

Online VS. Offline

How Dave Eggers (The Circle) and Ernest Cline (Ready Player One) warn against our relationship with online media

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This bachelor thesis analyses the literary techniques used to convey a culture-critical message about our relation to online media in *The Circle* (Dave Eggers, 2013) and *Ready Player One* (Ernest Cline, 2011). Both novels are a pressing warning against our dependence on online media, and attempt to warn their readers against media. They do so by creating a contrast between the dystopian character of the novel and the utopian society as their narrators see it. This contrast is further strengthened by the opposing of the real world and the online world in both novels. Secondly, the protagonists are used to convey the warning. Both have to make a choice at the end of the novel; whether to choose for the real world or remain in the online world completely. *Ready Player One* features a heroic narrator, who makes the heroic choice in choosing for the real world. The protagonist of *The Circle* however remains a flat character throughout the novel, with whom a reader cannot sympathize, and who eventually chooses the online world over the real world. This thesis will show exactly how Cline and Eggers convey the warning in their novels.

Content

- 1. Introduction.....2.**

- Theoretical Framework*
- 2. Utopia and Dystopia.....6.**
- 3. Joseph Campbell and the Monomyth.....9.**

- Literary Analysis*
- 4. Dream or Nightmare?.....11.**
- 5. The Heroic Choice.....18.**

- 6. Conclusion.....24.**
- 7. Works Cited.....26.**

1. Introduction

Online media, varying from social media platforms like Facebook and Snapchat, to extensive gaming systems that include virtual reality, have been experiencing a rapid increase over the last few years. Facebook, the most popular social media platform, has become far more than just a means to contact friends and stay updated on their lives. It provides users with the ability to follow thousands of companies, news agencies, famous people, and even non-profit organizations. Facebook users are not only updated on their friends' lives, but also on the latest global news. Kalev Leetaru mentions in an article for *Forbes* that “today almost two-thirds of the American public get news from social media, with 44% of the public getting its news from Facebook alone”. Scrolling through a newsfeed that used to contain updates from friends, has now become synonymous to reading a newspaper. It is not the only form of media that has steadily gained more influence; another prominent example is the use of virtual reality. Where until a few years ago 3D movies were a luxury in movie theatres, they are now more common than 2D movies. It has developed to virtual reality being featured in performances or theme parks, but virtual reality is also accessible at home. The Samsung virtual reality glasses use your smartphone to create a virtual reality in front of your eyes, whilst the HTC Vive uses virtual reality glasses, two controllers and sensors placed in your living room to recreate the room in your virtual reality game. Such developments show that online media have now become an undeniable part of life, but one that is still steadily increasing.

As with any development, this particular one has inspired many authors for novels. In two recent novels, Dave Eggers and Ernest Cline have explored online media. *The Circle*, published in 2013, features the young graduate Mae Holland, who starts her new job working for the customer service department at the ambitious company the Circle. It is an online media platform, but as opposed to our own world, it is the only social media platform, and it inhabits

far more functions than any of our social media combined. The Circle is nothing if not ambitious, and gradually increases social media use, for example by encouraging users to live stream their lives continuously. With ideals like “Privacy is Theft” and “Secrets are Lies” (Eggers 302), the Circle attempts to rule life in more ways than one: they want to make an account obligatory by regulating taxes and voting through one’s Circle account. The novel ends with protagonist Mae worrying about the few people who gave her a negative review, as opposed to hundreds of positive reviews, and feeling that thoughts should be made public, too.

Where *The Circle* is mostly concerned with social media, Ernest Cline takes a closer look at games and virtual reality in *Ready Player One*. It was first published in 2011, but the novel is set in the near future. Earth is slowly degrading, and mankind increasingly exchanges the depressing reality for the virtual reality world of OASIS. It is a game, but also includes school systems, an international public library and uncountable planets where users can build to their heart’s desire. The novel starts with the death of the creator of the OASIS, Halliday. He leaves behind a series of hints that aid users in a contest, from which the winner will inherit OASIS and the fortune that comes with it. To win the contest, players must complete a series of puzzles and challenges that are based around pop culture from the eighties mostly. Participants of the contest include both enthusiastic gamers, who dedicate themselves to the hunt and collecting knowledge about the eighties, and employees of a capitalist company that wants to win for profitable reasons. At the climax of the novel, a hologram of Halliday appears, asking the winner to remember the real world: “as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it’s also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*” (Cline 364). This proves to be the central message of the book.

