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Angelos Koutsourakis

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Introduction: Some Comments on Surveillance Capitalism

Franz Kafka's *Der Prozeß* (*The Trial*, 1925) remains hitherto an emblematic text in its depiction of surveillance as a constitutive feature of modernity. In the posthumously published novel, Joseph K. wakes up to see that some officials have entered his apartment, he is accused of a crime that nobody can explain, while despite having been supposedly arrested he remains free to follow his daily routine. *The Trial* pictures a world where the boundaries between the public and the private space are blurred, and individuals are at the mercy of officials who are also unable to understand the complexity of the processes they are involved in. The accumulation of information about individuals seems like a pointless procedure, but the key thing about this seemingly absurd situation is how it turns into a means of behavioral modulation and modification. The subject who is constantly monitored and observed is a person under constant control, someone whose individual autonomy is threatened. While Kafka's story has been repeatedly referenced to address social experiences in totalitarian regimes, it is remarkable that the character of the novel ignorantly downplays any potential danger given that he lives in a liberal state and considers his rights inviolable: 'After all, K. had rights, the country was at peace, the laws had not been suspended—who, then, had the audacity to descend on him in the privacy of his own home?' (Kafka 2009, 7). Kafka raises the alarm about the ubiquity of techniques of behavior modulation and regulation through monitoring practices in modernity. Kafka's lessons remain pertinent in the present, making legal scholars in the field of privacy, such as Daniel J. Solove, claim that his

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Angelos Koutsourakis, is Associate Professor in Film and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. He is currently completing a book titled *Kafkaesque Cinema*. He is the author of *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier* (Bloomsbury, 2013), *Rethinking Brechtian Film Theory and Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018). He has co-edited four books and special journal issues including *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos* (Edinburgh University Press 2015) and *Cinema of Crisis: Film and Contemporary Europe* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

work 'best captures the scope, nature, and effects of the type of power relationship created by databases' (2004, 37). For Solove, the reality pictured in *The Trial* is germane in the present and even more relevant than George Orwell's visions of a totalitarian society in *1984* (1949), precisely because it shows how private organizations and not a totalitarian state can accrue asymmetrical amounts of information about individuals and make decisions on the basis of these private data over which individuals have no control. What takes place is a crisis of agency that refutes the liberal humanist narrative according to which the individual is an active agent and not an object, or as Isaiah Berlin puts it: 'a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men' (2002, 178).

Kafka's lessons resonate with the topical anxieties of late modernity regarding the loss of privacy and how this loss disempowers individuals, who are expected to surrender control of their own data to participate in the current economy; the catch is that their information is used to shape their future behavior, to create consumer demand and to reach decisions e.g. credit rating through processes from which they are excluded and have no say. Contemporary capitalism, therefore, goes against the very Enlightenment models of subjectivity upon which it is rooted. Shoshana Zuboff aptly describes our current situation as surveillance capitalism. For Zuboff, the term signifies a shift in the relationships between companies and the customers which they serve. In the age of surveillance capitalism, data extraction turns into a new industry that aspires to modulate and influence consumer behavior. Companies like Google, Facebook, eBay, Instagram, and Amazon do not just receive data necessary to guarantee the reciprocal relationship between customers and service providers. Instead, they monitor people's online behavior, their affective engagements and their virtual social participation to acquire 'a behavioral surplus' through automated processes that do not just become familiar with their desires, but try at the same time to influence them in particular directions (2019, npg.).

In a way, surveillance capitalism describes a type of digital behaviorism committed to the accumulation of private data and information used to manufacture needs and manipulate individuals social conduct so as to maximize profit. Data are not only used by the data extractors, but also resold to other interested parties. The users' private information provides a free labor out of which an unprecedented surplus value is extracted. Zuboff explains that the very velocity upon which this market logic is based undermines democracy, because it bypasses regulatory interference; furthermore, the hoarding of 'behavioral surplus' provides unlimited amounts of information that can enable key market players to shape social and cultural attitudes that naturalize this business model and make it immune to

accountability and transparency. The boundaries between the private and the public are blurred, and this reality raises again questions of agency, since individuals participate in processes that they cannot influence and out of which a minority profits. The key contradiction is that the more transparent the public's life becomes, the opaquer the profit-making operations of the data extractors and profiteers turn into. As Zuboff says,

> The commodification of behavior under surveillance capitalism pivots us toward a societal future in which market power is protected by moats of secrecy, indecipherability, and expertise. Even when knowledge derived from our behavior is fed back to us as a quid pro quo for participation, as in the case of so-called "personalization," parallel secret operations pursue the conversion of surplus into sales that point far beyond our interests. We have no formal control because we are not essential to this market action. In this future we are exiles from our own behavior, denied access to or control over knowledge derived from its dispossession by others for others. Knowledge, authority, and power rest with surveillance capital, for which we are merely "human natural resources" (2019, npg).

One of Zuboff's central propositions is that details of people's lives are reduced to material for information extraction leading to the privatization of their own desires, sociality, tastes and preferences. Once again, the key question concerns agency. Who is entitled to own and disseminate private information, and who decides to what ends? As she claims, the inherent danger lies in an anesthetized resignation on the part of the population, who become habituated to the idea that corporations can accumulate personal data to serve their own and obviously not the data owners' interests. As she says,

> Our dependency is at the heart of the commercial surveillance project, in which our felt needs for effective life vie against the inclination to resist its bold incursions. This conflict produces a psychic numbing that inures us to the realities of being tracked, parsed, mined, and modified. It disposes us to rationalize the situation in resigned cynicism, create excuses that operate like defense mechanisms ("I have nothing to hide"), or find other ways to stick our heads in the sand, choosing ignorance out of frustration and helplessness. (2019, npg)

Importantly, Zuboff explains that we are aware that our data and interactions are used by big companies for the sake of profit; the latter take advantage of the fact that in the current economic system we are dependent on the internet. In a way, contemporary subjects' attitude resembles the famous motto of apparatus theory which suggests that spectators are willingly fooled by the cinematic institution adopting the formula 'I know very well but all the same' (Bettinson and Rushton 2010, 45). Apparatus theory argued that cinema does not just produce films but also an ideal mode of spectatorship that predetermines the way we receive films so as to obfuscate the medium's ideological implications (see Baudry 1974, 44). Paraphrasing apparatus theory, we can argue that Zuboff's key point is that

in the age of surveillance capitalism, the internet apparatus does not just operate to maximize profit for the key players who have shaped it, but seeks also to reproduce ideal subjects/citizens, who resignedly participate in the commodification of their behavior. People have become aware of their exploitation by big companies, but are oblivious to how the latter use their data to produce a "behavioural surplus" that does not just allow them to monitor behavior but also to shape it toward market ends. It is, therefore, important to emphasize that people are cognizant of corporate practices but 'our access to their knowledge is sparse' and this is why Zuboff parallels this to a 'Faustian compact' (2019, npg). A pertinent example is how people apathetically abandon their privacy so as to improve their credit rating.

