

The Future of the Enhanced Self and Contemporary Science Fiction: TED Talks and Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

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ABSTRACT: This article sets out to examine the ways in which cultural and literary texts actively shape the discourse on human enhancement. First, it identifies the emergence of a “sense of wonder” (Sawyer 87) in TED talks that advance transhumanist ideals. Second, it investigates the critical and ethical potential of Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) to challenge the notion of a ‘post-bodied future.’

KEYWORDS: TED Talks; Human Enhancement; Transhumanism; Sense of wonder; *The Circle*; Affect of Aliveness

The Future Survival of Humanity

The twenty-first century has witnessed amazing advancements in science and technology, such as bionics, genetic engineering through CRISPR-Cas9, or the first robot-citizen. The notion of scientific progress has captured the imagination of futurists who begin to imagine a better future for humanity. This act of imagining the future is often associated with the genre of science fiction. Fredric Jameson traced the genre's emergence back to the nineteenth century when the historical novel was replaced by SF as a “form which now registers some nascent sense of the future” (150), rather than the past. Whether utopian or dystopian, visions of the future continue to be a key feature of SF, attesting to its speculative and prophetic dimensions.¹ And yet they also reflect the contemporary social reality, which gives them a critical edge (cf. Haraway 6). As Jameson argued, they force us to “restructure our experience of our own *present*” (151). So, what do contemporary, technocratic futurists envision for humanity in our era of information overload?

In the digital age, scholars have grappled with the difficulty of the human to cope with an overwhelming amount of information that can lead to anxiety, loss of identity, an inability to make decisions (cf. Groes 2), or a sense of alienation from the body (cf. Bey 3-4). According to transhumanists, the brain is unable to assimilate such great amounts of data because of an evolutionary explanation: we have been ‘designed’ for a different environment. So, they call for a radical transformation of the seemingly inefficient body to extend the self beyond its corporal confines (cf. Stelarc). This article seeks to untangle such transhumanist rhetoric on “bodilessness” (Bey 4) as a future form of survival by considering two examples. First, it identifies the emergence of a “sense of wonder” (Sawyer 87) in TED talks that advance the

¹ I use the term ‘science fiction’ as an umbrella term for a genre that includes various subgenres (e.g. speculative fiction, utopia/dystopia) and generates an archive of possible futures (cf. Canavan and Robinson) and “worlds of wonder” (Panshin 1). In this article I use the term ‘speculative’ to address the hypothetical quality of SF as a genre that tests out ideas.

enhancement of the human. Second, it looks into the use of synesthesia in Dave Eggers's *The Circle* as a potential literary tool to challenge the technological utopia of transhumanism.

Transhumanism is a contemporary futurist philosophy that advances the prospect of human enhancement. The discourses of human enhancement envision a utopian future, when humans transcend the biological limitations of their bodies. Transhumanism is the idea that “man is merging with technology” (Sosa 00:00:13-16) and that technologies are greatly enhancing human capabilities. Whether bionic limbs, implants, artificial intelligence, or even the idea of mind-uploading (cf. Kurzweil), the notion that humans will become superhumans has gained traction. There is a plethora of concepts that describe the overcoming of the human: the cyborg, the transhuman, the posthuman, the superhuman. While these concepts constantly overlap, I will employ the term ‘transhuman’ to address the volitional transformation of the human body by (bio)technological means. While the transhuman may share hybridity with the cyborg or superpowers with the superhuman, transhumans also aim to reach beyond: to arrive at a ‘post-human’ state of invulnerability.²

Using a theologically-derived critique, Elaine Graham exposes the metaphysical core of a philosophy that strives towards “omnipotence, omniscience, and immortality” (69), but which hides a technocratic consumerism. For instance, Graham exposes the co-existence of “the urged-for-transcendence” with “the constant stimulation of consumer drives” (77). This article seeks to further explore underlying tenets of transhumanism by focusing on its cultural manifestations: how does transhumanism manifest itself in cultural and literary contexts? How do transhumanists try to ‘sell’ their story and what are their persuasive strategies? I will focus especially on the transhumanist treatment of survival, vulnerability, and embodiment.

