the illusory ideal. Cynicism, in this light, becomes just one strategy for masking this entanglement. Maintaining a critical distance through irony and mockery is possible through it, but behaviors and actions still conform to the dictates of the very ideology that it supposedly rejects.

Therefore, liberal democracy for Žižek is the other side of the coin alongside Capitalism. He argues that belief, the willing participation of the community which does not have to be direct or genuine, is an exterior in that it is "embodied in the practical, effective procedure of people" (31), he further elaborates saying that belief supports the fantasy that regulates our social life. It does not have to be genuine since it invites you to "Leave rational argumentation and submit yourself simply to ideological ritual, stupefy yourself by repeating the meaningless gestures, act as if you already believe, and the belief will come by itself"(38). Therefore, acting as-if we

believe in ideology is in itself enough to hold its illusionary power. Furthermore, Žižek argues that the overt rule of law always relies on an obscene supplement, the latter refers to hidden practices that contradict the surface legality. He calls this the "obscene supplement", a deceptive release of tension that actually reinforces the very ideology it seems to challenge. He uses the Abu Ghraib scandal to illustrate this where, despite US claims of ignorance, evidence suggests systemic condoning of torture (*The Parallax View* 366-370). This highlights how torture might be an unspoken necessity within the US system. It is what allows it to remain a world superpower yet it cannot declare these hidden practices publicly.

Alternatively, we must distinguish the cynical position strictly from what Sloterdijk calls kynicism. The latter represents "the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm" (*SOI* 26). It acts as a form of popular resistance against prevailing ideologies. Kynics employ a multifaceted critique: they juxtapose lofty pronouncements with the realities of everyday life, exposing the hypocrisy of it, they mock the grand ideas of the powerful, revealing the underlying self-interest. Finally, kynics prioritize practical critique through an *ad hominem* means that highlight the hypocrisy of those in power, like exposing a politician who advocates sacrifice while enriching themselves (26).

Banksy, the contemporary anonymous British street artist, is a prime candidate for a cynical analysis. On the surface level, Banksy's work often appears cynical. His satirical murals critique consumerism, war, and social inequality. He operates outside the traditional art world, using public spaces as his canvas. This disrupts the usual gatekeeping mechanisms and challenges the way art is valued and consumed. In addition, his 2018 Self-Destructing Artwork "Girl with Balloon" partially shredded itself moments after being sold at auction, acting against the commodification of art. However, this prank, as it went viral because of social media, increased the value of this artwork even more (Mancoff). Thus, raising the question of whether he is a genuine revolutionary or a clever marketer who seeks to profit. This ambiguity itself can be seen

as a cynical act. By refusing to be easily categorized, he forces viewers to confront the uncomfortable truths or the Real underlying his critiques. His work acknowledges the inherent limitations of the system while simultaneously gesturing towards something beyond it.

This procedure, then, is more pragmatic than argumentative, it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation. On the contrary, cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to this cynical subversion. It recognizes and takes into account the particular interest behind the ideological universality (*SOI* 26). Contemporary cynicism acknowledges the gap between the proclaimed universal ideals and the particular interests they mask. The ruling class, for Žižek, engages in a form of hegemonic disavowal. They are aware of the ideological fiction yet they maintain the mask. Hence, this cynical wink operates as a psychic stitch that holds the symbolic order together, even in its inherent contradictions. Furthermore, it is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like morality itself put in the service of immorality or “the truth as the most effective form of a lie” (26). This cynicism is therefore a kind of perverted ‘negation of the negation’ of the official ideology. Confronted with illegal enrichment, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and protected by the law.

It is clear, therefore, that confronted with such cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer works. Exposing the contradictions and hidden agendas within ideologies loses its effectiveness when cynicism permeates the social consciousness. With all its ironic detachment, the cynical reason leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself. Therefore, a new approach to ideological criticism is necessary to challenge these deeply embedded systems, even in a seemingly post-ideological world.

Conclusion

This theoretical chapter has explored the foundations of Slavoj Žižek's unique approach to ideology, drawing heavily on both Marxist and Lacanian thought. Žižek offers a compelling reinterpretation of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, arguing that the commodity form itself holds the key to understanding not just economic issues, but also the broader mechanisms of social organization and thought. Through the concept of the symptom, the chapter has offered an exploration of Žižek's perspective that ideology itself functions as a symptom, masking underlying contradictions and serving as a source of enjoyment (jouissance) for subjects within the system.

Through a Lacanian lens, the chapter explored the role of the big Other, the symbolic order that shapes our desires and experiences. The gaze of the big Other fosters ideological fantasies and the elusive "objet petit a" fuels our unconscious drives. Finally, the chapter touched upon the rise of ideological cynicism in the digital age, hinting at potential future explorations of this concept. This chapter has laid the groundwork for further investigation of Žižek's concept of the Sublime Object of Ideology in reading Dave Egger's novel *The Circle*.

Chapter Two:

Surveillance and Desire in The Digital Age: The Sublime Object in *The Circle*

The flash opened up into something larger, an even more blasphemous notion that her brain contained too much. That the volume of information, of data, of judgments, of measurements, was too much, and there were too many people, and too many desires of too many people, and too many opinions of too many people, and too much pain from too many people, and having all of it constantly collated, collected, added and aggregated, and presented to her as if that all made it tidier and more manageable--it was too much.

—Dave Eggers, *The Circle*

Introduction

The ever-growing power of social media platforms raises questions about their impact on human behaviour and the erosion of privacy. Dave Eggers' dystopian novel, *The Circle*, transcends literary aestheticism, offering a chilling reflection of contemporary anxieties surrounding technology and its impact on human behaviour. Set in a future dominated by a tech giant corporation, the novel paints a picture of a society enticed by the alluring promise of complete transparency and interconnectedness. This chapter will explore the dark side of such unhinged aspirations in the novel, offering an analysis of this utopian world through a Žižekian lens. In Here, we will see “The Circle” act as a panopticon of desire, manipulating individuals through constant surveillance and data manipulation to control their wants and needs. Moreover, it

explores the concept of Data fetishism through a traditional Marxist view. Furthermore, to lay the ground for a Lacanian analysis, the second section examines the concept of the Split Subject and the Quantified Self in the novel and further elaborates on “The Circle” itself as a Sublime Object highlighting the limitations of this system and the potential for a return of the Real, a reminder of the unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of human experience that challenge “The Circle’s” control. Finally we will explore the algorithm of desire and how the ever-watchful presence of “The Circle” creates a sense of control and conformity. The chapter will conclude by examining how the novel reflects contemporary anxieties about the limitations of online activism and the ease with which it can lead to feelings of helplessness and disengagement.

1. The Author Dave Eggers

American publisher, author, and literacy advocate Dave Eggers was born on March 12th, 1970, in Boston, Massachusetts, in the United States. He has made a name for himself in the field of modern American literature. Since his debut in the late 1990s, Eggers' work has been distinguished by a unique fusion of social criticism, satire, and an interest in investigating dystopian themes. His breakthrough achievement came in 2000 with the unusual memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction and won praise from critics, making him known as a bold and innovative writer (Albert). This book, which blurs the boundaries between memoir and fiction, explores issues of family and loss while also using sharp satire to critique the self-absorption of a generation. It is an expression of his own painful experience and the sorrow he felt after both of his parents passed away within a brief period of time, both from cancer and he was left in charge of his brother, who was eight years old at the time. He gave up his studies of journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for this purpose (Albert). Michiko Kakutani wrote in *The Times* about Eggers's first book the following:

Dave Eggers's new book, "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," is part autobiography, part postmodern collage, a novelistic "memoir-y kind of thing" that tells the sad, awful, tragic story of how the author's mother and father died within weeks of each other and how he became a surrogate parent to his 8-year-old brother, and tells it with such style and hyperventilated, self-conscious energy, such coy, Lettermanesque shtick and such genuine, heartfelt emotion, that the story is at once funny, tender, annoying and, yes, heartbreaking — an epic, in the end, not of woe, though there's plenty of that too, but an epic about family and how families fracture and fragment and somehow, through all the tumult and upset, manage to endure (*The Times*).

