**Class Presentation – *The Circle* by Dave Eggers**

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1. **Virtuality and materiality**

• Novel poses a tension between the dream of virtuality, transparency, “cloud-like” existence of data-filled world vs. the material “substrate” that this requires, or that can’t be escaped – with political consequences

 - “All That Happens Must Be Known” (Secrets Are Lies / Sharing is Caring / Privacy is Theft)

 - Series of material metaphors to describe this new state of knowledge: breaking down walls, eliminating boundaries, destroying the inside/outside or public/private division – but also *completing the circle* (or “closing” it)

• Steinbeck epigraph – “storing” happiness

• Novel opens with description of physical campus: already the virtual utopia is grounded in / represented by a physical, exclusive utopia

 - the campus embodies history, all happening at once: virtual made material: flatenning time

 - New economy marked by new cubicle

 - Pretty obvious metaphor of antiquated utility at which Mae used to work: building 3B-East, a “tragic block of cement with narrow vertical slits for windows” 9

• Campus is filled with secret rooms like temples, mirroring power structure of Circle world

 - Bailey’s library; server farm underground

• Mae ascends to pinnacle of power after being fully transparent about her movements

 - she had lied about going to Blue Island and about being in Bailey’s inner sanctum

 - but once this knowledge is shared (and she atones for moving in secret), everything is hers

• Individual servers for TruYou data

 - Stewart’s server 219

 - Santos has one, too; as big as buses, hope to get down to human size

 - use huge amount of water

 - Kalden/Ty: “Well, some people like to scatter their ashes and some like to have a plot close to home, right?” 220

• Okay, so those are just reminders that whatever takes place in the virtual world also takes place in the material world, and that the “substrate” teaches us something about the social consequences of this virtual utopia

 - Eggers is inverting the material metaphors of techno-utopianism

• Follow the “ash” metaphor: that’s the dream – ultimate efficiency in terms of a) energy, data, information transparency (nothing wasted) but also b) that social value, resources, people will be consumed for the benefit of someone at the top

• Stenton’s tank and deep sea creatures from the Marianas Trench; first scene: 308-9; second: 476 (shark eats octopus)

 - shark produces only thin layer of ash

 - create a highly artificial “ecosystem” to replicate the trench, with obvious results

 - pretty crude metaphor for capitalism

 - again, there’s a material substrate/equivalent to the “cloud” found in the deepest underground, just as with server farm

• Let’s follow Eggers’ art references

 • Shark = Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde

 • Calder statute that was in the French parliament or something (9) – Mae feels it pointing to her like a finger, welcoming her to the Renaissance

 • Stewart’s server “looks like a Donald Judd sculpture” 219

 • Statute by Chinese dissident artist *Reaching Through for the Good of Humanity:* 345-6

 - very badly misinterpreted as endorsement of the Circle’s project

 - shows Circlers’ inability to symbolically understand material substrate (don’t understand the shark analogy either, Ty has to provide it)

 • Mercer’s antler chandeliers: offered as something outside of this economy, not self-consciously art although Mae winces when Mercer calls it his “work”

• So Eggers calling attention to materiality – but what’s his intent in doing so beyond just showing the dystopian nature of the Circle project?

**(if time):**

1. **Politics**

• Class politics

 - Mercer flying off bridge from past to future

 - Middle-class, old-fashioned parents disappear

• Three Wise Men, Gang of 40 (Gang of Four)

 - Ty/Kalden’s warnings about “totalitarianism”

• Annie’s breakdown over slaveowning family history, parents watching homeless man die – did the family really not know this?

• Eggers sets up a pretty superficial distinction between “authentic” people and elitisit technocrats

 - the lesson of Annie’s experience is ambiguous

 - Mae’s naivete, invention of Demoxie, final scene of wanting to know Annie’s dream-state