

**INTERROGATING ANAESTHETICS,
AFFIRMING SOUSVEILLANCE: A STUDY
OF THE SELECTED CYBERPUNK
DYSTOPIAN FICTION**

BY

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**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES
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Thesis Title: Interrogating Anaesthetics, Affirming Sousveillance: A Study of the Selected Cyberpunk Dystopian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Title: Interrogating Anaesthetics, Affirming Sousveillance: A Study of the Selected Cyberpunk Dystopian Fiction

This study seeks to examine Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990). It seeks to investigate how the transformative power of AI goes beyond mere technological innovation by numbing society's collective awareness. When technology floods our senses, we live our lives under a totalitarian regime of machines and AI. In order to analyse my primary texts, I employ Susan Buck-Morss's concept of "Anaesthetics" and Steve Mann's idea of "Sousveillance", further elaborated by Kelly Ross in her essay "Watching from Below: Racialized Surveillance and Vulnerable Sousveillance". "Sousveillance" is a form of inverse surveillance in which individuals or groups use technology and AI to regain control over their representation and information. This alters the power dynamics of surveillance practices. "Anaesthetics", according to Morss, refers to the numbing or desensitising effects caused by pervasive technological advancements. The research seeks to investigate how "sousveillance" acts as a counterbalance to "anaesthetics" and provides means for individuals to exert agency, challenge power dynamics, and foster transparency. I use Catherine Belsey's model of Textual Analysis as a research method in order to closely analyse the interplay of "anaesthetics" and "sousveillance" in the selected texts. This study finds that technological and AI-driven systems function as anaesthetic mechanisms. It also finds that constant surveillance and information overload foster emotional detachment, producing passive conformity within dystopian societies. At the same time, sousveillance emerges as a counterforce, enabling ordinary citizens to document injustices, reclaim agency and consciously use technology. Resistance in these narratives does not manifest through large-scale revolutions but through subtle, everyday acts of observation and subversion. This research contributes to the production of knowledge by enhancing the scholarly understanding of how digital dominion is contested and negotiated, and how the selected fictional works echo the enduring human pursuit of autonomy in the midst of digital surveillance.

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study examines cyberpunk dystopian fiction in order to see the impact of technology on our lives and how we may resist the totalitarian regime of AI. In order to pursue my argument, I analyse Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990) by employing Susan Buck-Morss's concept of "anaesthetics" and Steve Mann's idea of "sousveillance." My research seeks to investigate how the transformative power of AI numbs our collective awareness, and how in the modern age, people live under a totalitarian regime of machines and Artificial Intelligence¹.

"Anaesthetics", according to Morss, refers to the numbing or desensitizing effects caused by pervasive technological advancements, while "Sousveillance" is a form of inverse surveillance. Individuals or groups use technology and AI to regain control over their representation and information, altering the power dynamics of surveillance practices. Therefore, "sousveillance" acts as a counterbalance to "anaesthetics", providing a means for individuals to exert agency, challenge power dynamics, and foster transparency (21).

In the modern era the convergence of digital domain and physical lives has made society closely connected to technology creating new ways in which power works and systems may be controlled. A formidable manifestation of this is digital authoritarianism—a phenomenon that leverages technology to curtail freedom, monitor populations, and enact control in unprecedented manner. The allure of the cyber space and the sense of anonymity it promises has faded over time, as a constant surveillance now watches almost everything we do online. The omnipresence of AI in our daily lives has become so normalised that its influence often goes unnoticed. From smart assistants managing our schedules to algorithms regulating our online content, AI operates seamlessly in the background shaping our personal experiences and interaction with society. The pervasive influence of AI, whether through algorithmic bias, dehumanisation or the erosion of human connection, gradually dulls

¹ I have used AI instead of Artificial Intelligence.

our collective awareness and ethical sensitivities. Due to overstimulation created by technology, the experiences become impoverished and, ultimately “sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control” (Morss 23).

The term "anaesthetics", has been used in Susan Buck-Morss's² essay “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, refers to the sensory experience of perception, particularly when it is dulled or numbed. The term plays on the concept of "aesthetics," which deals with the nature of beauty, art, and taste, the creation and appreciation of beauty. While aesthetics typically involves sensitivity to art and beauty, "anaesthetics" as defined by Buck-Morss would imply a kind of desensitisation or reduction in sensory experience, which is a key theme in Walter Benjamin's critical theory. The term "anaesthetics" itself is derived from the Greek word "anaisthēsia," meaning "without sensation," and it is traditionally associated with the practice of medicine where it refers to the absence of feeling usually by the intentional blockage of nerve impulses.

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence and technology into the fabric of society has ushered in an era of unprecedented innovation and connectivity. AI-powered deepfake technology is able to form hyper-realistic images and videos that manipulate faces, voices, and even entire personas. The proliferation of such content on social media challenges the authenticity of visual information leading to a society where discerning truth from falsehood becomes increasingly challenging. As intoxication becomes normal it dulls sensory perception, potentially leading to overwhelmed or desensitised interaction with technology (Morss 23).

Society is greatly affected by the tight control imposed by technological frameworks, especially those related to surveillance. This is particularly evident in today's rapidly developing digital age, where technology aims to enhance connectivity and optimize operations. Technological improvements have facilitated significant innovation but have also established a new kind of authoritarianism characterized by pervasive digital monitoring. It also renders citizens docile and

² An American Sociologist and a professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology. She has written several books on human relation with technology.

submissive. "Automated surveillance is 'operational' in the sense that it privileges intervention over the symbolic power of the monitoring apparatus; it is 'environmental' in its mode of governance and 'frameless' in scope." (Mark 184). The "anaesthetic" effect, where people become passive or lose interest in resisting, is especially common in cyberpunk dystopian stories. In this context, I explore both Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990) to present narratives that examine sousveillance strategies that redirect surveillance onto the system enabling individuals to reclaim autonomy and challenge the pervasive control exerted by technology.

In a technologically advanced world, there are countless ways of surveillance strategies practiced by the authorities. Using surveillance cameras, encryption devices social media etc. The individuals are continuously looked at and their daily lives are in the hands of the ones in power. Various social media sites are in action for instance Facebook, Instagram Google meet Twitter, Thread, LinkedIn etc. collect our information and this information is used without our consent pertaining to the fact that privacy is just an illusion. "We expect more from technology and less from each other. Social media platforms utilising "AI algorithms curate content tailored to users' preferences" (Schmidt et al 50). While this enhances user experience it also contributes to the formation of unreliability. Individuals are exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs; curated by the totalitarian state creating a distorted reality that anaesthetises them to diverse perspectives and alternative truths making them a docile subject.

However, Michel Foucault in his book, *History of Sexuality* (1976), points out regarding power, "Where there is power, there is resistance." (95) the concept of "Resistance" is used in a broad sense to refer to any act that challenges, subverts, or pushes back against dominant systems of power and control. This may include active forms, such as protest, critique, or sousveillance and also passive or non-participatory forms, such as complete disengagement from technology as a means of rejecting digital control. This research refers to a more subtle form of resistance. In this study, the concept of "Sousveillance" is treated as a distinct form or subset of resistance, one that engages with technology critically rather than rejecting it outright. Therefore,

wherever I use the word “resistance”, it needs to be read as a subset of sousveillance. Sousveillance by Steve Mann, focuses on the recording by participants within an activity, turning the gaze back upon the watchers, effectively becoming a tool of empowerment and assertion. The term is derived from the French word "sous" (meaning "below") and "veillance" (meaning "watching"), and it denotes a recording done by a participant in an activity, effectively "watching from below" (Mann and Ferenbok 19).