Beyond the realm of memoir, Eggers' literary influence extends to his role as the founder of McSweeney's, a publishing house renowned for its unconventional literary magazine. It serves as a platform for both established and emerging writers, fostering a vibrant literary community. Eggers took a further step into literary activism in 2002 when he founded the San Francisco-based nonprofit organization "826 Valencia". It was a volunteer-run writing lab with the goal of fostering children's creativity and love of reading through workshops and free tutoring. The organization targeted children from underserved communities aged six to eighteen. Soon after, 826 Valencia opened locations in several large cities, such as Chicago, Seattle, and New York; as a result, the company changed its name to 826 National (Albert). Aside from being an established writer, Eggers appears to be a dedicated author that aims to enrich the literary landscape for both readers and writers

Eggers' impact on contemporary literature goes beyond publishing; however, his foray into fiction has yielded critically acclaimed novels like his 2013 novel *The Circle*, a chilling portrayal of a dystopian society where technology and transparency become tools of oppression. His novel, along with others like *A Hologram for the King* (2014), which explores the disillusionment of a

businessman abroad, and *Zeitoun* (2009), a fictionalized account of a Syrian-American family's experience during Hurricane Katrina, exemplifies his commitment to social and political commentary.

Eggers' fiction consistently reflects a deep engagement with contemporary anxieties. He tackles issues like corporate control, privacy violations, and the erosion of human connection in the digital age. His recent works are not mere dystopian fantasies, but rather cautionary tales that compel readers to confront the potential pitfalls of unchecked technological advancement and the societal shifts it fosters. By holding a mirror to the anxieties of the digital age, Eggers critiques the trajectory of modern society and provokes critical reflection on the future we are shaping. Beyond this digital realm, Eggers's work explores a wider range of anxieties. His memoir, for instance, delves into themes of grief and family dynamics, exposing the vulnerability and resilience of the human spirit. Similarly, *Zeitoun* tackles the human cost of social injustice and bureaucratic nightmares, highlighting the plight of marginalized individuals caught in the gears of a complex system.

A recurring theme in Eggers's work is the critique of power structures, whether wielded by corporations in novels like *The Circle*, or by impersonal bureaucracies in works like *What Is the What*. He consistently exposes the human cost of unchecked authority and the potential for control disguised as progress. However, Eggers doesn't just critique, he also celebrates the power of storytelling and community. Through satire, social commentary, and his exploration of dystopian themes, this writer establishes himself as a crucial voice in contemporary literature, challenging readers to question the status quo and consider the ethical implications of a rapidly evolving world.

2. A Critical Overview of *The Circle*

Dave Eggers' *The Circle* is a dystopian novel set in a near future Silicon valley. The story follows a female protagonist in her early 20s named Mae Holland who lands a coveted job, thanks

to her best friend Annie, at The Circle. The latter is a powerful tech company, headed by the “Three Wise Men”, and it has also gained the title of the “most admired company four years running” (*The Circle* 6). It aims at revolutionizing the world by creating an all-in-one password for all online media and services, and revolutionizing the Internet by pushing users to adopt their real names online while hiring “hundreds of gifted young minds every week” (6). As the story unfolds, we get to see the company pushing the boundaries more and more supported by its ever-growing community of young enthusiastic people who indulge in this alluring tech paradise.

TruYou is the very first innovation, introduced by Eggers in the novel, which is a single integrated user interface that manages and simplifies every online transaction and interaction “One button for the rest of your life online” (16). The company is built upon the philosophy manifested in this app which is complete transparency and the extreme valuing of openness. The main character, Mae, is portrayed as a young, idealistic, and naive lady who, via her affiliation with The Circle, is eager to make a meaningful contribution to her family and society. Her first experiences in the corporate setting have been challenging, especially considering how demanding her work is in customer experience which also monitors her social life with tools such as PartiRank that datifies her interactions with other Circlers and her social participation, putting increasing pressure on her and benevolently surveilling her actions even outside work hours. Still, her willpower propels her to keep going and make an effort to stand out. Because of her gradual indulgence in The Circle’s culture, her worldview changes in that she sees all that is outside of “The Circle” to be engulfed in disorder, disappointment, and filth. Mae realizes that there is nowhere else that could compare to The Circle’s world and starts to abhor anything outside the realm of the company and its campus life.

As the plot progresses it uncovers how Mae, Blinded by this supposed utopia, readily adopts “The Circle” technology and embraces their philosophy. Mae’s big break came after her kayaking incident where she was caught stealing a kayak; however, as the moral compass is altered

by this communion, keeping secrets from others is considered as the more scandalous behaviour in this situation rather than stealing itself. To make amends for her unacceptable action, Mae volunteered for a pilot program called "SeeChange" that involves constant video surveillance, initially believing it fosters safety and transparency, that is after doing an interview with Emmond Baiely one of the Three Wise Men where she crafted her own Orwellian slogan that further sustains and revolutionizes "The Circle's" ideology which is: "SECRETS ARE LIES/ SHARING IS CARING / PRIVACY IS THEFT "(168). This act opens the door for the creation of a new culture that goes with The Circle's agenda which is referred to as "going transparent" that is through the cheap, small SeeChange cameras that provide a constant live view of every place in the world. This culture was soon pushed and encouraged among politicians that those who declined it were accused of hiding something. Mae as the pioneer of this new movement gained instant recognition and became the face of the company, ranking up the corporate and the social ladder.

However, as Mae becomes increasingly entrenched in the company culture, the lines between personal life and corporate control blur, and the expectations for sharing increase. Due to this rapid change in her personality and her indulging in this ideology, her previous relationships with her parents and friends began to crumble. For instance, Mercer, her ex-boyfriend, refused what The Circle was pushing for. After a few attempts to demonstrate his opinion against what she and The Circle are advocating for he disappears in the woods. However, Mae decides to pursue and find him to convince him of the power that technology can provide and to announce the new project SoulSearch to the audience. Unfortunately, as Mae and her viewers go on a hunt for him using their cameras and drones, Mercer panics while driving away from them and faces a tragic death. As such incidents accumulate, Mae experiences a growing sense of isolation despite constant digital connection and her millions of online fans.

Nonetheless, the traumatic incidents that pile up in Mae's life do not serve as wake-up calls. Instead, they perversely reinforce her belief in The Circle's ideology. Mae becomes convinced that privacy is the root cause of shame and thus, all evil. Blinded by this warped perspective, she actively promotes The Circle's agenda, even advocating for mandatory Circle accounts for all citizens. This proposal eliminates any remaining shred of privacy, forcing everyone to live under the constant scrutiny of The Circle's ever-watching eye. The novel's open ending leaves us with a chilling sense of unease. We see Mae visiting her friend Annie, who lies in a coma in a hospital bed. Instead of expressing concern for Annie's well-being, Mae fixates on her friend's thoughts. This fixation, coupled with Mae's previous actions and the suggestion for mandatory Circle accounts, hints at a terrifying future where The Circle might even conquer the final frontier of privacy: the human mind. Will they develop technology to read minds and eliminate the very concept of private thought? The ending offers no answers, but it compels us to consider the dangers of unchecked technological advancement and the potential loss of our most fundamental human right: privacy.

