Users or Used: Surveillance Capitalism in James Ponsoldt's film The Circle (2017)

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Abstract:

In contemporary society, enjoying the basic rights of freedom and choice appears at first glance as an acquired asset, yet the unprecedented level of conformity of taste signals some hidden forces, with a unifying tendency, that currently work online. Shoshana Zuboff proposes what she calls The Surveillance Capitalism, a cult and economic order that implicitly revolves around the commodification of collected data with the purpose of making lucrative profits for businesses. Through a thematic reading, this research examines how James Ponsoldt's film *The Circle* (2017) encodes Zuboff's tenets in cinema language. It argues that the film serves as an eye-opener on tech giants' agendas of crowd manipulation.

Keywords: Social manipulation; Behavioural surplus; Commodification; Privacy; Conformity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As we live in a progressively evolving civilisation, today we witness the digital era in which marvellous advances in technology appear on daily basis. They cannot go and find space without casting shadows on humans and their behaviours. While individuals enjoy an unprecedented level of economic thrive that is marked with an alerting level of democratisation, a few of them attempt to decipher the real motives behind such spread situation. Within this sphere of technological realms, tech-giants have seized the opportunity to take a leading position of our shared civilisation. If Karl Marx's criticism of the nineteenth century bourgeois-based system of social control resulted in his prophecy on the decline of capitalism and made him associate such demise to "the contradictions of the system that prompt its crises"(Fasenfest, 2022, p. 14), the current status quo of the world economics ushers further in the inner contained rationales for criticizing such ideology that goes beyond economy to embrace social and cultural perspectives.

Shoshana Zuboff (2019) makes distinction as she associates the current trend of free economy with control-minded policies, an ideology she calls Surveillance Capitalism. In her monumental work with the same name, she further defines the latter as "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales"(p. 9). This order framework describes how businesses collect and exploit the digital data from people as they immerse themselves in the online experience. The human side is reduced to the almost a zero-level to the benefit of the corporate leaders who in many ways resemble early American robber barons. The way Zuboff's vision is incarnated in literature and art seems interesting in that there are potentials of effective awareness raising outcomes. Within this sphere of cultural interest, this research attempts to investigate the repercussion of Zuboff's theory in a filmic adaptation of Dave Egger's novel *The Circle* (2013), proposed by James Ponsoldt in 2017. Mainly, the film revolves around the workings of a tech-giant, labelled The Circle, and centres on Mae Holland's explorative journey of the inner sides of the company's business. How Zuboff's theory resonates within this journey is an end that made us adopt a thematic study outlined by Elsaesser and Buckland (2002) and revolves around the detection of the main theme, its constituent categorisation, and inter-relationships.

2. Review of Literature

Many reviews on the film have been conducted, focusing on different aspects; the extent to which it succeeds in incarnating Dave Egger's 2013 novel has been appealing to a large category of film specialists. A good deal of criticism centred on its revenues on the box office, often interpreted as negative reception and grounded in its lack of visionary perspective (Williams, 2017). Others paid much attention to the film's categorisation and fell into questions of whether it complies with the dystopian drama (Silva, 2017). The loss of autonomy in a world moving away

from discipline to control is one of the aspects of surveillance capitalism that Koutsourakis (2022) sheds light on. However, he particularly captures how this loss is closely tied with labour. Actually, the loss of autonomy could be seen as a result of crowd manipulation. Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* is a significant work that delves into the psychology of crowds and their susceptibility to manipulation. This book provides valuable insights into how individuals' behaviours and thoughts can be profoundly influenced when they are part of a group or crowd, making them more vulnerable to manipulation. Le Bon explores the concept that the collective mind of a crowd can lead to irrational behaviour and a tendency to unquestioningly follow leaders, rendering individuals more susceptible to manipulation by those who understand crowd psychology. His work, written in the late 19th century, continues to be relevant for comprehending manipulation within crowds. It lays the foundation for understanding how manipulative tactics can be employed to influence and control the behaviour of individuals within crowds. Le Bon discusses how leaders can manipulate the emotions and beliefs of the crowd to achieve specific outcomes, making *The Crowd* highly pertinent for understanding manipulation in the context of group behaviour. Thus, Gustave Le Bon's work remains a crucial resource for grasping crowd psychology and how manipulation techniques can be used to influence the behaviour and beliefs of individuals within a group or crowd, offering enduring insights into this subject (Le Bon, 1895).