Comparable arguments have been made by other scholars in media and surveillance studies. McKenzie Wark suggests that the digital revolution has reshaped class relations. The ruling group of our times does not confirm its social superiority by owing the means of production but through the processing, sharing and controlling of information. The whole world turns into a site of extracted data which acquire value because of their future potential. As Wark idiosyncratically explains, the new dominant class takes advantage of 'an asymmetry of information'. Big firms offer services that are seemingly for free, provide necessary material in the web, or enable individuals to network. But in exchange for these ostensibly free services 'this ruling class gets all of that information in the aggregate. It exploits the asymmetry between the little you know and the aggregate it knows—an aggregate it collects based on information you were obliged to "volunteer"' (2019, npg.). It holds a monopoly of peoples' attention and commodifies it only to integrate it into the new realm of production and consumption. Consequently, not only are the borders between the public and the private confounded, but also between leisure and production, since individual activities outside the realm of wealth production, e.g. networking and browsing for information are all put in the service of profit maximization.

The legal scholar Antoinette Rouvroy has introduced the neologism 'algorithmic governmentality' to describe practices of data collection and mining used to standardize individual behaviors, which are processed, monitored, recorded and influenced by systems whose operations remain opaque not just to the simple users, but also to the cognoscenti of the digital sphere. Rouvroy identifies three stages in algorithmic governmentality. The first one refers to the automatic collection of vast amounts of data. The second stage consists of 'datamining', used to identify connections between them through techniques of automatic processing. The third stage involves matching these data to user profiles with the view to predicting individual behaviors. In effect, algorithmic governance stimulates

consumerism tailored to individual profiles and renders simultaneously apolitical any discussion of how certain products are produced and where they originate from. In other words, it does not simply regulate a preexisting virtual environment, but it creates a world based upon processes of digital behaviorism. As Rouvroy and Thomas Berns say, 'We thus use the term algorithmic governmentality to refer very broadly to a certain type of a)normative or (a)political rationality founded on the automated collection, aggregation and analysis of big data so as to model, anticipate and preemptively affect possible behaviors' (2013, 173).

Not unlike the above-mentioned scholars, Rouvroy and Berns alert that this development leads to the devaluation of politics and debate. Similarly, Jacob Silverman notes that the development of technologies of tracking and data extraction serve no other purpose but the monetization of all aspects of social life. Dataveillance and the voluntary surrender of personal information and viewpoints through social media platforms lead to homogenizing behaviors and 'the death of the personal' (2017, 151). The personal here is not to be understood in terms of liberal individualism, but the capacity to debate and formulate ideas that go beyond an imposed consensus. This results in the production of non-pluralistic attitudes of social conformity. Large virtual networks encourage self-censorship under the threat of constant observation that can lead to social exclusion, job loss and verbal abuse. Consequently, endless monitoring produces a different type of behaviorism that stifles individual autonomy and imagination.

Equally important is to emphasize how technologies of surveillance have radically transformed working environments creating more pressure for workers through performance monitoring strategies that end up maximizing the output expected from each individual worker. Indeed, this has led to a novel form of work devaluation. Phoebe V. Moore, Martin Upchurch and Xanthe Whittaker cogently argue that the rise of technology has not led to the Keynesian dream of reducing work through automation, but instead it has reduced the number of workers; those who work are subject to work intensification through surveillance that robs them of their dignity and even their leisure (see 2018, 11). Along these lines, Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon have pointed out how surveillance leads to the commodification of our personalities, putting pressure on individuals to treat themselves as salable objects and thus limiting their political imagination and their capacity to envisage alternatives. In contemporary surveillance societies, individuals lose their dignity in exchange for their participation in the economy, social interaction, and even mobility and this point pertains to Zuboff's above-mentioned understanding of this reality as a pact with the devil (see 2013, 122).

From the prolegomena, one can infer that the reality of surveillance capitalism is even more problematic, because as the scholars mentioned above

have explained, it has been somehow naturalized leading people to consider it as part of an evolutionary technological development and not as a political process. This depoliticization has affected people's capacity to perceive themselves as active agents, who can imagine, construct, and enact social and political changes. The depersonalized capitalist surveillance performed by the prevalent audio-visual regimes encourages conformity because in many cases non-conformity is tantamount to exclusion. Here, the Kafka metaphor with which we opened this essay becomes even more pertinent, because dedicated readers of *The Trial* may recall that K's problems start because he refuses to accept things as they are and conform to the new situation. It is his naïve belief in a liberal individual agency that brings his demise, and this is particularly relevant in the current reality of social fragmentation that precludes any possibility of change initiated by isolated individuals.