Sousveillance a term introduced by Steve Mann³ in 2003 to denote “inverse panopticon” (Mann et al. 332) or the act of civilians monitoring those in authority. This notion is not only an inversion of monitoring but a key act of regaining autonomy via technology. Sousveillance mitigates the numbing impact of digital monitoring by enabling people to see contest and disrupt the oppressive systems affecting them. This facilitates a transition from passive subjects of surveillance to active agents of resistance. The rapid growth of technology has introduced many social challenges. One of which is digital authoritarianism. The form of control where technology is given the right to monitor people, and restrict their individual freedom is standing out as a major concern. “The modern digital age, delineated by its swift technological progressions, has in turn birthed multifaceted challenges, with digital authoritarianism looming as a formidable concern. Delving into resistance against such authoritarian inclinations, especially within the sphere of fiction, furnishes critical insights into how societies discern, respond to, and potentially mitigate these oppressive mechanisms” (Dragu and Lupu 4). This study intends to grasp the diverse manners in which individuals and communities enforce their autonomy and defiance against the tightening grip of digital surveillance and control.

One of the selected novels, *Chosen Spirits* (2020), is written by Samit Basu. Basu is an Indian novelist and a filmmaker. He explores diverse genres in his works including science fiction and fantasy. He also writes for children and is famous for his graphic novels, short stories, and a film, *House Arrest*, which he has directed for Netflix. Basu's notable works include the *Game World* trilogy (2003), the duology

³ A Canadian researcher, inventor and is known as the father of wearable computing. He formed fundamental grounds for Augmented Reality (AR), google glass and cyborg technology.

Turbulence and Resistance (2019), and the more recent one is *Chosen Spirits* (2020) (published as *The City Inside* in the US). He blends the elements of Indian culture with social commentary, technology, and mythology in his works.

The second novel *Earth* (1990) is written by David Brin. Brin is a prominent figure in the world of science fiction. Brin recreates the real scientific concepts and theories into compelling narratives. He is not only a fiction writer but also a scientist with a Ph.D. in Physics. He explores complex themes in his stories like transhumanism, the intricate relationship between humans and other intelligent species, and the profound impact of technology on society. His works invite readers to ponder the future of humanity and its place in the cosmos. He has won numerous prestigious awards in the science fiction such as Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Awards. His notable works include *Uplift Universe* (1985) and *The Postman* (1985).

The themes of sousveillance and resistance in these works showcase a growing societal concern over the balance between technological omnipresence and personal freedom. The writings of Basu and Brin function as a caution and highlight the perils of technological dominance while maintaining an optimistic approach shown via sousveillance attempts made by the individuals. There may be ways for individuals to fight back, regain their independence and confront the powers that regulate a society where a small number of people have complete technological authority.

To explore the concepts of Anesthetics and Sousveillance in depth, this study turns to two cyberpunk narratives that reflect different technological and socio-political moments in history. The rationale behind selecting David Brin's *Earth* (1990) and Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) lies in the opportunity to trace the evolution of cyberpunk narratives across three decades. Brin's *Earth* (1990), written at a time when the internet was still in its formative stage, captures early speculative concerns about digital interconnectedness, environmental crises, and surveillance technologies that were only emerging in the public consciousness. It represents a vision of a near future informed by late 20th-century hopes and anxieties about globalization and technological progress. In contrast, Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) offers a distinctly contemporary perspective, portraying a world in which surveillance,

corporate control, and algorithmic governance are no longer speculative but deeply embedded in everyday life. Set in a near-future Delhi, it reflects the lived realities of the 21st century, where digital platforms shape identity, politics, and power structures.

The rationale behind choosing these texts is that both of these novels, *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and *Earth* (1990), engage with the questions of sousveillance and anaesthetics. At the same time, the world is rapidly moving towards digitalization and researchers have not yet, extensively, explored the selected ideas in connection.

1.1 Situatedness of the Researcher

In Pakistan, where digitization is now essential for development and access to services, direct resistance against technological control is rarely feasible. Citizens cannot fully disengage from systems that enable communication, mobility, and governance. As a Pakistani researcher, I have produced a research project whose scope lies close to digitization of Pakistan. This study is likely to blaze a path for digital Pakistan in future. Surveillance has garnered a lot of critical attention but sousveillance has been rather overlooked. This research is a unique interplay of social, cultural, and political factors. By situating sousveillance within Pakistan, my research not only highlights how a developing society negotiates its relationship with technology but also contributes to broader discussions on power, agency, and resistance in an anaesthetized digital world. In view of Digital Pakistan Vision launched in 2019, this study is likely to become part of digital infrastructure and digital literacy in Pakistani society. This study is also in line with NADRA's digital identity systems.

As a research scholar situated in a technologically influenced world, my research interests are drawn towards the narratives that interrogate systems of power that mediate through technology. The transformation of state into a digital nation through the comprehensive digitalization of its society has altered notions of privacy. Nowadays, personal data is often traded for convenience, and resistance often takes a form of sousveillance. Pakistan is a developing society where digitalization is essential for progress. So, direct resistance against technological control is often not viable. Society cannot fully reject or disengage from digital technologies that aid them

in services, communication and mobility. However, they can use sousveillance as a resistance tool to turn back the gaze onto institutions of authority. However, this study underscores the broader social implications of living in a hyper-connected world. Cyberpunk fiction serves as both a mirror and a warning, reflecting contemporary concerns about data exploitation, environmental degradation, and the erosion of privacy. In Pakistan, where digital literacy and regulatory frameworks are still developing, these issues take on heightened urgency. By engaging with narratives that imagine the consequences of unchecked surveillance and technological dominance, this research aims to foster critical awareness among readers, policymakers, and academics. So, through my research project, I investigate sousveillance as a mode of resistance in a highly anaesthetized world while interacting with technology for social progress. Hence, my approach to this research is not only an academic pursuit but also a personal interrogation of the technologically semi-sensitized society that I inhabit.

1.2 Delimitation

This research is specifically confined to Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990). Within these cyberpunk narratives, I concentrate on discussions pertaining to sousveillance and digital authoritarianism. Though I refer to a good number of secondary sources, I have deployed Susan Buck-Morss' concept of "anaesthetics" and Steve Mann's idea of "sousveillance" as lenses to explore my primary texts. It is worth noting that my attention will not be directed towards analysing AI technologies from a technical or computational perspective. Rather, my research is geared towards understanding the consciousness that is created by the individuals to counter the anaesthetic effect created by technology to maintain social control. The idea of sousveillance is not directed towards the use of state surveillance; instead, it is used to support the individuals affected by the anesthetizing control through technology. Therefore, sousveillance is about 'watching from below' and its movement is bottom upward. Cyberpunk as a genre encompasses a vast range of themes, including artificial intelligence, cybernetics, biotechnology, and virtual reality. However, addressing all these areas would risk dispersing the scope of the research and diluting its core arguments. So, by narrowing the focus to sousveillance

and digital authoritarianism, this study engages with the human and socio-political dimensions of cyberpunk rather than its purely technological or computational aspects.

1.3 Thesis Statement

In the unfolding landscape of a digital era, underscored by both groundbreaking technological advancements and the emergence of digital authoritarianism, cyberpunk dystopian fiction like Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990) engages with sousveillance strategies that reduce the numbing (anaesthetising) effect produced through technological control.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the manifestations of technology and AI controlling the human in the selected texts?
2. How is anaesthetization put into effect and how are characters in the selected texts impacted by it?
3. How does sousveillance play out against technological control in the selected fiction and with what effect?

1.5 Research Plan

I have divided the thesis into six chapters. In the first chapter I introduce my study and provide a rationale for it. Then, I briefly explain the theoretical framework and the methodology used. Moreover, this chapter also talk about the delimitations and significance of my study. The second chapter, helps locate the current study in the already existing scholarship and find research gaps in the available critical sources. I discuss critical scholarship related to my study. This chapter also connects my research with the previous works and vindicates it by pointing out the gaps thereof.