Additionally, Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* is a seminal work in sociology, shedding light on how social class and cultural capital influence individuals' tastes and preferences. While the book doesn't explicitly address manipulation, it provides valuable insights into how society, culture, and power dynamics can subtly manipulate and shape individuals' behaviours and choices. This influence can be viewed as a form of manipulation, with the dominant classes and institutions in society subtly guiding individuals to conform to certain cultural standards. Bourdieu introduces the concept of symbolic violence, where those in power impose their cultural values on others, effectively manipulating individuals by reinforcing dominant cultural norms. Moreover, the book explores how cultural tastes and preferences are often passed down through social classes, leading to a form of manipulation, as individuals are influenced by their social context and are more likely to adopt the tastes and values of their class, even if they are not consciously aware of it. Bourdieu's analysis of conspicuous consumption, where individuals purchase and consume goods to signal their social status, can also be interpreted as a form of manipulation. People may engage in conspicuous consumption to manipulate the perceptions of others, projecting a certain image to fit into a particular social group (Bourdieu, 2010). Therefore, *Distinction* doesn't explicitly address manipulation, but it provides valuable insights into how social, cultural, and class-related factors can subtly manipulate individuals' choices and behaviour within the context of cultural and social forces.

Andrew et al. swerve their attention from the problematics only to focus more on the solutions; the way the impact of Surveillance Capitalism on data breach could be reduced takes a second alternative way out. For them, to face the phenomenon, action should be taken rather than just prescription. Thus, they suggest the resort to disclosure as part of accountability. They think that this is one of the best ways to reduce the ongoing process of data breach (Andrew et al., 2021).

Among the rare reviews that praised the intent of the film is the one proposed by Mathews (2017) who blamed critics focusing on the film's flaws in terms of characterisation and plot, pointing rather to the layers of ideas. For him, there are important warnings about privacy issues in contemporary society. Moreover, new social division looms large as corporate control drives the tech-users to become a puppy- minded class of lower ranking (Mathews, 2017). Ideology-based criticism is therefore not ubiquitous in the case of *The Circle,* providing a good opportunity to address more interesting questions in this realm. Basically, this research paper takes as a reference point the intersection of Surveillance Capitalism, as a rising phenomenon, with the call for restoration and preservation of the cherished ideals of freedom and autonomy.

3. The Circle, or the Moats of Secrecy

The Circle at the heart of Ponsoldt's film refers not only to a fictitious tech-giant company, but, as we can see through an establishing shot in Fig.1., its architectural design points out the futuristic setting and ushers in the prospects of the artwork's project. In contrast to the convivial tone set by a number of scenes that introduced the building, in architectural terms, circular designs call for mystery and the need for contemplation. By this we mean the innate human curiosity over the hidden workings of what appears as familiar phenomena in the likes of the earth's both shape and movement in the universe. Duffield (2020) goes to interpret the shape of the circle as "symbolizing the notion of "total wholeness and original perfection." In the film, Mae Holland (Emma Watson) seems to despise the limitedness and frivolity of her actual job and eventually seeks to perfect her professional life. When she, a middle-class young girl, attempts to fulfil such desire, she finds herself trapped by the appealing architecture and inviting image of the company. As she visits the company's building for the first time, the latter intensely shows as a utopian city that is concealed from the rest of the world and literally closed and inner-directed. In a way, this is the filmmaker's reference to the world that humans supposedly aspire for out of their imposed recurrent encounter with technology and advertisement, namely through such new world's representative and symbolising companies and businesses.

Fig. 1. The Circle, the building as a utopia

Source: (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:06:00)

