

## Surveillance Capitalism and the Critique of Social Media in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010)

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### Abstract

This study seeks to explore speculative fiction's response to the growth and influence of surveillance capitalism on human values and social relations through a case study of Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). Prompted by unprecedented advancements in technology, surveillance capitalism is a novel and worrying economic system that underpins contemporary digital culture and capitalizes on the manipulation of human users' data for purposes of power and profit-making. Following an interdisciplinary approach, the study relies primarily on the theory of surveillance capitalism articulated by the American economist Shoshana Zuboff in 2019. It seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between dataveillance and new social media in Shteyngart's novel and the

influence of this syndicate on the digitization of human identity and social relations under surveillance capitalism. Employing Zuboff's concept of 'instrumentarianism', it further investigates how surveillance capitalism functions through instrumentarian power to control human behavior and instrumentalize social relations. The study ultimately concludes that there are eerie similarities between the observations of Zuboff and the fictional society created by Shteyngart as they both work to demystify and argue for resistance to surveillance capitalism which has transformed the way in which humans perceive their identities and the world surrounding them.

**Keywords:** surveillance capitalism, digital culture, new social media, Zuboff, Shteyngart

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### Introduction: Data Economy

Today, data is more extensively incorporated into the economic, social and political infrastructure of our societies than ever before. The amount of data produced and processed every day is truly exhilarating. More than 4 zettabytes<sup>1</sup> of data are generated worldwide on a daily basis: 500 million photos are uploaded and shared, 400 hours of video are streamed and rated, and 3 million emails are sent/received every second (Executive Office 1). Moreover, according to *Forbes*, 90 % of the data in the world today was produced over the last five years only. This means that the accumulation of data has been on a rising and evidently infinite trajectory, fueled by enormous advances in technology, the migration to Web 2.0 technologies<sup>2</sup>, the widespread use of the so-called "Internet of Things"<sup>3</sup> and the expansion of Big Data<sup>4</sup> industry. Wearables and smart devices have also become natural annexes of human species which mediate their everyday digital activities and online communication via new social media. People's online engagement is no longer limited to moments of leisure but extends to frame their lifestyles and everyday interactions, including work, socialization and entertainment. Central to these transformations are the utopic claims of digital utopianism, promising to use data to solve people's problems and enhance their lives.

However, these transformations are intermingled with the social, political and economic imperatives of governments and private markets that trade in data and technology for other purposes: to secure power and generate profit. Thus, data, as acknowledged by *The Economist* in an article published in 2017 entitled "The World's Most Valuable Resource is No

Longer Oil, but Data," has recently become the most influential force in contemporary social, economic and political systems. This mutation gives birth to what contemporary economists and scholars call "Data Economy" (Roy 2021). Data Economy is an economic system which is built on the collection, analysis and commodification of online users' information into profitable data capital sold to the advertisers and third parties (34). Data economy, thus, "does not trade in traditional commodities like oil, wheat, or natural gas; it works to capitalize on the prediction of human behavior itself" (Pine 199). In order to achieve its purpose of human behavior prediction, this economic system relies on the surveillance and accumulation of online users' data into manageable and sortable databases. Thus, in spite of its centrality to the economic realm, the real potential of data is especially realized in the sociopolitical domain where it is collected and categorized into relevant and related databases. Therefore, various studies have recently endeavored to demystify the relationship between data, surveillance and society.

Surveillance studies are interdisciplinary as they attract scholarships from various disciplines: sociology, economy, politics, technology and the humanities. For instance, Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson (2000), relying on the concept of 'assemblage' developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, introduce the notion of the 'surveillant assemblage' to expose state and non-state surveillance strategies through data-gathering. They reveal that the process of surveillance in the digital age forms a rhizomatic mode of growth that is distinct from the traditional top-down, state-led model of surveillance. More recently, David Lyon (2018) attempts to bridge the

gap between surveillance culture and literary studies. In *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life*, Lyon explores some literary works, starting from Orwell's 1984 to Eggers's *The Circle*, to find out how technology has significantly contributed to the widespread of surveillance culture in our contemporary society. In the same vein, Peter T. Marks' *Imagining Surveillance: Utopian and Dystopian Literature and Film* (2015) traces the link between technology and surveillance, focusing on the dehumanizing effect of surveillance technology as shown in selected literary works. These studies, however, do not take into account the capitalist growth and power of surveillance in contemporary social systems. Thus, while the expansion of data economy and digital marketing has been exceptionally increasing over recent years, the implications of their practices – especially how data is utilized, who has access to it, and how far human identification and social communication are affected – are not evident yet. Shoshana Zuboff's 2019 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* provides a comprehensive discussion of these issues, creating new terminology and fresh ideas to deal with the oppressive emergent forms of power which purposefully shape behavior and identity on a large scale.