Although both novels concern a different type of media, they both contain a critical message about our dependence on online media these days. Both the OASIS and the Circle

are portrayed as utopian, yet both novels are regarded as dystopian novels. They both imagine societies with new developments and their consequences. The result is a dystopia: where people completely disregard reality, or where privacy ceases to exist. Both novels provide a critical warning about our relationship with online media. Because they take place in the relative near future, they have the unique aspect of de-familiarization. Eggers, for example, places the physical company of the Circle on a campus that is very familiar to Silicon Valley, where many technology and media companies are situated.

In this thesis, I will argue that both Eggers and Cline give a culture-critical warning about our relationship to media. They both convey this warning using two major techniques. Firstly, there is a sharp contrast between the utopian society the characters in the novels perceive, and the novels themselves, that are both considered dystopian. Mae says about the Circle: “Who else but utopians could make utopia?” (Eggers 30), and while Wade does regard the real world as dystopian, as the environment is slowly degrading, but the online world of the OASIS is utopian to him: “a magical place where anything was possible” (18). I will analyse why both novels are regarded as dystopian and the strong contrast between the perception of the reader and of the characters in the novel. Secondly, I will use Joseph Campbell’s heroic biography to analyse the narrators of both novels. Joseph Campbell analyses the general structure of heroic tales, such as myths and legends, in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. This serves as the perfect framework to show that whilst Wade is very heroic, Mae hardly is. Both Wade and Mae have to make an important choice near the end of both novels, that essentially asks them to choose between the real world, and the online world. Whilst Wade chooses for the offline world, Mae chooses the online world. Using Campbell’s heroic biography, I will show that Wade makes the heroic choice; Mae does not. Eggers and Cline use their characters to portray what they believe is the right choice to make in such a situation and therefore say something about our relationship to media. In short, this thesis will

analyse exactly how Eggers and Cline attempt to warn us against our close relationship to online media.

2. Utopia and Dystopia

Although I will use the term utopia mostly to refer to the literary genre and the imagination of a perfect state within literature, ‘utopia’ is a broad concept that does not solely refer to its literary aspect. Ruth Levitas explains in the introduction to *The Concept Of Utopia* that the utopian imagination is found in literature, religion, and politics (1). The *Oxford Dictionary* describes it as “an imaginary place or state in which everything is perfect” (1705), but this does not fully cover the complexity of the term. The word ‘utopia’ first comes into practice when More uses it, and has its roots in Greek. It is a combination of the Greek ‘eu-topia’ that means place where things are well, and ‘ou-topia’, that means no place. (Levitas 2). The complexity of the word also starts with More, as he uses ‘utopia’ as both the title of his novel and the title of the island that is the setting of the novel. From here on, ‘utopia’ has both been known to mean an imaginary place, and the particular narrative that became a literary genre (Vieira 4). Like the word, utopia as a literary genre also starts with Thomas More, as his *Utopia* is the first narrative that classifies as utopian literature even today. *Utopia* is divided into two parts: one contains a conversation between More and a friend of his, in which they critique the English society; the second is the tale of the island Utopia, where society is regulated perfectly. Although More is the first to introduce the literary genre, he inspires many other authors like Francis Bacon and Voltaire (Ghesquière 201), and eventually the utopian genre grows to be a major literary genre that is particularly apparent in England, France, Italy and the United States (Vieira 7). Vieira argues that it has a very strict structure, that is similar amongst most, if not all, utopian tales:

“It normally pictures the journey of a man or woman to an unknown place, once there, the utopian traveller is usually offered a guided tour of the society, and given an explanation of its social, political, economic and religious organization; this journey typically implies

the return of the utopian traveller to his or her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society” (7).

Aside from this narrative structure, the utopian tale is often human centred, without divine intervention, and relies on the idea that the visited society is better than the real world (7).

Another important aspect of the utopia as a literary genre is the suspense of disbelief. Utopias are anchored in the real world, and although the utopia is imagined, it still needs to be plausible. Utopias therefore exist on the border between reality and fiction, and implies a “pact between the utopist and the reader: the utopist addresses the reader to tell him about a society that does not exist, and the reader acts as if he believes the author” (8). Therefore, the author cannot go overboard with his imaginations: his fiction needs to be plausible, it cannot be illogical. Utopia as a literary genre can therefore be classified by the imagination of a perfect society, its narrative structure, and it needs to be plausible in order for the text to work.