TED talks are one channel used by transhumanists to promote their ideas. Transhumanists are a mixed group of scholars and philosophers, innovators and entrepreneurs, scientists and authors who actively defend and promote the prospect of human enhancement. Most of them self-identify as transhumanists. ‘Humanity+,’ for instance, is an international membership organization that aims to build and grow the transhumanist community and they have their own website, magazine, conferences, and awards (cf. Will and McCabe). And yet, TED remains the most prominent platform used by transhumanists to reach a global and wider audience. The acronym TED stands for ‘Technology,’ ‘Entertainment,’ and ‘Design’—values that transhumanists also embrace. The TED platform seems to offer the perfect setting for celebrating innovation and progress and it has also developed its own popular genre: TED talks. Julia Ludewig has approached TED talks as an emergent and hybrid genre whose thematic and discursive features she aligned with three parent genres: the sales

² It is also important to distinguish between the use of the ‘posthuman’ in transhumanist and critical posthumanist discourses. While critical posthumanism uses the term to enact a critique of anthropocentrism, transhumanism uses it to celebrate the realization of human potential. Most often, transhumanists spell the term ‘post-human,’ rather than ‘posthuman.’ For another interesting distinction, see Munkittrick’s “Transhumanism and Superheroes” where “Batman is a human maxed out, Spider-Man is a biological transhuman, Iron-Man is a technological transhuman, and Superman is a posthuman.”

pitch, the memoir, and the academic lecture (cf. Ludewig). The entrepreneurial spirit, the presence of autobiographical elements, and the scientific jargon make TED a famous and successful disseminator of scientific knowledge. In fact, they have over one billion online views (Sugimoto et al. 1).

However, the popular appeal of TED may also reside in its science fictional character and the promise to deliver “life-changing insights” (Ludewig 5). The uttering of prophetic statements and the reliance on the TED slogan ‘ideas worth spreading’ recall the genre of SF as a ‘literature of ideas’ that “looks beyond the here-and-now to thrill and inspire us with dreams of what might be” (Panshin 4). According to Andy Sawyer, science fiction creates a “sense of wonder” by various means. The “sense of wonder” emerges “through the language of technology, fact, and detail” (93) by creating “realistically plausible future” scenarios, so that techniques of verisimilitude and plausibility gain primacy. Also, the ‘sense of wonder’ may be akin to the sense of “conceptual breakthrough” (89), opening doors to new possibilities. If we consider the science fictional elements of both TED and transhumanism, we may gain a new perspective on how the discourse of human enhancement functions, probing its tacit assumptions and rhetorical devices. I argue that particularly the ‘sense of wonder’ is used by proponents of human enhancement to make their visions more convincing and appealing to the public. While the ‘sense of wonder’ is intricately interwoven with the ‘sublime,’ I use the first term because besides amazement and grandeur, the term ‘wonder’ may take a secondary meaning as well, referencing a desire to know or learn (cf. Sawyer 90). I argue that precisely this combination allows transhumanists to suggest that the “invincible power and force” of the sublime (Longinus qtd. in Clewis 18)—in their case, the “(bio)technological sublime” (De Mul 32)—is controllable, so that the transcendental becomes a possibility. Accordingly, these talks are infused with a “unique extra-dimensional presence” (Panshin 2).

This article considers two diametrically opposed examples that deal with transhumanist philosophy. First, TED talks that celebrate the prospect of human enhancement by making use of the ‘sense of wonder.’ Second, the contemporary dystopian novel *The Circle* by Dave Eggers, which remains critical towards enhancement ideals. My aim is not to imply that all TED talks are transhumanist and all SF novels are against enhancements. Bestseller SF novelist David Simpson, for instance, promotes transhumanist ideals in his *Post-Human Series* (*Sub-Human* [2012], *Post-Human* [2009], *Trans-Human* [2011], *Human Plus* [2013]) and there are TED talk examples that remain critical towards transhumanist ideals, too (cf. Doudna; Knoepfler). However, since TED prefers the rhetoric of self-improvement,³ I assume that transhumanism also favors this genre, especially since transhumanists encourage the creation of local TED events on their Humanity+ website. Also, an analysis of transhumanist philosophy in a TED format may reveal tacit dimensions that may otherwise remain obscure

³ The TED preference for the rhetoric of self-improvement becomes quickly apparent even by browsing their playlists. Besides science, entertainment, or culture, TED contains an entire group of playlists under the title “A better You.”

in non-fictional writing. This is why I consider TEDx talks as well. Even though they are independently organized, they use the TED conference format.

Furthermore, I choose to discuss a dystopian novel not only because it offers a counterpoint to the utopian program of transhumanism. As James argues, when we think “about possible changes in the human body, [...] it is possible to think of just as many dystopian outcomes as utopian ones [...]. Immortality might extend the human propensity for growth and development; it might bring boredom, mental instability, or dangerous over-population” (228). Rather than focusing on the novel’s cautionary plot as a form of critique, I will focus on one of *The Circle*’s descriptive scenes to suggest that its expressive qualities are an alternative way of raising critical awareness. *The Circle* discloses the performative tricks of TED-like presentations since it contains and comments on such presentations. Besides, it also generates an “affect of aliveness”—a term that I use to pin the protagonist’s affective response to human survival as a challenge to the transhumanist ‘sense of wonder.’

