TRANSHUMANISM IN DAVE EGGERS' *THE CIRCLE*: UTOPIA VS. DYSTOPIA, DREAM VS. NIGHTMARE[1]

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ABSTRACT
Although transhumanism counts with the support of a growing number of followers, some critics and writers of fiction have recently warned about the detrimental effects that some particular technologies may have on human beings. Dave Eggers' 2013 *The Circle* is a novel that overtly deals with the possible dangers of transhumanism. Set in the near future, the novel places particular emphasis on social media tools and surveillance devices. This paper aims to explore some textual strategies the novel uses to set the debate over human enhancement technologies. More specifically, it argues that, by using a series of narrative strategies which ultimately make readers realize the dehumanization that social media tools and surveillance devices bring about, Eggers stresses the need to adopt a critical stance towards these technologies, avoiding the temptation of being carried away by their appealing promises.

RESUMEN
Si bien el movimiento transhumanista cuenta con el apoyo de un
número creciente de adeptos, algunos críticos y escritores de ficción
nos han advertido recientemente de los efectos negativos que ciertas
tecnologías pueden tener sobre los seres humanos. *El círculo* (2013),
de Dave Eggers, es una novela que aborda los posibles peligros del
transhumanismo. Ambientada en un futuro cercano, esta novela
pone especial énfasis en las redes sociales y los dispositivos de
vigilancia. El presente artículo ofrece un análisis de las estrategias
textuales utilizadas en la novela para establecer un debate en torno
a las tecnologías de mejora humana. Más concretamente, este
trabajo sostiene que, mediante el uso de una serie de estrategias
narrativas que nos advierten, en última instancia, de la
deshumanización que las redes sociales y los dispositivos de
vigilancia conllevan, Eggers nos muestra la necesidad de adoptar
una posición crítica con respecto a estas tecnologías.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his 2016 work *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, the
economist and founder of the World Economic Forum Klaus Schwab
points out that human beings are now witnessing the beginning of a
technological revolution which is fundamentally altering the way we
live, work, and relate to one another (7). According to Schwab, this
"fourth industrial revolution" began at the turn of the 20th century
and builds on the third industrial revolution (or digital revolution)
(12). What makes it stand out from previous revolutions is that it is
characterized by a fusion of technologies which interact across the
physical, digital, and biological domains (12). One of the major
promises of this revolution is the possibility of enhancing human
capabilities (both intellectual and physiological) by means of
technology. This cultural and intellectual movement aimed at
extending human capabilities is known as transhumanism and
among its chief proponents we find Julian Huxley, Max More,
Natasha Vita-More and Nick Bostrom. In his article "Transhumanist
Values," Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom—founder in 1998,
together with David Pearce, of the World Transhumanist
Association—defines transhumanism as a movement that "promotes
an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the
opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human

organism opened up by the advancement of technology" (3). Bostrom further explains that transhumanists pay attention to both already existing technologies (such as information technology and genetic engineering) and technologies which will dramatically expand in the near future (such as molecular nanotechnology and artificial intelligence) (3). According to him, the enhancement possibilities being discussed in transhumanist circles "include radical extension of human health-span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities" (3).

Although transhumanism counts with the support of a growing number of researchers and critics, its main tenets are still highly controversial. In fact, some critics and thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama or Leon R. Kass have warned about the detrimental effects that transhumanist technologies may have on human beings. Some writers of fiction (such as Margaret Atwood, Greg Egan, Dave Eggers or Don DeLillo, to name but a few) have also engaged with this issue in their works. Dave Eggers' 2013 *The Circle* is a novel that overtly deals with the possible dangers of transhumanism. Set in the near future, it tells the story of Mae Holland, a woman in her mid-twenties who starts working for the Circle, a US-based technology company which had "subsumed Facebook, Twitter, [and] Google" by devising a "Unified Operating System" which combined Internet search and social media capabilities (*The Circle* 21-23). Apart from trying to control all the searches and message exchanges in the country, the company aims at developing new technologies to increase human capacities and improve society and shows, thus, a clearly transhumanist ethos. Readers follow Mae as she makes her way up to the top of the company, becoming aware of the possibilities offered by the cutting-edge services and technologies developed by the Circle but also witnessing the protagonist's personal degradation and the Circle's progressive movement towards totalitarianism. Placing particular emphasis on the Circle's social media tools and surveillance devices—which as explained later, appear as a slightly updated version of the ones already present in contemporary society—and paying attention to some of the formal devices used by Eggers in *The Circle*, this essay aims to explore how the novel contributes to the debate over human enhancement technologies. More specifically, I argue that free indirect discourse is first used in the novel to make readers identify with the techno-optimistic protagonist and recognize

the possibilities offered by the Circle's transhumanist approach. Then, this essay argues that free indirect discourse is later used in the novel as a way of making readers distance themselves from the protagonist and the Circle's utopian ideology and that other narrative strategies are introduced in the novel to create dramatic irony and place readers in a critical position towards these technologies. By means of introducing the voices of other characters, as well as through the use of an ironic heterodiegetic narrator, and some mottos and symbols, the novel ultimately denounces the dehumanization these technologies bring with them and makes readers realize how easily a transhumanist utopia may turn into a dystopia.