Building on the work of Lyon, Marks and other surveillance scholars, this study seeks to utilize Zuboff's theory of 'surveillance capitalism' and follow a multidisciplinary approach to bridge the gap between surveillance studies and literary analysis which is characterized by dearth. It endeavors to explore the influence of surveillance capitalism in an illustrative novel: *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) by the American novelist Gary Shteyngart. The study begins by presenting the major critical concepts in Zuboff's theorization of surveillance, capitalism and identity. It then explores the representation of surveillance capitalism in Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, investigating the impact of

surveillance capitalism on human identification, sociopolitical structure, cultural values, and the form of interaction between human and technology in the contemporary digital age.

## Surveillance Capitalism

Surveillance capitalism is the term first used by the American economist Shoshana Zuboff (2019) to refer to a new and 'worrying' economic system driven by the surveillance, accumulation, analysis and monetarization of online users' personal data by governmental institutions and Big Data corporates to maintain power and maximize profit. Prompted by unprecedented advancements in technology, this economic system capitalizes on the practice of 'dataveillance', or the mining of online users' data as "free raw material for hidden commercial practices extraction, prediction and sales" (V). According to Zuboff, this practice of dataveillance has not only brought radical changes to the economic realm, but also represents a threat to the "Enlightenment values of humanity" (323) and people's perception of identity and the world surrounding them. Thus, for Zuboff, the growth and influence of surveillance capitalism in the contemporary digital age results in a new species of power that is heterogenous, complex and tyrannical.

The major problem that Zuboff raised in her groundbreaking and revolutionary work is that, under surveillance capitalism, people are denied the ownership of their own properties, i.e. data. The practice of reusing human users' data is not often declared to their owners, as Britney Kaiser (2019) explains: "data is the intangible asset of every individual and is the only asset class to which the producers (users) have no rights to its value or any other share of the monetary benefits gained by the surveillance capitalists" (375). Big data corporates develop so sophisticated and enhanced technologies that are able to accurately collect, analyze and sort users' data. This data, then, is sold to state and

non-state third party institutions which, in turn, transform it into advertisements and services designed to meet the needs of their targeted users. The users/consumers, who are actually the owners/producers of data, are then persuaded through algorithm-based marketing to purchase or obtain the product which is being advertised.

Therefore, being infinite and renewable, data in the surveillance capitalist age represents a gold mine for both governmental and private institutions to predict, map and control their targeted users' behaviors and attitudes. What becomes crucial for this economic system, therefore, is the online users' data rather than their offline 'real' activities: "the empirical evidence is no longer behavior in the corporeal real but behavior online. User data is packaged and sold to third-party corporations so they can appropriately target users with ads, services" (Pine 161). This means that the production of goods and services in this parasitic economic system is often intertwined with the practices of surveillance and commodification of human users' data for hidden purposes of control and profit-making. Bevington (2021) offers an example of the omnipresent mechanism of surveillance capitalism operating within one of the most popular social media platforms today: Facebook. On the surface, the Facebook's 'Like' button is designed as a tool for social media users to interact with shared online content. Nevertheless, this option functions actually as a surveillance strategy to track social media users' online activities and their preferences. Users' data are then sorted, analyzed and sold to third party corporations which, without any restrictions, are allowed to reuse it for purposes of control and profit-generation:

a ubiquitous example from the past decade can be found in the inner mechanisms of social media websites and apps, such as Facebook's 'Like' button. Superficially, this function is an

innocuous method for social media users to engage with shared online content. However, the technology behind the function facilitates surveillance on multiple levels, primarily by performing the deeper purpose of gathering information about the external websites its users are visiting, the online purchases they are making, and the media they are engaging with. Facebook's algorithms use this data to create a feedback loop, where businesses who have secured advertising space are at liberty to aggressively display promotional content interspersed with social content – a marketing strategy which has come to be described as 'behavioural retargeting'. (8)

The example of Facebook as a surveilling capitalist power illustrates how data is misused and manipulated under surveillance capitalism. Governments often collect large amounts of data in domains like education, healthcare, banking, policing, to name but a few. Similarly, big tech companies collect personal browsing data of users of platforms such as Spotify, YouTube and Facebook and then, through highly advanced algorithms, turn it into databases sorting the users' preferences, attitudes and future prospects, as Mannov, et al. notes: "Technology giants like Google and Facebook use their power to redefine social norms, to dodge privacy activists and to pay off government officials" (111). Data is often exchanged between public and private sectors to serve their common and mutual interests. According to these developed databases, state and non-state institutions with vested interests in the collection of online users' data are able to tailor services and products in response to their users' needs and urges.

