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Digital Surveillance, Social Media, and Fragmented Identity in Samit Basu's Chosen Spirits

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Abstract

In this paper I will look at Chosen Spirits (2020) by Samit Basu, which is a speculative fiction on life in a digitally saturated and heavily monitored near future Indian city. It suggests that the novel is a critique of surveillance and social media, as they are not just two distinct systems but rather a system within a system, that is, a system that creates a performative and fragmented self. The paper draws upon the theory of disciplinary power (Michel Foucault), societies of control (Gilles Deleuze), the sociology of surveillance (David Lyon), and the surveillant assemblage (Haggerty and Ericson) to examine how a surveillant society is envisioned in the novel: one in which being seen and being recorded are conditions of social existence. Based on the dramaturgy of Erving Goffman, the society of the spectacle of Guy Debord, the simulation of Jean Baudrillard, and the liquid modernity of Zygmunt Bauman, it depicts the negotiation of multiple selves of the novel's characters, their public and private selves, and their commercial selves, as well as the character's lack of coherence of these selves. Basu's fiction, the paper concludes, provides a darkly comic and ethically concerned critique of digital culture, in which intimacy, solidarity, and the recalcitrant opacity of the human heart is the space of resistance.

Keywords: digital surveillance; social media; fragmented identity; spectacle; Indian speculative fiction; Samit Basu; Chosen Spirits

Each age has its own set of worries, and the worry of the age in which we live is the worry of being watched, recorded and rated. The smartphone, the social, the face, and the data-driven state make visibility an essential feature of contemporary life, and the self in the face of visibility has emerged as a key subject of social theory and fiction. Chosen Spirits (2020) by Samit Basu tackles this question in an unprecedented way. The novel is set in a near-future city of India, as entertainment, politics, commercial practices and policing have become one apparatus of attention. A comic sensibility long associated with the Indian writer, Basu imbues the novel with chilling warnings, but not so chilling as to be less fun.

For quite some time, Indian speculative fiction has been working on imagining the futures of a society of extraordinary diversity, inequality and technological ambition. The possibilities and risks of digital life are unusually on display in India, as its digital transformation has seen the expansion of mobile networks, the large-scale rollout of biometric identification and the explosion of social media. Basu's novel is situated within this context but at the same time is not mired in the local. The city he envisions is obviously Indian in its textures, its sound, its differences, its politics,

but it is also a laboratory where tendencies that are evident around the globe are exaggerated (Lyon 20).

This paper argues that Chosen Spirits is an example of subject formation technologies that are both complementary and mutually reinforcing, namely surveillance and social media. In the novel, surveillance does not mean just the state looking at the citizen, and social media does not mean just the citizen looking at the citizen. The two become one, and people are asked to watch and show themselves, the distinction between exposure and monitoring is lost, and the final self is divided between different roles they have to perform for various audiences. The result, according to this regime, is fragmented identity, a self that is divided between screens, scripts, and scoring systems, and a process of trying to unite the self in these parts that can create anxiety and sometimes resistance.

Foucault's description of the panopticon, which suggests that a subject can be disciplined by the fact that they believe that they will always be watched, provides the theoretical underpinning. Subsequent writers have supplemented this account. Deleuze believes that today's societies are no longer primarily based on closed institutions, but on continuous modulation, via codes and data (Deleuze 7). Today, Haggerty and Ericson contend, surveillance is not a single, centralized look but a “diversifying collage” (22) of “heterogeneous systems” that fragment bodies into “flows” of “data” and “reassemble” them as “data doubles.” Lyon, on the other hand, notes that surveillance is an ambivalent practice that can be used as a form of care and protection as well as control and exclusion. These views combine to give a versatile vocabulary with which to analyse the novel.