4. Data Fetishism

In the ever-evolving landscape of technology, Dave Eggers' *The Circle* paints a chilling portrait of a dystopian future ruled by technology. To set the ground for a Žižekian reading, a traditional Marxist analysis of this novel is necessary, through which we can dissect the novel's underlying critique of unchecked corporate power and its impact on society. This will allow us to explore how The Circle, a seemingly benevolent tech giant, exploits its workers and manipulates public perception through concepts such as data fetishism. We will examine how this corporation thrives on the constant collection and analysis of data as it embodies a hyper-capitalist ideal, striving for complete control over the market and consumer behaviour. Exploring how the relentless data collection and obsessive belief in its power alienate workers, erode privacy, and ultimately create a new kind of proletariat within a capitalist utopia.

When read attentively, the symptoms of Capitalism appear in Marx's notion of class struggle in the novel. Though it does not explicitly depict a traditional Marxist class struggle between the owners of the means of production and the proletariat, it does explore a new kind of power dynamic in the digital age. The tech company, led by the Three Wise Men, functions as the new kind of ruling class. Being at the helm of this technological empire, the leaders create an environment where producing and saving data is prioritized. The creation of the platform TrueYou, for instance, and the high subscription rate to it meant the monopolization of this industry since "TruYou changed the internet, in toto, within a year. Though some sites were resistant at first.....the TruYou wave was tidal and crushed all meaningful opposition"(16). This results in a paradoxical economic state where the company adopts a monopolistic capitalistic stance by exploiting the free market ideal, competition and innovation, to create a monopoly that stifles true competition and user choice. That is by promoting and exploiting the innovation of new technologies and services that benefit their data collection and control over the market. And though The Circlers are paid for their work and customers receive services corresponding to their needs, this tech paradise creates a surplus value in that the data generated and collected is analyzed and used to attract new customers and further sell new products. Thus, data becomes the new form of capital allowing The Circle to manipulate behaviour, predict trends, and ultimately control the market.

The proletariats in the digital age are employees like Mae who become data generators, feeding the machine with online interactions, work performance, and even physical activities via SeeChange. Their labor extends beyond producing goods or services, it involves generating valuable data for The Circle. This reinforces the Marxist concept of a new kind of proletariat who are highly skilled but ultimately working to create a surplus of data for The Circle's benefit, not for themselves. As the company grows, it extend its power to all realms thanks to the data collected. Apps like LuvLuv, that is used for dating, attract those looking for love, further

submitting new info to the company's cloud in order to customize and suggest the perfect partner. Wrist bracelets are widely used to collect all their biometric data creating a digital economic totalitarianism.

Marx warns about the psychological effects of capitalism in his book *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and how it results in alienation saying:

The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself... It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification... As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. (30)

Here, Marx argues that the worker feels like himself only in his leisure time. The work alienates him and forces him to give up part of his humanity in that the only authenticity left to him is in his animalistic functions with no regard to his spiritual needs.

The previous diagnosis is accurate when applied to the novel. This Datification, apparent in The Circle's world, further alienates workers from their labor. However, here we see the employees are alienated even during their leisure time. The concept of PartiRank exemplifies this, ranking employees based on their social media interactions, creating pressure to conform and a sense of alienation from their true selves. Byung-Chul Han explains the alienation and exploitation that still ~~existz~~ exists within late capitalism when he compares the system-preserving power of the industrial society and that of neoliberalism. He says that "Out of the oppressed worker, neoliberalism creates the free entrepreneur, the entrepreneur of the self. Today, everyone is a self-

exploiting worker in his own enterprise. Everyone is both master and slave” (16), which is the same dynamic that Marx criticized yet in a different method. Thus, the same modes of production appear in *The Circle* but instead of producing tangible products, they generate a constant stream of data devoid of ownership. The data is used to measure and optimize their performance, dehumanizing them and reducing them to quantifiable units rather than individuals.

Overall, the alienation does not stop at the level of work but transcends to The Circlers’ real lives. Because the line is blurred between what is real and what is virtual, real interactions and social connectedness are altered to mere smiles, frowns, and comments which threaten the existence of genuine connections. Mercer expresses his frustration with these new conditions created by the commodification of emotions when he tells Mae “You no longer pick up on basic human communication clues. You’re at a table with three humans, all of whom are looking at you and trying to talk to you, and you’re staring at a screen, searching for strangers in Dubai” (*The Circle* 145). This passage shows how the corporate obsession over data and engagement fosters alienation and conformity that extends beyond its offices.

The Circle promotes a culture of data fetishism, where data is seen as the key to solving all problems and achieving progress. Employees are bombarded with data visualizations and statistics, creating the illusion that more data equals a better society. Marx's concept of reification, the transformation of human concepts and relationships into commodities, is best captured by Georg Lukács where he says “the essence of commodity-structure ... is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (83). This means that we see products as isolated objects with inherent value, instead of recognizing the social relationships that produced them. This, takes roots within *The Circle's* utopian ideology. The tech company promotes complete transparency as a core value, promising a more open and honest society. However, transparency becomes a

product itself, something to be bought and sold. People pay for access to its technological products such as the SeeChange cameras, allowing them to constantly monitor others which turns privacy into a luxury good. The result of this is that it reifies the concept of transparency, reducing it to a marketable feature rather than a core human value.

The ranking system PartiRank, based on social media interactions, further exemplifies data fetishism. Employees become obsessed with their ranking, striving to conform to The Circle's ideal online persona. This pressure to generate positive data becomes a form of unpaid emotional labor that benefits The Circle, not the employees themselves. Therefore, this obsession with data blinds them to the true purpose of this data collection which is to extract surplus value from their work and lives. It is a symptom of a late capitalist society where "...everyone is in competition with everyone else, even within a single enterprise. This universal competition may lead to an enormous increase in productivity, but it destroys solidarity and the sense of community" (Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive* 18). Thus, the focus shifts from human well-being to optimizing efficiency and maximizing profit based on data analysis. Correspondingly, The Circle promotes a distorted ideology, convincing its employees, and potentially society, that complete transparency is necessary for progress. This is a form of "false consciousness" that prevents workers from recognizing their true exploitation. The company uses data visualizations and statistics to manipulate perception, creating the illusion of a data-driven utopia. This reinforces the idea that The Circle acts in everyone's best interest while obscuring its true motives in the same way capitalist markets function.

5. The Split Subject and The Quantified Self

The conversation on alienation and subjugation as seen in *The Circle* can be further expanded through a psychoanalytic reading. As explained in the previous chapter, Lacan and Žižek argue that the subject is fundamentally split. The latter occurs due to the limitations of the preexisting linguistic systems that cannot fully capture the complexities of the Real creating a lack

that the subject yearns to fill. In *The Circle*, the hyper-transparency and emphasis on language create a hyper-Symbolic order. Everything is categorized, quantified, and constantly monitored. The language of this virtual empire is that of data that it becomes the dominant discourse, positing transparency as its master signifier and shaping how Mae and others perceive themselves.

Simulacra, copies that lack the essence of the original, for Jean Baudrillard are no longer peripheral but rather define our contemporary world. His central argument in *Simulacra and Simulation* is that we exist within a hyperreality, a realm where the boundaries between copy and reality have become blurred (3-6). It is a result of the culture of consumerism where the constant barrage of images and simulations in advertising and media fuels the illusion. Here, every element functions as a symbolic performance, with weak links, if any, to a foundational truth. Thus, in our contemporary world, “It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (10), we no longer possess a vision of the original, real state of the world as we get lost within the copies. Baudrillard proposes three stages of simulacra. The first involves a copy reflecting reality. The second blurs the line between copy and reality. The third, hyperreality, replaces reality altogether. Thus, in our hyperreal world, the real ceases to exist, making everything a copy within a copy.