A viable example of surveillance capitalism's power to influence users' behavior is the disclosure made by Cambridge Analytica's former employee

Brittany Kaiser in 2019 in which he accused Facebook of influencing its users' voting choice in the 2017 US presidential election. Kaiser reveals that Facebook sold its users' data to CA which, in turn, nudges its users, through prompted notifications and feeds, to elect the company's agent Donald Trump as US president (336). Kaiser's revelation falls in line with what the White House declared in a report published by the Executive Office of the President in 2014 that "the technological trajectory, however, is clear: more and more data will be generated about individuals and will persist under the control of others" (9). This statement also corresponds to Google's chairperson Eric Schmidt's declaration that "Google retained individual search histories that were also made available to state security and law enforcement agencies" (Newman). Therefore, Zuboff warns against the utopian promises of surveillance capitalism as she perceives it as an unprecedented threat to human values, freedom and privacy. Similarly, in his speculative novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), the Russian-American novelist Gary Shteyngart seems to share Zuboff's anxieties and doubts about the practices of surveillance capitalism and its influence on human identity and social relations.

### **Digital Identification in *Super Sad True Love Story***

*Super Sad* is a speculative novel in which new social media and surveillance technologies are interweaved together to form the fabric of an emergent surveillance capitalist society. In spite of its speculative nature, the setting, language and structure used by Shteyngart in *Super Sad* are what yields the novel a realistic and timely undertone. The novel is set in New York City in the near future—a locale and time familiar to the contemporary reader. It is also robust with techy language which is used purposefully to describe how young individuals interact with one another and with older generations in a cultural

framework characterized by free internet access and uncontrollable online communication. Based on social media communication, the novel's action unfolds as the online posts and messages written by the novel's protagonist Lenny Abramov and his beloved Eunice Park on the GlobalTeens platform, a Facebook-like social media network.

The novel's plotline is structured on a complex two-fold levels. It principally tells the titular 'super sad' love story between Lenny and Eunice. Yet, the couple's unsuccessful love story service only as a framework for scaffolding a critique of a digital dystopian community which is crippled by debt under the rule of a surveillance capitalist government. In the world imagined by Shteyngart in *Super Sad*, as in the real contemporary digital age scrutinized by Zuboff, socializing is absent, human communication is reduced only to social media networks, and identity is formed through digital identification. According to Shteyngart, human values and social norms—including love, affection, friendship, sociability, economic roles, social status, etc.—are transformed into data sets mediated by algorithms and technological devices. Especially, the novel explores the transformation of individuals' behavior and identity due to their interaction with nonhuman (i.e. algorithmic) networks that used to surveil, rank and codify their personal data. A crucial concern of the novel then is how this kind of interaction contributes significantly to the growth of a surveillance capitalist society and its impact on people's perception of identity and social interaction? Furthermore, what happens when this sort of connection between human online users and nonhuman algorithmic networks is severed?

The novel begins with a dystopian image of the collapse of the U.S.A. which lost its power and prestige after a long and devastating war against Venezuela. At home, a new government, called the

“Bipartisan” or “American Restoration Agency” (Shteyngart 7), holds the rein of power and seeks to instigate a new capitalist system based on the surveillance and commodification of its citizens’ personal data. As the novel’s action unfolds, the reader comes to realize that the new government is orchestrated by big tech corporations as part of the deal to pave the way for “America 2.0: A GLOBAL Partnership” (320) which is mostly run on money borrowed from China. Under surveillance capitalism, the country’s economy collapsed as it no longer produces anything and relies mainly on the practices of dataveillance and consumerism. As a result, the pillars of civil society have collapsed, all state institutions are privatized and the government serves private corporates’ interests only to maintain power, as Noah, Lenny’s friend, puts it: “it is zero hour for our economy, zero hour for our military might, zero hour for everything that used to make us proud to be ourselves” (94). Similarly, the social norms and values used to make people proud of their country, such as liberty, social justice and hard work, have faded under surveillance capitalism: “America as a functional democracy is over, leaving only a country of consumers and spenders” (Trapp 66). Thus, Shteyngart’s critique and warning is clear from the very beginning: surveillance capitalism will create docile subjects living in a tyrannical and oppressive society regulated by brutal capitalists and unethical business interests.

Above all, *Super Sad* is a novel of digital identification. It particularly dramatizes Lenny’s crisis of identification under surveillance capitalism. This identity crisis is, in fact, a data crisis. In the world imagined by Shteyngart, one’s sense of identity is transformed into a digital profile which is created by digits, scores and categories and mediated by (nonhuman) algorithms in the service of the interests and prospects of the new capitalist government and its private partners. The following is a digital profile of Lenny which illustrates the

digitization of identity in Shteyngart’s imagined surveillant capitalist society and how the characters are detached from their actual (human) identities and transformed into digital profiles automatically generated by (nonhuman) algorithms:

LENNY ABRAMOV ZIP code 10002, New York, New York. Income averaged over five-year-span, \$289,420, yuan-pegged, within top 19 percent of U.S. income distribution. Current blood pressure 120 over 70. O-type blood. Thirty-nine years of age, lifespan estimated at eighty-three (47 percent lifespan elapsed; 53 percent remaining). Ailments: high cholesterol, depression. (88)