The elitist tendency is sharply expressed in a recurrent manner only to foster how humans need guidance and leadership. There is no denying that often humanity welcomes novelty as suggested and called for by distinguished icons whom they trust as saviours, guiders, and inspirers. In the contemporary digital age, galvanisers are no longer religious people or philosophers but CEOs and leaders of high-tech companies. In The Circle—the company, the leader, Eamon Bailey, (Tom Hanks) rigorously announces himself as a guru when he declares that "knowing is good, but knowing everything is better" (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:17:42). He indeed succeeds in exerting a massive power of influence over whom he calls "The Circlers." We may come up with such clear-cut verdict on his power of influence in that most of the scenes that involve him in a direct encounter with his audiences show the latter as completely endorsing his claims and very excited to listen for more. Moreover, they even seem as hypnotised, submitted, and very attentive to every single uttered word or performed gesture. Such feedback is deliberately reinforced and made accepted by new comers as Bailey schedules recurrent meetings he calls Dream Fridays, with reference to the attendees' state of unawareness. At the surface level, the conference-like event is meant to exhibit new products and ideas in the manners of renowned tech-giants' leaders Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. Yet, throughout the film's narrative the event turns out as a preaching means that instils both The Circle CEO's spirit and ideology in the hearts and minds of his audiences. More importantly in the fashion of surveillance capitalists, who tend to instrumentalise a power that "knows and shapes human behavior toward others' ends"(Zuboff, 2019, p. 18), Bailey earns Mae's affinity and positive impression as he proposes his medical and psychological support to her ailing father and he apparently succeeds to a large extent in gaining her approval and trust. Aspirations of the audience look finely answered as they emphatically enjoy being in both the meetings and spaces off them. The company

organises other entertaining events, mostly musicals and performances, that foster a feeling of comfort, acceptance, and convenience. We, as viewers, could almost get convinced of the feasibility and sincerity of Bailey's corporal project. The positive impact of such project is even emphasised as Mae's friend Annie (Karen Gillan) is initially portrayed as a vibrant character with impressive skills that beautifully merge with the company's objectives and workings. She is actually the one who helped Mae to be recruited in the first place and their friendship drives much of the film's narrative. Among the twists that mark the plot is Annie's painful epiphany near the end of the film. Within such instance, she begins questioning Bailey's intents and goes further to reject the deeds and challenge the doer, a fact that makes her be literally expelled from The Circle company, or what Zuboff (2019) calls "the totality of society." Such turning point raises concerns about the way surveillance capitalists could lay down their plans of social control with much acceptance and near zero-resistance. In Zuboff's view, the real framing has never been the stated rationale, but it is a process that is not understood or accurately conceived by the masses and taking place at hidden layers.

Secrecy and darkness mark the behaviour of the two leaders of The Circle. Through their flash appearances and inter-scene revelations, they evoke uncertainty and ambiguity over their links with the concurrent scenes. Fostering this unclear hidden importance to the narrative, Mae gets intersected with their hidden history. While enjoying some time in an ordinary daily party, Annie suggests to Mae a short visit to a secret room that she knew during the augury days of the company. At first, a scene shows the place as a library, with reference to the elitist nature of the company's leadership. Yet, the purpose of the room as revealed by Annie is one of dark layers of planning, things that the CEOs never expose at their Dream Fridays, the scheduled meetings with the audience, or the masses. Ironically, When Mae meets CEOs Bailey and Tom Stenton (Patton Oswalt) in the very room, she is asked not to hide anything she knows. The scene serves as a contrasting mirror of the stated objectives of the company, all revolving around transparency and knowing, and the hidden layers of privacy tracking through a number of advertised products as we attempt to unveil in the remainder of this research paper.

4. TrueU, or the Digital Identity

Culturally speaking, identity raises perpetual and ever-lasting inquiries and debates over its essence and nature. Yet, it is widely accepted as the sum of features a person could be defined and made distinct through a set of beliefs and characteristic features. To have an effective awareness on such peculiar self-definition, one needs a certain interactivity with the other for "identity is only possible where a who finds itself mirrored back from the world" (Capurro et al., 2013, p. 12). Many ideas come to our minds as we investigate how one could look at himself in different spheres spanning from the personal to the public. Ideas that raise concerns over the way a normal human being considers hiding or sharing information about his very identity. While

civilisations differ in many aspects, they at least share some notions over the need of a certain level of privacy. Yet, The Circle's CEOs come up with a project that entails the unification of one's identity dimensions into one product they call TrueU. The product seems to suggest a solution to humans' self-definition dilemma and the audiences, with reference to humanity, show signs of hope over the potential understanding of one of the most perplexing concerns, art has ever raised. Right after the film's opening scenes, Mae praises The Circle's project and aims and considers the trope of TrueU as the company's touchstone for "it combined everything that was separate and sloppy into one account" (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:06:25). Actually, we need to point out the origins of an idea like TrueU which definitely finds roots in the emergence of the virtual world we have come to recognise as the cyberworld or the cyberreality. Citizens of the world today find themselves anchored to the screens of their computers or smartphones. The majority of the time, they are either involved in online activities related to business, education, or entertainment. Yet, with unprecedented magnitude, social media is seizing more and more of their time spent in such beyond classic-reality world. Even when we are oblivious to the real rationales behind their pursuit of virtual relationships on the blue spaces, we are to recognise their technical and real need for a certain way to identify such users in that growing network of relationships. The means by which they are accepted as potential participants in the ongoing online interactions is what Capurro et al. (2013) refer to as the "digital whoness."