In his argumentation, he uses Disneyland as an example of the hyperreal. It is a meticulously crafted world that evokes a sense of authenticity. However, the twist is that for Baudrillard this very illusion is in fact used to mask the fakeness of what lies outside Disneyland. It “is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (10-11). This indicates that reality as we experience it is fundamentally altered. Similarly, the Circle, with its emphasis on transparency and online presence, can be seen as a hyperreal environment. It creates a world that feels authentic. The

characters become consumed by maintaining their online persona. They lose touch with their inner reality and the unmediated world outside The Circle.

The company uses specific language to promote its ideology. Words and ideals like "transparency," "sharing," and "completion" are used to create a sense of security and belonging. However, this language also serves to suppress unconscious desires that might challenge The Circle's control. Although Mae starts integrating this ideology, it is apparent in her beginning as an employee that this form of conforming to this symbolic order castrates notions like privacy and autonomy, which make her confused at first. When Mae was a novice, she did not see that everything she did should be shared with others. Some things like kayaking, one of the hobbies she enjoys, seemed to be something dear and private that she did not want to share; however, when her work friends Josiah and Denise learned about her interest they were shocked at how she could hide such information from them, making her feel guilty about it as Josiah tells her "How do you think other Circlers feel, knowing that you're so close to them physically, that you're ostensibly part of a community here, but you don't want them to know your hobbies and interests. How do you think they feel?" (*The Circle* 106). This incident exemplifies Žižek and Lacan's concepts. Holding on to privacy is now castrated as part of the Real that the Other frowns upon and considers wrong.

At first, Mae clings to a fragment of the Real, her authentic self outside the watchful gaze of The Circle. However, this secrecy also emphasizes the lack within her. She can't fully access the wholeness she desires through being part of a community while maintaining some privacy at the same time. Therefore, just like the infant who acquires social identity and becomes a subject by entering the symbolic order, Mae is getting acquainted with the Name of the father which is the law governing The Circle that forbids her from preserving some privacy. Because sharing becomes the norm in this hyper-connected world, not knowing becomes part of the Real that cannot be incorporated and causes anxiety.

The mysterious man, Kalden who resides in The Circle but neither Mae nor Annie can find anything about online, causes them anxiety via this non-knowledge. When she meets him, Mae discovers that she cannot stand even a moment of being unable to contact another human being as she grows increasingly used to her constant social networking. Therefore, she “felt stupid when her doubts were confirmed. The tear was opening up inside her, a blackness overtaking her.....Mae cursed the not-knowing and knew she needed someone who could be known. Who could be located” (110). This quote emphasizes Mae's desperate need to re-establish control and fit Kalden into the existing Symbolic order. Her inability to fit him within the meticulous narrative, The Circle's all-encompassing data net, meant that things beyond it disrupted it and this symbolic order could not govern. This realization deepened the gap in her, further fragmenting her and creating a profound sense of incompleteness.

The quantified self-movement has appeared in recent years. It is “...simply about optimizing physical and mental performance” (Han 41). It is a cultural phenomenon of self-tracking with technology to a community of users and makers of self-tracking tools who share an interest in self-improvement through numbers. However, with these tools and despite all the benefits its data provides “the self-optimizers fail to truly care for themselves. The recording techniques of the quantified self are those of a self that has become self-referential”(41), which means that its sole focus is on performance. Thus the emphasis shifts from feeling good to achieving perfect numbers, which in turn intensifies stress and anxiety. In addition what Han argues in the quote is that self-optimizers might become self-absorbed and overly focused on their own metrics. This can lead to neglecting relationships and contributions to the world outside themselves.

This concept appears in Eggers' novel where the company creates and promotes the culture of the quantified self through its technology. One aspect of it is seen when Mae is introduced to health bracelets that all The Circlers have to wear in order to keep track of them and

monitor their biometrics. Dr. Villalobos describes its functions as the following “...you can have the bracelet measure about a hundred other things. If you run, it’ll measure how far. It tracks your standing heart rate versus active. It’ll measure BMI, caloric intake.... See, you’re getting it” (*The Circle* 89). She explains, that the health bracelets track a vast array of biometrics. It even “measures the pH level of your sweat, so you can tell when you need to hydrate with alkaline water. It detects your posture, so you know when you need to reposition yourself” (88), and all the data is available online for everyone to see. Moreover, Mae’s love interest Francis creates a chip installed in children for the sake of reducing child kidnapping and keeping track of their academic performance. Because of this invention, the records of everyone will be stored and available online from an early age.

This obsession with data reflects *The Circle's* desire to categorize and control every aspect of an individual's life. These bracelets become a physical manifestation of the Symbolic order, constantly monitoring and regulating the subject. In a secret meeting with Mae, Kalden tries to convince her to join his plans to destroy *The Circle* before it reaches completion. He expresses his discomfort with such invention, especially at the hands of *The Circle*, when he tells her:

No, no. Not at all. But you’re now the ambassador. You’re the face of it. The benign, friendly face of it all. And the closing of *The Circle*—it’s what you and your friend Francis made possible. Your mandatory *Circle* account idea, and his chip. *TruYouth*? It’s sick, Mae. Don’t you see? All the kids get a chip embedded in them, for safety, when they’re infants. And yes, it’ll save lives. But then, what, you think they suddenly remove them when they’re eighteen? No. In the interest of education and safety, everything they’ve done will be recorded, tracked, logged, analyzed—it’s permanent. Then, when they’re old enough to vote, to participate, their membership is mandatory. That’s where *The Circle* closes. Everyone will be tracked, cradle to grave, with no possibility of escape. (262)

Here Kalden tries to open Mae's eyes to the long term drawbacks of Francois' invention and the others'. He highlights that even if it seemingly solves a problem it allows the company to keep all citizens under surveillance with no option to escape.

The bracelet's functions expand when Mae accepts her role and becomes transparent. She becomes an influencer and a public figure watched by viewers around the clock and around the world. Although adopting this "quantified self" lifestyle often portrays itself as a path to self-knowledge and improvement, the constant pursuit of optimization can highlight inadequacies and create a deeper sense of lack within the subject. A major shift takes place where "Life processes are transformed into mechanical processes...the human being ever more closely approximates a machine and becomes alienated from itself. Dataism and artificial intelligence reify thinking." (Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive* 9). Mae transformation to a machine-like human is a way of opting for the internal lack through numbers and metrics that are supposed to make her feel good; however, not meeting these standards can be troubling.

Consequently, Mae is split between her own desires and wants and the desires of the other. Ever since she chose to go transparent, her online persona became what she identified with and lived according to. The gaze of the big Other creates the pressure to conform and perform accordingly, further intensifying the gap between Ideal ego and Ego ideal. For instance, when the SeeChange cameras were installed employees had to be aware that they were being watched which erased any spontaneous behaviour they once possessed, Mae herself "began to think a bit harder about the clothes she wore to work. She thought more about where she scratched, when she blew her nose or how" (*The Circle* 135). What was once an everyday activity for Mae is no longer. Instead, they became a calculated performance, an appeal to earn the big Other's acceptance.

Technology, therefore, and the accompanying cultures such as the quantified self, are a manufacturing desire machine that blurs the line between the authentic self and the online persona. Though Lacan does not believe that there is a self, to begin with, and that the subject in its essence

is constituted because of the split that emerges as he enters the symbolic order, the digitalization and the rise of social media deepen this gap and increase the lack. The subject is in constant dilemma struggling between his desires and what the big Other wants from him which is demonstrated through characters like Mae Holland. It is perhaps the reason why this era is primarily characterized by dissatisfaction. The split within the subject is heightened when social media pretend to have a remedy for this lack through objects and commodities ; however, nothing can in fact fill the lack. Therefore, we often feel dissatisfied and even sad after gaining the ever-desired object, it is the “not having” that we actually desire, the restriction put on the thing elevating it to the level of the sublime.