The importance of a literary approach to these issues shouldn't be lost on anyone. The mechanisms of surveillance can be described in sociological studies, but it is not easy to convey what it feels like to live under surveillance: the low hum of self-consciousness, the ironic distance one can establish from one's image, the difficulty of knowing which of one's feelings are one's own. These textures can be conveyed in fiction, and Basu's novel does just that, with such vividness that the theoretical echo becomes physical. As the author reads it, one realizes that the stakes of surveillance, social media are not only political, but existential: they relate to the possibility of being a self at all. The novel's Indian setting exacerbates this reflexive issue as there is never a socially neutral visibility. Digital systems are in a society that already has unequal access to mobility, safety, money and public voice. What makes a device convenient for one user can cause enhanced scrutiny for another. Speculative power is thus a function of the novel's insistence that technology does not just arrive in an empty social field. It intrudes within a hierarchy and coils around it. The question of whether the surveillance expands, then, is not all that important; rather, it is who's made visible as a necessary condition of the platform's operation, who's visibility remains purchaseable, and who's speech is amplified. Indeed, Lyon's focus on surveillance is on just this social sorting mechanism, by which populations are classified and opportunities distributed unequally (Lyon 20).

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The novel also suggests a separation of information and knowledge. Data can be collected on habits, places, contacts, and faves, and the mass of data can be so large that it doesn't reveal a person's nature. This difference is pivotal to the argument of the paper in relation to the concept of fragmented identity. But a data result can create a very fine-grained abstraction, and an abstraction is a profile. It is created from measurable traces and thus favors what can be counted over what can be only interpreted. This is where literature comes into its own because narrative is concerned with motives, inconsistencies, omissions, and shifts in thoughts that are hard to fit into a database. In reality, the opposition of data to narration will be repeated in the analysis in one of Basu's most fruitful means of challenging the authority of digital systems. Chosen Spirits is an area that is constantly being watched. There are constant streams of data generated by cameras, sensors, platforms, and devices relating to its inhabitants, data which is collected, analysed, and utilized by a mix of government agencies and private enterprise. The difference between the vision of the novel and the older images of the surveilled society is its diffuse nature. There is no central eye, no watch tower. There are many nodes monitoring, and it's not only political, it's commercial too. This is exactly what Haggerty and Ericson talk about when they characterize "surveillance" as an assemblage, a kind of assemblage made up of systems that operate across institutional boundaries, and whose functions involve abstracting human bodies into data flows (Ericson 22).

This diffusion has important implications. The classical panopticon, in which the inmate knows that he is being watched, but he does not know when, generates self-discipline (Foucault 228). The surveillant assemblage is more complex: the watcher is many, multiple, and in some cases, invisible, and the watched may not even be aware that they are being watched. The novel describes this state of being watched in its portrayal of the characters that have to deal with day-to-day life in a world where they feel watched but don't know exactly by whom. They change their conduct, style and dress and expect to be criticised, but are never sure by whom or by what. The outcome is a generalized anxiety that is a symptom, as well as a support, for the system. Michel Foucault states:

"Visibility is a trap."
(Michel Foucault, 200)

Lyon's emphasis on the "dilemmas of surveillance" is partly responsible for the high public acceptance of the system of surveillance in the novel's world (Lyon 20). To citizens, surveillance is a service: it protects them, makes their lives easier and makes it their own. The novel is aware of how these promises can be actually, if not literally, delivered, which is why they are so powerful as tools of control. The first step toward protecting people is getting them to feel protected. Basu's satire is so often revealing of how the language of safety can mask intrusive forms of monitoring. Care isn't the bad word, but the bad word becomes care. Deleuze's idea of the "society of control" sheds light on the mechanism of the city's power of access and exclusion rather than confinement. In this society, he proposes, it is not where people are enclosed, but what they are allowed to go through that is important, and the code that allows or prevents things to pass is the most important

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means of power (Deleuze 7). The novel's city operates in just this fashion. Identification systems, ratings and permissions dictate who is allowed access to which spaces, access to which services, and access to which form of public life. The citizen is not jailed, rather he is constantly sorted and the sorting process is seamless enough to be confused for freedom. Gilles Deleuze explains:

"The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it."