Lenny’s digital profile is thus an illustrative example of how identities are constructed in the age of surveillance capitalism. What is gathered and sorted here are not just the characters’ data, but their own actual identities. As Lenny’s digital profile reveals, one’s identity and status is formed and defined by a set of statistics and rankings. In this system, only the individuals who are young and financially successful are considered ‘healthy’ and ‘productive’ as they are able to carry the highest potential of consumer capitalism. Thus, it is not coincidental that Lenny’s health history comes in the second place after his financial status. Compared to the digital average of the whole population, Lenny’s digital health profile are just as significant as his credit information: “both are part of a particular knowledge discourse that favors quantitative over qualitative information, evaluating a person’s (credit/health) well-being and thus their ability to contribute to America’s survivability in an environment of external threats” (Schober 366). In order to achieve its goals of control and profit-making, surveillance capitalism is not so much interested in actual human identities and qualities as in the data that stands for them online. The result is the emergence of what

Goold calls “categorical identities”—an identity conception which functioned in conformity with the logics of the computer, not according to humanity values and principles:

Categorical identities stress the importance of particular personal characteristics with a view to determining whether an individual belongs to some predefined group. Personal information is viewed as static and capable of being distilled into data, which can in turn be combined and used as the basis for making statements about an individual’s character and [...] predictions about his or her future behavior. [...] [T]he notion of categorical identity is based on the belief that human beings are capable of being summarized and understood in terms of lists. (16)

Lenny, like most of the characters in the novel, exists only as the digital reproduction of his identity. He functions only as a “data double”—data assets produced when the actions and behaviors of the Internet users are transformed into a stream of texts that can be read and analyzed by algorithms (Haggerty and Ericson 606). A data double is not a duplication of human person, but rather constitutes an(other) actual life of that person in both the actual and virtual worlds (613). Throughout *Super Sad*, Lenny experiences the obscure sensation of living with an identity that is digital. His emotions, attitudes and actions do not seem to count as much as do the data sorted and manipulated by hidden algorithms in favor of surveillance capitalist system.

Therefore, through its critique of the digitization of identities under surveillance capitalism, *Super Sad* defamiliarizes the current critique of social media and surveillance technologies. It calls upon the readers to imagine the way through which their identities and personalities formed under a digitized surveillance capitalist

culture: “passers-by on the street could see their credit ranking flashing on a post, their vitals and daily moods are to be posted on a digital grid at work, or an algorithm creates several scores from their data portfolio in order to show which possible mates are desirable and vice versa” (Hasse 86). The problem raised by *Super Sad* is not merely the issues often associated with dystopian portrayals of surveillance, such as the invasion of privacy, oppression and control. More importantly, the novel endeavors to demystify the discourse of power underpinning surveillance capitalism and the effects it has on human values and social relations: instrumentarian power.

### **Instrumentarian Power: From the Big Brother to the Big Other**

Zuboff perceives surveillance capitalism as a tyrannical system as it gives rise to an oppressive power discourse which she called ‘instrumentarianism’. She coined the term ‘instrumentarianism’ to describe the power discourse supporting surveillance capitalism through which “automated machine processes not only know our behavior but also shape it at scale” (15). According to Zuboff, the approach of surveillance capitalism to power is instrumentarian in the sense that it seeks to predict and control human behavior by replacing human relationships with machine interaction and algorithmic processing. Often glossed over by the utopian appeals of improving the quality of life for consumers, instrumentarianism has extensive impacts on almost all human online activities: social media posts, profile information, emails and text messages, among others. It functions like ‘the puppet master’ that is able to tailor and ‘instrumentalize’ online users’ data “for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization and control” (331). Contrasting it with totalitarianism, Zuboff further explains that while totalitarianism functioned through ideology to change people’s minds using violent means in most cases, instrumentarianism seeks to control

people's behavior the technological apparatus (353). In Shteyngart's novel, the technological device that plays the role of the "puppet master" is the "äppärät".

The "äppärät", a device similar to today's smartphone (Shteyngart 61), is the technological tool that enables surveillance capitalism to forcefully exercise its instrumentarian power over the characters' behaviors in the service of the new government's ends. Very similar to today's smartphones and wearable devices, the äppärät enables users to perform multiple tasks at one device: chatting communicating, shopping, watching videos, catching news, and, more importantly, instantly previewing the digital profile of any other user: "Most people carry an äppärät which helps them seamlessly blend material and online worlds. Everybody is constantly and publicly rated" (87, 116). Although the äppärät's network connectivity enables the characters to communicate more quickly and efficiently, the predominant uses of the äppärät in the novel are instrumentarian: to accumulate information about its users, to surveil their activities, and to mediate social roles and communication through its ranking and rating features.