6. “The Circle” as The Sublime Object and The Return of The Real

We have established in the previous chapter that Ideology for Žižek is what gives structure to the manner of which we desire. This system of desire fills in the object cause of desire, creating an ideological fantasy, an illusion that a certain elusive object is able to fill in the lack that is constitutive within the subject. In *The Circle*, the fantasmatic specter created revolves around the idea that privacy is theft. In order to clutch its claws on its subjects, the company dumbs down all the world problems into one single blamable target that serves the ideology and further enriches and perpetuates it. For instance, the very introduction of the TruYou platform promised that “all comment boards became civil, all posters held accountable. The trolls, who had more or less overtaken the internet, were driven back into the darkness” (17). Framing the nonknowledge of others’ data and identity as the root of all evil which in turn gives *The Circle* the advantage in that it provides answers to these inconsistencies.

As the story progresses we see that more people internalize this idea. Instead of being a basic human right, privacy becomes an intolerated action, a kernel of the Real that disrupts *The Circle*’s meticulously crafted narrative that allows it to collect data. Like the war on terrorism, *The Circle* initiates a war on privacy where it is depicted as some evil that must be eradicated. The

problem of corrupted governments and politicians is also simplified to the notion that privacy given to these politicians, in and out of office hours, allows them to do morally questionable things. The transformative situation is described in the novel as the following:

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? Though some citizens and commentators objected on grounds of privacy, asserting that government, at virtually every level, had always needed to do some things in private for the sake of security and efficiency, the momentum crushed all such arguments and the progression continued. If you weren't operating in the light of day, what were you doing in the shadows? (134)

This echoes Žižek's reference in "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology", where he talks about the British Prime minister, in the early 90s, John Major's conservative narrative. He describes that "All evils of society are embodied in the figure of the unemployed single mother: she is getting social benefits, she causes budget deficit, disintegration of society because she is unable to raise her children properly and so on." (Žižek 44:50). Similarly, *The Circle* creates a narrative that condemns privacy and the figures who embrace it such as the politicians mentioned in the quote.

Mae's ascending career as she went transparent made her internalize the orders of the big Other and act to spread them. She even tries to impose the ideology of "The Circle" on her close circle. However, because *The Circle's* ideology, like any ideology in that sense, holds within it its demerits, her attempts are met with resistance. Annie, Mercer, Kalden, and her parents' dissatisfaction and paranoia over this data-driven machine are all symptoms of the completionist ideology. It represents an underlying unease of the ever-watchful eye of *The Circle* and a repressed desire to free themselves from its ideological constraints.

Therefore, *The Circle's* ideology of transparency and connection masks the contradictions of the suppressed Real that erupts its neat categorization. Mercer, for instance, is one way of

seeing how the preserve kernel works. He did not accept The Circle's ideology and therefore was moved to the peripheries of the society quite literally. Several attempts were made in hopes that he embrace it and be allured by the seemingly perfect world and ideals of The Circle a search for him was initiated by Mae that ended in his tragic homicide or suicide. We can rationalize Mercer's step of wanting to live in the woods and although he knew that her "cameras are mapping out these areas as they have mapped the Amazon, Antarctica, the Sahara, etc. But at least [he will] have a head start. And when the cameras come, [he will] keep going north" (236); This is what Žižek would refer to as "sinthome." It is a rejection of the big Other and an embracing of the symptom, the thing that announces you as broken in the other's eye (*SOI* 86). However, Mercer's suicidal act stems from his encounter with the Real. What the world has come to, is that despite The Circle claiming to have an all-encompassing knowledge there is the chaotic and unpredictable aspect of human experience that The Circle seeks to mask or even erase.

This act of suicide is an act of violence that entails that there is something that cannot be put into words. As Žižek frames it in his film "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology": "Violence is never just abstract violence. It's a kind of brutal intervention in the Real to cover up a certain impotence concerning what we may call 'cognitive mapping' – you lack a clear picture of what's going on. Where are we?" (35:48). Therefore, we can interpret this event by saying that characters like Mercer were forced to repress their anxieties or resort to extreme measures. Annie's repressed anxieties about her family's shameful past that appeared in her expirement as the face of PastPerfect, a platform that traces back all your family heritage, appeared in her entering a coma.

After the death of Mercer, we see Eamon Bailey, one of the Three Wise Men and the public face of The Circle, trying to smoothly condense a multitude of anxieties and desires into a single, simplified narrative. He tells Mae that it was not her fault since she was "trying to help a very disturbed, antisocial young man. [Her] and the other participants were reaching out, trying to bring him into the embrace of humanity, and he rejected that" (The Circle 252). He even uses the

issue in favor of The Circle's technology arguing that if Mercer was in a self-driving vehicle this would not have happened and that if he had accepted to use The Circle's tools he would not have gone into the state of depression he was in because he would have been constantly surrounded by this community. This enables us to recognize that when the Real disrupts, the ideology is able to rebuild itself around it via fantasy formation.

Furthermore, because we are fundamentally ideological beings, according to Žižek, asserting something as free from ideology is ideological par excellence. Kalden, the mysterious, secret love interest of Mae who turns out to be Ty the Wise Man who created The Circle in the first place, enters the realm of ideology that revolves around destroying this data machine. Kalden/Ty's actions, while seemingly opposed to The Circle, are still ideological. He is not operating outside ideology but within a different one. This reinforces Žižek's point that we can never truly escape ideology. Initially, he created The Circle to solve the problems that were present but after that, the gaps appeared revealing the drawbacks of this ideology. Later on in the novel, we see Kalden searching for a new symbolic order opposed to that, and we do not get to know if it will really work. What Kalden desires can be seen from a Hegelian dialectic as the synthesis of the previous two systems. Nonetheless, it shows the closed circuit of this ideological deadlock.

Žižek uses the example of the shark in the movie *Jaw* to explain that the easiest way to confront the Real is by utilizing a scapegoat to trade all our fears and anxieties, that cannot be fully captured and digested, into one digestible fear: the fear of the shark ("The Pervert's Guide to Ideology" 40:48). Similarly, Eggers uses a shark as a symbol for The Circle and more specifically Tom Stenton as he explicitly stated. Kalden parallels the shark, Mae showed to her watchers, to The Circle. However, in so doing he is also using The Circle as a scapegoat to fit with the narrative of the anti-Circle ideology. This shows that there is no escape from ideology, we only keep searching for a new master signifier and recreating a symbolic order around it.

In the Gang of 40 meeting where Mae was invited for the first time we get to see a bunch of young people pitching their ideas for The Circle to adopt and develop. This showcases that even with the amount of inventions already created that promote complete transparency there was more to explore and implement. It is similar to Lacan's "Encore!" as explained in the previous chapter. All of this makes The Circle luring, creating a sense of frustration and longing. This tension between the promise and impossibility of completion is what makes it sublime. However, this utopian vision can also be terrifying. The complete erasure of individuality and the constant pressure to conform create a sense of suffocation and loss of freedom. This tension between the desire for connection and the fear of homogenization fuels the sublime aspect of the ideology.

Nonetheless, the Real Kernel of Jouissance always threatens to disrupt this perfect order. It represents the disruptive, excessive aspects of human desire that resist complete control and symbolization. As we have already explored, the characters experience a nagging sense of emptiness from time to time, despite the apparent fulfillment offered by The Circle. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of the real kernel, a desire that can not be satisfied within the confines of the ideology. Furthermore, the constant surveillance promoted by The Circle creates a sense of anxiety and paranoia. This anxiety can be seen as a reaction to the threat of the Real kernel, the aspects of subjugation that resist complete transparency and control. All of this, as we have seen, is masked by ideology.