(Gilles Deleuze, 5)

The novel is also remarkable for the role of its state/corporation relations. Basu doesn't paint a picture of a single entity that can be called the government and that monopolizes surveillance, but rather an ecosystem in which public agencies and private companies interact, compete, and share data. This setup mirrors the concept of surveillance capitalism introduced by Zuboff, where the commercial extraction of the behavioural data is the basis of the new form of power that competes and even cooperates with state power (Zuboff 100). As in the novel, and indeed as Zuboff describes, the essential resource is human experience itself – data, patterns, analysis, predictions and sales. The citizen is also a consumer, a product and a raw material. It is significant that this apparatus of surveillance does not appear in the novel as continuous. System failures, corruption, and skimmers exploit loopholes. These misfortunes add to the comic tone of the story, and as much they're there for a good reason. They remind the reader that surveillance is not a technological inevitability, but a social and political structure which is constructed and sustained by humans for specific purposes and motives. In principle, what has been built up can be contested, and the fissures in the surveillant façade of the novel are the sites where contestation starts. Finally, social geography of the city is an issue. Not all are equally subject to surveillance in the novel. Wealthy, powerful or well-connected people can buy privacy or control their visibility, whereas those that are not have limited options of redress and are more likely to be monitored. Overall, this imbalance is indicative of the fact that privacy is a resource that is not equally distributed, and connects the novel's critique of surveillance with a critique of inequality. It is, then, demonstrated that surveillance is not only a violation of the autonomy of the individual but also a means of the reproduction of social hierarchy. Lyon's distinction of surveillance as care and surveillance as control (Lyon 20) can serve as a means of understanding the tension underpinning Lyon's treatment of the city in the novel.

There are lots of systems which are used to track the inhabitants of the city and it is justified by real issues such as crime, disorder, diseases, and accidents. All of these technologies—parent tracking apps, remote monitoring of patients, real-time traffic data for commuters—make for abuse. The great thing about the novel is that it manages to balance both without settling the tension. It reminds us that the infrastructure can serve as a protection mechanism as well as a mechanism of oppression, and that it is not the technology that is the problem, but the relations of power and accountability in which it is situated. Consent is thus at the heart of the matter. In a formal sense, the citizens of this city in the novel have consented to be monitored when they sign

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the terms of service, carry the devices, enter spaces where the cameras are present. But the consent is weak and the choice is to be excluded from the fundamental activities of social and economic life. Anyone who says no is not free but restricted. It is a type of coercion without coercion, and is typical of the control societies to which Deleuze refers (Deleuze 7).

It is the novel's focus on this that shows us the power of the language of choice to cover the lack of genuine options. This logic is reflected in the city's physical environment. Legible public spaces and porous private spaces. Devices that bring the network to each room blur the lines between home and street, personal and public. The result is the loss of what could be called unobserved time: the time when no observer is watching him/her, the time when he/she is not performing for an observer and the time when thought and feeling can grow without being measured. The precondition of reflection is unobserved time, the precondition of the formation of a self that is not simply a reaction to outside expectation. Also, the function of infrastructure in the novel is to be emphasized. Watching is not just the act of watching; it is the conditions (and systems) necessary to make watching happen: surveillance networks, surveillance databases, surveillance standards, surveillance protocols, and the people who keep them working. This hidden substructure is hinted at in the novel; the seamless surface of digital life relies on material and flesh and labour, all largely invisible to the reader. The first step to the critique of this infrastructure is to make it visible, demystify it. Everything that seems to be a part of everyday life is actually a series of choices made in hardware, software and legislation. This infrastructural view also undermines the illusion of a virtual space of surveillance.

Digital monitoring relies on physical systems: cameras, cables, servers, energy, buildings, maintenance crew and supply chains. It is often hard to recognise that it takes space and resources. The novel focuses attention on material conditions that allow for continuous observation, and thus challenges the rhetoric of frictionless technology. The system might seem simple to the user, but it is created by a number of layers of work and institutional coordination. The two models are helpful because they highlight exactly this coupling of the heterogeneous elements to create networks which gather, flow, and recombine information (Ericson 22; Haggerty).

The Politics of Technical Authority shows up again in the problem of error. The classification system does not have to be entirely accurate in order to be used as a vehicle for exercising power; it only has to be accepted as such by the institutions to which it is applied. If the profile is incorrect, it is difficult to know who should correct it: is it the person who was classified, or the system that made the classification. This is an asymmetric vulnerability – one in which people have to demonstrate themselves against depictions of themselves made elsewhere.