2. *THE CIRCLE*, TRANSHUMANISM AND ITS TECHNOLOGIES

According to Max More—one of the best-known philosophers of transhumanism and the formalizer of the transhumanist doctrine in the 1980s (Tirosh-Samuelson 23)—transhumanist philosophy does not inherently endorse any specific technologies (4). However, More does acknowledge that there are some technologies and areas of present and future technological development which are particularly pertinent to transhumanist goals (4). In particular, he is referring to

> information technology, computer science and engineering, cognitive science and the neurosciences, neural-computer interface research, materials science, artificial intelligence, the array of sciences and technologies involved in regenerative medicine and life extension, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology. (4-5)

Thus, any kind of technology that extends human capabilities and enhances human experience in any way seems to be working at the service of the transhumanist movement. Nonetheless, certain technologies do seem to feature more prominently in transhumanist discourses. This is clearly the case of artificial intelligence, life-extension technologies and, perhaps above all, genetic engineering. By contrast, other technologies, such as social media tools and surveillance devices, my main concern in this paper, have often been overlooked by transhumanist critics, despite the possibilities that they offer for implementing transhumanist aims. These technologies are, in fact, increasingly used by human beings in contemporary

society to overcome some of their limitations, an issue fully addressed in *The Circle*. The novel engages with both present and future opportunities opened up by these technologies, and thus offers a seemingly accurate picture of what our technologies (and, by extension, our society as a whole) could be like just a few years from now.

On the one hand, the social media tools described in the novel seem to be a combination of well-known social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, even if slightly updated. As happens in contemporary society, the characters in the novel have at their disposal some online platforms where they can share their experiences, as well as their thoughts, tastes and preferences. They can also learn about other people's experiences and thoughts, give them "a smile or a frown" (*The Circle* 51), find people with similar interests and become involved in online communities. Besides, thanks to the company's instant messaging services, they are connected to each other at all times. In sum, the social media technologies provided by the Circle allow the characters in the novel to transcend any physical barriers that had previously confined them to a narrower social circle and to lead instead more active social lives—albeit virtually. But the novel goes one step further and suggests that even democracy would benefit from the opportunities offered by these social media tools if they happened to be put to new uses. More specifically, Mae Holland and Eamon Bailey, one of the Circle's chief executives, consider the possibility of forcing citizens to get an online profile to vote in the general elections. Apart from considerably reducing the costs of carrying out an election, this measure would ensure full participation and, therefore, help to build a more democratic society. The notion of creating a more participatory democracy by means of the use of social media tools stands clearly in line with the transhumanist aim of improving mankind and society by means of technology. More specifically, it reflects one of the main tenets of an existing trend within the transhumanist movement known as democratic transhumanism, which places increasing political participation as a main issue in its agenda. Thus, in his work *Citizen Cyborg,* James Hughes makes the following claim: "human enhancement technologies promise to expand our capacity for citizenship, making direct, participatory, electronically mediated democracy more possible" (199).

On the other hand, the novel shows how, by addressing the principles that "all that happens should be known" (*The Circle* 68)

and that "knowledge is a basic human right" (303), small-sized and wireless surveillance cameras are set up all around the globe. These "SeeChange cameras" (67) are an improved version of the actual closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) that, by the turn of the century, had become a symbol of security in the modern urban landscape (Relph 133) and whose presence is unstoppably increasing since then, especially after the dramatic events of 9/11. One of the main objectives behind the setting up of these cameras in the novel— in line with the traditional purpose of surveillance cameras—is to make crime rates drop because, as Eamon Bailey points out, "who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched any time, anywhere?" (*The Circle* 67). However, as well as reducing crime rates, SeeChange cameras are put to some other revolutionary uses in the story. Firstly, they are a way to transcend physical barriers by allowing citizens to benefit from an unlimited access to information. In the novel any kind of information is now within the citizens' reach: "You want to see Fiji but can't get there? SeeChange. You want to check on your kid at school? SeeChange. This is ultimate transparency. No filter. See everything. Always." (69). Secondly, SeeChange cameras are a way of ensuring transparency in important aspects of public life, such as politics. In an "Ideas talk" (205) that he gives at the Circle, Tom Stenton, "the world-striding CEO and self-described *Capitalist Prime*" (23), suggests that wearing these cameras and, thus, going transparent, should be mandatory for all the elected leaders because it is the right of the citizens to know how their representatives spend their days.