7. The Big Other is Watching You!

In explaining the concept of desire for Lacan and Žižek, we have covered how the condition of subjugation that happens in the mirror stage causes a split in the subject between the ego and the unconscious. "The Circle" creates a network that takes on the structure of the big Other. Therefore, The Circlers are always asking the question of *Che vuoi?* What do you want from me? As the big Other, The Circle is the one who is expected to answer in that it dictates desires. It does so by offering a prefabricated notion of fulfillment. It promises completion

through complete transparency, social connection, and quantified self-knowledge. This creates a false object of desire, the illusion that achieving these external markers will lead to happiness. Lacanian “objet petit a”, the fundamental void that drives human desire, persists even within this system. The Circle's offerings can never fully satisfy this lack because it is not about specific objects, but a deeper longing for connection and wholeness, which keeps the subject's performance under the gaze of the Other. This fuels the desire for social validation and approval within the platform's metrics. PartiRank, for instance, is “...an algorithm-generated number that takes into account all your activity in the InnerCircle” (58). Every reaction, every comment, and even participation in social events is turned into data that ranks them on popularity, which becomes desired. Users participate by sharing, connecting, and conforming to the system's expectations to gain a positive standing in the big Other's eyes, for high ranking equals social acceptness.

Mae's initial desire for social recognition further exemplifies this. For instance, when Josiah and Denise were building her profile they discovered that she does not share her father's sickness with other circlers which was a violation considering that there “...are four groups on campus for staffers dealing with MS.. Two of them are for children of MS sufferers...” (102). She is pressured to share her father's illness with colleagues despite her initial reservations, which highlights The Circle's control over desires. While the system rewards her with her father's healthcare integration, this is a form of illusory fulfillment. It reinforces the system's control while failing to address the underlying anxieties and lack that fuel true desire.

The company's aim is not to provide free health insurance for the sake of the common good but rather to attract more people to its data-sharing network. It is rather tangible in the integration of her parents into the healthcare program. At first, they were thrilled to get the help they needed; however, the cost was their privacy. Even when Mae visits to show her watchers her father's progress, the following dialogue happens between them:

“You’re sure affectionate tonight, Mae!” her father said. “Ha ha,” Mae said, and tried to indicate, with a rolling back of her eyelids, that they should not imply that she was ever less affectionate. As if remembering that they were on camera, and that their daughter was now a more visible and important person, her parents adjusted their behavior.... (199)

In this interaction, it is evident that both Mae and her parents lose some agency in their interaction due to the pressure of the big Other. It is not that they are forced explicitly to conform like in *1984*, however, they’re prisoners to the watcher’s expectations, the Other. Their behaviour is not driven by authentic emotions or personal connection but by the desire and the need to conform to the expectations of The Circle. This makes The Circle’s ideology a lot more sufficient in that it presents itself as benevolent, promoting transparency and connection as a justification for its control.

The polished vision of The Circle’s ideology is masking the suffocating nature of it. Her parents soon discovered that and tried to cover the SeeChange cameras at their home with the help of Mercer. He describes their state in his letter to Mae after covering their Cameras saying that “They don’t want to be smiled upon, or frowned upon, or zinged. They want to be alone. And not watched. Surveillance shouldn’t be the tradeoff for any goddamn service we get” (201). This resonates with concerns about the growing pervasiveness of surveillance technology and the erosion of privacy in the digital age. It challenges the idea that we have to give up our privacy in exchange for the benefits of modern technology

By repressing human desire for privacy, it becomes the forbidden fruit. Something rather more desirable in that it becomes part of the Real. How The Circle manipulates people’s desire shows when Annie posts a zing, which is Egger’s equivalent for a tweet, that says “Actually, I don’t know if we should know everything” (237), which was amended to “We shouldn’t know everything—without the proper storage ready. You don’t want to lose it!” (237). Though, whether

or not the Zing was edited by Annie remains mysterious, this act was done because this Zing threatened the company's reputation and its position especially since Annie held a high position in the company and there was no possibility of deleting. Annie's initial Zing, questioning the value of complete transparency, challenges The Circle's ideology. The Circle silences dissent and reinforces its desired narrative by editing it to a message about data storage. The company understands the importance of online persona in its society. By editing the Zing, they protect their image of a company that promotes complete transparency. They prioritize their monopoly of information over the authenticity of individual expression. However, the attempt to control the message backfires in a few ways. the editing itself becomes a form of censorship, highlighting the lack of true transparency. It is similar to Žižek's example of the relation between Capitalism and freedom. The first advocates for the latter, which paradoxically includes the freedom to sell the worker's own labor in the market (*SOI*47).

Furthermore, there happens to be one pivotal moment in the novel that marks the climax of Mae's internalization of the company's ideology. This occurs when she becomes the first one to go transparent via the SeeChange camera on her at all times. Her watchers unconsciously control her behaviours and choice-making. The tool this transformation took on her is described as the following:

The first time the camera redirected her actions was when she went to the kitchen for something to eat. The image on her wrist showed the interior of the refrigerator as she scanned for a snack. Normally, she would have grabbed a chilled brownie, but seeing the image of her hand reaching for it, and seeing what everyone else would be seeing, she pulled back. She closed the fridge, and from the bowl on the counter, she selected a packet of almonds, and left the kitchen. Later that day, a headache appeared—caused, she thought, by eating less chocolate than usual. She reached into her bag, where she kept a few single-serving aspirin packets, but again, on her screen, she saw

what everyone was seeing. She saw a hand searching her bag, clawing, and instantly she felt desperate and wretched, like some kind of pill-popping addict. She did without. Every day she'd done without things she didn't want to want. Things she didn't need. (*The Circle* 181)

In this quote, we see the first instance of the camera influencing her behaviour regarding something as simple as a snack choice. She craves a brownie, but the image on her wrist, a constant reminder of the watching public, makes her pull back. This initial hesitation sets a precedent. Mae prioritizes the perception of others over her own desires, a core principle of The Circle's ideology.

The passage goes on to detail a cascade of similar events. The ever-present gaze regulates her intake of junk food, sugary drinks, and even pain medication. Mae internalizes The Circle's vision of a healthy lifestyle, not because of any personal conviction, but because the act of indulging is now a public performance judged by an invisible audience.

This self-denial expands to have physical effects, with headaches plaguing her for indulging less in chocolate. However, the psychological effects are even greater. Reaching for aspirin becomes a moment of shame, a perceived weakness broadcasted to the world. Despite the pain she feels she enjoys the castration of what the big Other denounced. This is what Lacan and Žižek refer to as the excess of pleasure in pain or *Jouissance*. This is not a public denouncement or a conscious choice to align with The Circle's ideology. It is a far more insidious transformation. Mae doesn't need to outwardly declare her beliefs, "The Circle" has infiltrated her subconscious dictating her choices and desires through the ever-watchful gaze of the cameras. She embodies the terrifying efficiency of The Circle's control, where complete transparency becomes a tool for self-regulation and the erosion of individuality. This quote is significant because it does not only depict a grand gesture of conformity, but instead, it showcases the subtle ways The Circle manipulates behaviour. It signifies the culmination of her gradual transformation, where her sense

of self becomes inextricably intertwined with The Circle's vision. She publicly denounces a previously held personal belief that contradicts The Circle's ideology by volunteering for a particularly invasive procedure that pushes the boundaries of transparency.