The novel's satire is repeated, exposing the absurdity of these situations—and the humour does not dilute the critique. It shows how readily the certainty of the bureaucracy can be transferred from paper to digital. Social media plays a like-for-like role in the novel's social order as do the works of surveillance: it's the carrot. The platforms of the novel's world are the sites where they can be visible, a site of status and income, can show themselves, can seek approval, and can compete with

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others. Goffman's classic theory of social life as performance can help in this regard. According to Goffman, people control the impressions they project on others by adjusting their behavior to fit the audience in front of them and by separating the front stage—the place where the performance is presented—to the back stage—the place where the performer can relax (76). Erving Goffman observes:

"When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them."

(Erving Goffman, 17)

The novel undoes this separation. Once all the moments have been captured and all the spaces have been sung, there is no more back stage; there is only the individual performing a performance. The effects are extremely psychological. The "presentable self" cannot stop working, and conforming to the image across various platforms and audiences is a kind of work. The very nature of the commodified self is what makes it so oppressive: not only is one's picture being sold, but one is forced to work continuously on oneself as if one were a brand on management. Han's interpretation of the neoliberal subject as an entrepreneur of the self, engaging in self-exploitation in the name of freedom, is highly applicable (Han 15).

In this novel's universe, people are directed to think of themselves as a project, to fine-tune themselves and their popularity, and to value themselves in terms of likes, followers and ratings. The competitive pressures become normalization within the individual and failure is felt as an individual failure rather than as the result of a set-up competition. It is one of the most perilous aspects of social media culture and is rendered with keen comic acuity in this novel. Turkle's work on the psychology of digital life indicates that people feel more connected and more alone, with so many tools for communicating but not so many for real relationship (Turkle 20).

This paradox is represented through Basu's characters. They are always in public, but the audiences they have are mostly unidentified, ephemeral, and business-like. The relationship occurs through the screen, intimacy is fraught with the knowledge that it could be seen or captured. Perhaps the novel's most pernicious depiction is the way in which the desire for performance pervades even the most intimate of moments, and that a character can be composing her life experience for an imagined audience even as she is living it. Zuboff's concept of behavioural surplus helps to explain the economic logic at work. The platforms aren't just benefiting from the creation of content by their users; they are also benefiting from the data provided by their users' actions, which is analysed to predict and influence future user activity (Zuboff 100).

In this model, the user is not a customer but is the commodity source. The novel's social media economy is like that and the novel is sensitive to its psychological impacts. Platforms are compelling and designed to elicit emotional responses and compulsion. What emerges is a place where paying attention becomes an enterprise and controlling desire a model of business. One of the cleverest observations in the novel is that this economy teaches a specific kind of authenticity: Authenticity as performance. They are encouraged to look spontaneous, vulnerable, real, and even

if they aren't, they'll get rewarded for this.They're encouraged to look spontaneous, vulnerable, real, and if they're not, they'll get rewarded for it. The more people want to be seen as who they are, the more their expression is influenced by the audience they must please and the medium through which it is to be shared. There are no longer any boundaries between natural state and artificial state and the self that has emerged is not entirely fake, but not entirely real either; it is a hybrid whose reality is produced by its reception. Digital communication has also changed the nature of reputation—in terms of its speed and scale. In a small community, reputation is built slowly and is bound up with personal acquaintance. Reputation can be earned or lost in hours in the network society of the new novel by people who have no idea of the individual they are rating. The fear of public shaming becomes a strong means of conformity; people know that a single wrong move once observed can become permanent. This fear is a particularly contemporary means of discipline, and it is a reminder of Foucault's notion that the power to normalize is most effectively played when people normalise themselves (228).

One aspect that should be pointed out is the connection between emotion and social media. The platforms of the novel are designed to produce emotional reactions as the feeling that has been created is what brings engagement and engagement brings revenue. The four bases of unholiness are trained and sold: anger, envy, longing, fear. As time passes, this engineering becomes a way of experiencing affects, such that users begin to experience their affects in the mode of "how will it look like if I experience it like this?". Therefore, emotion is not only a raw material, but also a product, and the distinction between feeling and performing emotion is blurred. Many of the characters in the novel are not certain of the source of their behavior because they do not know if it is their own or caused by their environment. Self-selling also has a temporal aspect.