The ‘Sense of Wonder’ in Transhumanist TED Talks

The rise of human enhancement discourses may be better understood in connection to the longstanding popularity of self-help narratives. The number of personal development books and motivational speakers has constantly increased and the value of the US self-help market is worth eleven billion dollars (cf. Rigby). Even more, the self-help movement was raised to the rank of religion in the United States (cf. Karlgaard). The talks organizer TED provides a famous platform for disseminating self-improvement ideals. I argue that human enhancement is an offshoot of the self-help discourse as both rest on the concept of “self-actualization” (Maslow 46). While the framework of this article does not allow for an extensive discussion of Abraham Maslow’s theory of human motivation, it is worth noting that his humanistic psychology envisions a ‘self’ governed by the need to better itself—the individual quest for personal fulfillment becomes the driving force of human behavior.

Transhumanists also rely on the notion of ‘self-actualization’ as they keep reinforcing their belief in human potential. Following the so-called “Extropian principles,” transhumanists value “self-transformation” and “self-direction” (More). Their philosophy is thus humanist at the core and various authors have already established connections between transhumanist values and the Enlightenment principles of progress, rational thinking, and liberal individualism (cf. Ferrando 27; Braidotti 17; Graham 66). A closer look at transhumanist philosophy may contribute to the on-going bioethical debates surrounding the topic of human enhancement. Human enhancement raises epistemic concerns, such as understanding the possible risks that it might bring.⁴ These debates also consider issues of social justice and equality, questioning the degree to which enhancements may increase the gap between classes. And bioethicists also ask whether enhancements may lead to an undermining of the sense of ‘self.’

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, for instance, considers the eugenic underpinnings of human genetic engineering (cf. Fukuyama).

The subject of human enhancement keeps gaining popularity across the media. I argue that TED talks contribute to the wide spreading of transhumanist ideals and they may offer new ways of approaching transhumanist philosophy. Instead of focusing on the transhumanist writing of prominent representatives such as Max More, Nick Bostrom, or Julian Savulescu, an analysis of transhumanist TED talks may expose the presenters' reliance on a science fictional 'sense of wonder.' Graham has also identified the "metaphysics of technoscience" as lying at the core of a philosophy geared towards "omnipotence, omniscience, and immortality" (69). And yet, what are the specific elements that construct the 'metaphysics of technoscience'? I argue that transhumanist TED talks invoke a 'sense of wonder' in their narratives of human enhancement. But how is this 'wonder' mediated and what are the elements which make it attractive to the audience?

On a thematic level, transhumanist TED talks deal with a wide area of subjects (from artificial intelligence to biohacking and neurology) and yet they all share a set of assumptions which keep recurring. Most of these talks are concerned with the future and they favor a certain scenario where technology saves humanity from extinction and helps it progress towards a post-human condition (cf. Bostrom). Moore's law, for example, is invoked to explain the exponential trend in the evolution of technology (cf. Sosa 00:03:19; Simpson 00:07:00), which promises the emergence of a "technological singularity" (Vinge): the life-changing event that will raise a superhuman intelligence. The transhumanist vision of the future is optimistic and hopeful and its temporality relies on a geologic time-scale to narrate a long history of cumulative developments that promise an on-going advancement of the species. This is the story of humanity and its evolution which in this case becomes synonymous with progress. Since they anchor their narratives in a capitalist logic of competitiveness and "perpetual growth" (Monbiot), transhumanists envision survival as both struggle and future progress.

Besides the topic of the future, another thematic concern keeps resurfacing in these TED talks, the notion of bodily extension and the overcoming of biological limits: "[B]ody 2.0 will include artificial eyes with zoom capabilities [...] and the prosthetic limbs of the future will be even more flexible and powerful than our original organic limbs" (Sosa 00:07:17-34). Nanobots will merge with the body and wake it up at the perfect moment (cf. Simpson 00:10:30-40); sensors, smart implants, and chips will be integrated into the body to override wrong decision-making based on "hunches and gut feelings" (Sjobald 00:13:46-54). Computer scientist and director of engineering at Google, Ray Kurzweil, advocates the belief that humanity will become digitally immortal by 2045. In his talk "Get Ready for Hybrid Thinking" (2014), Kurzweil tells the story of a neocortex that will be extended to a cloud by using a synthetic neocortex.