Thus, in *The Circle* Eggers presents his readers, first of all, with some of the present and possible future opportunities opened up by the Circle's social media tools and surveillance devices and puts forward the common view that, by extending our limited human capabilities in different ways, these technologies could open up a whole array of possibilities for human beings and improve our way of living. In a similar vein, many contemporary critics have expressed their optimism about transhumanism and claimed that both human beings and society as a whole could greatly benefit from the use of some new technologies. For instance, Nick Bostrom has claimed that "while there are hazards that need to be identified and avoided, human enhancement technologies will offer enormous potential for deeply valuable and humanly beneficial uses" ("In Defense" 56). On his part, Sky Marsen has defined transhumanism as "a general term designating a set of approaches that hold an optimistic view of

technology as having the potential to assist humans in building more equitable and happier societies" (86).

However, other critics—and perhaps more clearly those who focus their attention on the posthuman condition—have warned us of the necessity to see beyond the optimism that usually accompanies technological developments, a path that Eggers also opens in his novel. It is worth paying attention here to some discrepancies existing between optimistic transhumanist critics and some critics of the posthuman condition. As has been explained above, transhumanism is a movement whose main aim is to improve the human condition by means of science and technology. Transhumanism places, therefore, human beings at the center of their ideology and, as such, it is often conceived of as an extension of humanism (Wolfe xv; Bostrom "A History" 2). By contrast, critics of the posthuman call our attention to the fact that, due to all the scientific and technological developments that have recently been introduced in contemporary society, human beings end up being conceived as information-processing machines (Hayles *How We Became* 264; Haraway 165). Furthermore, these critics argue that, as a result of giving information prominence over material instantiation and of considering consciousness as "an epiphenomenon" (Hayles *How We Became* 3) rather than as a unique characteristic of human beings, the traditional humanist notion of the human being has been destabilized. Human beings have lost their privileged position and they can be now "seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (Hayles *How We Became* 3). Thus, Rosi Braidotti—one of these critics of the posthuman—has claimed that "the pride in technological achievements and in the wealth that comes with them must not prevent us from seeing the great contradictions and the forms of social and moral inequality engendered by our advanced technologies" (42). At a more concrete level, even Bostrom himself— in spite of firmly believing in the possibility of human beings eventually becoming posthuman by means of a responsible use of science and technology[2]—has warned us of the potential risks that a misuse of the new technologies may entail. According to this

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[2] For Bostrom and other transhumanists, the term "posthuman" refers to the next stage in the evolution process. They believe that one day human beings will become posthuman thanks to the use of science and technology. By contrast, for critics of the posthuman such as Katherine Hayles (notice the use of the past tense in the title of her work *How We Became Posthuman*) or Peter Mahon, human beings are already "posthumans living in a posthuman world" (Mahon 18).

transhumanist philosopher, although "future technological capabilities carry immense potential for beneficial deployments, they also could be misused to cause enormous harm" ("Transhumanist Values" 4). More specifically, Bostrom is referring to the possibility of technology widening social inequalities, preventing human beings from establishing meaningful relationships, affecting ecological diversity and, ultimately, propitiating the extinction of intelligent life (4). Furthermore, in the introduction to his article "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity"—a clear defense of transhumanism—Bostrom points to the existence of a group of "bioconservative writers" who warn us about the dehumanizing effects of human enhancement technologies. Among these bioconservative writers we can find Leon Kass, Francis Fukuyama, George Annas, Jeremy Rifkin, Wesley Smith, and Bill McKibben. What links these writers together is the fear that "these technologies might undermine our human dignity or inadvertently erode something that is deeply valuable about being human, but that is difficult to put into words or to factor into a cost-benefit analysis" ("In Defense" 56). Although in the remainder of the article Bostrom sets out to prove that the fears of these bioconservative writers are "partly unfounded" (56), his article reflects well the controversy that surrounds the development of human enhancement technologies.

    Both social media tools and surveillance devices have been, in fact, frequently accused of bringing about dehumanizing effects. More specifically, social media tools have been blamed, among other things, for negatively affecting human relationships (see Mahon 11; Turkle 11; Keen 66-7) and for threatening both human freedom, by forcing human beings to go with the flow and share their lives online in order not to feel excluded (see Keen 13), and privacy, by making citizens live under constant surveillance (see Mahon 15). Surveillance devices have, on their part, also been blamed for threatening personal privacy. As David Lyon puts it in his introduction to *Liquid Surveillance:* "loss of privacy might be the first thing that springs to many minds when surveillance is in question" (17). However, Lyon goes one step further and suggests that, because pervasive surveillance in contemporary society creates and strengthens long-term social differences, it should not be considered just a matter of personal privacy anymore but of social justice (*Surveillance as Social* 1), ultimately proving that new surveillance practices pose new threats to human beings which need to be identified and tackled alongside the traditional ones. When reading

The Circle, we realize that Eggers seems to support some of these accusations. The novel is not just the naïve celebration of transhumanist values it might seem to be at first. The negative effects that social networks and surveillance devices may entail at both an individual and a collective level take Eggers to look not only at the positive implications of new technologies but also at their fundamental shortcomings.