Perhaps the most popular and oppressive function of the äppärät in the novel is its "RateMe" property (Shteyngart 86). Characters classify each other by 'FACing', an acronym for "Form a Community"—an äppärät platform, similar to Facebook, which enables the characters to rank each other according to their preferences. FACing occurs in public spaces where the characters' personal äppäräti are scanned by far and wide installed credit poles, declaring their credit, health and sociability scores openly (89). Depending on the user's score, he/she is ranked as being competent or unfit. If, for example, a character's credit score is high, he/she is instantly instructed to spend more money whenever he/she passes by a credit pole. Every speck of data fed by people

into their äppäräti is turned into a profile. An algorithm converts the data into categorical scores such as "fuckability," "personality," and "sustainability" (88). These ratings are ranked and matched, and the ranking is constantly visible to everybody close by. Thus, instead of being a private room for its users, the äppärät disintegrates privacy and provides unprecedented avenues of power and control. Shteyngart's dystopian version of apps like Facebook and Twitter makes human values and social relations quantifiable, calculable, controllable and therefore nonhuman.

The influence of the äppärät's instrumentarian power extends beyond the crisis of identification to the question of sociopolitical formation. The reliance on social media communication and digital identification produces docile subjects who are not able to act as effective political agents as they live in a virtual bubble: "Far from offering agency, electronic media operate as forms of distraction that immobilize political action. Electronic media do indeed deterritorialize the subject, but for Shteyngart, it is not necessarily into a diasporic community but rather into a virtual community of distracted consumers" (Trapp 64-65). Under surveillance capitalism, the process of subjectification is denied because, as Rouvroy (2013) explains, the system does not "confront 'subjects' as moral agents (avoiding to question them about their preferences and intentions, about the reasons and motivations of their actions) but attunes their future informational and physical environment according to the predictions contained in statistical data body" (146). Individuals act only as data doubles in a 'shareveillance society' in which they must share and surveil the content being shared in order to survive (Birchall 1). In this culture of shareveillance, people's relationship to technology is made possible only through the conditional idea of sharing, resulting in the production of 'anti-politicized' subjects



are beguiled into producing the amount of data necessary for the survival of this system only. Identical to present modes of social media communication, involvement in public life entails constant attunement to media streams and broadcasts, and those who do not subscribe to this model raise suspension and revulsion.

Playing the role of the puppet master that “monitors everything” (Shteyngart 73), the *äppärät* becomes so omniscient and obsessive that its absence is considered a rebellion against the government’s surveilling and hacking policies which is often encountered with correspondingly wary governmental interference. The power of the *äppärät* as a surveilling device is evidenced early in the novel during Lenny’s flight back from Rome to New York after his one-year business trip. When Lenny uses his *äppärät* to scan fellow travelers on the plane for identification, he observes a doubtful passenger: “there was this one guy who registered nothing. I mean he wasn’t there. He didn’t have an *äppärät* . . . . And he looked like a nothing. The way people don’t really look anymore” (Shteyngart 35). Upon the plane’s landing, the suspicious man is instantly arrested by the National Guard. Although his crime is undisclosed, the idea of lacking *äppärät* connection ranks him as suspect. This scene reveals that *äppäräti* usage does not simply enhance one’s connection to others and to the world as proponents of digital utopia often claim. Rather, it constitutes one’s identity and existence: “whether his *äppärät* is missing, not set to ‘social’, or turned off, the man without the data ceases to exist for Lenny and the digital society he inhabits. when the data double is gone, so is the man, despite the undeniable presence of his body” (Kern 151). The *äppärät* constitutes the primary discourse of knowledge and, therefore, the absence of *äppärät* connection renders one’s profile and identity nonexistent.

Lenny himself becomes a source of suspension to the U.S. immigration

authorities because of his outdated *äppärät* (Shteyngart 6). Represented by a simulated beaver, the virtual interrogator misinterprets “some Italians” Lenny utters for “Somalians” thus ranking him as a potential risk (7). Another source of ridicule is the otter’s impaired hearing ability. When Lenny mentions his job in “Indefinite Life Extension,” the otter understands “Effeminate Life Invention” (7). Despite his absurd interrogator, Lenny is genuinely terrified that the mistakes of the otter or his own failure to give the right answer might land him in a mysterious “secure screening facility” (7). He represents the helplessness of individuals confronted with an authority that does not understand them (in this case, literally) but makes fundamental decisions about their identities anyway. Lenny’s misgivings turn out to be understandable when the name “Fabrizia DeSalva” causes his *äppärät* to freeze and permanently flags him (8). He never learns what prompted this fateful error code, just as he never learns how his data is used and what identity the otter digitally fabricates for him. Lenny feels the uncanny presence of an ambiguous authority assessing him with unknown standards and for unknown reasons. The scene has an Orwellian undertone and, thus, calls to mind immediately images of power and surveillance exercised by the Orwellian Big Brother.