Consumer Behaviorism: *Paranoia 1.0*

Studies in cinema and surveillance abound and some of the most pioneering work in the field has addressed issues of cinematic self-reflexivity produced by the medium's incorporation of narratives of surveillance. Garrett Stewart has aptly explained that surveillance narratives raise questions of mediation and invite us to consider how cinematic technologies assist monitoring practices. As he explains, cinema's engagement with the dialectics of watching and being watched characterizes films from the first decades of the twentieth century, while the shift from the analogue to the digital has led to a plethora of films musing on issues of surveillance something that speaks volumes about the abrogation of privacy brought about by the digital expansion (see 2015). Certainly, much of the conversation on the topic focuses on issues of voyeurism and mediation, or the securitization of societies and the normalization of surveillance following the 9/11 attacks. Thomas Y. Levin has analyzed how 'the rhetorics of surveillance' infuses post-1990s films, making at times film narrative 'synonymous with surveillant enunciation as such' (2002, 582). John S. Turner adopts a different stance and suggests that most films that thematize surveillance are somehow conservative, because they naturalize it by emphasizing the spectacular aspects of contemporary technologies of observation (see 1998). Similarly, David Wittenberg posits that unlike influential precursors, contemporary films draw on the correlation between the medium and monitoring technologies so as to depoliticize the expansion of surveillance and eventually to depict it as 'as no threat at all' (2019, 221). Lorna Muir suggests that the growth and omnipresence of digital means of surveillance should urge us to reconsider the dominant Foucauldian notion of the panopticon and

think instead through Gilles Deleuze's idea that disciplinary societies have been replaced by societies of control; this is intimately tied to the development of new technologies of observation that make traditional disciplinary institutions less influential. The development of digital technology has collapsed the neat boundaries between the public and the private sphere and challenged 'traditional notions of space (and the body)' (2012, 277). Catherine Zimmer has discussed how cinema and audio-visual surveillance are mutually influencing each other; films about surveillance reflect on its ubiquity thematically but also formally, since they incorporate into their stories practices of digital surveillance. At the same time, surveillance as a mode of social regulation and control becomes further influenced by cinematic representational practices (see 2015, 14).

Yet what remains off the radar of scholarship is a discussion of cinema's engagement with the reality of surveillance capitalism. Scholars have acknowledged how dataveillance has become an established form of social control and Zimmer has also identified connections between 'first-person camera films', such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and a political economy of spectatorial interactivity that exceeds the confines of the narrative universe and aspires to shape consumer demand and activity (Ibid, 73–5).[1] What has not been discussed is how contemporary cinema captures the experience of surveillance capitalism, and its by-products, such as consumer behaviorism and its effects on the world of labor.

This article aims to shift the conversation surrounding cinema and surveillance to address these questions through a discussion of *Paranoia 1.0* (2004) and *The Circle* (2017). The two films I analyze have been chosen on the basis of their illustrative potential and not necessarily their cultural value. They both reflect on how the normalization of surveillance conditions consumer and working behavior. In these terms, the films urge us to ask questions about how both unwilling and eager participation in the regimes of digital surveillance reduce individuals and their interactions to data captured for the marketization of human experience.

The first film, a blend of neo-noir, cyber-punk and science fiction thriller, addresses issues of market behaviorism. It tells the story of Simon (Jeremy Sisto), a computer programmer working on a secret project for a big corporation. Simon is a recluse whose mental health becomes unstable after receiving empty packages by unknown senders. He lives in a rundown block of apartments populated by other estranged characters: Trish, an overworked nurse (Deborah Unger), an inventor (Udo Kier) who spends time trying to manufacture a human android, a seedy character who creates S&M virtual reality porn experiences by performing the acts with various partners (Bruce Payne), a voyeurist landlord (Emil Hostina), and Howard (Lance Henriksen), the building janitor and the only one in the premises

not receiving empty packages. Simon becomes alert after developing symptoms of an illness that killed one of the residents while at the same time his computer system seems to have caught a virus that apparently affects his physical and mental health. His behavior becomes erratic, and he starts consuming increasing amounts of milk, while others in the building become addicted to other products: the porn-gaming neighbor to cola 500, the landlord (Emil Hostina) to farm cut meat, and Trish to orange juices. One day the landlord is found dead with his brain having been removed and the same fate is in store for the porn gaming neighbor. Simon's friend, Nile (Eugene Byrd), who works as a high-speed courier – a fictional predecessor of Uber deliveries – warns him about a corporate experiment aiming to implant Nanomites in people's brains to get them to consume certain products. While Simon dismisses his claims, he gradually notices his own and the neighbours' patterns of addiction that become detrimental to their physical and mental well-being. In the end, Simon is murdered, and we get to know that the killer is Howard, who seems to be on a mission to alleviate the burden of the people who have been turned to consumer addicts.

The film has a deliberate visual style that strengthens the sense of paranoia permeating the story. Running through *Paranoia 1.0* is a constant interplay of shadow and light that underlines its noir influences in terms of form but also content, since it is generally accepted that noir is the genre par excellence dominated by narratives of anxiety and distrust (see Breu and Hatmaker 2020, 14). Stylistically, there are also obvious affinities with key precursors such as *Barton Fink* (1991) and *Matrix* (1999) and thematically with *The Stuff* (1985), a cult horror film about shopper addiction to a substance that literally consumes people's bodies and brains; moreover, *Paranoia 1.0* draws on the Kafkaesque trope of the unexplained intrusion of strangers that violate individual privacy. The key difference is that unlike Kafka, the intruders remain invisible throughout the narrative, since they are not individuals, but tracking devices that infect computers with a virus, which subsequently contaminates people and turns them into consumer addicts. Thus, the film offers an anticipatory reflection – it was made in 2004 and thus prior to the increased mediation of social life by electronic platforms – on how labor and social life are electronically mediated leading to violations of privacy in the name of consumer-oriented objectives.

The noir references and motifs become more evident if we consider how the theme of homelessness pervades the film's narrative although the story is predominantly set in domestic places, that is, Simon's and his neighbours' apartments. Vivian Sobchack has famously argued that a standard theme in the noir repertoire is the sense of homelessness and mourning for the loss of intimacy and security offered by domestic spaces. Sobchack suggests that film noir's emphasis on transit places associated with the

experience of modernity such as bars, motels, diners, and night clubs is symptomatic of the collective sense of disintegrated domesticity following the end of WWII and the social changes that accompanied it (see 1998, 146). But whereas postwar noir focused on public spaces evoking alienation, *Paranoia 1.0* portrays the sense of homelessness and alienation by focusing on domestic spaces, which simultaneously function as places where production and consumption coexist.[2] What is absent in these domestic spaces is the sense of individuality something that is to be attributed to the invasion of the character's privacy by impersonal forces that monitor his behavior toward market ends to the detriment of his individuality and eventually his mental health.