A first attempt to describe dystopia is often to regard it as an opposite of the utopia. When one consults the Oxford Dictionary, one will find the following definition for ‘dystopia’: “an imaginary place or state in which everything is extremely bad or unpleasant → compare utopia” (476). George Claeyns, however, argues that the dystopia is not as much an opposite of utopia, but rather a consequence of the utopia; dystopia then is also known as the ‘end of utopia’ (108). The heart of the utopia is often “a rigid set of laws” (Vieira 7), which then easily transforms into a totalitarian society, or a police state (Claeyns 108). At the heart of all this lies human behaviour; which is not trusted in a utopian state (hence the rigid laws), but is considered superior in a dystopian state. He provides several examples of societies that are often considered dystopian: the police state (*1984* by George Orwell), an environmentally degraded society (*The Drowned World* by J.G. Ballard), and a society that focuses on

controlling behaviour through genetics (for example *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley). Alan Weiss adds that dystopian societies often emerge out of a crisis, such as “war, overpopulation and resulting starvation, and so on” (126). Furthermore, he states that dystopias often rely on the extrapolation of a certain trend (109): in *The Circle*, this is the extrapolation of social media, where *Ready Player One* takes virtual media and online gaming to a new level. Important here is to realize that it only concerns a dystopia when the extrapolated trend is a trend that is already happening in some way, that is already real: otherwise, it falls into the science fiction genre (109). Robert Evans argues that dystopian tales also nearly always have a message for their readers; that the authors actively want to warn their readers. He claims that dystopian tales are “essentially a warning of what may happen if we do not pay attention to the way in which our social and political institutions develop” (Evans 33). This adds an important dimension to the dystopian tale: not only is it concerned with extrapolating a certain event, but it seeks to actively warn about the consequences of this event. This is important, as the warning that Cline and Eggers give about our relationship to online media can only be analysed if we acknowledge that the novels contain a warning, and that it was indeed the author’s intention to give that warning.

3. Joseph Campbell and the Monomyth

Any society, including the disciplinary society, has literature, has legends and myth. That myth exists in every society, lies at the basis of the research of Joseph Campbell. In 1949, he published *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. In the book, he explains the phenomenon of the monomyth. The theory behind this is that behind every myth, fairy tale and folktale, there is a similar structure, and this is exactly the structure that makes the monomyth such a success. Campbell follows the psychoanalytic approach that was created by, amongst others, Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung, stating that nightmares are similar for everyone. Campbell extends this by stating that “each of us has his private, unrecognized, rudimentary, yet secretly potent pantheon of dream” (4). He continues by illustrating that many images that occur in dreams, also occur in myth, such as the tyrant-monster. Karl Jung has classified these as archetypal images, and the main argument behind the monomyth is that archetypes are the same for every culture. With psychoanalysis as the basis behind his research, Campbell examined a large number of myths and folk tales from different cultures, and from that established a structure now known as the monomyth. This similarity in structure and imagery that exists in myth amongst all cultures, is explainable by what Campbell describes as the primary function of mythology and the rituals that accompany it: “to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward” (11). The hero, as he or she appears in the monomyth, has survived historical limitations, to still be considered as a hero today. The aspects of such a hero then, are all similar, and the reason that they are regarded a hero still. Campbell divides the structure of myths about such a hero in three phases: separation, initiation and return. In these phases, one can find several steps; which I will elaborate on later. Beside these fixed steps in the life of a hero, there are some general characteristics that Campbell points out:

- The hero is either a social outcast or already in a honourable position in society

- The hero misses a symbolic item or relic that comparable characters in his world do have; like the only king without a crown
- There is a minor triumph in a domestic setting, and a major triumph in a bigger setting

The reason behind the hero's quest, the morals that drive the hero, can differ in the monomyth; high morals, for example, occur more often in religious texts than in non-religious texts. Although the driving forces behind the hero can differ, the structure (the monomyth) still remains the same. It consists of three phases: separation, initiation and return, that each have specific steps that the hero follows on his journey. These vary from the initial call to adventure, to the threshold that the hero crosses to enter the 'other world', the world where the actual adventure (initiation) takes place. It always ends with the hero being a master in both his old, home world, and the explored world, and by having the knowledge of both worlds, he does not fear death anymore, and is thus 'free to live'.