The third chapter revolves around the theoretical props I deploy for my thesis. In addition, I discuss my research methodology and theoretical lenses to examine my primary texts. It is hereby necessary to mention that I do not apply theoretical lens on my selected primary texts but rather use it as reading lens to foreground the notion that the research is not done in isolation. In Chapter 4 and 5, I do analysis of my

primary texts. Chapter Four and Five are the textual analysis of *Chosen Spirits* (2020)⁴ and *Earth* (1990) respectively. I have analysed the aforementioned primary texts by deploying the theoretical positions of Morss and Mann. In the last chapter, “Conclusion”, I conclude the whole discussion based on my analysis. It presents a comprehensive overview of my research project and findings of my study. At the same time, I write recommendations for future researchers at the end of my conclusion.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study holds significance in the contemporary digital age marked by the intertwined domains of literature, technology, and societal control. By delving into Cyberpunk narratives, particularly focusing on *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and *Earth* (1990), this research aims to unravel the varied ways individuals use technology to resist the dominating powers in a surveillance-saturated era.

My research seeks to explore how the conscious use of technology may serve as a means of resistance against desensitization and societal conformity. The study extends beyond literary analysis, shedding light on broader debates concerning individual agency, surveillance ethics, and the intricacies of digital resistance. As technology keeps getting more advanced, it is becoming crucial that we understand how to interact and learn about the difference it may create in our lives and society as a whole. This research contributes in expanding existing cyberpunk scholarship, which largely focuses on surveillance, control, and dystopian aesthetics, by foregrounding sousveillance as a counter-narrative. It situates sousveillance not merely as a technological act but as a cultural and political practice that enables resistance within constrained environments. In the next chapter, I locate my study in the critical literary scholarship available on/around my field of study. I also point out research gaps in the available critical scholarship to justify my point of intervention.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of literary and cultural studies, the intertwining concepts of “cyberpunk”, “Dystopian Fiction”, “anaesthetics” and “sousveillance” have been instrumental in clarifying the mechanisms of resistance and autonomy, particularly in the face of digital authoritarianism. While anaesthetization refers to the numbing effect enforced by technological control, which suppresses critical awareness and agency, sousveillance emerges as a counterforce that reclaims observational power from dominant systems. By engaging with these concepts in the context of cyberpunk dystopian fiction, this study aims to fill up the existing gaps in critical scholarship by exploring how narratives like *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and *Earth* (1990) navigate the tension between technological control and acts of resistance. I divide this chapter into five different parts for a review of the available literary scholarship. I review articles, books, essays, and dissertations under the following subheadings.

- a. Anaesthetization Caused by Digital Control
- b. Sousveillance as a Counterforce to Surveillance
- c. Evolution of Cyberpunk Dystopian Fiction
- d. Existing Academia on the Selected Texts
- e. Research Gap

2.1 Anaesthetization Caused by Digital Control

Anaesthetization in digital control refers to the process by which technology, particularly digital surveillance and control systems, gradually numb individuals to the effects of constant monitoring and manipulation. I deploy Susan Buck Morss’s idea of anaesthetization as a theoretical reading prop. Instead of analysing that in isolation, I review the stance of other theorists and then bring the attention to my primary theorist.

Susan Buck Morss draws upon the concept of “phantasmagoria,” taken from Walter Benjamin, to explain how hyper-mediated experiences, shaped by the socio-political and economic conditions of the age, produce a distorted sense of reality that

prevents individuals from engaging meaningfully with the physical world. Sensory overload caused by modern technological advancements numbs individuals' perception, detaching them from traditional sensory experiences and altering their connection to the world around them. The numbness caused by this technologically altered world is like a drug, just like “drug addicts confront a society that challenges the reality of their altered perception, the intoxication of phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm.” in this way, “Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control” (23). This idea of hyper-mediatization ties into broader discussions of how technology influences and distorts perception. My study, however, engages with the concept of *Sousveillance*, where the multiplicity of experiences and the technology that facilitates them may be harnessed as tools of resistance, enabling individuals to watch from below and reclaim agency in an increasingly mediated and controlled environment. In this context, *sousveillance* becomes a response to the numbing effect of technological saturation, providing a way for individuals to challenge the power structures that seek to control their lives through digital means.

Lahiji, in her work “Phantasmagoria and the Architecture of the Contemporary City” (2016), delineates anaesthetics as the “sensory experience of perception,” (6) further elaborating on several crucial facets of sensory experience that piqued Benjamin's interest and continue to be relevant today. She argues that the manipulation of synaesthetic systems, specifically through the control of environmental stimuli, leads to the anaesthetization of the organism. This process is not achieved by numbing the senses, but rather by overstimulating them to such an extent that individuals lose their ability to discern or meaningfully respond to their surroundings. This overstimulation results in a “sensory addiction to a compensatory reality, where individuals become so saturated by external inputs that their capacity for critical thought and emotional engagement with the world is dulled, ultimately transforming this sensory overload into a tool for social control” (6). In this research, while Lahiji focuses on the anaesthetics and dissociation caused by architectural differences and spatial design, I explore a different facet of this phenomenon; the numbness induced by the over-influx of technology. I discuss how various

technological advancements, particularly in the realm of surveillance and digital control, overwhelm individuals' sensory faculties and gradually diminish their awareness of the power dynamics at play. Furthermore, I explore how these advancements may offer a means for individuals to reclaim their agency. Through technologies such as sousveillance, people may observe from a lower perspective, using the very systems that are designed to control them as tools for resistance and empowerment. This sheds light on the dual nature in the role of technology, while it may contribute to anaesthetization, it also holds the potential for individual autonomy when wielded as a means of resistance.

In the aforementioned articles, the researchers discuss the idea of anaesthetisation in multiple ways. The articles examine how technological control leads to emotional and sensory numbness. My study explores how the very numbness can be overcome by the conscious use of the same anaesthetization. Moreover, it explains the attempts of resistance on a rather personal level to enforce the agency that an individual holds.

2.2 Sousveillance as a Counterforce to Surveillance

The concept of sousveillance has gained significance in discussions about surveillance and control, particularly in digital societies where technological monitoring is pervasive. Sousveillance, which refers to the practice of watching from below, serves as a means of resistance against top-down surveillance, redistributing observational power from authorities to individuals. The idea challenges traditional power structures by enabling those who are typically watched to become watchers themselves. This shift in perspective disrupts the dynamics of control, creating opportunities for individuals to hold those in power accountable. In analyzing *Earth* (1990) and *Chosen Spirits* (2020), key differences emerge in the representation of sousveillance. Brin's *Earth* (1990), portrays sousveillance as an optimistic tool of resistance where citizens gain access to flows of information and develop the capacity to hold subvert the power structures. Sousveillance in this context is framed as a potential to reshape hierarchies of knowledge and counterbalance institutional power. By contrast, Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020), set in near-future Delhi, depicts sousveillance not as utopian possibility but as an everyday necessity for survival

under authoritarian regimes and corporate control. In the forthcoming pages, I review some significantly relevant sources in order to highlight the study gap and vindicate my intervention in the field.

The book chapter "Sousveillance and Social Media", authored by P. Reilly is featured in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media* (2021). In this chapter, Reilly discusses the concept of sousveillance, which refers to the act of citizens recording surveillance activities, particularly by authorities, as a form of resistance and accountability. The author highlights two historical case studies; the Rodney King assault in 1991, captured by George Holliday, and the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal in 2003, illustrating how video evidence can challenge systemic injustices and provoke public outrage. The article examines the implications of sousveillance in the pre-social media and post-social media eras, arguing that while sousveillance has the potential to spotlight abuse of power, its effectiveness also depends on audience perceptions and the manner in which narratives are integrated into broader social justice campaigns. The paper concludes by discussing the potential of sousveillance to impact informational power dynamics in society, emphasizing that its effectiveness in focusing public attention on authority figures depends on broader social justice movements, the relevance of its narrative, and circulation across traditional and social media.

Overall, Reilly underscores the importance of sousveillance in empowering citizens and promoting transparency within society. Reilly's article provides a critical foundation for understanding sousveillance as a tool of resistance against systemic oppression by examining key historical examples. While the article effectively discusses the role of citizen-led surveillance in challenging authority, it does not extend its analysis to fictional depictions of sousveillance in cyberpunk literature. My research differs by exploring how sousveillance functions within the dystopian landscapes of *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and *Earth* (1990), focusing on its role in resisting AI-driven technological control. I examine how cyberpunk narratives reinterpret real-world surveillance dynamics and critique power structures in speculative settings.