The engineer and biophysicist Hugh Herr, who is in charge of the MIT Media Lab Biomechatronics, gave a famous TED talk on "New Bionics" (2014) which went viral and amounted to more than seven million views. It is included in the "11 Must-See TED Talk" TED list, which means that it captures the normative features of the TED genre as well. While his first talk focused more on disability and how technology could end it, the most recent 2018

talk promotes the prospect of human enhancement more strongly. “How We’ll Become Cyborgs and Extend Human Potential” introduces the audience to an advanced bionic technology called ‘NeuroEmbodied Design,’ which does not only remarkably change the practice of attaching prosthetic limbs to the human body, but also promises a future of new bodies:

I believe the reach of NeuroEmbodied Design will extend far beyond limb replacement and will carry humanity into realms that fundamentally redefine human potential. In this twenty-first century, designers will extend the nervous system into powerfully strong exoskeletons that humans can control and feel with their minds. Muscles within the body can be reconfigured for the control of powerful motors, and to feel and sense exoskeletal movements, augmenting humans’ strength, jumping height, and running speed. In this twenty-first century, I believe humans will become superheroes. Humans may also extend their bodies into non-anthropomorphic structures, such as wings, controlling and feeling each wing movement within the nervous system. Leonardo da Vinci said, “When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been and there you will always long to return. (00:11:55-13:08)

Herr uses the language of science to describe a realistically plausible future scenario where humans might even fly. His vision aims to inspire wonder in the audience, especially visually, as the speaker makes use of an animation with a winged human flying high above the earth. The upward movements (whether climbing or flying) cement the notion of progress, but also transcendence. If technology will empower humans to become “superheroes,” the ‘sense of wonder’ also takes the form of the ‘technological sublime.’ The mention of Da Vinci is used to strengthen the emphasis on the visionary and prophetic power of the human to continuously shape the future, to innovate, and even transcend its limitations—to celebrate human imagination as the source of great discoveries and achievements; to revel in the limitless human potential, which promises a future ‘self-actualization.’ By turning his vision skyward and by using wide-angle video captures Herr hints at the human conquering of the transcendental, which appears to be no longer an impossibility. If the experience of the sublime may evoke a “heightened awareness of our manifest vulnerability and insignificance” (Budd 85), in this instance, the ‘sense of wonder’ loses such negative connotations and it reinforces the belief in a cognitive mastery that escapes the limitations of the body.

This ‘sense of wonder’ is not built only on a thematic level—inspired by the possibility of flight—but also on a formal level. Most of the talks stage the emergence of a ‘sense of wonder’ by making use of two formal features: first, they manage to instill “awe at the vastness of time and space” (Hartwell 66)—an element cited by Sawyer in his discussion of the ‘sense of wonder’ (cf. 88). It is not only the optimism of progress or the promise of a better future that inform these talks, but the vastness of time, too. Presenters stretch their vision across millions of years, using graphs and comparisons to depict the immensity of time: “[I]f Earth was created one year ago, the human species, then, would be 10 minutes old. The industrial era started two seconds ago” (Bostrom 00:00:49-01:00). Besides creating

awe at such vastness, these comments also hint at the possibility of the human to partake in deep history. Transhumanists also use the theory of evolution and its geologic time scale to imply that the human species is no longer adapted to the present environment and needs to change (cf. Sjobald 00:12:37-54; Kurzweil 00:08:24-33).

Second, it is not only the notion of bodily extension (via chips or exoskeletons) and the overcoming of biological limits that frame these talks. The example of wings as an extension of the human body is compelling and wonderful, but it is the notion of cognitive mastery that helps instill the ‘sense of wonder’: the notion that the ‘mind’ or the neural system has control over everything, including its exoskeletons. Most talks contain a sense of “conceptual breakthrough” (Sawyer 89) to mobilize a response of cognitive wonder. With the help of visual clues, Herr describes the invention of AML, a myoneural interface that connects nerves with the external prosthesis, thus allowing the mind to sense the position and movements of its limbs. The transhumanists’ belief in mind-uploading takes a further step toward establishing the superiority of the mind over the body. So, there is an implied hierarchical vision lying at the core of transhumanism, which favors the cognitive abilities of the mind over the biological limitations of the body. Bodily senses have only a functional role whereas the ‘mind’ reigns supreme. In “How AI Can Enhance Our Memory, Work and Social lives,” Tom Gruber ponders the possibility that AI may “retrieve anything you’ve ever seen or heard before” (00:06:28-33),⁵ placing the role of memory at the forefront as he assumes that such access would be an improvement, while he ignores the possibility of information overload. By focusing on paradigm shifts, new inventions, and possibilities these talks manage to evoke a science fictional ‘sense of wonder.’ The prevalence of adjectives such as: ‘wonderful,’ ‘amazing,’ ‘exciting,’ ‘superhuman,’ ‘incredible,’ ‘enormous,’ or ‘extraordinary’ support the thesis that transhumanist TED talks rely on a certain emotional response to advance their ideas. The future will not only be “post-bodily and post-human” (Featherstone and Burrows qtd. in Graham 66), but also wonderful.