4. Dream or nightmare?

If one opens a physical copy of *The Circle*, the cover and first pages are filled with reviews that praise the book. “A genuinely chilling dystopia” comes from the blurb from *Scotland On Sunday*, while the *Washington Post* compares it to *Brave New World*. Similar reviews can be found on the opening pages of *Ready Player One*: Chris Farnsworth writes “Cline blends a dystopic future with meticulously detailed nostalgia to create a story that will resonate”, whilst *io9.com* writes “It goes down like escapism, but sticks with you like a fable should”. All these reviews portray, in one way or another, the genre in which these books fall: the dystopian genre, to which *Brave New World* belongs too. A similar view is expressed by Rachel Berkey, in her list of favourite dystopian novels. She lists *The Circle* and *Ready Player One*, amongst dystopian classics like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *1984*, *Animal Farm* and *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?*. There can be no doubt that we regard both *The Circle* and *Ready Player One* as dystopian, even if the societies portrayed are completely different from one another.

The society of *The Circle* is a modern take on a totalitarian society, that quite resembles a dystopian novel like *1984* in its portrayal of constant surveillance. Whilst *1984* features Big Brother, who is constantly watching, everyone participates in the surveillance of the Circle. Mae presents a new program of the Circle, that allows people to for example search fugitives by using the worldwide network of Circlers. As an example, they attempt to find a fugitive in the UK, and do so within six minutes.

“Within three minutes, there were 201 photos posted, most of them close corollaries to the face of Fiona Highbridge. On screen, votes were tallying, indicating which of the photos were most likely her. In four minutes it was down to five prime candidates.”

(Eggers 449).

The society in *The Circle* is very similar to the disciplinary society Foucault theorizes in his *Discipline and Punish*. It is based on the panopticon: a prison system where all prison cells surround one supervisor cell. The supervisor can survey all the prisoners at any given time, but the prisoners cannot see when exactly they are being surveyed; they are only aware of the possibility (Foucault 200). This leads to an improve in their behaviour, because they are under constant surveillance. Mae experiences this herself when she is the first to go fully transparent, meaning that she broadcasts her life every minute of the day, for anyone to see. She is the ultimate proof of the success of the panopticon put into practice: “Every day she’d done without things she didn’t want to want [...] And she found it freeing. She was liberated from bad behaviour” (Eggers 329). The disciplinary society is the panoptic system put into practice, but rather than only focussing on the negative sides of society (criminals and their punishment), it also uses surveillance for positive effects and neutralizing negatives (211). This is the kind of society that the Circle aspires to create: one where constant surveillance will not only be helpful in finding criminals, as exemplified above, but also neutralizing dangers, and creating a society where anyone can share anything with anyone. This is also visible in the three ideals the Circle adapts:

“SECRETS ARE LIES

SHARING IS CARING

PRIVACY IS THEFT” (Eggers 303).

In other words: the Circle wants to eliminate secrets and privacy through their constant surveillance, and create a society where that surveillance is used to share experiences: “Why

shouldn't everyone see whatever it is they want to see? Why shouldn't everyone have equal access to the sights of the world?" (300). But rather than creating a disciplinary society that attempts to neutralize negatives, the Circle wants to eliminate them completely: no more secrets, no more privacy. It is exactly this totalitarian aspect that makes the Circle dystopian, and the fact that the Circle controls it all.

"If you can control the flow of information, you can control everything. You can control most of what anyone sees and knows. If you want to bury some piece of information, permanently, that's two seconds' work. If you want to ruin anyone, that's five minutes work. How can anyone rise up against the Circle if they control all the information and access to it?" (482).

The dystopian aspect of the Circle is perfectly explained by Ty, one of the Three Wise Men who originally created the company. He enlists Mae's help in taking the Circle down, because he does not want a fully transparent society: he believes in secrets, in privacy, in anonymity. He tries to stop the Circle, and fails, because it has already progressed to a point where Mae has the ability to destroy Ty, and she chooses to do just so, rather than helping him. I will explain Mae's choice here in more detail in the next chapter: important here is to realize that the Circle is dystopian because they will not only eliminate any form of privacy; they will be the only one with power enough to control everything. *The Circle* shows us how current technological developments are changing what it means to be human (Moynihan n.p.)