One of the earlier seminal works that engages with the idea of 'Watching from below' or 'sousveillance' is David Lyon's *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of*

Surveillance Society (1994). While Lyon's work primarily addresses real-world surveillance infrastructures, it inadvertently lays the groundwork for understanding sousveillance in fiction. I intervene in terms of examining the selected texts to see how sousveillance figures in the narratives. By positing that individuals are not merely passive subjects but may, in fact, invert the gaze upon authoritarian structures and counter the set narratives. To put the idea of the narrative control in a slightly broader context it must be understood that Giddens uses it as part of a more general argument that conflict and struggle happen on many different levels in society. A key element of his critique of Marxism is that class struggle is not the archetypical, let alone only, kind of struggle that takes place in modern societies. Struggles over what he calls 'authoritative' resources are also extremely significant. According to this theorem we would expect to find attempts countervailing power in all situations where surveillance is experienced negatively as constraint.

His discussion of surveillance culture and the normalization of constant monitoring provide a crucial foundation for examining how sousveillance operates as a resistance mechanism in both reality and literature, against digital control. The omnipresence of technology in modern society fosters a passive acceptance of surveillance, where individuals no longer question the extent to which they are being monitored. As far as this research is concerned, I discuss the normalization of technology into the daily lives of individuals, which makes them indifferent to the authoritative practices that enforce social control. I further explore how individuals become so accustomed to being surrounded by technology that the invasion of privacy often goes unnoticed, hidden beneath the guise of socialization and modernization. This indifference to technological surveillance underscores the significance of sousveillance as a means of reclaiming agency, allowing individuals to subvert the structures that seek to control them.

Steve Mann's article "Sousveillance: Inverse Surveillance in Multimedia" also sheds light on inverse surveillance as a participatory surveillance, he says, "Thus a main feature of 'sousveillance' as a tool for multimedia artists is effortless capture, processing, storage, recall, and transmission of an activity by a participant in the activity" (Mann 620-21). He emphasized that sousveillance serves as a way for

individuals to reclaim control over their own actions and perspectives effectively inverting the traditional top-down power dynamics of surveillance. “Cyberculture sees its historical duty as one of preventing these leftovers of the industrial age from hijacking the natural development of the new technologies towards decentralisation, flexibility, and community. The narratives of resistance and political agency told within cyberculture stress the importance of a more decentralized production and distribution of knowledge” (Terranova 21). Mann’s arguments find echoes in works where protagonists leverage technology to challenge overarching systems turning the instruments of their oppression into tools of rebellion. This transformation of technology from a tool of domination to one of resistance highlights the dual potential of technological advancements in both enabling control and facilitating autonomy. However, this research remains limited to the investigation of the ways individuals contest the seamless integration of technology into daily lives. Although this process empowers individuals to question surveillance, it simultaneously makes them less aware of how deeply it surrounds them. This desensitization to the omnipresence of technology forms a key focus of this study as it explores how characters in the selected cyberpunk fiction respond to and resist this normalization of digital anaesthesia.

Simone Browne, in her 2015 article “Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness”, introduces the concept of “dark sousveillance” to describe the use of Black epistemologies in challenging various methods of antiblack surveillance, such as plantation surveillance and lantern laws. She writes, “I plot dark sousveillance as an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in anti-surveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices. Dark sousveillance, then, plots imaginaries that are oppositional and that are hopeful for another way of being” (21). Browne explores how marginalized groups, particularly Black individuals, engage in acts of “sousveillance” as a way to resist and subvert the surveillance practices imposed upon them. This involves the use of personal recording devices and other tools to counter the surveillance that has historically been used to monitor and control their lives. The concept of dark sousveillance encapsulates the practices that appropriated, repurposed, and confronted

these methods of social control, enabling survival and resistance in the face of systemic oppression. For Browne, dark sousveillance is not simply an act of resistance but also a strategic approach aimed at rendering oneself invisible to traditional surveillance mechanisms, while simultaneously plotting alternative oppositional imaginaries and aspiring for a different mode of existence. “I use the term “dark sousveillance” as a way to situate the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight” (21). This form of resistance is deeply tied to the larger struggle for autonomy and dignity, as it disrupts the control and visibility enforced by dominant power structures. My study intends to make a conscious attempt to study the resistance against digital authoritative regimes, particularly those that numb society towards the active infiltration and control of technology. It explores how digital surveillance mechanisms, which often render individual’s passive and desensitized; may be challenged through sousveillance strategies that offer an alternative form of resistance and empowerment.

Moreover, the article titled “Surveillance and Sousveillance (Control Vs. Freedom)” (2023) explores the dichotomy between surveillance and sousveillance, particularly in the context of Cory Doctorow's novel *Little Brother*. It examines how advancements in information technology and artificial intelligence have transformed surveillance practices, posing threats to personal privacy and freedom. It also explains normalization in a society, emphasizing how individuals are disciplined within society, and highlights various academic perspectives on the novel, including psychological warfare through technological espionage, the erosion of privacy, and youth resistance against state surveillance. Ultimately, it underscores the necessity of maintaining individual freedoms in a technologically advanced society. While Zaheer’s analysis focuses on *Little Brother* and the youth’s struggle against surveillance, my research explores sousveillance as a resistance strategy against the anaesthetizing effects of technological control in cyberpunk dystopian settings, specifically in *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and *Earth* (1990). Rather than centering on state control alone, my study investigates how individuals use sousveillance to counteract the numbing effects of pervasive technology. However, Zaheer’s discussion of

normalization and digital surveillance provides a useful foundation for understanding how technological control disciplines individuals, helping to contextualize the broader socio-political implications in my research.

Kelly Ross, in her article “Watching from Below: Racialized Surveillance and Vulnerable Sousveillance” describes the act of watching from below, (the concept of “watching from below” is intrinsically tied to the term “sousveillance”) or a reversal of the dominant gaze of authority. One finds its subtle imprints in classic literary works. Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* given by Roberts in *The Stranger Within: Dostoevsky’s Underground* (2010) stands as a testament to an early form of this concept. The protagonist, often referred to as the Underground Man, offers a meticulous chronicle of his inner thoughts juxtaposed with critiques on the deterministic nature of the emerging modern society. His introspective narrative acts as a beacon that watches back at the society attempting to scrutinise and label him, thus presenting a counter-narrative to the prevailing ideologies of his era. This schema interrogates the pervasive influence of technology and its integration in daily life, which poses a threat to human identity and autonomy.

In this section, I have reviewed that the exploration of sousveillance and anaesthetics in the context of digital authoritarianism within cyberpunk fiction is not an isolated endeavour. I have discussed that, in the face of oppressive regimes, both real and fictional, the acts of watching back and crafting counter-narratives are not just forms of resistance but also vital expressions of autonomy and agency. In the next section, I provide an overview of the progression of Cyberpunk Dystopian Fiction.

2.3 Evolution of Cyberpunk Dystopian Fiction

In this section I review the evolution of Cyberpunk dystopian fiction. The science fiction genre has existed for over two centuries, with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, written in 1817, often credited as the first work of science fiction. Following Shelley, authors like H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Rice Burroughs emerge in the 19th century, writing stories that remain influential among readers and writers today. Over the years, science fiction has evolved significantly. The genre is often dismissed as “pulp fiction” (Svihla 5) which means that it lacks the depth and

strong character development as compared to other works. Many stories during this period follow simple plots focusing on revenge, love, or freedom, often reducing female characters to mere rewards for male protagonists. This phase limits the genre's potential, but the mid-20th century saw a revival, thanks to visionary authors who reshape science fiction into a more respected literary form. Writers such as L. Ron Hubbard, Robert Heinlein, John W. Campbell, and especially Isaac Asimov are instrumental in this transformation, ushering in what is now called the "Golden Age" of science fiction (Latham 51). Their works ground science fiction in real scientific concepts rather than pure fantasy. Asimov's introduction of the positronic brain and the Three Laws of Robotics become a foundation for future stories, influencing characters like Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Roddenberry 24) and Murderbot from *The Murderbot Diaries* (Wells 23), as well as advancements in real-world robotics and artificial intelligence.