In *The Circle*, characters are often classified in accordance with their stances regarding one's identification within the virtual spaces. They range between traditionists and elitists. Such grid of taxonomy actually shakes the viewer's perception of such online identity, especially when there is a kind of identification with the very character in question. Mae, as a protagonist, probably makes distinction as she embraces both classic and online identifications at different points in the narrative. She is well developed as a character in different dimensions. Her psychological, economic, and social features progressively evolve, making her an epitome of the contemporary individual who is trying to find a stable position in a world in the making.

If Mae's convenient and charismatic presence appeals to recognition and sympathy, the viewer might find it odd that other central characters in the image of the CEOs seem to engender shades of ambiguity and are very different from the casual circlers, with reference to the masses, or what Zuboff (2019) refers to as the herd-minded persons. It is worth noting that through their action and description, the circlers form a social entity that is closer to the crowd. Often such gathering is renowned for its following and conformity features, as opposed to more advanced types of social forms in the image of the community. The latter manifest much complex workings of interactivity and meaning negotiation, leading to the elaboration of certain methods of recognition and individual development. Human dimensions are what separate the community from the crowd. Mutual respect and good will propel both the individual and his society to more advanced instances of civilisation. If civilisation is known to involve human cooperation and

collaboration, modern time actions taking place in the virtual space show similar tendencies of benevolent progressive ideological ends, but innately they reduce and dispel communal impulses. As Archer (2014) puts it, "one of the specificities of cyber-activism is that it allows the fast constitution of large crowds in spite of a remarkably low degree of unity either in terms of organisation or in terms of ideology" (p. 211). The ideas the circulate such virtual spaces are rather personal and lucrative than common-good based, promoting some consumerist behaviours.

The circle actually overrides much of the human essence of social bonds and for this later in the film's narrative, Mae meets yet another dark person in terms of characterisation. Away from the circlers, or the masses, Ty Lafitte (John Boyega) shows up near the bushes and Mae stumbles over him. They have a short conversation that seems different from the usual dialogues we repeatedly encounter in the film. The filmmaker purposefully selects renowned actor Boyega, with all the intertextual elements referring to justice and the pursuit of identity linking him with the sequel of Star Wars. Again, he sends a message of the pursuit of genuine identity joined with heroic attributes. In an act of courage and trust, he dares to expose one of the secrets of The Circle by inviting Mae to the basement corridors where the central digital archives are stored. In Fig.2., a two-shot sets them against darkness which is sharply penetrated by a bright sport of light as to invoke the revelatory prospects in play.

Fig. 2. Ty Lafitte exposing The Circle's foundations
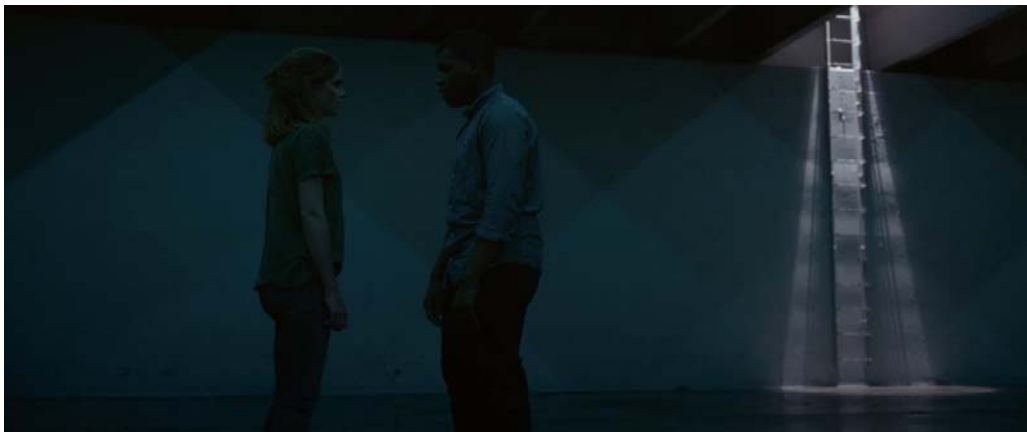
Source: (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:43:51)