You can't keep the attention, so there is an economy of social media, and a need to keep things fresh: new content, new stories, new scandals. The successful “meme” is to be presented again and again and again. The novel conveys the weariness that results, the sense of being caught on a treadmill whose speed is set by forces beyond one’s control. This tiredness is not only individual. It serves a social purpose as a population that is always tired, always engaged in a struggle to look good, doesn't have the energy to question the system that creates it. There is also a gendered dimension of the labour of self-presentation that the novel deals with, albeit on a less developed level. Looking, speaking and acting in a manner that is approved is a burden that is not shared equally by all bodies and those already disempowered are likely to be held to a stricter standard and provided with fewer rewards. Both platforms claim to be democratic and open to everyone, but the novel demonstrates how they create and reinforce current hierarchies of power. In other words, visibility – this is not a neutral good; it's a resource whose advantages and disadvantages are not evenly distributed. The platform economy thus turns identity into an investment portfolio. Users invest time, feelings, look, and personal disclosure to get something in return: attention, influence, work, status, or belonging.

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These returns, however, are not guaranteed, due to the fact that the rules of visibility are not controlled by systems that are governed by users. The outcome is more akin to what Deleuze describes as continuous modulation: the subject is continually examined and recalibrated (Deleuze 7) instead of passing through a single examination and getting a fixed position. The value of social worth is provisional. The key to a successful persona is that it is constantly re-proven, as the metric continues to move. This continuous assessment also impacts on memory. Platforms hold onto old images and old statements, while at the same time they need something new. The user is thus exposed to a dilemma: anything is always available, but the relevance is perishable and must be continually updated. The past can suddenly appear as evidence against the present self and the present self must continue to create to prevent its disappearance. This is the temporal paradox which gives rise to fragmentation. Identity becomes too permanent and not so permanent: permanently archived, but not guaranteed. This contradiction provides comic energy to Basu's speculative world, and the more serious implication is that personal change can be more difficult in a digital memory while digital culture requires constant reinvention. Fragmentation of identity is the main psychological theme of the novel.

The characters are divided between the selves they suggest, the selves they believe they are – between the selves they have seen on screen, and the selves they have met in the real world – between the selves which have been given or assumed by them through classification systems. This is not described as pathological, first of all. It's the way things are in a multi-platform, multi-audience world. The novel reveals, however, that it comes with a price, and that the price is felt as confusion, exhaustion, and a loss of agency. One facet of this situation can be conceived in terms of the data double, as described by Haggerty and Ericson. The data double is a virtual construct of the individual that moves through the institutional systems, and is utilized for decision making in people's lives (Ericson 22). Importantly, the data double is not the individual's to control and can be very different from the person the double represents. Large part of the novel is a drama of coming into contact with one's own data double, with systems reacting to one's profile, which one did not create and cannot fully perceive. In this sense, identity is partly externalised: it's not just recorded in databases and algorithms beyond the individual's control. Another lens is Debord's concept of the spectacle. Debord defines contemporary society in terms of the accumulation of spectacles: "social relations are mediated by images" and "lived experience is replaced by its representation" (24). In the world of Chosen Spirits, it's literally a showing spectacle. There are shows for entertainment, shows for politics, shows for business, and personal shows.Political, commercial, and personal news is all packaged as shows, and entertainment shows are everywhere. The world isn't just entertaining, it structures your perception: it focuses you on some and not others. People who reside in it are starting to become confused about what is real and what is being acted out. Guy Debord writes:

"Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation."

(Debord, 12)

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The idea of simulation carries this argument further, as Baudrillard points out. The contemporary world, according to his account, is one marked by the presence of signs that have no connection to any reality and thus the copy has taken the place of the original; indeed, the distinction between the original and the copy is lost. (Baudrillard 7) The novel's media environment is approaching this. Images, personas, narratives are moving at such a speed and in such a concentration that they're connected to things outside of them. An online identity can be more real than the person itself; staged events can have more impact than unscheduled events. In this world identity is itself a simulacrum, a sign of signs maintained by the gaze.

The image of "liquid modernity" that Bauman uses in describing a world in which social forms have become loose and individuals are constantly creating and recreating their identities (40) is fitting for the novel's depiction of fluid selfhood. In the liquid state, identity is not inherited, it is a project, a work of the mind and body that requires continuous work in the midst of uncertainty. Novel characters reappropriate themselves, take on masks, change allegiances, and react to the evolving algorithms and trends. What this means is that the freedom is very real, but it brings with it insecurity, a lack of stable ground to stand on, and no assurance that the identity that you build today will keep standing tomorrow.