William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, first published in 1984, is widely credited with shaping the cyberpunk literary genre. However, it is not the first work to explore cyberpunk themes. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (later adapted into *Blade Runner*), published in 1968, sets the stage for what cyberpunk eventually becomes. Gibson draws inspiration from Dick and other early cyberpunk writers, crafting the dark and immersive world of *Neuromancer* (1984). The novel follows Henry Dorsett Case "a former data thief who is coerced into infiltrating a powerful mega-corporation's space station to free an imprisoned AI. The narrative takes readers from crime-ridden urban slums filled with violence, drug addiction, and corruption to the corporate elite's fortified spaces, vividly depicting wealth inequality and the dangers of unchecked capitalism. While these themes are central to the novel, *Neuromancer* goes even further by exploring religion in a postmodern world through Rastafarian characters, challenging traditional gender roles with Molly, the formidable street samurai, and questioning the nature of artificial intelligence through the twin AIs, Wintermute and Neuromancer. Gibson's work lays the foundation for future cyberpunk novels, solidifying *Neuromancer* (1984) as a defining work of the genre and cementing Gibson's reputation as the father of cyberpunk.

Cyberpunk settings are far from idealized visions of the future; unlike the utopian aspirations of some science-fiction narratives, cyberpunk worlds are grim, lawless and dominated by crime and corruption. Cyberpunk stands in stark contrast to many other works within the broader science-fiction genre offering a bleak and often dystopian vision of the future. While it still engages with scientific advancements it frequently presents them in a way that highlights exploitation and inequality. For instance, the androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) are self-aware beings doomed to servitude with any attempt at freedom met by relentless Blade Runners who hunt them down (qtd. in Sivihla 8).

Similarly, Morgan in *Altered Carbon* (2002) introduces cortical stacks, a technology that enables eternal life but only for those wealthy enough to afford resleeving, reinforcing class division (qtd. in Sivihla 8). Massive corporations rule from their fortresses indifferent to the suffering of the masses while the streets are filled with violence despair and societal collapse. These stories depict the consequences of unmonitored greed and unregulated capitalism showing a world where power and resources are in control of the elite. Unlike the noble and principled protagonists common in science-fiction, cyberpunk often follows characters from the fringes of society; criminals, hackers who navigate the chaos in morally ambiguous ways. Even a character named Rick Deckard, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* though officially a police officer, is ultimately a state-sanctioned assassin tasked with eliminating those deemed unworthy of existence reflecting cyberpunk's cynical and anarchic worldview.

The term dystopia is often used in everyday language to describe any bleak or disastrous future scenario. Christopher Schmidt, in his 2014 analysis of dystopian films, observes that “the recent uptick in dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenarios seems more urgent and more extreme,” (Schmidt 1) linking this trend to concerns over climate change and environmental destruction. Cyberpunk, in its depiction of grim, chaotic futures, undeniably fits within this broad understanding of dystopia. The sprawling, decayed landscape of Chiba City in *Neuromancer*, the crime-infested Metaverse in *Snow Crash*, and the corporate-controlled virtual Hong Kong in Kelley Eskridge's *Solitaire*. All novels present settings that are far from utopian. However,

dystopia as a literary genre goes beyond simply portraying a future worse than the present; it envisions a future that is fundamentally altered in structure, control, and human experience. Hence, cyberpunk is frequently categorized as dystopian, seminal works such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* are also widely analysed within this framework. As Fife notes in "Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*: '92's Eerie Cyber-Prophet" "But, I think, one of the most frightening of dystopias is the one that is in the near future, and seems to be getting closer and closer. *Snow Crash* kind of fits that bill" (Fife 44). Fife's observation highlights how *Snow Crash* embodies a dystopia that feels unnervingly close to reality, making its warnings about corporate dominance and societal collapse even more pressing. This sense of an impending dystopian future is a hallmark of cyberpunk, reflecting anxieties about technological overreach and systemic inequality.

The main characters in these stories are rarely traditional heroes; instead, they are deeply flawed individuals facing personal struggles such as grief, addiction, identity crises, or violent tendencies. These issues are often direct consequences of the harsh realities they live in, where governments have collapsed or become powerless, leaving massive corporations to dictate society's rules. With profit-driven entities in control the majority of the population is forced into poverty, while crime and lawlessness spread across cities. In such worlds, criminal organizations and underground networks hold significant power and the protagonists often find themselves entangled in morally ambiguous situations, where they must make difficult choices to survive. Unlike typical heroic figures, cyberpunk protagonists often operate in the shadows making choices that challenge conventional ideas of right and wrong. The upcoming section explores existing research on the selected primary texts.

2.4 Works Already Done on the Selected Texts

In her MPhil dissertation, "The Portability of Memory: A Psycho-Spatial Analysis of Selected South Asian Dystopian Fiction", Zoha Jan Tagi, a Pakistani scholar, has analysed Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* through the lens of prosthetic memory and the indirect responsibility of the characters in perpetuating the oppressive digital regimes. Her analysis delves into the themes of mass censorship

within the narrative while focusing on the social disintegration caused by the pervasive control of technology. Tagi examines how the digital flow facilitates the spread of censorship, and she highlights how individuals, often unknowingly, become complicit in maintaining these oppressive structures. By exploring the indirect responsibility of characters in upholding the power dynamics embedded in the digital realm, her work sheds light on the socio-political implications of such systems and their profound impact on society. The dissertation explores the interplay of memory, complicity and power dynamics in the fluid space between the virtual and the real platforms, emphasizing the complexity of individual agency in the face of overwhelming technological control (Tagi 5). However, the focus of my research differs in the sense that it seeks to examine how individuals resist the pervasive integration of technology into their daily routines, which leads to a state of desensitization or anaesthetics. While Tagi's work highlights the complicity in sustaining digital regimes, my study investigates the mechanisms of resistance, particularly how individuals reclaim their agency amidst the anaesthetizing effects of digital surveillance and control. In doing so, I aim to understand how individuals push back against becoming passive subjects in a world dominated by technological infiltration and control.

The article titled "A Study of Cultural Dilution and Influencer Advertising in Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* authored by M. S Shajith and G Bhuvaneswari, examines the convergence of art and advertising through the experiences represented in Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020). The article discusses the role of influencers as modern celebrities who engage in self-promotion while simultaneously endorsing products, the impact of the "Megaphone Effect" enabled by social media, and the relationship dynamics between celebrities and their fanbases. The article also critiques the dilution of cultural significance due to advertising practices and proposes that responsible advertising can maintain integrity in cultural representations. Furthermore, it emphasizes on the evolving definition of celebrity in the digital age and calls for a deeper understanding of the implications of influencer marketing on consumer trust and cultural authenticity. Additionally, the article emphasizes how *Chosen Spirits* provides a cautionary tale about the consequences of a hyper-mediated society, where

personal lives are commodified and cultural rituals are sensationalized for entertainment. It explores the psychological effects of constant surveillance and the pressures faced by influencers, revealing how these individuals navigate their identities within a public space fraught with scrutiny. The authors draw parallels to Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, illustrating how the boundaries between authenticity and performance blur in the digital realm. Ultimately, the article calls for a critical examination of how influencer culture shapes societal values and questions the sustainability of such a commodified cultural landscape. By analyzing the intersection of art, commerce, and technology, the authors invite readers to reflect on the future of cultural identity in an increasingly commercialized world. While this article provides valuable insights into the intersections of influencer culture, digital identity, and commercialization, it does not fully explore *Chosen Spirits* in the context of sousveillance and numbness caused by technology, which are central to my research. By building on its discussion of digital influence, my study examines the novels to highlight technological control, the manipulation of information, and the role of sousveillance in resisting oppressive systems. By integrating the article's analysis of hyper-mediation, I further investigate how digital technologies shape autonomy, resistance, and societal power structures in Basu's dystopian vision.