The Affect of Aliveness in Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*

In “Science fiction from 1980 to the present,” the critic John Clute has identified a “lack of security about the interestingness of sf as a tool of cognition and imagining” (67), especially since writers “had a great deal of catching up to do in order to describe a world which (shamingly) already existed” (68). According to Clute, SF writing published in the last two decades of the twentieth century failed to produce speculative and prophetic visions, which is the purpose of reading it in the first place. Sawyer also understands the science fictional ‘sense of wonder’ as the reason “*why* people read this literature” (88). And yet I will argue that besides the cognitive functions of a ‘literature of ideas,’ science fiction novels also have the affective potential to challenge the narrow and strong association of SF with visionary

⁵ The British TV Series *Black Mirror* (2011) contemplates this scenario in the episode entitled “The Entire History of You” (season 1, episode 3, 2016). The enhanced humans have an implant behind their ears that records everything and allows them to replay memories. But instead of gaining cognitive security, the protagonists’ behavior is increasingly obsessive.

power only. I choose to address this affective potential of SF precisely because scholars such as Clute tend to ignore this dimension of a genre that is not only a “tool of cognition” (Clute 67) but which also mobilizes certain affective responses as well. Moreover, it is this affective potential which may give the novel a strong, critical, and ethical dimension. I have chosen to include a dystopian novel in this article, precisely because I want to suggest that dystopian novels do critical work not only through their cautionary plots, but also via their expressive literary qualities.

Through the use of literary synesthesia, literature may evoke what I call an ‘affect of aliveness.’ While I cannot discuss the multilayered phenomena of synesthesia in this article,⁶ I use it here to address the use of metaphorical imagery that captures cross-sensory experiences. I argue that these sensory fusions give rise to a form of awareness that I call ‘affect of aliveness’ because it reworks the notion of ‘survival.’ Survival as the “state or fact of continuing to live or exist especially in spite of difficult conditions” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) invokes notions of struggle. But transhumanists have extended this definition and have conflated survival with future progress and a reign of the mind, especially since the body actually hinders survival. And yet, my designated ‘survival scenes’ use synesthesia to offer alternative ways to think of survival by shifting the focus from struggle and the evasion of danger or death to an encounter with life. So, survival is no longer treated as a goal to be achieved, but as a way of being.

If synesthesia is an “intersense analogy” that works as a “refinement or heightening of sensuous experience” (O’Malley 393), the ‘enhanced self’ does not need additional technological devices to better its senses and it cannot become a digital pattern either because synesthesia needs an interaction of the senses with the ideational realm. In other words, bodies and minds cannot be separated and bodily senses acquire an existential role, rather than being merely functional. Rather than evoking a mere ‘sense of wonder,’ ‘survival scenes’ may mediate the emergence of an ‘affect of aliveness’ to signal a different kind of self-awareness. Rather than stretching its vision across centuries into the future, the ‘affect of aliveness’ is focused on the present. And instead of sustaining the notion of cognitive mastery, it considers the essential role of bodily sensation, objecting to the transhumanist disposal of the body. In this way, Dave Eggers’s *The Circle* illustrates how synesthesia can be used to critique the ‘bodilessness’ of transhumanism.

The Circle (2013) is a novel that negotiates utopian and dystopian discourses of “full transparency” (Masterson 730), i.e. public openness in a future without secrets or privacy. Set in an immediate future that resembles the present, it follows the story of Mae Holland, a white lower-middle-class girl who, with the help of her friend Annie, manages to become employed at a seemingly dream-like internet company called ‘The Circle.’ The modern-looking company provides many benefits for its employees, from full health insurance to elaborate leisure and entertainment events on its campus. The Circle united all online

⁶ For a more comprehensive overview of synesthesia as both a pathology and Romantic ideal, see Duffy’s “Synesthesia in Literature.”

platforms under one “Unified Operating System” where all users use ‘TruYou,’ a single online identity that is “unmaskable” (21). And the company managed to produce a revolution in society because trolls disappeared, commerce became safe, and everything else “had been perfected” (30).