3. *THE CIRCLE*: UTOPIA OR DYSTOPIA?

In his contribution to the collection *The Utopian Fantastic*, Dennis M. Weiss suggests—in line with what has been discussed in the first part of this article—that over the last decade and a half human beings "have witnessed a far-reaching, potentially important, but polarizing debate on the role of technology in reshaping and redefining our place in the cosmos" (69). Some critics have held, according to Weiss, rather dystopic visions of this digital turn, denouncing "our growing reliance on technology," showing "concern over our increasing alienation from nature," and prophesizing "the loss of authentic subjectivity and true community" (69). By contrast, other critics have held more utopian positions, embracing technology as a way of building "more democratic, open, networked societies" (70). This debate has, according to Weiss, been recapitulated in contemporary science fiction (70). As a matter of fact, over the last few decades and, as a direct consequence of the rapid technological development, there has been a proliferation of science fiction novels exploring the possible benefits and ills that the new technologies present for human beings. Among these works we find utopian and dystopian novels dealing with human enhancement technologies, such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Greg Egan's *Diaspora*, Zoltan Istvan's *The Transhumanist Wager* or Dave Egger's *The Circle*, as a case in point.

Although utopian and dystopian visions—and, by extension we could say utopian and dystopian novels—are often conceived as antithetical, some theorists have argued for the need to treat them as complementary. M. Keith Booker, for instance, claims that "one might, in fact, see dystopian and utopian visions not as fundamentally opposed but as very much part of the same project" because "not only is one man's utopia another man's dystopia, but utopian visions of an ideal society often inherently suggest a criticism of the current order of things as non-ideal, while dystopian

warnings of the dangers of 'bad' utopias still allow for the possibility of 'good' utopias […]" (15). That utopia and dystopia are two sides of the same coin becomes evident when reading Dave Egger's *The Circle*, a novel which has, since its publication, been described by critics and reviewers as both a dystopian book (Smith) and "a satirical utopia for our times" (Atwood). Egger's book can be considered, in fact, a mixture of the two perspectives, as at the beginning it seems to be a celebration of the values of the company that gives the novel its name but, as the story progresses, Eggers' narrative choices make readers realize that the techno-utopia has become a dystopia.

3.1. *The Circle* as a techno-utopia

The first half of the novel shows, mainly, a markedly utopian character, as in it Eggers makes readers aware of the Circle's privileged position as one of the leading companies in the country and the positive implications of the technology developed by the company. This effect is achieved, mainly, by making use of a particular type of heterodiegetic narration which merges with the status of the internal focalizer and which is often referred to as free indirect discourse or free indirect style. In this narrative mode, as French literary theorist Gérard Genette puts it, "the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then *merged*" (original emphasis 174). When discussing the literary effects achieved by the use of free indirect discourse, literary theorist Brian McHale points out that this narrative mode has come to be widely recognized "both as a mode of ironic distancing from characters and as a mode of empathetic identification with characters" (275).

In *The Circle*, the narrator's voice fuses with Mae Holland's perspective and spatio-temporal position. From the beginning of the novel readers learn how excited the protagonist is to start working for the Circle, which is described from her point of view as "the only company that really mattered at all" (3), as a place where "everything was done better" (42) and, ultimately, as the ideal workplace:

> Mae knew that she never wanted to work—never wanted to be—anywhere else. Her hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world.

> Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But *here*, all had been perfected. The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible *this*, the best place to work. (31, my emphasis).

The previous quotation is a clear example of free indirect discourse, as evidenced by the use of the words "here" and "this" instead of "there" and "that", which has the effect of bringing Mae's perspective closer to the reader. Also, from Mae's point of view, we learn that her Circle's health assurance is going to cover the expenses of her father's multiple sclerosis treatment. Again, thanks to the use of free indirect style we identify with the protagonist, we share her joy and we realize that the Circle might be indeed a reference company in the provision of cutting-edge services:

> "Mae was alone in Annie's office, stunned. Was it possible that her father would soon have real coverage? That the cruel paradox of her parents' lives—that their constant battles with insurance companies actually diminished her father's health and prevented her mother from working, eliminating her ability to earn money to pay for his care—would end?" (161).