The scene is indeed revealing in that not only it opens Mae's eyes on the secret layers of the company, but it brings to the fourth the origins of TrueU. We come to know that Ty is the founding father of The Circle, but with completely different views from the current CEOs who took over. One might see how the current status of economy and society has swerved away from the initial projects of ideal leaders in the image of the founding fathers of America. We may see how the pursuit from freedoms and personal identification have fallen into the hands of what Zuboff calls surveillance capitalists who imbed their own lucrative agendas into widely accepted

concepts of idealism and human rights. In this line, TrueU turns from Ty's view of the virtual world as a continuation of the real world to Bailey's conception of transparent digital identity that overtakes every single private information to the benefit of different businesses which are ready to pay for the valuable data, Zuboff (2019) calls the behavioural surplus. Actually, TrueU makes it possible for the users to log in to any online service with the same profile, a thing that at first hand appears practical. However, this very unification and concentration of the login procedure makes it very easy for the company to collect valuable data and turns it into predictable behaviour. Hence, users turn into used objects within the framework of their very own online experience. For this, Zuboff tells us that for the surveillance capitalists, the users' experience is no longer about computing, but tuning, herding, and conditioning.

5. SeeChange, or Rendition: From Experience to Data

In the current digital age, one's personal digital information has become critical and much needed to login to different services on the cyberworld. Like the real world, such new dimension in the life of every person ushered in new prospects of social interactivity that invokes both positive and negative consequences. Human nature involves that curiosity which calls for new experiences and discoveries, but it also entails another type of curiosity that breaks the common sense on freedom. The cyberworld has become the haven of hackers and opportunists who loom the ordinary net user's freedom of web surfing and information technology learning and exploitation. Within this experience, privacy breach has come to signal the dangers of the information age. Privacy breach called for attention and mainly was explained in terms of consequences and ownership factors. While the former essentially deals with what privacy breach might inflict upon the user's life both social and personal, the latter pays much attention to the personal information as an asset. Yet more recent outlooks into privacy in the image of Floridi's (2006) view that elevates privacy to the level of personal identity (as cited in Capurro et al., 2013, p. 195).

As heavily mediatised, privacy breach is often interpreted through the consequence-base perspective. Social and economic realms have become influenced by this view as to innocently associate any privacy infringement with the leaking of personal information as a by-product of the online experience. However, a newly advocated criticism proposed by Zuboff (2019) pays much attention to the currently evolving model of capitalism. For her, this is not merely about the dangers of basic personal information distribution in a concurrent model of capitalism. The question is not related to some details ranging from personal identification to banking references and so on. The core of the matter is rather about the amount of data corporate practitioners and services are collecting and using without the actual consent of the users, or put differently, the "proprietary behavioural surplus" (p. 17). In *The Circle* (2017), this tendency has been rendered real and is alarmingly brought to the front in the form of an advanced product, Bailey terms

SeeChange. The latter revolves around implementing very tiny cameras everywhere in private as well as public spaces to collect data from different scenes. Using satellite connectivity, the company aims at acquiring, analysing, and storing the information for a usage, they promote as benevolent and promoting to human life and condition. In Fig.3., through a crowd-shot, the emulator and personifier of tech-giant leaders announces SeeChange and swiftly puts into practice what he thinks of as a revolutionary product that would ultimately promote human rights by eliminating totalitarianism and preserving freedoms. For him, "Activists no longer have to hold up a camera" (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:16:27). All the job will be concentrated at the company and in a way The Circle declares itself as the only entity capable of taking the human destiny into the ideal safe place.

Fig. 3. The Circle's CEO introducing SeeChange to the audience

Source: (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:15:54)

One scene that is ironically linked with the 2004's Orange Revolution in Ukraine shows how people are seemingly searching for democracy through violent acts. While the apparent intent is a call for human rights, time has proven that the very contenders for freedom have committed atrocities in regions of their own country. In the same manner, Bailey is initially portrayed as a benevolent inspirer, but his determination to lead his audiences to believe in the need for full transparency evolves in different directions through the film's narrative only to raise concerns over his real intents. While at surface level he and Tom, the other CEO, detach themselves from the institutional circles of power, giving an impression of their free stances, their actual interests and actions intersect with symbolic references to the power-based spheres. At one important meeting, Tom exhibits congresswoman Olivia Santos (Judy Reyes) embracing and using SeeChange on daily basis. The latter shows complete harmony and consent over The Circle's line of development. As viewers, we may infer the reconciliations or overtaking between the two parties that might reach a level of fusion, one of interests not ideals. In such manner, one could only understand why the corporate illegal actions are not questioned, but rather backed up.