In her investigation of the growth and influence of surveillance capitalism, Zuboff notices a transformation in the nature of capitalist power from the Orwellian Big Brother to the digital ‘Big Other’ of surveillance capitalism. Under surveillance capitalism, power is no longer hierarchal and surveillance does not function according to the classical top-down model of control. With the widespread of surveillance technologies and devices and the migration to the Internet of Things, multiple and diverse points of power emerge—all of which are tied to the Big Other’s apron strings. Hidden behind the omnipresent digital

apparatus, the master puppet or the ‘Big Other’, as Zuboff called it, is the new power system that “renders, monitors, computes and modifies human behavior” (376). Zuboff’s notion of the Big Other marks a shift in the conventional symbol of totalitarian power, the Orwellian Big Brother—as the “totalitarian symbol of centralized command and control” (82). Unlike the Big Brother of industrial capitalism, the power of Big Other is more omniscient and pervasive: “there is no escape from Big Other. There is no place to be where the Other is not” (82). The target of Big Other is no longer the means of production but the sources of behavioral adjustment and control, i.e. data.

Traditionally, the discourse of power operates according to the principle of the few watching and surveilling the many. By contrast, in surveillance capitalist systems, the classical apparatus of power morphs from the few watching the many into the many watching the few: “the anxiety lies not with being watched but *not* being watched. There is no longer any shame embedded in the erosion of privacy for the subject. Instead, the subjects are rewarded for forfeiting their privacy” (Pine 11). As Lyon (2018) also argued, to be one of the few watched by the many converts shame into power. For instance, one’s influencing power on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube is measured according to their number of followers and subscribers: “There is a reward for displaying your body and its activities. It is gratifying to be watched; close surveillance is destigmatized” (7). In other words, it is the virtual, rather than the real, that accesses individuals whose online activities “are saturated with data and produce radically distributed opportunities for observation, interpretation, communication, influence, prediction, and ultimately modification of the totality of action” (Zuboff 82). Thus, the ubiquity of surveillance technologies and devices today renders the Big Other superfluous. It is the individual’s yearning for this form of

gratification, i.e. being watched, that stimulates and allures human users to conform to a culture of surveillance capitalism.

### Loss of Connection and Communication

In spite of the widespread use of social media networks and communication devices in the world of *Super Sad*, one of the major problems that faces Lenny and his community is the lack of communication. Lenny, for instance, is not able to fully make sense of the techy language used by younger generations in the novel. Throughout the novel, he alternates between his obsession with books and his futile attempts to comply with business goals and younger people’s language and lifestyle. Therefore, central to Lenny’s crisis of identification is his failure to establish a meaningful relationship with the materialistic power of a digital capitalist culture, represented in the novel by his beloved Eunice:

Eunice and McKay were verballing each other. They were discussing clothes in a way I could not fully appreciate. They were discussing the finer points of a particular dress not made of natural fibers. The waists, stretched, unstretched. Composition—7 percent elastane, 2 percent polyester, a size three, 50 percent rayon viscose. “It’s not treated with sodium hydroxide.” [...] Eunice had put one hand on the shiny white arm of the Retail Girl, a gesture of intimacy I had seen only to one of her Elderbird friends, the plump, matronly girl, with the low Fuckability rating. (Shteyngart 208)

Lenny’s reflection on the language used by Eunice and her friends has many implications of the crisis of communication in the digital society imagined by Shteyngart. Everyone is so immersed in the virtual world created by their *äppäräti* that online communication becomes the norm

and face-to-face interaction is described as marginal and weird. For Eunice, who is fluent in techy language, ‘verballing’ is absolutely absurd: “The moment anyone gets near me or I get near anyone there’s just this STATIC. Sometimes people verbal me and I just look at their mouth and it’s like WHAT? What are you saying to me? How am I supposed to even verbal back and does it even matter what comes out?” (48). Thus, like today’s smartphones, the *äppärät* turns into a technological territory that confines not only its users’ data but also their consciousness: “by reducing human perception exclusively to the binary information readable to the smart machine, the *äppärät* confines both physical and emotional processes of human consciousness within the technological apparatus of its own epistemology” (Schober 365). Lenny therefore disdains the young generation’s immersion into the virtual world of social media, “The world they needed was right around them, flickering and bleeping, and it demanded every bit of strength and attention they could spare” (Shteyngart 84). Thus, although the world of *Super Sad* teems with human enhancement technologies that have been sought to improve people’s connectivity and sociability, they conversely result in a deeper gap between social groups and different generations.

But if it leads to all this social and cultural decline, why are the practices of surveillance capitalism so successful among the novel’s characters and, accordingly, in our contemporary world? Why cannot the characters for example dispense of their *äppäräti* and their oppressive power? The problem is that, like today’s smart devices, the *äppärät* constitutes the primary discourse of knowledge and the main source of identification for its users: it provides them with endless information about the personal data, professional histories, social proclivities, credit ratings, and emotional preferences of other individuals through ranking and community features. In this

way, the *äppärät* becomes so pervasive in people’s lives that they live almost exclusively digitally. One must always be connected to his/her *äppärät* as all sorts of connection—social, political and economic—occur through it. Another aspect are the imperatives of surveillance capitalism—dataveillance, shareveillance and consumerism—which underpin digital culture today. Lenny’s boss Joshie gives a first clue:

“Remember, I started out just like you. Acting. The Humanities. It’s the fallacy of merely existing. FME. There’ll be plenty of time to ponder and write and act out later. Right now you’ve got to sell to live. [...] You’re going to have to learn to surf the data streams better. Learn to rank people quicker. (Shteyngart 65)

Both Zuboff and Shteyngart seem to agree that surveillance capitalist power does not intervene into the social order through brute force. Rather, it infiltrates the fabrics of society via the intriguing forces of instrumentarianism which seeks to replace the values upon which the society is based, such as liberty, equality, hard work and social justice, with new values and standards: dataveillance, shareveillance and consumerism. Joshie’s message is that in order to take part in society, Lenny has to not only sell their products, i.e. immortality, but to sell (i.e. share) himself. The only way to exist in his society is to share, post, sort and rank himself and others. All else is just a fallacy. The problem in such a capitalist system “is not being watched but in *not* being watch” or followed (Pine 3). Thus, Lenny throughout the novel is preoccupied with assessing how he is rated and categorized in comparison with the rest of his community. This form of obsessive sharing is a key feature of all social media networking, as Carr opines: “[b]ecause we’re often using our computers in a social context, to converse with friends or colleagues, to create ‘profiles’ of ourselves,

to broadcast our thoughts through blog posts or Facebook updates, our social standing is, in one way or another, always in play, always at risk” (118). Teens and young people specifically, he writes, who “send or receive a message every few minutes throughout their waking hours,” are intensely preoccupied with staying in the know and in the spotlight: “If they stop sending messages, they risk becoming invisible” (118). In other words, obsessive sharing, ranking, following and posting are what render surveillance capitalism and its tyrannical practices absolute power over its citizens.

In *Super Sad*, this fear of becoming invisible is fully embodied during the “Rupture” (Shteyngart 231)—a protest uprising modeled on the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. The new government’s attempt to suppress it culminates into the loss of connection for all *äppäräti*. Failing to grasp his own existence without *äppärät* connection during the blackout, Lenny describes his crisis of connection and communication as he narrates: “My *äppärät* isn’t connecting. I can’t connect. . . . I can’t connect in any meaningful way to anyone, even to you, diary” (270). The moment of blackout is ineffable and paralyzing as four young people commit suicide out of despair. Two of them left notes, as Lenny writes, on “how they couldn’t see a future without their *äppäräti*. One wrote, quite eloquently, about how he ‘reached out to life,’ but found there only ‘walls and thoughts and faces,’ which weren’t enough. He needed to be ranked, to know his place in the world.” (270). The suicidal incident reveals how Shteyngart is eagerly concerned with unmasking the problem of human communication under surveillance capitalism and the question of what happens when this type of connection is severed? The immediate result is a period of media dysfunction and social disconnection. What is more significant is what the dysfunction discloses about a society that has become progressively yielding to the *äppärät* and its power.

The period of media dysfunction uncovers a fragile system of distorted identification and ineffective social communication. When the *äppärät* connection has broken down, all social communication has failed. “I can understand him,” as Lenny acknowledges, “We are all bored out of our fucking minds. My hands are itching for connection, I want to connect to my parents and to Vishnu and Grace . . . . But all I have is Eunice and my Wall of Books” (Shteyngart 270). Lenny’s remarks on his inability to connect meaningfully to anyone except Eunice and his books has larger implications on the devaluation of social communication under surveillance capitalism. Although he has access to physical connection with Eunice and his books, what he aspires for is digital connection to the *äppärät*—his profile, followers, rankings, updates, credit score and status in a social network. According to Lenny, as well as most of the other characters in the novel, this type of digital connection is the only evidence of one’s identity and existence. Thus, without his virtual profile and the identity it confers upon him, Lenny feels lost and confused.

The abstraction of social relationships into mere digits nudges the individuals’ behavior more into the order of consumerism and shareveillance. For example, Eunice and her young friends compensate their sense of loss and estrangement with obsessive online shopping and data streaming: “They seem like decent girls, effervescent but unsure of themselves, lusting after big-ticket items and some measure of identity, confusing one for the other” (203). The young generation is crippled with the imperatives of the culture of shareveillance which is based on competition and comparison. In order to be identifiable they need to share and compare their profiles to others’ scores and rankings. So, if social relationships are mediated through competition and comparison, then it is impossible for an individual to become a desirable ‘product’ without this sort of identification. Thus,

shareveillance, along with consumerism, becomes a driving force for increasing the power and influence of surveillance capitalism:

The greatest acceleration has come recently, with the rise of social networks like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter. These companies are dedicated to providing their millions of members with a never-ending “stream” of “real-time updates,” brief messages about, as a Twitter slogan puts it, “what’s happening right now.” By turning intimate messages—once the realm of the letter, the phone call, the whisper—into fodder for a new form of mass media, the social networks have given people a compelling new way to socialize and stay in touch. They’ve also placed a whole new emphasis on immediacy. A “status update” from a friend, co-worker, or favorite celebrity loses its currency within moments of being issued. To be up to date requires the continual monitoring of message alerts. The competition among the social networks to deliver ever-fresher and more plentiful messages is fierce. (Carr 97)

In short, surveillance capitalism exploits the urges and desires of the characters to be known and identifiable. The more data the user submits, the more identifiable he or she becomes. Therefore, Shteyngart’s novel is primarily concerned with the nature of human connection and communication under surveillance capitalism where human identities, values and affections are transformed into digits and numbers. Shteyngart proposes that the growing reliance on smart devices and social media networks could have a devastating impact on society, both through the collapse of social communication and the distortion of human identification.