All in all, apparently reducing the distance between narrator and character by means of using free indirect discourse—which, thus, frequently produces the effect of making readers identify with the focalizing character—Eggers manages to convey, at first, a positive image of the Circle and paves the way for what is coming next. Because readers are induced to share Mae's deep admiration for the Circle, they are more likely to accept without question all the innovations that are mentioned in the following pages. In fact, by means of delivering a series of very eloquent speeches similar in format to the well-known TED talks, Eamon Bailey, Tom Stenton and Mae herself almost manage to convince everybody that the technologies being developed by the Circle—and especially its cutting-edge social media and surveillance devices—could indeed build a safer, more egalitarian and more democratic society. However, readers may manage to reject the Circle's ideology eventually, mainly for three reasons, which will be explained in more detail in the following section. First, because also through free indirect discourse we may also become aware that, despite her increasing confidence in the Circle, the protagonist also appears at

times hesitant about some of its innovations. Secondly, because the same narrative mode is also used in the novel to make readers adopt ironic distance towards Mae and, consequently, towards the values she endorses. And thirdly, because through the introduction of other narrative strategies such as the use of dramatic irony and of some mottos and symbols, Eggers further incites readers to distance themselves from the Circle and its values.

3.2. *The Circle* as a dystopia

Free indirect discourse is also used in the novel to convey the protagonist's occasional doubts about some of the Circle's innovations. Thus, at some point the Circlers—that is, the people working for the Circle—are asked to answer the following question: "*Is Mae Holland awesome or what?*" (408, original emphasis). While 97 percent of them send Mae a smile, the other three percent frown at her. Mae feels defeated and she seems to become aware, if only for a moment, of the overwhelming volume of information she has to deal with every day:

> And then it occurred to her, in a brief and blasphemous flash: she didn't want to know how they felt. 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 [...] But no. No, it was not, her better brain corrected. No. You're hurt by these 368 people. This was the truth." (413-4)

The fact that Mae shows herself hesitant at some points—even if she always ends up discarding her negative thoughts—is of special relevance for the narrative. Because we are expected, as readers, to identify with her, we share her doubts and we wonder whether all those innovations are necessary or even desirable.

But apart from shortening the distance between readers and Mae, free indirect discourse is also used with a completely opposite purpose. As mentioned above, this narrative mode also helps to create ironic distance. Throughout the novel, there are several instances of Mae's thoughts being problematized by means of this narrative mode. At some point, the protagonist's mother asks her to come home because her father has had a seizure derived from his

MS disease. When Mae gets home, she finds out that her ex-boyfriend Mercer, who still lives and works in Mae's hometown, is also there, and that he was the one who drove Mae's parents to and from the hospital. Instead of being grateful to Mercer, Mae's thoughts go in a very different line, as can be traced in the following quotation: "She'd driven two hours to find her ex in her home, anointed the hero of the family. And what was she? She was somehow negligent. She was superfluous. It reminded her of so many of the things she didn't like about Mercer" (128). Thus, giving readers access to Mae's ambiguous thoughts is one of the strategies used by Eggers to gradually undermine readers' empathy towards the protagonist, creating instead emotional distance from her and, consequently, from the values she promotes.

As the story progresses, this anti-empathic distance does nothing but increase, as Eggers additionally introduces other narrative techniques that induce readers to question what is happening at the Circle and ponder whether the company's utopian promises may not hide a dystopian reality. Dystopian novels usually feature protagonists who are aware of the adverse conditions under which they and their own society are living, and this is something the protagonists themselves often manage to convey to readers (National Council). One of the most well-known examples is that of Winston Smith, the protagonist of George Orwell's dystopian classic *1984*, who makes readers aware of the pain to which the citizens of the totalitarian regime of Oceania are subjected. This does not, however, apply to *The Circle*, a novel whose protagonist is increasingly committed to the Circle and its values—despite her occasional doubts. However, readers are not left in the shadow for very long, as Eggers soon creates dramatic irony by introducing some secondary characters who call our attention to the naiveté of Mae's point of view, making readers feel progressively detached from the protagonist and, in turn, from the values she endorses. Among these characters we find Mae's parents, Mae's ex-boyfriend Mercer, and even one of the creators of the Circle: Ty Gospodinov, who tries to warn Mae of the dangers of Completion[3] disguised as a mysterious and eccentric character named Kalden. In clear contrast with Mae's ideological position, these characters do not readily accept the

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[3] As Timothy W. Galow points out, Completion "seems to reference the moment when every aspect of human existence will be saved and processed by the Circle" (122).

Circle's policies and technologies; instead, they show more cautious
moral stances.

To start with, it is worth focusing on Kalden. Even after
having had a few short encounters with him at the Circle's campus,
Mae still does not know much about Kalden: she does not know his
surname, his occupation within the Circle nor has she his phone
number. At some point, Mae decides to use the Circle's search tools
to try to locate him online, only to realize that he does not appear in
the company directory. Kalden is, thus, evasive and difficult to get in
touch with, and, as Galow points out, he "seems to represent the
iconoclasm and unpredictability that the Circle's technology aims to
mitigate and manage" (121). In effect, Kalden seems not to approve of
many of the things that happen at the Circle. In spite of everything,
he is on several occasions presented, from Mae's point of view, as
trustworthy—"She trusted Kalden, and couldn't believe he had any
nefarious intentions" (*The Circle* 172)—and, even though Mae's co-
worker and best friend Annie keeps warning her that he could be an
"infiltrator of some kind" or a "low grade molester" (172), most of the
time Mae seems to trust him. The fact that she becomes sexually
involved with him at some point is good proof of this.