One of the owners of the company, Eamon Bailey, organizes ‘Dream Fridays’ to present what the “engineers or designers or visionaries” (60) are working on. In a TED-like fashion, these events occur in an auditorium—a “Great Hall” in the “Enlightenment” building, with 3500 seats and a “lucite podium” (59). At first, these talks seem to be ‘authentic.’ When Mae sees Bailey on stage for the first time, she is astonished by his eloquence and sense of ease. But the novel also reveals the performativity of these acts of seeming ‘naturalness.’ As Mae will be a guest on the stage, we learn that she and Bailey have rehearsed their talk (cf. 294) and she even stages her shame when she looks at her hands in “what she realized was a theatrical gesture” (295). Betiel Wasihun has connected the absence of shame brought about by the “omnipresence of surveillance” with an erasure of the individual (17). I would also add that such erasure occurs because “bodily borders” (4) also vanish under the constant gaze of the Circle.

During his first presentation, Bailey is welcomed on stage with a roar of applause as he is much loved by his public. Using humor, eloquence, autobiographical elements, and false modesty, his persona develops into an inspirational character. In this scene alone, the novel depicts the ‘sense of wonder’ that Bailey animates in his audience while presenting the newest technological discovery: SeeChange cameras. The high-quality live streaming of a video depicting Stinson Beach produces “sounds of awe throughout the room” (61). The next “incredible” (62) parts relate to the smallness of the devices as well as to their wireless transmission. The more recordings Bailey shows on screen, the more the audience applauds and is left “stunned” (65). And yet, since most of the focalization in this scene is external, the novel also throws a critical perspective on the emerging ‘sense of wonder’ that the novel describes. Behind all the roar and enthusiasm, the scene already hints at the consumerism of the project (since cameras will be cheap and available for everyone to buy) as well as the risk of losing one’s own privacy, since cameras are easy to hide and “all that happens will be known” (70). Bailey’s presentation captures the emergence of a ‘sense of wonder’ not only as simple admiration of technology, but much like in TED talks, it captures it as a feeling of “awe at the vastness of time and space” (Hartwell 66). Since these cameras are able to record “beaches, mountains, lakes, cities, offices, living rooms” (Eggers 65), they give access to the planetary vastness of the earth, especially since Bailey also shows “a hundred live streaming images on the screen at once” (70). Analogously to the act of flying, humans will presumably manage to be in more than one place and gather an all-encompassing view—like an omniscient gaze—which hints at a transcendental dimension. SeeChange cameras sustain the cognitive enhancement of the human who is offered the possibility to seemingly know everything.

But the novel also remains critical towards this scenario: it challenges the notion of progress by depicting a narrative that develops from an initial utopian perspective to a dystopian

end—its cautionary thread signals the loss of privacy. The utopian promise to extend the cognitive capabilities of the human species to see and to know everything (by having access to millions of cameras around the globe) twists in the opposite direction. Rather than gaining cognitive security and peace of mind, Mae is increasingly worried both about the gaps in her knowledge and about what she knows. Rather than creating a “securitized, sane, and sanitized future” (Masterson 735) where people live harmoniously together in a sharing community, Mae becomes more and more egotistic as she turns inward. Obsessed with her own image in society, she can “only think of the 3 percent who did not find her awesome” (405) while her relationship with her friend Annie becomes more competitive. In other words, the ‘cognitive enhancement’ leads to an even more acute sense of alienation, challenging the transhumanist solution to the ‘information overload’: an extension of the self only worsens its ‘symptoms.’

Rather than preventing abuses of power, the Circle’s vision leads to the death of anyone who opposes it. Mae’s ex-boyfriend, Mercer, opposes the Circle’s philosophy and decides to retreat into a cabin in the woods where he is hunted down and dies in an attempt to escape. If this scene shows that the Circle fights to win against the ‘Luddites’ of society, it also hints at the denial of the choice to not live a technological and public life. Finally, the loss of privacy is also associated with a loss of intimacy since human relationships are endangered and nothing is personal anymore. This loss also signals the supremacy of the life of the ‘mind’ over the ‘body’: “The Circle’s answer to the problems of lived, breathed, smelled, and felt experience emerges from the comparatively abstract realms of algorithms and the actions of digital communities. Yet again, emphasizing calculations and solutions [are] divorced from fleshy reality” (Masterson 736).