In this regard, Francisco Collado-Rodríguez argues in “Patterns of Posthuman Numbness in Shirley & Gibson's *The Belonging Kind* and Eggers's *The Circle*”, published in *Transhumanism and Posthumanism in Twenty-First Century Narrative*, that Mae herself becomes a surveillance object. The more influential she becomes the more people follow her recommendations on products and services; thus, she becomes “a living camera-eye”(104). Her transformation from a curious newcomer to a hyper-surveilled influencer offers fertile ground to analyze the Big Other's manifestations. As her every move is documented and analyzed, Mae becomes an object of fascination, her choices dictating trends and influencing the desires of others. The constant monitoring positions her as a repository of knowledge, and people following her recommendations for products and services rely on the data collected about her life, creating a Symbolic Order based on her curated existence. This aligns with the big Other's role as the source of desire and the Law. However, the power dynamic remains unbalanced. While Mae basks in her newfound influence, she is constantly under the watchful gaze of the system, unable to fully embody the big Other as the true power lies with those analyzing the data. This manipulation of the big Other concept exposes the dangers of surveillance capitalism where a false authority is constructed based on information, not inherent knowledge.

Mae indeed is a fictitious character existing merely in the minds of Eggers and his readers; however, her likings exist numerously in our techno-capitalist societies. Having influencers sharing their private curated lives has become a tool for social engineering, that social media has become a source of truth. Power dynamics are, therefore, manipulated in the digital age. Influencers and celebrities get to define what is desirable, shaping public opinion, and dictating trends and cultural tastes. Just like Mae, they occupy a dual role of striving for the acceptance of

the big Other while also shaping the other's desire to align with the big Other. Michael Foucault describes the situation in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995) as the following: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202-203). This means that users, aware of the algorithmic gaze, curate their online presence for likes and validation, internalizing the power dynamics and becoming active participants in their own data panopticon. As a result, the daily exposure to targeted advertising bombards us with products and services we never knew we needed, keeping us in The Circle of desire and consumption.

8. Cynicism in The Age of Clicktivism

The Circle's philosophy of total transparency is its foundation. Every aspect of life is tracked and recorded, including communication and labor. This seemingly idealistic project begins to shatter when its contradictions prevail. The characters in the novel start to realize how easily information may be manipulated and used against them. They are aware that every activity they take is monitored and affects their social credit score. This knowledge leads to profound cynicism since they perceive the openness as a front put up to keep The Circle in power. Mercer, the main antagonist in the novel, runs a business selling chandeliers and he is pressured by his ex to start using social media platforms to market his products. Nonetheless, he is constantly reminding Mae of the illusion of "The Circle" and how life used to be and should be. He tells her in one of their first encounters after her joining The Circle:

"See, that's not true, Mae. It's not true. I know I'm successful if I sell chandeliers. If people order them, then I make them, and they pay me money for them. If they have something to say afterward, they can call me or write me. I mean, all this stuff you're involved in, it's all gossip. It's people talking about each other behind their backs.

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...(*The Circle* 76)

The quote shows Mercer's attempts to demonstrate and argue against the social media platforms The Circle promotes. In so doing it appears that he believes that she is ignorant to these facts.

In this case, we are arguing for the sake of the Marxist notion of false consciousness, that Mae and the others do not know that they are oppressed therefore knowledge is the key to their subjective distortion or as Han explains that "In that system, it was clear who the oppressors, as well as the oppressed, were. There was a concrete opponent, a visible enemy who could serve as the target of resistance" (16). However, Mae had no comment on what Mercer said indicating that she already knows about the pitfalls of this ideology and agrees with him but has nothing to do about it. Thus, her inner dialogue must be "Against what should we protest? Against ourselves?" (Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive* 17), because she voluntarily accepted this exploitation. This highlights the ways that surveillance is possible without the need to make people docile by power.

What Mercer pointed out, later on happens to her when 368 voted that she was not awesome. Mae forgot about the 97 percent who voted in her favor and was hyper-fixated on the 3% who did not, which caused her a panic attack thinking that they preferred her dead. The incident showed her how fragile these manufactured desires make her and how all the numbers perceived as recognition do not fulfill the intrinsic lack within her. However, Mae does not abide by this realization and continues to act according to this ideology despite its destructive nature. This highlights Žižek's transformation of the Marxian maxim in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* to "They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (25). Accordingly, Žižek believes that this is consistent with the idea of "enlightened false consciousness." Instead of being naive pawns, citizens are people who are conscious of how the system is used but confined by it.

The Circle embodies Žižek's concept of ideology through the Hegelian Triad. The doctrine of complete transparency and connection serves as the good that justifies all actions. This doctrine is enforced through institutions like the pervasive SeeChange cameras and the social credit system. Citizens' participation in rituals of transparency, such as constant sharing and rating, reinforces the belief in this ideology even if they do not believe in it deep down. The Circle creates a closed system where ideology is not just a set of beliefs, but rather a way of structuring social reality itself. Overall, It is true that social media can be a tool for change and can shape collective consciousness, however, the novel depicts the citizens who passively like and share information, generating a sense of participation without real engagement or critical reflection. This superficial engagement with social issues especially that of political activity may not have much of an impact in the real world, just as a simple click offers the illusion of contributing to a cause. They know clicking a button might not translate to real change, yet it is the only readily available form of participation. This frustration mirrors the growing cynicism associated with clicktivism, where individuals question the impact of online activism in a world saturated with information.

In addition, Mercer highlights the obvious to Mae when he tells her: “You sit at a desk twelve hours a day and you have nothing to show for it except some numbers that won't exist or be remembered in a week. You're leaving no evidence you lived. There's no proof” (*The Circle* 145). The alluring aspect for Mae is that through The Circle she is significant and can be remembered but in reality, with an abundance of data that enters every day and the datafication of people, it is impossible to stand out and be remembered. Being a social media influencer is a mirage that tells her that by enjoying and clicking she should not have any guilt about world issues because she has done her part. As Han highlights in *The Burnout Society*:

The late-modern achievement-subject does not pursue works of duty. Its maxims are not obedience, law, and the fulfillment of obligation, but rather freedom, pleasure, and inclination. Above all, it expects the profits of enjoyment from work. It works

for pleasure and does not act at the best of the Other. Instead, it hearkens mainly to itself. (38)

Therefore, online clicks and shares can serve the same purpose as the numbers in Mercer's statement that is, creating the appearance of productivity within a meaningless system. They transform the human desire for social change and connection into a system that eventually upholds the status quo.

While pressing a button may provide a brief feeling of achievement, it does not always result in lasting change, which breeds cynicism. Annie's previously discussed Zing best captures that. She is an important member of The Circle but she feels cynic about it when her life begins to crumble because of the PastPerfect experiment. She expresses her desire to shut it down because it appears that The Circle has sucked the life out of her but she does nothing about it except for clicktivism because she thinks that there's nothing to be done, which eventually leads to her breakdown. Kalden shares the same sense of hopelessness. He is skeptical about The Circle's approaches and though he is mysterious and preservative about his data, he attends The Circle's meetings regularly and is an employee there. Finally, he attempts to get Mae to join him in dismantling The Circle as a final resort; however, she betrays him by exposing his plans to the other Wise Men and his fate remains unknown.

Conclusion

The enticing power and inherent contradictions of "The Circle" in Dave Eggers' dystopian novel are examined through Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in this chapter. Data fetishism fuels the illusion of a quantifiable self, while "The Circle" itself functions as the sublime object of desire, making use of the inherent lack constitutive to the subject. The company creates an ideology that masks this fundamental lack and waves narratives essential to mask the Real. Moreover, The ever-watchful gaze of the Other dictates norms and expectations which leads to the manufacturing of desire. It also fosters a sense of self-consciousness and cynicism. Citizens

like Annie, Kalden, and Mae's parents are aware of the manipulation yet they remain trapped by social credit scores, the allure of connection, and the limitations of clicktivism.