Mae Holland, however, does not see anything of the dystopian character of the Circle. She is drawn to the company like anyone else: "A million people, a billion, wanted to be where Mae was at this moment [...] working for the only company that really mattered at all (Eggers 3). Mae, like all other Circlers except Ty, genuinely believes that "the utopia is

achievable through the use of social media” (Levina 280). The utopian character of the Circle lies in its mandatory participation: everyone becomes invested in the society, and it is in everyone’s best interest to work to create a better society. Part of this is the elimination of lies, of criminality, of fraud. The society that the Circle is trying to achieve is a “participatory democracy” (280), that is focussed on the individual citizen’s wellbeing rather than the general wellbeing of the state: and in doing so, it guarantees the perfect society. She regards a world without media as dystopian: after she takes down Ty with his plans to stop the Circle, she says: “To have gotten so close to apocalypse – it rattled her still” (Eggers 489). The only time where she feels upset with the Circle’s advancement, is when it is inaccurate. During the presentation of LuvLuv, a program that gives you the most accurate information about someone, so that you can for example have the perfect first date, the information the program presents about Mae is mostly correct, but not entirely. She becomes upset, leaves the presentation before it ends, and afterwards realizes that she was upset because the program was not perfect. “It was some kind of mirror, but it was incomplete, distorted” (125). She is not upset by the ability to distinguish her favourite movies or her favourite restaurants based on her online profile, she is upset by the fact that it is not perfect. This ultimately shows that to Mae, the society the Circle wants to create is ideal: and she will do anything to complete that ideal. Marina Levina argues that this is the most interesting aspect of the Circle (280): the ability of this dystopian novel to portray a utopian society, that is completely accepted by the characters in the novel. It is the extrapolation of social media, and it works because it still makes sense. The suspense of disbelief that is crucial to any utopian or dystopian tale, as mentioned above, is there because Mae Holland and her fellow Circlers completely believe in the utopia the Circle promises.

Unlike Mae Holland, Wade Watts, protagonist of *Ready Player One*, realizes at the end of the novel that the utopian world of the OASIS is perhaps not the utopian world he has always made it out to be. Unlike *The Circle*, the sharp contrast between the dystopian and utopian character of the novel is not only in the perception of the reader and the characters, but also within the novel itself. The world Wade lives in is a dystopia in itself; an environmentally degraded society, that completely opposes *The Circle* with the chaos that has spread everywhere: there is an energy crisis, the climate is changing rapidly, and there is constant war. All this happened because society burned so much fossil fuel that there is now no longer enough energy for the world; resulting in wide-spread chaos. “Human civilization is in ‘decline’. Some people even say it’s ‘collapsing’” (Cline 18). Ernest Cline extrapolates the threat of climate change, and combines it with the trend of online gaming and virtual reality to create the utopia presented within *Ready Player One*. This is the OASIS, an online virtual reality world. Almost anyone has access to it, and it has passed far beyond any game: it is a world, where children go to school and there is an indefinite amount of planets to visit: most of humanity “used it on a daily basis” (Cline 1). People massively escape the terrifying reality of life on earth in the OASIS, which becomes clear when Wade explains that he found out about the state of the Earth in the public library of OASIS, rather than experiencing or even communicating about it in real life. The OASIS is mankind’s escape: “I had access to the OASIS, which was like having an escape hatch into a better reality” (18). To Wade, the OASIS is not even simply a virtual reality game; it is reality; yet at the same time, it is “a magical place where anything was possible” (18). It is part of Wade’s learning process that he eventually realizes that the OASIS is not the utopian reality he makes it out to be; I will return to this in the next chapter.

But the OASIS is not merely a game that is used as an escape: part of the OASIS are many schools that are considered of higher quality than schools on Earth. Bullying is much

less of a problem in the OASIS, as curses are prohibited by the system; teachers can log in from anywhere on the world, making way for a higher level of education. Even the buildings are better; because building costs or space are not important, “so every school was a grand palace of learning” (Cline 31). Chip Stewart considers *Ready Player One* a utopian example of the future of copyright law: as the library of the OASIS is accessible to anyone, and its collection is greater than any library at this day.