However, Mae's attitude towards Kalden radically changes as
soon as he tries to persuade her that Completion is not a good idea.
Kalden first warns Mae, while she is giving her online viewers a
guided tour of the Circle's facilities, that: "Most of what's happening
must stop. I'm serious. The Circle is almost complete and Mae, you
have to believe me that this will be bad for you, for me, for humanity"
(*The Circle* 323). A few pages further on, readers learn that what
Kalden means is that should the Circle increase its powers and
decide to put its technologies to completely new uses, it could
eventually become a totalitarian monopoly and human beings could
end up being deprived of the freedom to opt out:

> Once it's mandatory to have an account, and once all government
> services are channeled through the Circle, you'll have helped create
> the world's first tyrannical monopoly. Does it seem like a good idea
> to you that a private company would control the flow of information?
> That participation, at their beck and call, is mandatory? (404)

From the moment Kalden starts to question the Circle and its
policies, Mae starts to think of him as a "lunatic," a "spy," a
"doomsayer" (323-25), and not even when she learns that he and Ty

Gospodinov are the same person does she give credit to what he is saying—although she does stop for a while to ponder whether she should actually be scared. Nonetheless, even though Kalden does not manage to convince Mae, he does convince readers that things must be stopped. In fact, we could say that he plays the role of moral compass for readers, turning our opinions in his direction. The revelation of Kalden's true identity close to the end of the novel is crucial in this respect: readers may realize that if the very same person who has created the company is warning that it is becoming a tyrannical monopoly in which human beings would not have the option of opting out, his warnings deserve some attention. The above-mentioned fact that Kalden is presented as trustworthy from Mae's point of view, in spite of being at times unreachable and eccentric, also helps readers to reach this conclusion.

The idea that the society depicted in the novel might be undergoing a movement towards totalitarianism is further reinforced by the use of other narrative strategies which are also frequently found in well-known dystopian novels. One of these strategies, which is deliberately used by Eggers as a nod to Orwell's *1984* (Eggers in Craps and Bex 556), is the use of mottos. The words "SECRETS ARE LIES / SHARING IS CARING / PRIVACY IS THEFT" (*The Circle* 305) are repeated on several occasions throughout the story, and remind us of the three well-known slogans of the English Socialist Party in Orwell's dystopia, which also appear repeatedly: "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength" (6). By inviting readers to draw a connection between the two texts—both of which provide evidence of the subtlety of totalitarian strategies in our mass-mediated world—Eggers underscores the inherently totalitarian character of the Circle's ideology and, consequently, further increases the distance between readers and the company.

The use of symbols is another strategy used by Eggers to reinforce this idea. In her work *A Dictionary of Stylistics*, Katie Wales defines the term symbol as "a sign, whether visual or verbal, which stands for something else within a speech community" (408). According to Wales, different fields within each culture develop their own particular sets of symbols or symbolism. Literature, for example, makes use of both general and literary symbols, which readers need to decipher in order to gain a better understanding of the literary work as a whole (408). However, Todorov had already gone one step further when arguing that the indirect production of meaning that qualifies the use of the symbol is a *dominant* feature of literary

discourse (12). It is indeed difficult to find a literary work that does not make use of symbolism, and this clearly includes dystopian novels. In Orwell's *1984*, as a case in point, Big Brother and telescreens stand as symbols of power and surveillance in the totalitarian state of Oceania. In this respect, *The Circle* is no exception. Close to the end of the novel, the Three Wise Men—the name the three creators and main figures of the company receive in the novel—meet in order to put in the same fish tank some creatures brought by Stenton "from the unmapped depths of the Marianas Trench" (*The Circle* 473), more specifically an octopus, a male seahorse and his progeny, and a shark. Galow describes this scene as "an obviously symbolic moment" (124) and establishes a parallelism between each of these creatures and each of the Three Wise Men. For Galow, the seahorse is "the symbolic corollary to Ty Gospodinov, who hides while his babies float aimlessly in a group above (the Circlers)" (124). The octopus, on its part, represents Eamon Bailey, "who is constantly exploring with his tentacles, as if he wants to know about every inch of the tank" (124). Finally, the shark stands for Tom Stenton, who "seems able to consume nearly anything" (124) and who is, as Galow argues, "motivated primarily by power and money" and, thus, "represents the greatest threat to the utopian dream of the Circle community" (123). When the three creatures are put together in the aquarium, the shark eats not only the seahorses and the octopus, but also the seaweed, the coral and the anemones within the tank. With this symbolic scene, Eggers seems to be suggesting that, even though the intentions behind the devising of the Circle's technologies and policies might be noble, these good intentions are always overshadowed by economic interests, and human beings often end up compromising their rights and freedoms for the benefit of those in power.