The corporate influence over society becomes more and more dangerous as Bailey begins to plan for the fusion between the voting registration profile system and The Circle's TrueU databases. In many ways, it seems very clear that the surveillance capitalists go beyond the stated slogans regarding the basic rights of knowledge to target the control of the citizens' actions and choices. Zuboff speaks of the dangers of the illegal use of collected data from user not only as a prediction asset, but as a means to mass control and manipulation that actually reach higher levels of influence translated as actions in the real world. Voting seems to be one of these actions that the new capitalists aspire to take hold of. *The Circle* puts much emphasis on these intents and repercussion as the major characters of the film meet to discuss the new project regarding the fusion of governmental and corporate databases. At this moment, benevolent characters that captured the viewer's pity throughout the film's journey detach themselves from the rest who are basically manipulated herd-minded persons. This includes Ty and Annie, the authentic friends who never used their relationships with Mae to ends other than pure friendship.

6. SoulSearch, or the Reality Business

Actually, one of Mae's friends conceals himself and never joins the rest of The Circle's characters at any level of reconciliation or participation. In contrast with Ty and Annie, Spencer is the only friend who is not a circler. He represents the real resistance to the surveillance corporate system. In an emphatic manner, as seen in Fig.4., he is portrayed as the emblematic figure for nature and the purity of previous status of civilisation. If the current culture is one of complexity and calculation, Spencer reminds us of the prior belief in simplicity and spontaneity. Through his firm connection with nature, the filmmaker refers to one's organic relationship with the real world. By this, we mean a world that is concrete and lively. In a number of scenes Spencer's portrayals display his natural outlook both in terms of physical appearance or inner spirit. With little exception, such character embraces an intuitive smile to the events taking place around him, including the departure of his best friend to a remote space that, for him, represents mystery and ambiguity. Despite the number of skills, he boasts of, the facial expressions associate him with childhood, as a reference to his imbedded innocence. In many ways, he serves as a contrastive stylistic device to the upcoming representations of the unnatural business world and its plethora of social and cultural dimensions. As repairs Mae's car, one static wide shot sharply points out the couple's relationship to Nature. Mae asks him to plan a meeting to have some discussion, he promptly answers her "or we could do that now since we're both here" (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:03:34). The main characteristic features he embraces are autonomy and independence. This is stylistically achieved by associating him with disciplines such as hunting and mechanics. In the previous discussed scene, he had actually come for Mae's rescue after her car broke without any delays. While through their conversation she shows superficiality in terms of knowledge regarding the car mechanics, he is totally devoted and focused to effectively fulfil the

task he is asked for. The scene evokes much about the harmony of their friendship and to some extent certain signs of platonic love surface in this instance as well as others.

Fig. 4. Mae and Spencer, with nature as a background

Source: (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:03:03)

In our view, Spencer serves as a supporting character who effectively emphasises what the circlers are not. If they are mostly herd-minded and easily manipulated, he is independent and autonomous. Their primal concern is raising their popularity score in the manners of known social media protocols and his is making himself useful to his community. Their final end is numbers and his is concrete utility. They converse following protocols and he interacts spontaneously.

Spencer shows distinction and resistance to the status quo through his unwillingness to join The Circle. This is confirmed when Mae asks him to pay her a visit at work and when he reluctantly does, he finds himself trapped and assaulted by her peers there. In a disturbing scene, they deliberately humiliate him as they call him "deer killer," with reference to his hunting activities in the woods. Reversing realities seems one of their preferred choices as they present themselves as the alternative friends to Mae, instead of complementing her needs for the diversity of social relationships. Manipulation of the truth appears bluntly in this scene as they call him what he is not. Actually, in contrast to the bulk of film's purposeful narrative, on another occasion that jumped out of the blue and preceded Mae's immersion to her newly formed virtual community, she remotely conversed with her parent (see Fig.5.). No clear purpose or meaning could be evoked out of this scene but the final moment's allusion when she noticed a chandelier made by hands in her parents' room. She asked her mother a rhetoric question only to firmly confirm that it was made by her friend Spencer.