Ready Player One clearly presents the offline world as the dystopia: Earth is dying, there is always war and many people are starving. The online world of the OASIS is their utopia; their escape, where they do not have to think about the reality. There is a clear boundary between them, illustrated for example by the actual log in, that requires a console, gloves and a visor. There is a logging in screen: “These three words were always the last thing an OASIS user saw before leaving the real world and entering the virtual one:

READY PLAYER ONE” (Cline 26).

This boundary slowly disappears as the novel progresses. At a certain point, the capitalist company IOI who wants to monetize the OASIS tries to enlist Wade to their cause. He refuses, and discovers that the IOI have discovered his real identity, something that he thought to be impossible. He does not fully realize the consequences until they bomb the trailer park he lives in; he only survives because he never logs into the OASIS from home. From here on, the hunt continues in the real world: Wade hides, and infiltrates the IOI in the real world to ensure that they cannot win. Therefore, the strict boundary between the dystopian and utopian societies in *Ready Player One* is already disappearing before Wade must choose between them. I will return to his choice in the next chapter.

Both novels are considered dystopian, while the societies they portray are considered utopian by their characters. Whilst Mae Holland completely believes in the utopian ideal the Circle promises, Wade recognizes the difference between the dystopian reality and the

utopian virtual reality; eventually, he discovers that the OASIS might not be as ideal as he has always thought it to be. This difference remains important in the next chapter.

5. The Heroic Choice

Campbell's monomyth gives a basic outline for the heroic adventure, based on hundreds of myths from all ages and societies. It thus gives an image of what has been considered heroic for centuries in different cultures. Although Campbell's monomyth may not be applicable to all heroes of the modern literature, it certainly is still successful: Star Wars author George Lucas based the original movies on the monomyth, and although the first film came out forty years ago, it still is insanely popular today. Therefore, it can be used to identify whether Mae Holland and Wade Watts conform to the heroic ideal. This is important because a heroic character is more likely to persuade readers of their motivation behind their choices: in this case, the choice for online media or the real world.

Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox consider Wade a heroic protagonist "who must choose between direct contact with "reality" and the allure of a virtual environment" (563). They point out that the former is the 'heroic act', and that even amongst science fiction authors and fans, there is a general understanding that fully committing to a virtual environment like the OASIS comes at the cost of the reality (564). The question then is: how does Cline show that Wade makes the heroic choice? And does this apply to Mae as well?

Wade is immediately portrayed as an important character at the very start of the novel through his characterization. He is introduced as important, as he is the first one to decipher the first clue of the hunt: "Dozens of books, cartoons, movies and miniseries have attempted to tell the story of everything that happened next, but every single one of them got it wrong. So I want to set the record straight, once and for all" (Cline 9). This image is further strengthened when Wade explains the name of his online avatar. Starting when he first logged into the OASIS, he continuously changed the name of his avatar until the start of the hunt, when he permanently settled for 'Parzival'. His name is a direct intertextual reference to Percival, one of the heroic knights from Arthurian legend. Wade's permanent name change

coincides with the first step of Campbell's monomyth: the call for adventure. Here, it is a literal call from Halliday and his avatar Anorak, to which Wade immediately responds. He crosses his first threshold when he climbs down the tomb where the first challenge is set. Campbell explains that the first threshold often occurs in "the regions of the unknown (desert, jungle, deep sea, alien land)" (79). The tomb is set in the dark forest, and is in itself an unknown, creepy place: "the skull-topped hill that marked the tomb" (Cline 76). The series of challenges Wade faces subsequently represent the belly of the whale (the first challenge that makes the hero appear dead) and the road of trials, as he deciphers clues and completes challenges, that all require different skills. He experiences female temptation very early in the novel, where he helps out his love interest Art3mis: "For some reason I felt compelled to help her, even though I knew I shouldn't" (Cline 99). He continues his communication with her, even though she stresses that they should both focus on the hunt rather than each other. He has an important realization at the point where the IOI attempt to kill Wade in the real world; as explained previously, this is one of the moments where the line between the reality and the virtual world disappears, and this provides Wade with a realization; an apostasis, in Campbell's words. The apostasis is a critical observation that changes the hero's direction (Campbell 152): this is the point where Wade decides that he must continue the hunt in the real world, as he infiltrates the IOI.