The issue of language and naming is related to fragmentation of identity. People are given handles, usernames, ratings, brands in addition to their names and these "names" have connotations of social status in the novel's world. One might be known by one name and unknown by another; trusted in one name, but not trusted in another. The naming of names is a release and a responsibility. It enables people to discover a variety of selves and to hide themselves from others, but it also breaks the time-line of personal history, meaning that there is no one single story that connects the diverse selves.

Fragmentation's biggest drawback is the loss of continuity in the story. A coherent identity is at least in part based on the capacity to narrate a story of one's life, to view past and present as being part of the same trajectory. These stories are difficult to sustain in a world where selves are created for fleeting audiences and thrown away as trends switch. One of the other hallmarks of a novel's characters living in a perpetual present are that they have trouble conceiving of their future. Their lives are liquid modernists, as Bauman explains, in that they give little weight to the long term, and much more to the short term. (40)

Embodiment is also impacted. The body in the novel is hyper-visible and strangely absent, it is displayed, filtered, enhanced and tracked, and treated at the same time as an object to be managed rather than a ground of experience. Self and body are then the subject of presentation, and the bodily sensations are overpowered by the image of the body. The novel records this disorientation and the discomfort humans experience when they are reminded, by pain, hunger, desire, fatigue and other circumstances, of the persistence of their materiality. These moments serve as a mini-return to reality, a mini-break in the spectacle through which the unscheduled breaks in.

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This is also a point on which Turkle's argument about the decrease of solitude tolerance as a result of digital connection is relevant. A self that doesn't allow itself to be alone is a self that is dependent on the outside for its reality. The novel's characters are a lot of people who do not like being left alone, being left unobserved, being left with no audience. Their restlessness is a symptom of an identity that has become dependent upon the gaze of others and, in order to resolve their restlessness, they need to recover a capacity for solitude, a capacity to be with oneself without being seen.

One additional comment is about the feeling of belonging. One does not become who he or she is solely through self-determination but in response to other people's recognitions of him or her, and the nature of those recognitions determines who he or she becomes. In a culture of display, recognition is superficial – oriented towards the image and not towards the person – and un-fulfilling, in that people do not feel themselves to be known. Hunger for this more profound recognition is what propels the novel's characters on their quest for the less substantial recognition, and their hunger is one of the novel's engines. It is after all, the disparity between what they are recognized for and what they are entitled to be recognized for that is the diagnosis of fragmentation the novel provides.

Fragmentation should not, however, be confused with simple multiplicity. As human beings have always played various roles in various contexts, Goffman's dramaturgical model explains that social life is always social life that involves selective presentation (Goffman 30). The unique challenge of this novel is the separation of these roles from their historical significance and the creation of an environment where they are both searchable, comparable, and monetizable. What used to be a situational performance could turn into a lasting record. Context collapse is a problem of social flexibility, where things that are thought appropriate for one audience are construed differently by another audience based on other expectations.

The novel in turn poses a question whether coherence will be the ideal of identity or not. One doesn't necessarily have to be one whole person to be a meaningful person. The ability to negotiate one's multiple roles without losing one's sense of authorship over them, may in fact be what matters. The crisis starts when platforms and institutions start saying what authors are, based on rep, metrics and profiles. The issue isn't plurality but fragmentation without control – the fragmentation of the self into images that are circulating and returning with effects. The process is double-talked by Haggerty and Ericson, since they focus on the informational fragments that surveillance systems use to build operational identities.

In this context, the issue of resistance is urgent. How do people object to a regime operating on their own desires, felt as pleasure not as pain, and spread over too many nodes to have a centre? There is no easy solution to the novel. It shows a variety of reactions — from cynical toleration to opportunist exploitation to real efforts at subversion — and it is sensitive to the boundaries of each reaction. What becomes visible is resistance in fragments, in the interim, and at times incomplete, but still present. The second approach is to grow opacity. In a world that requires transparency,

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the right to be unknown, to withhold, to keep some thing back, is political. The novel implies that the inner experience, the space of private thinking and feeling, is the final space that is not completely accessible to external systems, and whose protection is therefore paramount for autonomy. Han has suggested that too much transparency robs of trust and the possibility of a genuine relationship (Han 15), and the novel seems to concur. It is during moments of self-revelation, freely granted, without any audience, that it is most affecting, when a character gives way to that person by allowing them to enter into him and he allows the person to enter into him.