This separation “from fleshy reality” recalls the transhumanist ideal to transcend the body. The future in this novel is digital because everyone will lead digital lives: recorded, commented on, shared, and ranked. It is also a life of the ‘mind’ divorced from the ‘body’ as they are placed in an antagonistic relationship. The next wilderness to be tamed is the human body. At the end of the novel, Mae visits her comatose friend Annie, whose nervous breakdown was caused by the Circle’s data-mining which publicly revealed sensitive information about her ancestors: “Another burst of color appeared on the screen monitoring the workings of Annie’s mind. Mae reached out to touch her forehead, marveling at the distance this flesh put between them. What was going on in that head of hers? It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing” (491). Mae’s final decision to succeed in gaining immediate access to thoughts rests on the assumption that they are separate from the body, from the ‘flesh’ that one simply needs to dispose of. But the scene may also hint at the impossibility of such an endeavor, which becomes even more apparent in the novel’s ‘survival scene.’ I use the label ‘survival scene’ to pinpoint the emergence of a highly descriptive scene that offers an alternative way of thinking about ‘life,’ ‘survival,’ and the ‘self’ by using literary synesthesia.

The ‘survival scene’ in the middle of the story counters its main narrative and remains pivotal for the entire novel. Since this is a kayaking scene, it seems to depict a recreational

activity. The scene also contains an element of danger, since Mae does not have a life preserver (cf. 264). But there is no real struggle involved, which seems to decouple survival from the danger of death. So, this scene also challenges notions of survival as struggle and it proposes an alternative way of seeing survival as a form of interaction. Also, instead of insisting on overcoming the vulnerabilities of the body, this scene emphasizes its strengths. Spontaneously, at night, Mae goes kayaking alone in the bay and she heads out to a distant island, 'Blue Island,' where, as literary scholar Timothy Galow puts it, she "stops to marvel at the world, implicitly reveling in her own existence even as she acknowledges her obvious limitations [...] she is awed by the life all around her, both up above and hidden below the water" (87). If here Galow detects the emergence of a natural sublime, I would argue that this scene evokes an 'affect of aliveness.' Rather than mere 'awe,' this scene builds a moment of heightened awareness that challenges the very premises of 'wonder':

She jumped from the bow, the water *white-cold* and seizing her. [...] She stood, breathing heavily, feeling strong, feeling enormous. [...] All of these questions and concerns were irrelevant now, because it was dark, no one could see her, and no one would ever know she was here. But she would know. She walked the perimeter. [...] There was a thick stripe of seaweed, with crab shell and flotsam embedded, and she threaded her fingers through it. The moonlight gave the seaweed some of the phosphorescence she'd seen before, adding a rainbow sheen, as if lit from within. [...] It was enough to be aware of the million permutations possible around her, and take comfort in knowing she would not, and really could not, know much at all. (267-70, emphasis added)

This descriptive scene occurs like a halt in the main narrative, seemingly detached from it, so that it disturbs the reading process. And yet, it also brings the reader's attention to the importance of the present moment—mediating a heightened awareness of the present—where Mae stands here, now, on this island, being very grounded in her present moment. But this moment is not ahistorical either; Mae retains the past and anticipates the future, without losing sight of her present. Even though the passage is written in the past tense, the many enumerations help build present momentum. Rather than being awed at the vastness of time and space, Mae remains anchored in her present awareness. Even the act of breathing, an unconscious act, becomes a conscious one and anchors the 'self' in an awareness of the present. And the emphasis on her anonymity seems to imply once again that time stops for herself while everything else keeps moving—she owns her own personal time, rather than being a mere pawn in a larger and vaster universe. In other words, she also owns her own gaze, rather than being subjected to or identifying herself with the public and omniscient gaze of the Circle, especially since she is the only focalizer now. Wasihun has elaborated on the role of the "all-knowing, heterodiegetic authorial narrator" as a formal analogy to the "transparency or omniscience claim" of the novel (11). And yet, this scene's internal focalization may adopt a critical stance toward such claims.

Mae's senses are heightened: the sense of touch while she runs her fingers through the seaweed is coupled with the sense of vision as the seaweed becomes phosphorescent—leading to a synesthetic experience that is further sustained by images such as the "white-

cold” water. The “white-cold” water also joins the sense of sight with touch, which makes the experience more tangible. Besides suggesting that cognitive visions and physicality are interdependent, this imagery can be read as a counterpoint to the “full transparency” (Masterson 730) professed by the Circle since an achromatic color—whiteness—seems to gain substance. It reveals the illusion of transparency and omniscient objectivity by forcing the reader to consider the following question: who owns the gaze? This scene creates a juxtaposition to panoptic social surveillance by revealing the opacity of vision. Instead of following Scott Selisker’s claim that privacy takes place within “character networks, rather than in the characters’ interiority” (759), I believe this scene shows how interiority and social interactions are deeply entangled, which may become even more apparent in human-non-human interactions. In place of depicting a “self-contained” (Selisker 756) and autonomous self, this scene foregrounds the embeddedness of a networked self. Mae’s alertness in this instance is different from the self-reflexive moments of being seen, which is “making one aware of one’s own vulnerability” (Wasihun 3). But it is also different from the kind of alertness at work that gives her a “distinct sense of the power she could wield in her position” (Eggers 243). This scene may, in fact, separate the notion of agency from contexts and discourses of power and control.