The return phase, after the quest is completed and Wade wins the hunt, is the most interesting part of Wade's story with regards to the warning Cline wants to convey. The last two steps are 'master of two worlds' and 'freedom to live'. The hero now fully understands both worlds, and he can travel freely between them, without any consequences. After winning the hunt, Halliday tells him that he hopes he will not only live in the OASIS. "Don't make the same mistake I did. Don't hide in here forever" (Cline 364). This is the point where Wade must make a choice. Halliday gives him a red button that, if pressed, will terminate the

OASIS entirely, and leaves him an important piece of advice. This is a climactic moment in the novel. The lines between the real world and the virtual world have been disappearing; at this point, Wade has met his virtual best friend Aech in real life (and discovered that she is in fact a girl, further blurring the lines between real and virtual). The climax is announced by a change in time, as *Raffung* changes to *Deckung*: up until this point in the chapter, a lot of time has been covered in a few sentences. “It took me only a few minutes to reach the Secret Room” (Cline 362), but when the egg (the object the hunt was about) appears, story and plot are running simultaneously. “As I did, there was a brilliant flash of light, and then I saw that my avatar was no longer holding a joystick” (362). This is the point where Wade proves that he is a hero: because at this point, he has all the power. He can either terminate the OASIS, continue his life in the OASIS now that he has access to everything in its universe, or return to the real world and follow Halliday’s advice. Wade chooses to restore the avatars who died in the last fight of the hunt, but then logs out to find his virtual reality crush Art3mis in the real world. He does not terminate the OASIS, but he logs out, and “for the first time in as long as I could remember, I had absolutely no desire to log back into the OASIS” (Cline 372).

Because the moment where Wade has to choose is such a climactic moment, his choice becomes important, too. Throughout the novel Wade has been portrayed as a hero; which makes his choice heroic too. He chooses real life, but he does not choose to terminate the OASIS. Ernest Cline here warns us against our relationship with online media, but does not state that such media should disappear completely.

Yet where Wade is so obviously heroic, Mae Holland is anything but. She is not active at any point in novel, but always remains passive. She applies at the Circle because Annie had urged her to do so, she replaces her laptop with a Circle-issued tablet and throws the laptop away because she is urged to do so, not because she wants to. She remains a flat character throughout the novel, and even though she is the narrator of the novel, one learns little about

her personality. She works hard to please her superiors, but is also pressured to do so: “Well, you have a certain, well, I don’t want to say quota, but there’s a number of questions that would be ideal and expected for you to answer in a given workday” (Eggers 229). Rather than forcing their employees to perform to a certain extent, they are expected to perform something, and to continuously try to raise their performance. Everyone else does so. The first time Mae appears on stage, to talk to a big audience about her ideas, it is because Bailey, one of the Three Wise Men, wants her to be. The ideas she speaks about, the phrases she utters, like sharing is caring, are her own, but have been rehearsed before with Bailey, so that her speech will be exactly how Bailey wants it to be. The only two characteristics that can be described to Mae are slightly competitive, but mostly very passive. She only acts when someone else pushes her to, making her a very hard character to empathise with. She does not, like Wade, follow a heroic journey. This is partly because she never acts herself, only when urged to act. This is mostly because where Wade follows a goal, Mae does not. She quickly rises within the Circle, but often because of others, and she expresses little enthusiasm about it. Michael Groden classifies a flat character as a character who is entirely built around one idea or characteristic (np), without any character development. This perfectly describes Mae: she does not learn anything throughout the novel except how to grow within the Circle, and this is the only thing at all she expresses a little enthusiasm about.

According to Alan Weiss, Mae falls into a long tradition of dystopian ‘heroes’, to which Wade is an exception. He states that dystopian heroes are hardly ever actually heroic, because they eventually always fall to the dystopian regime. “By definition, a dystopian tale takes place in a world in which it is ‘too late’ to act, a world in which there is no longer a possibility of resistance” (Weiss 122). He names *1984*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Brave New World* as examples of these types of dystopias: part of the nightmare is that it is inescapable. This certainly applies to *The Circle*: there is no more escape possible for Mae, as she

completely believes the utopia they promise, and thus, the Circle closes. She has a choice: Ty enlists her help in a last, desperate attempt to stop the Circle's plans, but Mae refuses, regarding a world without the Circle as an 'apocalypse'. Interesting here is to note that Mae never even actively tries to rebel against the Circle; even in this, she is passive compared to the 'dystopian heroes' Weiss names.