Certainly, these themes are dealt with through a narrative of conspiracy, which, however, invites us to consider contemporary parasitic practices of behavioral modification as a marketing strategy. Fredric Jameson has famously suggested that conspiracy narratives are the layperson's attempts to understand the complexity of late capitalism; it is indicative of the inability to provide an explanatory model for processes of production that remain opaque due to the shift from industrial to finance capitalism. As he says, 'it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content' (1988, 356). The abstractions of capital and the shift from civil society to individualism withhold any sense of orientation and conspiracy narratives are desperate attempts to make sense of a reality that seems obscure and impenetrable. Yet despite the facile conspiratorial tropes, the narrative raises pressing questions about how electronic mediated lives become raw material for data extraction.

From its opening, the film tackles the issue of electronic mediation since we see a video call from Simon's boss, Richard, (Hiep Pham) asking him desperately to return a code he is meant to produce. This videocall is repeated throughout the film and at some point, Simon is informed that he is fired due to his inability to deliver the code on time. These videos suggest that the corporation for which Simon works is also involved in some problematic business, a point implicitly voiced by his boss, who admits unawareness regarding the aim of the project: 'we are only working on a specific part. We do not know the big picture'. The nature of Simon's work and the fact that he works from home for a company that could be located anywhere[3]—Richard's Asian accent points to the international division of labor—is an index of the rise of what Wark calls 'the hacker class', which is tasked with the ceaseless production of 'information' and 'intellectual property' for a 'vectoralist class' 'owing the infrastructure on which information is routed, whether through time or space' (2019, npg). The hacker class experiences its own alienation from work, precisely because of its inability to control the ends toward which its labor is directed.

This alienation is exemplified powerfully in the film by the fact that despite Simon's skillfulness in computer technologies, he is unable to understand the objectives of his work, while he is not immune to techniques of surveillance capitalism either. The thin boundaries between public and private life are highlighted by the conditions of his labor, since he does everything from home; the flickering computer visuals that appear regularly on screen and Richard's recurring video-calls evoke the perennial question raised by surveillance films, that is, who is looking and who is being looked at? Importantly, computer forms of mediation of social life are also typified in the neighbor's porn game, where the borders between the physical and the virtual world are complicated making one experience pleasure by gazing at the actions of their verisimilar avatars. Simon also takes part in this game after finding out that it provides a form of release for other residents in the building. The film suggests that this ceaseless mediation of life through electronic media produces isolation and makes one much more vulnerable to practices of information extraction that objectify individuals to data sources that can be monetized.

Indeed, Marteinn Thorsson, one of the two directors of *Paranoia 1.0*., has acknowledged that the film is about 'loneliness and corporate control' (Unknown 2015, npg). Loneliness and consumer behaviorism are pictured as coextensive. We get to see Simon frequently visiting a white convenience store whose color alludes to the impersonal atmosphere of corporate environments. His consumption of milk increases as he returns to the store and so do the prices, implying that the tracking of his habits affects the value of the product. When at one point he complaints to the cashier about the cost of milk the later one retorts that he does not control the prices. Things turn more complicated when Nile comments on Simon's milk consumption noting that he used to avoid it due to an allergy.

A significant leitmotif of the film concerns how isolation and the absence of civil society can render individuals into reproducers of an alienated reality. This is literally illustrated in some sequences when the characters' speech is interrupted, and they start voicing advertising messages as if their bodies have been colonized by an invasive other. The first instance of this invasion is pictured in the seedy neighbor's apartment when Simon acquiesces to take part in his virtual reality sex game. Simon asks for a beer and as the neighbor heads to the fridge, his corporal posture changes as well as the texture of his voice as he declares: 'I drink Cola 500'. He then brings the same beverage for both of them as if he had totally ignored Simon's request. After the latter finishes playing the virtual reality game, the neighbor is inexplicably pictured bloody and moribund on the floor ventriloquizing time and again the words, 'Cola 500'. In another striking sequence, his landlord, who spends his nights observing the residents through the

building's CCTV cameras, calls Simon to express his distress about his physical and mental health. As he voices his complaints, his head starts moving frenziedly and parrots the words: 'farm cut meat, farm cut meat'. Earlier, it has been suggested that he is addicted to this product; as he pronounces these advertising slogans, he asks for help explaining to Simon that he has no control over his body and brain. The same fate is in store for Simon; toward the end of the film, he calls Trish in distress worried about the deterioration of his health and throughout their conversation his body convulses, and he intermittently pronounces the words 'nature fresh milk'. The characters find themselves turning into puppets of capitalist value and this facet of the film addresses questions of agency in the period of surveillance capitalism. The film's representational solution to the complexity of surveillance capitalism draws on the Marxist understanding of capital as vampiric dead labor that feeds on the workers bodies and brains during their labor time; but here the dead labor of capital is pictured consuming individuals even during their leisure time and this coincides with Zuboff's argument that 'instead of labor, surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of every human's experience' (2019, npg.).

The colonization of bodies and brains by capitalist imperatives are not to be attributed to Orwellian Big Brothers but to algorithmic gazes that monitor behavioral patterns and manipulate consumer habits as implied in the film's storyline, in which a computer virus has been transmitted to human bodies. Ironically Simon, despite being an IT expert, still tries to locate the threat of surveillance in the empty boxes he receives, rather than on online techniques of monitoring. Howard warns him in a conspiratorial manner: 'that's how they get inside your head with their tools. They would offer you that target audience, mass production, cheap labor, uniform quality, easy access, growth. That's growth forever'. This emphasis on machinic agency instantiates the shift in production processes and the global acceleration of market activity through digital technology. Thus, the key challenge is not just that individuals lack agency, but also that capitalist interests are being promoted through machinic/impersonal forms of control that can easily access facets of people's private lives to influence their consumer patterns. Silverman refers to the widely used term '"context collapse"' to comment on the permeability of 'our once-discrete social contexts' (2017, 150) that runs the risk of making subjects compliant to market interests. The film perfectly captures this penetrability of private lives by the market through generic sci-fi and thriller conventions that highlight how individual lives become transparent while the market operates under a culture of secrecy.