Anindita Shome, in her article "Pandemic, Dystopian Fiction, and Increasing Inequalities: A Reading of Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*", discusses the push of the world towards a dystopian existence, especially in the wake of increased technological control and surveillance. The paper explains how certain groups, particularly marginalized populations, are pushed to the sidelines by those in power, emphasizing the systemic inequalities that exist within society. It delves into the contrasting ways in which the privileged and the marginalized operate in a predominantly surveilled and technology-controlled world, revealing the disparities and the ways in which different groups experience the societal structure. Shome's analysis highlights the blatant inequalities that persist in such a society, where those in power exploit technological advancements to further entrench control. The paper also explores how the pandemic might accelerate the world into an even more oppressive dystopia, where the government categorizes citizens and expects them to be good

citizens who lead compliant lives, without challenging the established system. However, my research adopts a different stance by focusing on investigating how people resist the widespread integration of technology into their everyday lives, which often leads to a state of desensitization, or anaesthetics. I aim to explore how the recognition of technology's pervasive presence and its infiltration into personal lives may also serve as a means of sousveillance in such a tech-controlled society. My study seeks to highlight the potential for resistance and empowerment through sousveillance, using technology as a tool to subvert the very systems of control that it was designed to enforce.

Tereza Østbø Kuldova, in her article “Thinking the Delirious Pandemic Governance by Numbers with Samit Basu’s *Chosen Spirits* and Prayaag Akbar’s *Leila*”, discusses the idea that if societies want to live in an un-isolated world, we may have to accept being watched over by the government. The article explores how the pandemic has increasingly isolated people, making them more marginalized and confined within their own spaces. It delves into how, in a world where walls and gates are constantly scrutinized, the notion of privacy becomes both impossible and obsolete. Kuldova highlights the ways in which the pandemic has intensified these boundaries, intensifying existing social divisions. However, at the same time, the article offers a glimpse into the near future where the marginalized might break down these walls, walls created by the privileged, creating new possibilities for resistance and reclaiming autonomy. My study, however, differs from Kuldova's because it tilts more toward the realization of technological advancements and surveillance practices within society, rather than focusing on oneself as a form of resistance against state control. The recognition of these technological systems and their pervasiveness in everyday life allow for a position that is tangential to Kuldova's, providing a new perspective from which to approach the issue. This shift in focus allows for a more proactive exploration of how technology may be used to resist surveillance, rather than merely retreating from it. Through this lens, my research offers a space for intervention that challenges the established notions of control and surveillance in ways that align with the increasing recognition of technology's role in shaping social and political dynamics.

In the article, “Hatred of the *Earth*: Climate Change and Post-Planetary Culture,” Brad Tabas examines David Brin’s novel *Earth* (1990) as a critical case study in understanding the complexities of post-planetarism. In his analysis, Tabas highlights how Brin’s narrative reflects a perspective of disdain toward the *Earth*, suggesting a dichotomy between human advancement and environmental degradation. The protagonist, Goldman, illustrates a struggle between the desire for technological progress and the necessity of acknowledging ecological limits. Brin portrays a future riddled with catastrophic consequences stemming from unchecked environmental exploitation, ultimately challenging readers to conform to the ideals about human progress and sustainability. David Brin’s *Earth* (1990) presents a compelling vision of ecological collapse and technological intervention, yet it remains relatively underexplored in scholarly discussions compared to other cyberpunk and climate fiction works. While much attention has been given to Brin’s broader contributions to science fiction, the intricate themes of surveillance, AI governance, and their impact on human agency in *Earth* (1990) have not been extensively analyzed. Existing literature often focuses on its environmental warnings rather than its implications for sousveillance and technological control. This gap makes *Earth* (1990) particularly relevant to my study, as it allows for a deeper examination of how surveillance functions within a cyberpunk dystopian framework and how resistance emerges in technologically controlled societies.

My selection of *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and *Earth* (1990) allows me to study how cyber punk dystopian fiction has evolved across different socio-political and technological contexts. The two novels provide a comparative framework to interrogate the shifting anaesthetics created by technology and the sousveillance strategies used to resist the over-arching control.

The literature gap in the current discourse on digital control and resistance in cyberpunk dystopian fiction lies in the insufficient exploration of how individuals actively resist the pervasive integration of technology in an anesthetized society. While much of the existing literature such as the works explore the ways in which technology and surveillance contribute to oppression there is a lack of focus on how characters actively navigate and challenge these systems while being active users of

technology. These studies primarily address the broader socio-political impacts of surveillance censorship and digital regimes but overlook the individual mechanisms of resistance that may emerge in response to the numbing effects of constant technological monitoring. Therefore, a critical gap remains in understanding how characters in works like Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990) utilize technology not just for self-enhancement but as a tool of resistance employing sousveillance as a means to reclaim agency and expose the hidden power structures of surveillance.

Another notable gap exists in the examination of how these dystopian works engage with the concept of anaesthetization or sensory numbing, which results from the overstimulation and saturation of digital technologies. While scholars like Susan Buck-Morss and Lahiji have discussed anaesthetics in relation to architecture and societal control, their focus remains limited to broader themes of desensitization rather than the specific role of technology in this process. There is limited research that directly connects the anaesthetic effects of digital surveillance with individual responses to these systems in the context of cyberpunk literature. By exploring how characters in these texts begin to recognize and challenge the technologies that desensitize them, this study aims to fill that gap. It offers insights into how resistance to technological control, through the act of sousveillance, serves not only as an act of defiance but also as a method for reclaiming human agency in a world dominated by overwhelming digital forces.

While much of the existing literature, explores the ways in which technology and surveillance contribute to oppression, there is a lack of focus on how characters actively navigate and challenge these systems. These studies primarily address the broader socio-political impacts of surveillance, censorship, and digital regimes but overlook the individual mechanisms of resistance that may emerge in response to the numbing effects of constant technological monitoring. Therefore, a critical gap remains in understanding how characters in works like Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990) utilize technology to reclaim control over their own narratives and autonomy.

The collective findings from these studies suggest that, in both real and fictional contexts, oppressive regimes control society to an unprecedented level. The studies highlight that researchers that have worked on the idea of sousveillance have not connected it with the numbness caused by the technology. I have reviewed resources on sousveillance where researchers explore sousveillance practices done due to racial oppression, talked about hyper mediated spaces causing anesthesia, the possibility of art breaking the numbness caused by modern technology, individuals acting like passive spectators, and also have discussed the overwhelming effect of hyper-controlled spaces on citizens. Moreover, resistance in a digitally sedated society is often showcased by inhibiting the use of technology. On the other hand, my research shows the practice of ‘watching back’ as an active participation of individuals through constant involvement with technology. It explores that there are substantial research gaps in contemporary critical scholarship of sousveillance studies. This literature review and the research gaps I have been able to find, help me determine my theoretical support and research methodology that I have discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter, I reviewed important sources related to surveillance studies, technological numbing, technological dependency, and looked into existing research on my primary texts. This has helped me place my work within current scholarship, identify gaps in the research, and gain useful insights. It has also provided the theoretical foundation I need for analyzing my texts. Additionally, the review has guided the development of the research methodology for my dissertation. I have divided this chapter into two sections: the first explains and justifies the theoretical framework, while the second outlines the research methodology.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This research deploys the theoretical concepts of “Anaesthetics” and “Sousveillance” as frameworks. I elaborate both of these theoretical concepts in order to provide a rationale for my research. The former is proposed by Susan Buck Morss in her essay “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered” (1992), while the latter is discussed by Steve Mann in “Sousveillance: Inverse Surveillance in Multimedia Imaging” (2004). Together, these concepts form the theoretical underpinning of my research. The aim behind putting these ideas is to clarify how sousveillance may challenge and contest the numbness created by the excess of technological advancements. At the same time, the overload of technology has dulled the senses of the people collectively. This study seeks to affirm the underplay of resistance strategies that come into play to uphold individual agency and autonomy of an individual in highly surveilled states.