But apart from Kalden, there are other characters who help to create dramatic irony by making readers question Mae's attitude and perspective and, by extension, the Circle's values and technologies. This is certainly the case of Mae's parents and her ex-boyfriend Mercer, who are her main connection with the world outside the Circle's physical and virtual campuses. By highlighting the inappropriateness of Mae's behavior, these characters denounce the dehumanizing effects that the human enhancement technologies described in the novel have on Mae—and, one can infer, on most of

the citizens of the society depicted in the novel.[4] In the case of Mae's parents, they seem to be, at the beginning of the novel, very proud of their daughter having got a job at the most important company in the country, and they become even prouder when they learn that Mae's health insurance is going to pay for her father's multiple sclerosis treatment. However, as soon as she starts working for the Circle, Mae's behavior starts to change, something that Mae's parents do not like. Under the pressure of her supervisors, who tell her that being active online is an intrinsic part of her job, Mae keeps posting things and checking her phone while she is with her parents. Besides, her phone keeps beeping, which is something that upsets her mother, as evidenced by the following quotation from a family dinner conversation: "'I was going to thank you, Mae, for all you've done to improve your father's health, and my own sanity.' […] She paused, as if expecting a buzz to sound at any moment" (*The Circle* 258). In this quotation, an ironic heterodiegetic narrator calls our attention to the sense of unease that Mae's mother experiences when trying to talk to her daughter, indirectly denouncing Mae's behavior. In a similar line, in her work *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Turkle denounces that, in contemporary society, mobile technology has negatively affected our face-to-face interactions. As she puts it:

> Mobile technology has made each of us 'pauseable.' Our face-to-face conversations are routinely interrupted by incoming calls and text messages. In the world of paper mail, it was unacceptable for a colleague to read his or her correspondence during a meeting. In the new etiquette, turning away from those in front of you to answer a mobile phone or respond to a text has become close to the norm. When someone holds a phone, it can be hard to know if you have that person's attention. (161)

On his part, her ex-boyfriend Mercer Medeiros also tries to make Mae realize that her behavior has changed since she started working at the Circle. For instance, at the above-mentioned family dinner, in which Mae keeps checking her phone, Mercer blames her for being immersed in the virtual world and forgetting about the

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[4] This is another aspect in which *The Circle* resembles other dystopian novels, as this type of fiction usually denounces the dehumanization to which the citizens of a particular totalitarian regime are subjected (for instance, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*).

tangible world and those who care about her. In his own words: "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" (262). Later on, in a letter that he writes to Mae, Mercer regrets that they do not see each other anymore and predicts that, if things continue to be the way they are between them, they will be very soon "too far apart to communicate" (369)— no matter that they have at their disposal technology that allows them to be connected at all times. Mercer's views remind us of some of the arguments put forward by some critics of the posthuman, especially Katherine Hayles' view that, as a result of the introduction of a wide range of virtual reality technologies, human beings in contemporary society increasingly tend to leave aside more physical aspects of their lives and to focus instead on their virtual selves (Hayles *How We Became* 1-49). The "condition of virtuality" arises, according to Hayles, as a direct consequence of human beings thinking of information as "more mobile, more important, more *essential* than material forms" (19; emphasis in the original). Hayles stresses, nevertheless, the need to look for "the erasures that went into creating the condition of virtuality" (20) and ultimately argues for an "[embodied] version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality" (5). In line with Hayles' view, Egger's strategies in the novel point to embodiment over virtuality, explicitly focusing on some characters— Mae's parents and Mercer, more specifically—who stress the need to go back to the real and to enjoy the here and now.

Apart from denouncing that Mae's attitude has changed since she has started working for the Circle, in the above-mentioned letter Mercer also adopts a similar attitude to that of Kalden and warns Mae against the totalitarianism that the Circle is fostering. He expresses his wish to live free from the constant surveillance that the Circle is enforcing and vindicates that, in this totalitarian society, human beings "need options for opting out" (*The Circle* 371). In a second letter sent to Mae, Mercer had clearly expressed, once again, both his distress for how things had gone totally out of control and his wish to remain at the margins:

> So I'm gone. By the time you read this, I'll be off the grid, and I
> expect that others will join me. In fact, I know others will join me.
> We'll be living underground, and in the desert, in the woods. We'll be

> like refugees, or hermits, some unfortunate but necessary
> combination of the two. Because this is what we are. I expect this is
> some second great schism, where two humanities will live, apart but
> parallel. There will be those who live under the surveillance dome
> you're helping to create, and those who live, or try to live, apart from
> it. I'm scared to death for us all. (*The Circle* 436-37)