Yet, this 'context collapse' elaborated in the narrative is fundamentally tied with an atomized society stripped of collective ties and purposes. In a

1992 essay dedicated to the study of conspiracy thrillers, Jameson suggested that anxieties regarding the withering of privacy in late modernity are manifestations of 'the end of civil society itself (1992, 11), the rise of individualism and unrestrained corporate power. Individuals live and work in proximity with each other, but they experience a sense of disorientation, which is the outcome of the corporatization of everyday life that makes it difficult to differentiate the boundaries between market-driven and non-market-driven experience. Jameson's points anticipate Shoshana Zuboff's idea that we live in the 'third modernity'. The first modernity of the Fordist mass industrial production enabled many individuals to unshackle themselves from the social control of older institutions associated with the feudal world. For Zuboff, the first modernity, although it did not completely dispense with many feudalist institutions and divisions, remains notable as a historical time when many individuals managed to break away from past traditions and achieve a sense of individuality. Then again, the first modernity was still a period of strong collective institutions, mass production processes and mass consumption. Things become more complicated during the second modernity that starts roughly in the mid twentieth century when more individuals gained access to education, health care and international travel. Within that period, values of individual self-betterment started gaining traction and the individual became the basis of social responsibility and identity something that was much more magnified after the collapse of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism. Zuboff explains that 'by the second modernity, the self is all we have' (2019, npg) and this change has led to many crises of identity as well as psychological instability, since individuals are encouraged to be the authors of their own lives. It is this crisis of identity produced by the second modernity that coincides with the rise of the internet and electronically mediated social experience. Zuboff calls this the third modernity, which has replaced mass consumption with 'a new society of individuals and their demand for individualized consumption' (2019). Obviously, mass production and consumption still take place, but tracking of individual behavior can predict consumer behavior and focus not just on satisfying demand but on creating demand (for mass produced products), which is tailored to the traces left by the online presence of the individual. The market penetrates one's privacy aggressively making it look as if certain mass-produced products are designed for this targeted individual.

Paradoxically, it is in the pursuit of individualization in a world bereft of a sense of community, that people end up having their private information extracted, tracked, and processed by firms, which eventually enforce standards of social behavior, something that compromises democracy and individual autonomy. *Paranoia 1.0* speaks eloquently to these issues and is

premonitory to the current expansion of digital marketing and people's willing subjection to the algorithmic gazes of social media and other internet platforms in exchange for social participation and comfort. Its dystopian narrative infused with conspiratorial undertones is indicative of the epistemic challenges of portraying late capitalist surveillance for the purposes of behavior modification.[4]

The film's conspiratorial connotations do not weaken its political critique. Stef Aupers has cogently argued that conspiracy narratives should not be seen as symptoms of an anti-modern mindset but as part and parcel of the culture of modernity. Not only do conspiracy narratives thrive because of historical events such as the Watergate or the WikiLeaks files that cemented a mistrust toward modern institutions, but they are also the product of the logic of modernity that cultivates epistemological doubt. Skepticism was a fundamental aspect of modern thought (including science) that responded to anxieties of existential uncertainty that permeated modern societies (see 2012, 30). Conspiracy theories for Aupers do nothing but perpetuate the modern culture of skepticism and mistrust toward the established doxas. In these terms, it is wrong to juxtapose the logic of 'scientific rationality' against anti-modern conspiracy narratives, given that science itself is not a unified project, but one that produces novel results through epistemological skepticism and critique of preceding practices. In his words, the culture of conspiracy 'is a radical and generalized manifestation of distrust that is deeply embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and is, ultimately, produced by ongoing processes of modernization in contemporary society' (2012, 23). In this context, narratives of conspiracy are symptomatic of political but also existential uncertainties. For Aupers, therefore, the roots of conspiracy theories are the 'cultural discontents' of modernity that make individuals comprehend their limited agency in modern societies (2012, 25); this realization cultivates a wide mistrust toward social institutions and a pervasive sense of social opacity that renders social reality even more complex and ungraspable. It is within this ethos that we can see how a sci-fi, dystopian film made in 2004 bespeaks something about the contemporary normalization of surveillance capitalism while at the same time poses the esthetic problem of how to represent abstract processes that cannot be understood through the lens of individual agency.[5]

Labor in Surveillance Capitalism: *The Circle* (2017)

While *Paranoia 1.0* makes use of dystopian generic tropes to dramatize contemporary anxieties regarding the invisibility of processes that allow the penetrability of private lives by capital, James Ponsoldt's *The Circle* is a

techno-thriller that relies on a canonical narrative structure to capture the complexities of labor in the age of surveillance capitalism. Based on Dave Eggers' homonymous novel, it tells the story of Mae Holland (Emma Watson) a young woman working precariously for a call center. Thanks to her friend Annie (Karen Gillan), she manages to get a job at the Circle, a world-leading tech-company modeled on Facebook and Google. The firm is staffed with young, talented, educated and tech-savvy people hoping for a career break by constantly pitching new ideas to the management, which is committed to constant innovation and expansion. Led by Eamon Bailey (Tom Hanks), a new age styled CEO who preaches clichés about modernization and online connectivity, and Tom Stenton (Patton Oswalt), the Circle aspires to exceed its function as a social networking service, and become a necessary part of everyday life that can integrate people's activities – banking, shopping, health checkups, and voting – to their Circle account. The firm's new big project is a miniscule camera tritely named SeeChange, which is constantly turned on and can disseminate and transmit data in real time. This project is promoted on the basis of transparency, social security and accountability. The film adaptation is for the most part faithful to Eggers' novel, although the former has a bleaker tone since it shows Mae fully embracing the project of the Circle and even betraying one of the company's founders, with whom she shares a romantic relationship; the latter disagrees with the Circle's desire to establish worldwide surveillance and this brings him into conflict with the other CEOs, and with Mae, who uncritically embraces the company's messianic pretensions.