Susan Buck-Morss uses the term “anaesthetics” to describe a state in society where individuals become desensitised or numbed to their surroundings due to the overwhelming presence of technology or other factors. This concept suggests a condition where people might lose their ability to fully engage or critically assess their environment and experiences, leading to a sense of “detachment or a dulled

perception of reality” (23). A situation where individuals become less responsive or aware, metaphorically akin to the effect of anaesthesia in medicine, but applied to societal or cultural contexts. She elaborates that technology creates a false reality, overwhelms the society, prevents critical thought and “this sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control” (22).

Buck-Morss talks about “anaesthetics” as a way to describe how technology can make us numb. She says that when technology becomes a big part of our lives, we might lose our feelings, interest, and ability to think deeply. This happens because technology is everywhere and affects how we see and understand things in the world. Morss suggests that because of this, we might not notice things or think about them in important ways. In this way, we become indifferent towards our surroundings and the ways in which we are being controlled / surveilled. In a world increasingly dominated by digital technologies, individuals have become desensitized to the invasive nature of technological control, often accepting it as a natural part of daily life. This numbing effect, which may be seen in the way people blindly engage with their devices or surrender their privacy without hesitation, makes it difficult for individuals to recognize or challenge the underlying power structures that control their lives. As technological systems grow more sophisticated, they often operate invisibly, seamlessly integrating into society to such an extent that their presence goes unnoticed. So, unlike drug addiction, this mass intoxication is experienced collectively, making it harder to challenge. (Morss 23). This process of anaesthetization means that people no longer question the consequences of living in a digitally surveilled world, and their awareness of their autonomy and agency gradually diminishes. The idea of anaesthetization is closely linked to broader discussions of power, control, and resistance in the digital age, where individuals can be conditioned to accept surveillance as an inevitable and harmless aspect of modern life. However, it is this very desensitization that underscores the need for strategies like *sousveillance* to awaken and empower individuals to engage actively with the society in technological pervasiveness.

The digital era has led to an exponential increase in the volume and accessibility of information. Endless streams of emails, notifications, social media

updates, and content bombard individuals, leading to cognitive overload. Verily, the advent of the digital epoch has caused an unparalleled surge in the extent and availability of knowledge. Constant influxes of emails, notifications, social media posts, and content overwhelm individuals, contributing to perceptive overload. The pervasive infiltration of artificial intelligence (AI) into our daily routines has reached a level of normalisation where its pervasive impact frequently escapes our notice. Whether it's the management of our schedules by smart assistants or the curation of our online content through algorithms, AI functions effortlessly behind the scenes, moulding our encounters and guiding our decision-making.

As people in a city get used to relying on automated systems a lot, they start feeling disconnected without realising they're giving away control over many parts of their lives. Such cities become narcotic cities having similar function to that of absinthe or hashish; which dull our senses and fog our ability to think. Being inhabitants of such a metropolis where technology has taken over, we are deeply entrenched in technological dependency, causing a desensitisation and anaesthesia of our senses. We become trapped in a system of political power and social control, driven by powerful and overwhelming influences. (Lahiji 7)

On the other hand, in an essay featured in the third edition of *Surveillance & Society* in 2003, Mann, Nolan, and Wellman in “Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments” outline a reversal in the concept of “veillance” (or surveillance), suggesting the repositioning of surveillance “technologies of control on individuals, offering panoptic technologies to help them observe those in authority.” And, with that aim in mind, the concept of sousveillance functions as an “inverse panopticon” (332). Their idea aims to provide panoptic tools to enable individuals to “watch from below”. This leads to the inception of the concept of sousveillance, which is described as an act of “watching the watchman” (332). In its simplest form, sousveillance signifies “watching from below” (Mann 19). Just a few years later, Ganascia asserts that sousveillance has assumed a prominent role in contemporary societies. In his online essay, Bryce Clayton Newell refers to Ganascia who holds that this shift marks “a new regime in which powerful people were permanently observed by those they are

[sic] supposed to dominate” (qtd. in Newell 257). Sousveillance is commonly discussed within the context of social control, but it reverses the “traditional panoptic view of state surveillance and power, allowing individual citizens (or noncitizens) the means to observe back and hold the state accountable.” (Newell 63).

Mann, Nolan, and Wellman characterise sousveillance as a means of liberation, a tool to challenge authority and reverse its influence. Others have defined it as “the present state of modern technological societies where anybody may take photos or videos of any person or event, and then diffuse the information freely all over the world” (Ganascia 489–90). Additionally, Fan sees it as accomplished by “placing the authority of capturing people or events in the hands of ordinary individuals who can easily obtain a small sousveillance device like a cell phone camera and share these recordings and visuals worldwide via the Internet” (qtd. In Amatuozzo 493). These advancements have led to a rise in both surveillance and sousveillance creating a time where many people are constantly being watched, and a large number of records are being kept.

My study tends to present ways in which the normalisation and numbness created by the overstimulation owed to technology may be dealt with to claim back agency and autonomy. I tend to shed light on the resistance practices that may be affirmed in a technologically controlled sedated society and explore how sousveillance may disrupt the anaesthetic environment, fostering individual sensibility. In the following section, I describe the research methodology employed for this paper.

3.2 Research Methodology

This research is located in the qualitative paradigm. Its research design is interpretive and exploratory in nature. On account of the subjective nature of the qualitative analysis, I aim to pursue my argument through textual analysis of the selected texts. For this, I employ Catherine Belsey’s idea of “Textual Analysis as a Research Method”.

Belsey raises multiple questions regarding the analysis of the text, for instance, she questions the nature of text by asking, “What is it about? What kind of

prior knowledge it illuminates?” (160). Additionally, she posits that textual analysis “involves a close encounter with the work itself” (qtd. in Griffin 160), highlighting a deep-rooted appreciation for the primary texts’ salience. Nevertheless, her emphasis on the primacy of the text doesn’t eclipse the significance of knowledge that exists beyond it. As Belsey articulates, “interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge” (163), differentiating textual methodology from the more traditional close reading. While scholars of close reading predominantly anchor their interpretations in the text itself, Belsey’s approach, although primarily centered on primary texts, accords weight to secondary sources as well. This recognition underscores her belief that drawing upon extra-textual information may significantly bolster the analysis. For my research, this means that while the primary texts, Samit Basu’s *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin’s *Earth* (1990), are central to my analysis, the methodology actively incorporates extratextual resources. These include secondary resources like scholarly books, critical articles, auto/biographies, literary reviews, newspaper op-eds, and even insights gleaned from personal experiences.

Since my research underlines how the individuals make sense of the concept of resistance or lack thereof within technology-controlled platforms, the aforementioned concept of textual analysis resonates with my literary investigation. Belsey’s method goes beyond surface-level interpretation and allows for a critical exploration of how texts construct and convey power, identity, and resistance. Belsey’s approaches of textual analysis assist me in analysing the primary texts and find answers to the controlling questions I have raised in the beginning of this study. Belsey’s poststructuralist approach and her technique of closely reading the text alongside the emphasis on the secondary sources suits my study. My research methodology and theoretical framework assist me to analyse my primary texts in the next chapter. In the following chapter, I discuss the themes of technological anaesthetization and sousveillance practices that may turn observation into a bottom-up process. I take help of Belsey’s idea of Textual Analysis as a Research Method, and utilise the selected theoretical framework as a lens for interpretation.

CHAPTER 4

WIRED FOR OBLIVION: INTERROGATING ANAESTHETICS IN SELECTED CYBERPUNK DYSTOPIAN FICTION

This chapter investigates the impact of technology on our lives and the transformative power of AI. The AI numbs our collective awareness in such a fashion that we live under a totalitarian regime of machines and AI. I have selected two novels for analysis which are David Brin's *Earth* (1990) and Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020). It is pertinent to note that both the novels come under the category of cyberpunk dystopian fiction. To carry out my analysis of the selected texts, I employ Buck-Morss' concept of "Anaesthetics" as my theoretical support in this chapter. In the next chapter, I invoke Steve Mann's idea of "Sousveillance" to examine my selected Cyberpunk Dystopian novels.