General conclusion

Let's say that you are a small child and one Sunday afternoon you have to do the boring duty of visiting your old senile grandmother. If you have a good old-fashioned authoritarian father, what will he tell you? 'I don't care how you feel, just go there and behave properly. Do your duty.' A modern permissive totalitarian father will tell you something else: 'You know how much your grandmother would love to see you. But do go and visit her only if you really want to.' Now every idiot knows the catch. Beneath the appearance of this free choice there is an even more oppressive order. You seem to have a choice, but there is no choice, because the order is not only you must visit your grandmother, you must even enjoy it. If you don't believe me, just try to say 'I have a choice, I will not do it.' I promise your father will say 'What did your grandmother ever do to you? Don't you know how much she loves you? How could you do this to her?'"

Slavoj Žižek, *The Superego and the Act*

The quote above captures the gist of Žižek's argument. The postmodern tendency of deconstructing the traditional modes of authority suggests that the growing disbelief in metanarratives means the absence of the big Other and that nothing dictates what one should do or desire to do. However, capitalistic control masks itself in the ideals of freedom, authenticity, and enjoyment. The command of the big Other is: "Enjoy!" and through this command, it perpetuates itself. It sells the illusion that our desire is to enjoy and that consumerism allows us to be our authentic true selves. In the digital era, the distinctions between monitoring and desire are rather unclear. Examined via Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Dave Eggers' *The Circle* reveals this complex relationship. We see the allure of total transparency as the sublime object, an unreachable utopian world that conceals an oppressive system. Therefore, this dissertation Examined how ideology functions according to Žižek focusing on the manipulation of desires to maintain the status quo and reproduce the economic conditions.

The first part of this dissertation offered some insights into the work of Slavoj Žižek. Building his thesis upon multiple philosophers like Lacan, Marx, and Hegel, he arrives at an innovative critique of ideology via psychoanalysis. This was achieved by establishing the

commonalities between Marx and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. The subsequent analysis employed a symptomatic reading of Dave Eggers' novel, *The Circle*. This approach delves beyond the surface narrative to expose the underlying contradictions and veiled anxieties within The Circle's seemingly utopian ideology. By analyzing how The Circle utilizes mechanisms of displacement and condensation, common in Lacanian psychoanalysis, we have provided an examination of the ways in which uncover the ways in which the ideology attempts to manage and control the desires and anxieties of its subjects. For example, the company's emphasis on transparency and complete data visibility might be a displacement for deeper societal anxiety about not having enough knowledge. Moreover, Marx's notion of Commodity Fetishism was used to explore the data fetishistic inversion in the novel. The Circle as a data-driven machine exploits the human desire for connection and belonging. This fosters a system where individuals constantly feed the machine with personal data in exchange for a sense of connection and validation through its services. However, this creates a self-reinforcing cycle where individuals remain trapped, consuming the byproducts of their own data while never achieving true connection.

Delving deeper into Žižek's core ideas, we analyzed how Lacan's concept of the split subject manifests itself in the novel. Lacan posits that the subject is fundamentally split, forever yearning for a wholeness that can never be attained. This split arises from the separation from the mother in infancy and the symbolic order that shapes our identities. The "objet petit a" represents this lack, the ever-present desire that fuels our actions and motivations. The Circle's seemingly utopian ideology capitalizes on this inherent human lack. It offers itself as a solution to the split subject's longing for completeness, promising connection, validation, and transparency, all fueled by the constant flow of data. However, this is a manipulative strategy. The Circle manufactures desires for its own services and products, keeping subjects trapped in a cycle of needing, consuming, and lacking. In addition, Lacan's concept of the big Other, a symbolic order that

represents societal norms and desires, is also crucial here. The Circle positions itself as the big Other, constantly observing and judging its subjects. This fosters a desire to conform to The Circle's expectations, even when they contradict individual desires simply because we desire what the Other desires. The pressure to maintain a positive social credit score and participate in the system's transparency becomes a form of internalized control, more insidious than traditional authoritarian methods.

Moreover, this analysis has shown how The Circle's control is more subtle, unlike any traditional regimes that rely on overt force. It leverages psychological manipulation and technological tools to create a seemingly benevolent environment where individuals willingly surrender their privacy and desires in exchange for a sense of belonging and connection. This façade, however, masks the underlying exploitation of the Lacanian subject's fundamental lack. A traditional Marxist would argue that the current modes of exploitation are effective because subjects are unaware of their situation. We have argued through a Žižekian lens that Sloterdijk's enlightened false consciousness is what characterizes this mode of identification. Many characters show that they are aware of the situation "mais quand même". Thus, characters like Mae are aware of the manipulation but remain trapped by the allure of connection and the fear of social exclusion. However, Žižek's concept of cynicism adds another layer to this dynamic. The characters' awareness of the manipulation breeds a cynical acceptance. Characters like Annie participate in the system "nonetheless". It is not necessarily out of genuine belief, but out of a sense of resignation or a belief that there are no viable alternatives.

Overall, Žižek argues that ideology often functions through the presentation of an impossible Real, a utopian ideal that can never be fully attained. In *The Circle*, complete transparency serves as this sublime object. Characters such as Mae chase this ideal, even as they recognize its impossibility. This pursuit, however, becomes a form of cynical self-display. They become products to be quantified and judged, their privacy sacrificed at the altar of performative

transparency. Cynicism in this context becomes a twisted form of critique, a recognition of the system's flaws without a genuine desire to dismantle it. Unlike the previously held assumption, it becomes rather encouraged because it provides a false sense of choice that still operates within the margins of ideology which in turn helps to maintain it.

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الملخص:

في عصرنا الرقمي المتنامي تعمل التكنولوجيا ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على تغذية رغبتنا في الاتصال، ولكنها غالبًا تعمل تحت نظام من المراقبة الشاملة. رواية ديف إيغرز "الدائرة" تصور مستقبلاً ديستوبياً كاملاً أين تهيمن شركة تكنولوجيا قوية واحدة على كل جانب من جوانب حياة الناس وتحنكر السوق و من خلال استخدام هذه الرواية كنموذج ، نهدف إلى تسليط الضوء على مخاطر السيطرة التكنولوجية غير المقيدة على الذات البشرية. تساهم هته الأطروحة في المناقشات النقدية حول التكنولوجيا والأيدولوجيا والوضع البشري من خلال توفير فهم دقيق للعلاقة بين الرغبة والرقابة في العصر الرقمي و ذلك بالاستعانة بمفهوم "الموضوع السامي للأيدولوجيا" لسلافوي جيچك، والذي يستخدم بدوره مجموعة من النظريات بما في ذلك الماركسية والتحليل النفسي اللاكاني. تجادل الأطروحة بأن شركة التكنولوجيا "الدائرة"، بمراقبتها الشاملة والتلاعب الخوارزمي، تجسد هذه الفكرة. يشكل عام، نستنتج من خلال هذا البحث أن الرقابة يمكنها بالفعل أن تشكل الرغبات. من خلال مراقبة سلوكنا عبر الإنترنت باستمرار، يمكن للخوارزميات أن تتوقع وحتى تدفع رغباتنا نحو منتجات أو تجارب أو حتى أيدولوجيات معينة. وهذا يثير المخاوف بشأن حرية الإرادة وتآكل قدرتنا على تكوين رغبات أصيلة بعيدة عن التلاعب الخارجي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الموضوع السامي ، الأيدولوجيا، جيچك، الرقابة ، الموضوع أصغيرة.