Initially frustrated from the pressures of her new role that expects her to be constantly alert and maintain a service score of at least 90%, Mae has an accident while kayaking and is saved by the coastal guard thanks to the SeeChange cameras operating on the beach. From then on, she decides to be the first 'Circler' to go 'fully transparent'; this requires her life to be constantly online and observed by all the global Circle users. Her initiative allows her to be promoted in the company's pecking order and this emboldens her to pitch new ideas such as linking one's voting with their Circle account so as to ensure higher percentages of voter participation. Mae's transparency harms her relationships with her parents, whose sexual activities are one day accidentally transmitted in real time to all Circle users, and her friend Mercer (Ellar Coltrane). After the latter dies, following a trial of a new programme she developed that can track and trace individuals across the globe within minutes, she takes leave from the company only to return and suggest that the higher management's accounts need to be open to the public so as to guarantee transparency. The public responds enthusiastically but the management seems to be dismayed. The film ends with a scene

capturing Mae kayaking and monitored by drones. In the last visual, Mae's experience is placed alongside a series of other rows transmitted in real time and resembling a streaming platform app menu.

The film was panned by critics and to an extent rightly so because it relies on many clichés that prevent it from engaging more subtly with such a historically pertinent theme. Then again, I want to highlight its importance not because of its esthetic value, but the significant questions it addresses regarding the labor reality within surveillance capitalism. It is important to start by taking note of the fact that Mae is a precarious worker aspiring for a career break. In getting a job at the Circle, she is given the opportunity to be part of the hacker class hoping to join the forces of the alleged creative laborers. Then again, the film aptly captures the impasses and the continuing uncertainty and precarity experienced by the hacker class, which is not only expected to produce new information and intellectual property, but whose private lives are supposed to be an endless source of information extraction even outside work hours.

Let us start with issues of working precarity. When Mae joins the Circle, she quickly realizes that her duties involve mundane administrative tasks that do not differ much from her previous temp labor. Her working uncertainty is heightened by the fact that after every engagement with a customer, she is expected to send them a survey grading her performance. Faced by seven screens as she performs her duties, Mae's scores are in the range of 80% something that is received with encouraging remarks but also hesitation by her colleagues, who constantly remind her of the need to improve her ratings. Surveillance here is not just embodied in the forms of ceaseless performance monitoring by customers, colleagues, and managers but also in the hardware infrastructure that stares back at her during her workday. The recurrent question addressed by scholars in cinema and surveillance 'who is doing the looking' gains a renewed currency here. Watching Mae being gazed by seven screens and having her performance constantly monitored, one is asked to consider questions of agency about the producers of information, that is, the hacker class. Faced with an infrastructure that precedes them, the hacker class has only limited agency in the workplace environment, which is compromised by the severe automated tracking of their activities by the very devices which are meant to facilitate their labor. Scholars have discussed how computers can intensify work and turn to "extremely merciless monitoring tools" (Peaucelle qtd in Moore, Upchurch, Whittaker 2018, 2), which do not just function as indicators of productivity but also condition workers' psychic and emotional reality. In other words, the hacker class experiences a different form of working precarity compared to the manual laborers but is equally subject to demeaning practices of surveillance. As Wark notes, 'The hacker class was supposed to be a privileged one, shielded from proletarianization by

its creativity and technical skill. But it too can be made casual and precarious' (2019, npg.).

One of the key sources of the hacker class's precarity lies in the complication of the boundaries between work and non-work time that leads to a loss of autonomy and personal space. This is appositely captured in the film when Mae realizes that her participation in the company's social networks outside her work is not voluntary but an essential aspect of her employment. In a sequence remarkable in this respect, Mae is visited by two colleagues Gina (Smith Cho) and Matt (Amir Talai), who assist her in setting up her social media accounts. They both seem puzzled by the fact that Mae has not been active online. When she retorts that she has not had time for 'extracurricular activities' they reply that her online presence and contribution are 'integral to your participation here'. Mae is also chastised for not having informed anyone on her weekend activities. After explaining that she had some family issues with respect to her father's health, she is asked by Gina whether this had to do with his multiple sclerosis condition. Astonished, Mae gets to realize that details of her private life are available to the company. Additionally, after mentioning that she had some time for kayaking during the weekend, she is affably reprimanded because this was not mentioned in her social media. While the Circle promotes this erosion of privacy on the basis of community building, one cannot fail but notice the transformation of the workforce into a constant source not just of labor but also information extraction. This information turns into a new form of surplus-value produced by workers in their free time; in effect, private lives are expropriated to produce profit, a new form of unpaid labor.

In keeping with novel practices of data extraction, this reality of compulsory-extroversion is promoted trough strategies of seduction that valorize sociability; as Gina points to Mae, 'communication is not extracurricular'. Furthermore, knowing more about an employee can allow the firm to step in and help with any personal issues she encounters. For instance, the Circle offers Mae's father a good insurance plan that can cover expenses for his multiple sclerosis, while it provides opportunities for social interaction after work in the Circle campus. These social events are not compulsory but at the same time everybody notices the absentees. Meanwhile, Circle employees are burdened with high workloads that produce mental and physical exertion. Mae's close friend Annie is a good case in point pictured as someone working on Friday nights to satisfy company expectations, or traveling from Amsterdam to London, New York and then back to the Circle within a three days' timeframe.

The uncertainty of the work, which expects from the employees to constantly come with new ideas, conditions their behavior and makes them accept the most cliched technorationalist banalities according to which

technology can identify solutions to social problems. Indicative in this respect, is Mae's encounter with a woman who enthusiastically explains how the firm has produced a microchip that can be implanted into sexual predators' bones and track their movements to protect vulnerable kids. When Mae reacts with skepticism, her colleague responds that the product is 'reducing kidnapping, rape, and murder by 99 percent'. Indeed, one of the central themes of the film is how surveillance capitalism cannot just produce consumer behaviorism, but also condition one's thinking to such an extent so as to produce an apolitical consensus according to which business innovation translates unproblematically to social gain. The film shows, for example, how notions of security, connectivity, and transparency used by the CEOs for the expansion of their business activities turn into empty shells devoid of any socio-political context.