Thus, in this scene, Mae also manages to regain a sense of agency as she makes her own decisions, rather than acting accordingly to the Circle’s expectations. Even more, her decisions have a strong ethical dimension; if her and the Circle’s decision to hunt down Mercer was driven by a desire for omniscience, a ‘sense of wonder,’ in this scene Mae decides to leave a nest of birds alone, in spite of her desire to lift it and look inside: “She knew enough to know she couldn’t. If she did, she’d ruin whatever was inside” (269). If her ‘wonder’ has led her to make egocentric choices, including the final choice to get rid of Annie’s body in order to access her private thoughts, the ‘affect of aliveness’ makes her aware of and more empathic to the world outside. Only by exercising her agency does Mae become aware of the agency of another: rather than turning inward, she becomes aware of the seaweed that seems to be “lit from within.” This is not just a solitary moment in the absence of any social parameters. Quite the contrary, it seems to generate a social interaction with the non-human that remains impossible inside the Circle. In a symbolic scene at the end of the novel, the shark will devour the seaweed, hinting at the loss of awareness and agency in a world of ravenous consumerism and public openness.

In conclusion, the ‘survival scene’ of *The Circle* mediates the emergence of an ‘affect of aliveness.’ Rather than mere mystical wonder or sublime, the affect reinstates the importance of the body while challenging celebrations of technological progress. It shares with mindfulness the “be here now approach” and the “expanded awareness in the form of seeing the interrelatedness of one’s external world and one’s inner Self” (Logan), because Mae is present in her moment and interacts with her surroundings. And this scene also challenges anthropocentric perspectives while it brings attention to the subjectivity of one’s own experience. So, rather than getting rid of the body, this scene reinforces the belief that bodies actually help mediate a sense of agency, which contests the entire transhumanist

agenda. And it also implies that the kind of “universal telepathy” mediated by SeeChange cameras would not only signal “political control and the end of privacy” (James 228), but also a loss of agency. In the end, Annie’s body remains the last defense against the Circle’s desire to know everything.

Conclusion

Contemporary bioethical debates on the topic of human enhancement are concerned with epistemic questions about concepts of human ‘nature’ and identity. This article aimed to contribute to these debates by uncovering some of the complex issues that reside in narratives of human enhancement, such as the entangled relationship between transhumanist ideals, notions of human survival, physicality, and agency. By analyzing the discourse of human enhancement in cultural and literary contexts we may gain a new perspective on the tacit assumptions and formal features that structure its narratives. TED talks negotiate the emergence of a ‘sense of wonder’ to promote a transhumanist agenda of optimism, progress, and rational thinking. The transhumanist celebration of the future and of human imagination is sustained on a formal level as well: the vastness of space-time and the power of innovation are reinforced via visual clues and rhetorical strategies, such as Herr’s animation of a winged human while he mentions Leonardo da Vinci. Even more, these elements sustain the belief that the human mind is transcendental and that we may reach a future of absolute cognitive mastery.

The literary example offered by Dave Eggers’s *The Circle* discloses the performative functions of TED talks and their consumerist character. The novel also proposes an alternative scenario that evokes an ‘affect of aliveness’ and challenges the transhumanist wonder by reworking notions of survival and agency. Instead of associating survival with struggle and future progress, as transhumanists do, the novel associates it with present interaction. While both ‘wonder’ and ‘affect’ are subjective moments enmeshed in their own temporality and self-awareness, the ‘affect of aliveness’ is showcasing rather than hiding its own subjectivity, commenting on its very limitations. And rather than justifying acts of control and a drive to conquer the human body, the ‘affect of aliveness’ has a strong ethical dimension attached to it.

The Circle’s ‘survival scene’ that captures Mae’s journey in the bay reveals a ‘self’ embedded in a bodily experience that cannot be separated from the ideational realm—effects that are achieved through literary synesthesia. Rather than evoking a mystical experience of transcendence, the ‘affect of aliveness’ raises critical awareness. So, instead of focusing on the dystopian plot, this article aimed to show the socio-political relevance embedded in a highly descriptive scene. Through the use of literary synesthesia, the novel draws attention to the importance of the present and to the existential role of bodily senses, thus performing a critique of the ‘post-bodied future’ of transhumanism and, implicitly, arguing for the significance of affective life.

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