Fig. 5. Mae's mother expressing her appreciation of Spencer's chandelier

Source: (Ponsoldt, 2017, 00:33:48)

Mae appears to be hanging between two sorts of communities; one is real and caring and the other is virtual and self-immersed. As she grows in the hierarchy of The Circle, she is attributed the task of exhibiting the new products of the company. At this instance, she is to present what the leaders behind the scenes conceived as a revolutionary product. What makes them think so is that such app makes users jump from the virtual to the real-world committing action. In this regard, Zuboff (2019) explains how "Surveillance Capitalism is not technology; it is a logic that imbues technology and commands it into action" (p. 25). The app which is labelled SoulSearch ironically evokes some meanings that intrinsically contradict what it is really about. Mae introduces the product and explains that it is about the pursuit of those who commit unethical activities and virtually are not circlers, lacking TrueU profiles. She selects an example, a fugitive woman named Fiona Highbridge who supposedly made a crime and is wanted by the authorities. As Mae launches the app, thousands of circlers in the real world, begin a hunt pursuit against the woman and finally they catch her at her work, only to handcuff her. The scene shows a certain level of brutality and an execution without trial if we may say. The audience get excited and they call for more, a reminder of the bloody games in the ancient world. To her astonishment, Mae is asked to select her friend Spencer as a fugitive and target of the newly introduced application. At first, she rejects and attempts to make the audience forget about their demand, but they insist and leave her no choice but to eventually falls under the crowd's influence. This scene represents the pinnacle of her weakness and submission to The Circle's control. It is a moment in which she submits the privacy of her childhood friend to the audience. Under the latter's hailing and excited calls, the real-world circlers launch a hunting mission which ends with Spencer's car falling off a high bridge, leading to his death. In many ways this is the filmmaker's symbolic allusion to the end of privacy in the age of Surveillance capitalism.

7. CONCLUSION

The Circle (2017) makes a daring attempt to criticise the actual economic order that challenges cinema itself. In a meticulous way, the filmmaker succeeds to a large extent to make the audience lean to the film and ponder over the current state of civilisation as it witnesses what was once looked at as the next industrial revolution. The film sheds light on the digital era and the associated form of economy the world falls under its grips today. In many ways it gets along with the ideas proposed by Shoshana Zuboff, outlining the cult or economic order she coins as The Surveillance Capitalism. Ponsoldt's film makes distinction in a world of massive film production as it adapts Dave Egger's 2013 novel with the same name in a purposeful manner only to foster the key concepts that work at an ideological level. As such, the turning points of the film reflect faithfully the basic tenets of criticism regarding the economic order that has become guided and heavily influenced by the tech-giants and their leaders. Despite the fact that *The Circle* was released before Zubuff's seminal work, it interestingly focuses on products like TrueU, SeeChange, and SoulSearch and hence thematically overlaps with Zuboff's notions on secrecy and rendition. Actually, such ambiguity is cleared when we point out that Zuboff's ideas were being developed as early as 1988, the publication year of her prophetic work *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*. The film attempts to raise awareness on the fallacy of the claims we often encounter in advertising conferences that attach witty to ambiguous hidden intents. It suggests that it is only through facing businesses with firm determination that humans could finally restore their command over their privacy to become masters of their destiny. In other words, only this epiphany will restore civilisation to its origins, one based on individual autonomy and grounded in pursuit of progress. As much as modernity was shaped by high esteemed authorities, current critics in the likes of Zuboff and esteemed filmmakers as Ponsoldt's would help the citizens of the world to benefit from technology and the internet without giving up their privacy and agency. Put differently, *The Circle* serves as a lighthouse to the users of internet and social media to mind very carefully their online experience to remain users and not dodge being used.

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9. *Appendix*

Fig. 6. *The Circle* (2017) film poster
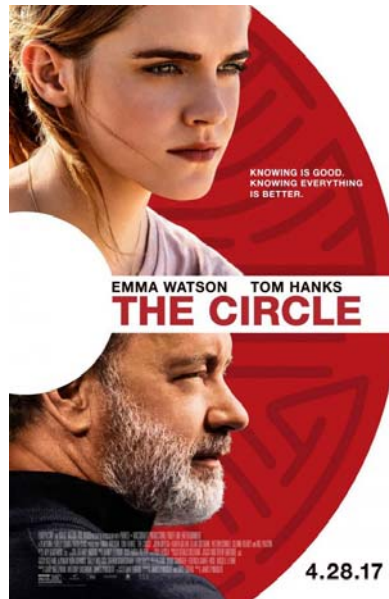
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