At some point, for example, we see the Circle's CEO, Eamon, preaching to the compliant workers that: 'Knowing is good but knowing everything is better'. This passage from the film is rife with visual ironies since we see Eamon introducing the new micro-camera whose size and shape resembles a human eye, while in the background we get to see real-time videos being streamed from different parts of the world to show how the new technological tool SeeChange can observe anyone and everywhere in the planet. As Eamon offers his techno-messianic rhetoric, the alternating images in the background produced by the Circle's novel technological tools obliquely condemn his seemingly pseudo-utopian vision and alert the viewer to the contradiction that a private company can have such an asymmetrical access to information across the globe. The enthusiastic response to Eamon's comments from the company's workers, and the excess of streamed information in the background heighten the ironical tones of the sequence, which acts as a critique of the apolitical view of technology as a messianic solution to social problems. This mindset evokes Evgeny Morozov's critique of 'technoescapism', a neologism he introduces to describe corporate tendencies 'to ditch politics altogether and hope that technology—especially "the Internet"—can rid us of problems that politics [supposedly] can no longer solve or, in a milder version, that we can replace politicians and politics with technocrats and administration (2013, 128–9).

How does this affect labor? Is there any room for genuine 'creativity' in the workspace environment where the producers of information work within predetermined structures upon which they have no influence? If politics no longer counts as the Silicon Valley preachers argue, who does the thinking for whom and to what ends? Mae, for instance, befriends Ty (John Boyega) the architect of the Circle platform TruYou, a product he designed supposedly to connect individuals only to be used by the firm for the storying, studying, and commercializing of human data. The hacker class' misfortune

as aptly shown in the film is that while they were promised work with which they could express their creativity and imagination, they end up realizing that they have very little control when it comes to the ends that the fruits of their labor are used. This is reinforced by the ideology of constant connectivity that leaves little room for pluralism and ideas that could potentially exceed the technorationalist clichés and empty mantras voiced by the representatives of the vectoralist class. In other words, the film demonstrates how surveillance capitalism does not simply produce consumer standardization, but standardized thinking too, something that recalls Silverman's point regarding 'the death of the personal' mentioned in passing in the first section of this essay. As Silverman explains, uniformity becomes a façade that shields individuals from unpopularity: 'homogenization of style is an act of public relations. It shows that one fits in, isn't too distinctive, is abreast of the viral zeitgeist. It is also, potentially, the death of the personal' (2017, 151). Autonomy of thinking and expression are lost, because online audiences are vast and subject individuals to more scrutiny leaving little spaces for genuinely original ideas.

It is within this framework that the hacker class is expected to operate professionally, since standardization of thinking is the only route to professional success. This may explain the sudden shift in Mae's behavior; her initial skepticism toward the normalization of the culture of surveillance is followed by an unequivocal embracement of it. Indeed, most of the reviews of the film are critical of this sudden change in Mae's conduct, which they find unconvincing (see Callahan 2017, npg; Kohn 2017, npg). I wish to pinpoint, however, how Mae's change can be seen as a career move, since by the time she goes 'fully transparent', she does not just become a social media sensation across the world, but gains respect on the part of the management and her colleagues. Running throughout the film's storyline is the idea that the hacker class is not expected to innovate, as we are ad nauseam told, but instead to integrate in order to escape working precarity. By having her life live-streamed 24/7 to Circle users across the world, she becomes an emblem for the standardization of surveillance in contemporary societies, which Zygmunt Bauman sardonically describes as 'voluntary servitude' (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 122). Not only does her body turn into a constant source of information extraction, but it enables the extraction of data from all the global users following and commenting on her everyday activities. These data and information do not become public property, since they belong to the Circle and are, therefore, privatized. Eventually, Mae becomes an advocate of the most reactionary ideas such as requiring from every voting citizen to have a Circle account, something pitched on the grounds of achieving 100% participation in the elections. This technorationalist rhetoric is a symptom of the desire to normalize the market's invasion of privacy. Once again, 'innovative ideas' are simply ways of

enlarging the already existing operational infrastructure and not outcomes of independent thinking, something that raises questions of how the hacker class is subject to behaviorist conditioning.

Another instance of this, is Mae's introduction of the 'SoulSearch' app, which can locate people without a social media account, or missing individuals across the world within twenty minutes. Mae derides non-Circle users as people unwilling to 'be woven into the fabric of society' and as a threat to social order; her remarks recall Eugène Enriquez's argument that within surveillance capitalism 'those who care about their invisibility are bound to be rejected, pushed aside, or suspected of a crime' (qtd in Bauman and Lyon 2013, 31). Mae gets to experience the dark side of constant surveillance when the public asks her to locate through SoulSearch her friend Mercer, who happens to be a social media skeptic. As the latter drives fast to protect his privacy and escape the drones and the drivers recording his whereabouts, he ends up having a fatal car accident.

The irony, however, is that even after this experience, Mae and Ty, who are resentful toward the Circle management, lack the political imagination to envisage something outside the further expansion of surveillance practices in the name of 'transparency'. In their attempt to punish the pioneers of the Circle, they argue for increasing surveillance so as to get access to all the company documents, the email accounts, and the phone conversations of the management.[6] One could interject that Mae's and Ty's solution is a paradigm of 'sousveillance', a neologism introduced by Steve Mann and Joseph Ferenbok to describe the capacity of modern individuals to return the gaze to the surveillance practices of institutions thanks to the rise of the new media. Mann and Ferenbok suggest that individuals have currently more power because they can use the new media to expose problematic established practices of surveillance as well as institutional practices, such as police violence. As they say,

> New media has enabled a secondary gaze that moves along the power and veillance axis in different directions than surveillance practices. Sousveillance acts as a balancing force in a mediated society. Sousveillance does not exactly or necessarily counteract surveillance, but co-exists with surveillance within a social system that then provides a kind of feedback loop for different forms of looking—potentially creating a balancing force for 'veillance' (2013, 26).