Therefore, Zuboff warns against the techno utopian rhetoric of surveillance capitalist systems to change the world for the better and enhance people’s lives. Under surveillance capitalism, she claims, social media networks are transformed into a site for digital labor and all users’ data and activities are manipulated to maximize profit. Often likening them to the Trojan Horse, she argues that the practices of capitalist techno corporates are cunning and misleading. Instead of enhancing people’s lives, she asserts that the migration toward the Internet of Things and Web 2.0 technologies at the early twentieth-first century has kick-started a “behavior-oriented capitalism”, enabling big tech companies to tailor the consumers’ needs and search queries to their interests: “the ‘dot-com bubble’ at the dawn of the new millennium pushed budding tech companies to re-think their avenues to profit, leading first Google, then others, to the realization that ‘data exhaust’ could be used to sell ads” (Mannov, et al. 110). This transformation is fully realized when ubiquitous surveilling technologies cross the borders of the online (virtual) fora to ‘real’ public and private spaces. The widespread use of the internet and surveilling technologies, Zuboff further contends, ushers in the age of “digital omniscience” (207), marking the beginning of a new trend of “wearables” and other devices that move with us through the physical environment, documenting – and later, modifying – our behavior (208). Leaning on metaphors of territorial conquest, Zuboff argues that, with these connected and smart devices, surveillance capitalists conquer human values and principles (238). Under the guise of techno utopianism, Zuboff claims that the new capitalists wish to create products that ‘nudge’ the citizen toward certain behaviors, often using instrumentarian tools to generate a market utopia for its docile and distracted subjects.

## Conclusion

To sum up, there are notable similarities between the observations of Zuboff and the fictional world created by Shteyngart in *Super Sad*. Both writers provide a critique of digital identification under surveillance capitalism. They agree that surveillance capitalism, with its practices of dataveillance, shareveillance and consumerism, generates a new discourse of power that is based on the instrumentization of human users' data. They also subscribe to the conviction that surveillance capitalism radically transforms the way in which identities are constructed in the digital age. They both attempt to answer the question of how does self-identification change when surveillance capitalism penetrates every layer of social existence? *Super Sad* especially traces the main characters' attempt to appropriate a new, databased kind of identity. The novel presents a dystopic disposition in focusing on the potentially unjust aspects of surveillance capitalism. At the same time, it is much more nuanced and complex in assessing the social and individual changes tied to surveillance technologies. In the novel, the *äppäräti* become the locus of social life and govern everything from professional success to interpersonal relationships, making Shteyngart's imaginative community undeniably readable for contemporary readers.

Technological advancements, no doubt, facilitate the growth of surveillance capitalism as a new sociopolitical system based on data commodification. The utopic promises of enhancement technology, along with the invisibility of their hidden strategies, have intrigued individuals to surrender their privacy and willingly participate in the exploitation of their own data and personal experience as a price to

get the services which have become central to their everyday life in which reality is mediated by virtual modes of communication and existence. The widespread use of surveillance technologies and new social media indicates that engagement with broader issues of surveillance capitalism and digital culture are timely. Therefore, the study calls for further research on surveillance capitalism's engagement with current broader world issues, especially the role of data during the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of surveillance capitalism on the global refugee crisis and World Literature's representation of surveillance capitalist practices.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A zettabyte is a unit of measurement used to describe digital storage capacity. 1 zettabyte equals about 1.1 trillion (1,000 000,000,000,000,000,000) gigabytes, or units of information. ("2016: The Year of Zettabyte")
- <sup>2</sup> The term "Web 2.0" is used by IT experts to refer to the new, more advanced age of Internet usage which is characterized by social media networking and on-demand availability of users' data, allowing big tech companies to connect more effectively with its users. (Jackson 14)
- <sup>3</sup> The Internet of Things (IoT) is a term used to refer to a system of connection that automatically links various devices together via the Internet, without human intervention, to transmit, collect and analyze data and information more fluidly and efficiently. (Executive Office 2)
- <sup>4</sup> Loosely defined as data with a huge size that grows exponentially in time, the term 'Big Data' is used to refer to data sets which are too large and complex that no traditional data management tools are able to store or process it such as trade data and social media data. (Snijders, Matzat, and Reips 2)

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