Ready Player One, as already shown above, does not fall into this pattern, as Wade eventually does choose for the real world and thereby escapes the dystopian world of fully living in the virtual reality. A possible explanation for this is that Ernest Cline chose to not follow in this line of tradition, but rather write a dystopian novel that has a mostly happy ending; after all, the environment is not saved yet. Ernest Cline would not be the first author to write a dystopian novel that does allow an escape from the dystopia: *Fahrenheit 451* shows that although it is the life of a fugitive, there is a place for those who still read and cherish books, and Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* eventually changes his life for the better, as he expresses the desire to settle down and form a family.

All in all, there is an obvious difference between the character of Wade Watts and Mae Holland. Wade is continuously portrayed as the hero of the novel, and he eventually makes the heroic choice by choosing the real world over the virtual one. Important to realize is that Cline does not necessarily state that online media should disappear; merely that one should always remember the real world, too. Mae on the other hand remains a flat character throughout the novel, she is always passive and prompted by others rather than taking action herself. She falls into a line of dystopian protagonists who fail at rebelling against the dystopian society they live in; but even here she is passive, as she never wants to rebel. She fully believes in the Circle, and the novel shows that there is no escape possible from this society: "They needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait" (Eggers 490). Whilst Cline

uses his heroic character to portray the right choice, Eggers uses an unsympathetic character who ultimately fails to act, to show that this is not a desirable society.

6. Conclusion

Ernest Cline and Dave Eggers both portray an important message about our relation to online media these days. In a time where media becomes increasingly important, their novels become less and less futuristic. *Ready Player One* is set in 2041, but many aspects of the technology Cline describes are already present in our modern day society. *The Circle* is eerily familiar to us; think of major companies like Facebook and Google, whose influence reach further and further.

Cline and Eggers both provide a warning: to be aware of the rise of online media, and to be critical about our relation and dependence on media. Both novels are regarded as dystopian, but are considered utopian by the characters in both novels. The utopian world is the online world, and there is a sharp difference between the online and offline world in both novels. But where the online world gradually becomes the only world in *The Circle*, as the Circle closes and there is no escape possible, in *Ready Player One* the lines continuously blur until it becomes clear to Wade that they are not separate from each other; and eventually he realizes that he cannot live in the virtual reality alone.

Both Wade Watts and Mae Holland have to make a choice near the end of the novels: do they choose the online or offline world? Wade makes the heroic choice by choosing the real world. By continuously portraying him as the hero of the novel, Cline shows that his choice is essentially the right choice: that a fully virtual world is not desirable. Eggers, on the other hand, has Mae as his protagonist. Mae remains a flat character throughout the entire novel, unsympathetic and passive; she only takes action when prompted to do so. She falls into a tradition of dystopian heroes who fail to rebel against the dystopian society; but Mae does not even want to. When she is given the choice between the online world and the offline world, there is no doubt for Mae as she chooses the online world.

Cline and Eggers create an important message in an age that has been referred to as the digital age. They remind us to be aware of our relationship to online media, and how our culture slowly becomes more dependent on online media. In an age where social media are increasingly used as people's primary news source, but also when virtual reality slowly makes its way into our daily lives, these novels could not be less important. Both convey a pressing warning against the direction our lives are going, as they de-familiarize us and remind us about the worst possible consequences of such developments.

Should one want to further study this subject, there are quite a few novels that continue this line of thinking. *1984* by George Orwell has already been named a few times in this thesis as an example, and is very similar to *The Circle* in terms of a disciplinary society and constant surveillance. A film like *The Matrix* has a similar dilemma to the choice Wade and Mae have to make, but there are also many theories that go deeper into this line of thinking. Examples are Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, that critically observes mankind's relationship to technology, or Gilles Deleuze's *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, who continues Foucault's disciplinary societies and theorizes about the 'dividual'. It offers some consolation that Dave Eggers and Ernest Cline are not the only authors with a critical view of the rise of online media.

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