Despite Mann and Ferenbok's techno-optimism, which becomes even more problematic if we ask whether every individual in each part of the world has equal opportunities to return the gaze to the watchers, they forewarn their readers that the new opportunities offered by sousveillance do not warrant that societies will become more equal and transparent (2013, 31). May's and Ty's solution might be within the spirit of sousveillance, but their intervention does not offer a critique of institutional/corporate practices but a mere extension of the apparatus of surveillance to the company's

CEOs. In many respects, this tactic is indicative of a naïve liberal idea that prioritizes individual agency instead of structural and institutional factors. There is, therefore, a certain irony inscribed in the film's narrative denouement, which appositely demonstrates the limits of the hacker class' political outlook and its inability to think beyond the technorationalist ideology of 'solutionism', aptly described by Morozov as a certain tendency to understand social issues as 'problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized—if only the right algorithms are in place!' (2013, 5).

Mae is an anti-hero, because the principle of the dramatic hero requires a certain degree of agency, whereas she and the hacker class as pictured in the film have relinquished their capacity to think outside a technorationalist framework that has been devised by the vectoralist class, which they desire to expose. This anti-heroic facet of the narrative is reinforced in the last visual, when Mae's broadcasted experience of kayaking is placed alongside other rows of streaming media apps, highlighting the normalization of surveillance, and recalling familiar platforms of data capture, including Netflix, which was apparently a co-producer of the film. The film's optimistic tenor is countered by this last ironic visual, which does not differ much from Mae's resigned cynicism in the finale of Eggers' source- text, where she justifies her decision to stay committed to the Circle project. As the source-text reads:

> Mae had not reached her parents in a few months now, but it would be only a matter of time. They would find each other, soon enough, in a world where everyone could know each other truly and wholly, without secrets, without shame and without the need for permission to see or to know, without the selfish hoarding of life—any corner of it, any moment of it. All of that would be, so soon, replaced by a new and glorious openness, a world of perpetual light. Completion was imminent, and it would bring peace, and it would bring unity, and all that messiness of humanity until now, all those uncertainties that accompanied the world before the Circle, would be only a memory (2013, npg).

This passage from Eggers' source-text is critical of the technorationalist clichés and pseudo-messianism of contemporary social media companies and points to people's tendency to rationalize surveillance practices. Similarly, the film's refusal to provide narrative closure is not an approval of the character's 'solution', but an ironic commentary on how surveillance capitalism has restricted our capacity to envisage alternatives, or as Zuboff puts it 'our right to the future tense, which accounts for the individual's ability to imagine, intend, promise, and construct a future' (2019, npg).

Epilogue

In her influential study of surveillance cinema, Catherine Zimmer convincingly suggests that the confluence of technological and ideological

principles in cinema and surveillance can enable us to understand the medium as a product of modernity committed to the visualization of a world and a '"global" culture defined by mediation and surveillance' (2015, 6). Pushing her arguments further, we can possibly think about how many novel monitoring practices can be understood in the context of the 'cinematization' of everyday life. *The Circle,* for instance, highlights the cinematization of life through social media as it registers Mae's 24/7 broadcasting of her private life accompanied by message bubbles from her global followers, which are visualized on screen. Cinema here needs to be understood as cultural and social phenomenon, which is ubiquitous in numerous media practices, technologies and social usages. According to Thomas Elsaesser, 'cinema has become invisible as a medium because it has become so ubiquitous, meaning that its specific imaginary (its way of 'framing' the world and us within it and also separate from it) has become the default value of what is real—to us' (2016, 19). We experience the ubiquity of cinema in the new technologies of mediation and surveillance that rely on cinematic forms of visualizing and perceiving the world; there is also another cinematic dimension in the new media of monitoring and tracking behavior, in the sense that they recall science fiction narratives making it perhaps difficult to determine the real impact of surveillance on our lives. In this respect, *Paranoia 1.0*'s conspiratorial narrative of market surveillance and behaviorism points to a historical juncture, where the reality of our increasingly recorded and tracked lives resembles overused narrative tropes of genre movies, and this confluence between cinema and life might act as an impediment to realizing the gravity of surveillance capitalism, whose capacity not just to monitor people's behavior, but also to shape it toward future market ends and challenge their capacity for individual agency can sound like a canonical conspiratorial Hollywood script. Both films I discussed in this essay make use of such a conspiratorial tone that can be attributed to a broader culture of paranoia and distrust produced by the proliferating strategies of monitoring, tracking, and affecting behavior. It remains to be seen, how the medium will keep on responding to the epistemic challenge of visualizing capitalist surveillance on screen.

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Notes

1. Dietmar Kammerer has also briefly mentioned how surveillance today is mostly voluntary without discussing, however, how cinema deals with this novel experience. As he says, 'On the other hand, as has often been noted, surveillance today comes not

in the shape of a centralized and threatening state, but as manifold "Little Brothers" who do not affect us so much as citizens, but as consumers. Private commercial companies hold potentially more information on their customers than any state institution. The data is often given voluntarily' (2012, 101).

2. In a way, this reworking of the noir motif of homelessness indicates the shift from modern forms to late forms of production and labor.
3. It is important to note here that the film was shot in Bucharest although the narrative alludes to a story set in the global north. At the same time, there are some specific outdoor shots of Bucharest that problematize topographical orientation; furthermore, the antiquated building, where the character resides, is in contradiction with the hi-tech technology visualized on screen blurring the boundaries between development and underdevelopment and pointing to the precarity of the hacker class. This facet of *Paranoia 1.0* evokes Orson Welles' adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* (1962), which was photographed in various parts of Europe including Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Paris, Rome, Milan and this lack of geographical specificity pictured in the narrative strengthens Welles' modernized take on Kafka's text.
4. Pertinent in this respect is Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's point that dystopian narratives, like their utopian counterparts, attempt to envisage and understand the world 'beyond the present' (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 96).
5. As the film's assistant director commented, *Paranoia 1.0* is about 'the future biology of advertising. It is like subliminal seduction redefined' (Qtd in Totaro 2004, npg).
6. Here the film also points to the embracement of surveillance by many US liberals on the grounds of transparency. As Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson observe, 'Although it often appears that liberals oppose surveillance while conservatives are more predisposed to embrace it, the political demarcation is not that straightforward. Liberals occasionally champion greater surveillance, as is apparent in the demands for greater transparency of major social institutions such as the police, the media, the military, and corporations' (2007, 8).

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