In this sense, intimacy is the main opposition of the novel. The ones that are most important in the story are those that don't make sense in terms of giving or taking or showing: friendships, loyalties, loves that last beyond the rule of attention. These are not relationships that end surveillance or social media but are ones that generate zones of meaning that are not entirely colonised by social media or by surveillance. It implies that the experience of being truly known is something that is different from being continuously visible: there is a difference between being truly known and being continually visible. Rather, the most powerful opposition to a market-based set-up for attention might be a willingness to give it away, without the promise of metrics, publicity, or reward. Lastly, it might be worthwhile to consider what the novel demands from its readers. It invites us to think about how we are part of the world it is depicting—and how we are complicit in that world in both ways, big and small—and how we can both uphold and challenge the choices through which we sustain and resist that world. These are not innocent and neutral practices of everyday digital life, and the new invites a re-thinking about the sum of all those practices. The type of reassessment I am suggesting is not a type of withdrawal, but a type of attentiveness: of valuing presence over display, depth over reach, and trust over transparency (Goffman 30).

To summarize, the means of recovering the self that the novel locates are limited yet tangible. These involve the safeguarding of interior life, the developing of intimacy, the use of humour, the building of solidarities, and the ongoing ethical awareness of others. None of these can be the end of a regime of surveillance and spectacle, but taken together they give rise to hope for a life that is not fully shaped by it. The vision of the novel is neither utopian nor despairing in this aspect. It is a vision of humanity that is always to be created, against forces that would like to measure it. Democracy calls for more than individual digital self-discipline. Personal decisions regarding privacy or screen-time are significant, but are not enough to change institutional incentives for extraction and sustained engagement. The social vision in the novel has implications for the collective norms that can be used to regulate what can be collected, who can use it, how it can be contested, and when a person may no longer be a part of a record. Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism is relevant because it doesn't just focus on the intrusive devices as the problem, but on an economic logic that sees human experience as a free source of behavioral data (Zuboff 100). Ethics and political economy are therefore interwoven questions.

However, resistance can't be equated with regulation. The novel's best counter-images are those of relations that defy scoring, that are felt rather than performed before the public, that are not

recorded in the public sphere. These are small practices; or, their smallness is the point. They add value to experiences that the platform culture fails to notice due to the difficulty of quantifying them. The novel's moral imagination, then, is ambivalent and goes in two directions simultaneously: one toward institutional responsibility; one toward the restoration of non-instrumental attention. This moral focus connects the novel to a long literary tradition that considers attentiveness as a moral accomplishment. Patient observation of others that great fiction requires and fosters is the opposite of the extractive gaze of surveillance technologies. Literary attention looks in order to understand, surveillance looks in order to control or profit. Basu's novel, which is comic and quick to read, is a part of this tradition, and the reader is encouraged to practise this second way of looking while also seeing the damage done in the first.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper has been that Chosen Spirits provides an insightful and disturbing reflection on the nature of digital surveillance, social media and identity fragmentation. The novel portrays a near-future Indian city where surveillance and attention economies are syncretized, where one watches and the other invites display, where they work in tandem to create a divided, performative and commodified self. Theories about this regime by Foucault, Deleuze and Ericson, Lyon, Goffman, Debord, Baudrillard, Bauman, Haggerty, Han, Turkle, and Zuboff have shed light on the structures and effects of this regime and the novel has tested these theoretical outlooks and has enriched them with real-life examples. The novel's strength is that it is satirical and at the same time, serious morally. It makes the reader laugh at the absurdities of a ratings-driven, feed-driven world; it also makes the reader feel the pain of such a world in the loss of privacy, the fatigue of permanent performance and the weakening of solidarity. Meanwhile, it will not give up. It is in opacity, intimacy and the ability to attend to others without the exploitation of them, that the human subject, however fragmented, has resources for its reclamation. Basu's novel is an equally appropriate reminder of the most pressing question of our times: who watches us, and who we become when we're watched, in an era where digital technologies are pervading every aspect of life.

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