Not only is Mae dismissive of Mercer's warnings, but she is also
determined to prove to him that he cannot remain off the grid for
very long because, thanks to the Circle's technology (especially its
cutting-edge social media tools and surveillance devices), he can be
found in just a few minutes no matter where he is hiding. In fact,
with the help of her watchers and the Circle's advanced technology,
in about ten minutes Mae manages to locate him in Oregon Town.
When he realizes that he is being watched and recorded, he tries to
run away. However, Mae decides not to stop until Mercer has
acknowledged the Circle's superior powers: "But something about his
inability to give in, to admit defeat, or to at least acknowledge the
incredible power of the technology at Mae's command… she knew
she couldn't give up until she had received some sense of his
acquiescence" (464). Consequently, Mae gives her viewers the order
to start a persecution, which ends in Mercer's tragic death after his
car drives off a cliff. Mercer's death close to the end of the novel is
perhaps the clearest symbol for the impossibility of opting out of this
system. As Philippa Hobbs puts it, "the death of the novel's strongest
voice of dissent signals the impossibility of escaping the company's
power, as soft and non-violent as it may appear: the only options are
to submit or to die." The fact that Kalden, the other main voice of
dissent in the story, suddenly vanishes as we approach the end of
the novel, further reinforces this idea. Because the society depicted
in the novel is not too distant from our present-day society, it would
be legitimate to think that, with these plot turns, the novel is
denouncing the fact that, in contemporary society, human beings are
often deprived of the freedom to opt out of digital culture and forced
to assimilate into it so as not to feel excluded. Therefore, this
narrative choice puts to the test Bostrom's argument that "people
should have the right to choose which enhancement technologies, if
any, they want to use" ("Transhumanist Values" 11) and points to
the fact that, although transhumanist critics and philosophers
advocate for free choice in the use of enhancement technologies, very
often human beings do not have this choice once social networks

and surveillance devices have taken over our social roles and exposed our private lives. To be deprived of the freedom to choose also means, thus, to lose part of our humanity.

4. CONCLUSION

Because they are aimed at improving the human condition, the ideas that the transhumanist movement promotes may seem, at first encounter, reasonable and even appealing. Enhancing our limited physical and intellectual capacities by means of technology does seem, indeed, a reasonable thing to do. However, when we delve deeper into the implications that some particular technologies might have for human beings, we soon realize how easily the transhumanist dream can turn into a nightmare. According to Katherine Hayles, the framework in which transhumanism considers how advanced technologies affect human life and culture is "too narrow and ideologically fraught with individualism and neoliberal philosophy to be fully up to the task." She suggests that we should instead take advantage of any available resource to help us think through the changes that enhancement technologies promote, and stresses the important role played by science and speculative fiction in this respect ("Wrestling" 225). This paper has offered an analysis of some of the formal devices used by Dave Eggers in *The Circle* to deal with both the possibilities opened up by some specific human enhancement technologies and the dangers that these technologies may entail.

First of all, this paper has argued that, by means of merging the voice of the narrator with the protagonist's perspective through the use of free indirect discourse, Eggers manages to convey, firstly, the possibilities that the social media tools and surveillance devices described in the novel—which happen to be a slightly modernized version of the ones already present in contemporary society—offer for implementing transhumanist aims. Special attention has been paid to the ways in which these technologies help to build an interconnected, safer, more egalitarian and more democratic society. However, this paper has then set out to prove that, although the novel may seem to be, at first, a celebration of transhumanist values, as the story progresses some textual strategies are deployed which make readers realize that the techno-utopia may have become a dystopia, inciting them to distance themselves from the Circle and its transhumanist approach. More concretely, this paper has discussed

that, by creating dramatic irony through free indirect discourse—
which is also used in the novel to convey Mae Holland's occasional
doubts and to make readers adopt ironic distance towards the
protagonist—as well as by means of introducing the voices of other
characters, making use of an ironic heterodiegetic narrator, and of
some mottos and symbols, Eggers denounces the dehumanization
that, paradoxically, human enhancement technologies (especially
social media tools and surveillance devices) bring about. All in all, by
portraying a dystopic society in which human enhancement
technologies limit human freedom and privacy and lead human
beings to neglect true human relationships and other physical
aspects of their lives in favor of virtuality, *The Circle* ultimately
stresses the need to adopt a critical stance towards these
technologies, avoiding the temptation of being carried away by its
appealing promises. More specifically, Eggers' novel underscores the
importance of having both an embodied human experience and the
option of opting out in a world increasingly predated by fantasies of
disembodiment and virtuality. Thus, my analysis of *The Circle*
ultimately confirms, in line with Hayles' contention, that fiction may
be a suitable means for exploring the ways in which our
contemporary technologies may affect human life while offering
warnings against possible dystopian futures.

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