Cyberpunk fiction explores a future dominated by digital power, social decay, and the struggle for survival in highly technological but deeply unequal societies. It often focuses on themes like unchecked capitalism, rebellion against oppressive systems, and the psychological effects of living in a world controlled by technology and corruption. Buck-Morss suggests that modern society is dazed by technological stimuli. So, to avoid cognitive overload, it numbs the senses. "The simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as anaesthetics." (Morss 18)

Buck-Morss argues that societies that are immersed in technology function in an unconscious manner. People start to view things in accordance with the perceptions provided by the authorities. The authorities construct realities which manipulate the system by controlling external environmental stimuli. "It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses" (22). The technological infiltration reflects on the modern-day spam, bot intrusion, or overburdening of social apps, where meaningful discourse gets drowned

in a torrent of content. Through the overwhelming flood of vain information, as Brin writes,

The chaos in the Net felt like having one of life's underpinnings knocked out. What had been a well-ordered, if undisciplined, ruckus of zines, holochannels, SIGs, and forums had become a rowdy babel, a torrent of confusion and comment, made worse because in order to be noticed each user now sent out countless copies of his messages toward any node that might conceivably listen. (Brin 388)

Through this research, I investigate that government and those in power restrict access to knowledge, information, control digital spaces and even sabotage entertainment and media just to enforce their authority. Additionally, Buck-Morss explores the anaesthetization of mass media and curated realities. In a cyber-controlled society, perceptions provided are also constructed by those in power. She states, "Phantasmagorias are a technoaesthetics. The perceptions they provide are 'real' enough...but their social function is in each case compensatory" (22). As we may see in today's world, the entertainment, digital experiences, advertisements are manipulated giving us the sense of a false consciousness. Here, the authorities disguise their intension of control under the illusion of interactivity and personailisation of individual data.

This omnipresence of screens, and altered virtual reality dull critical thinking making individuals passively consume whatever information is sent their way. By analysing the numbing effect caused by technology, both, texts, discuss the way individuals become indifferent towards their surroundings and become alien to the horrors of a tech-controlled world within these novels. This oblivion reflects the anaesthesia of collective awareness, where individuals fail to recognize the unseen forces shaping their lives. I explore the texts in order to see if the concept of anaesthetisation plays out in them. In this chapter, by making use of Belsey's approach of textual analysis and taking theoretical support from Buck-Morss. I analyse the selected texts with reference to anaesthetisation under the following three sections.

4.1 Digital Daze and the Death of Consciousness

In this section I explain how omnipresent technology desensitizes humans and erodes their consciousness. This way the digital-control manipulates people, dulls their critical thinking and ultimately dictates their perception. The authors of the book *Earth* (1990) and *Chosen Spirits* depict that technology, consumerism, and ambition detach individuals from a critical awareness of deeper global issues. They argue that the narratives create a world on the edge, numbed by distractions and complacency. One of the most pervasive tools for this numbing effect is the invasion of privacy through digital surveillance, a process that is both imposed by authorities and accepted by the public. This numbing of senses can ultimately cause mortification of self. As Harcourt puts it, “Mortification of the self, in our digital world, happens when subjects voluntarily cede their private attachments and their personal privacy, when they give up their protected personal space, cease monitoring their exposure on the Internet, let go of their personal data, and expose their intimate lives” (Harcourt 233). This exploitation of self happens due to prevalent inclination to share and submit a person’s private life.

In Brin’s world, privacy is no longer a right but a threat to the collective order. The protagonist, Alex, a scientist safeguarding dangerous information, experiences this firsthand as his every move is monitored. The novel, *Earth* (1990), suggests that surveillance has become so ingrained in society that people have stopped resisting it, viewing it as a necessary safeguard rather than an infringement on their autonomy. This condition mirrors the anaesthetics described by Susan Buck-Morss, where the masses are desensitized to oppression by the sheer normalisation of digital oversight. This pervasiveness of digital normativity “over the past decade... has demonstrated its efficiency in many different applications and a huge number of algorithms have become central and ubiquitous in our life” (Fournieret and Yvert 5). This omnipresent nature of technology becomes a pressing challenge for human subjectification under a totalitarian digital society. The society in *Earth* (1990) portrays the government’s use of technology as a means to control information flow, ensuring that individuals remain passive consumers rather than active participants in their own reality. The Rio Treaties, for instance,

Did allow one to withhold information temporarily—or try to—so long as careful records were maintained. That exception had been left in order to satisfy the needs of private commerce. The treaties’ drafters—radical veterans of the Helvetian War—probably never imagined that “temporary” might be interpreted to be as long as twenty years or that the registering of diaries like hers would become an industry in itself” (Brin 154).

Treaty which was initially created to regulate data-sharing among corporations, ultimately evolves into mechanisms of strict information policing. In this society, even diaries must be registered, ensuring that no personal reflections remain truly private.

This mass surveillance does not cause an outright rebellion but rather a quiet submission, illustrating how the digital daze pacifies resistance and makes citizens adhere to the rules set. Alex, despite being aware of the system’s flaws, internalizes the necessity of propagating false information, acknowledging that “Lying had become so reflexive since then, it took some effort to break the habit today” (8). His acceptance of deceit shows that technological control has seeped into personal ethics, reducing even critical thinkers to become passive enablers of the system. Moreover, the government even gets to decide who a good citizen is as per the information extracted from the individuals. The automated-controlled governments dictate who a “good citizen” (Basu 53) is and also who gets excluded from the rights. This kind of surveillance asserts that modern individuals experience reality through mediated spectacles rather than direct engagement, leading to the erosion of genuine consciousness.

The government’s acceptance of “cryosuspension” as a solution to overpopulation reflects a broader trend of prioritizing technological fixes over systemic reform. Jane P. Gloumer’s proposition that billions of people be frozen for a few centuries to allow the remaining population to use resources more sustainably. He says, “What if those billions could be persuaded to leave temporarily?” (51) exemplifies a utilitarian approach that reduces human lives to logistical challenges. The justification centers on scientific advancements, as seen in the claim that “recent work at the University of Beijing shows we’re only a decade away from perfecting

cryosuspension” (51) reinforcing the illusion that technological progress may bypass ethical dilemmas. This solution effectively detaches overpopulation from its underlying causes, such as wealth inequality, resource mismanagement, and unsustainable consumption. Instead of addressing these structural issues, the government’s promotion of cryosuspension numbs collective cognizance by reframing the crisis as a temporary surplus of people rather than a fundamental imbalance in global systems. The insensitive statement by Alex in *Earth* (1990) that “our problem isn’t too many people, per se. It’s that we have too many right now” (Brin 50) underscores the elite’s preference for removing individuals rather than redistributing resources, highlighting the dystopian logic of sacrificing parts of the population to sustain the status quo.

By presenting cryosuspension as a voluntary, temporary measure, the government masks its coercive nature and avoids confronting the ethical implications of treating humans as disposable. Jane’s indifferent narrative, “Of course, there are a few bugs to work out, such as the logistics of safely freezing five billion people, but that’s what SIG discussion groups like this one are for—coming up with ideas and solving problems!” (Brin 51), suggests an emotionless response to such a crucial step, yet it conveniently ignores the agency of those being ‘persuaded’ and the long-term consequences of such an intervention. Through this experiment conducted by the authorities, the attitude of the governing institutions is exhibited as they use humans “lab rats” (Grover 7). The government’s rhetoric aligns with an anaesthetic approach, as described by Susan Buck-Morss, where discomforting moral questions are avoided in favor of maintaining societal order. Additionally, the justification of cruelty by technology in *Earth* (1990) is portrayed when Alex says that “projects such as reforestation, or orbital solar power, or (other solutions) aren’t making any progress because our slender margin must be spent just feeding and housing so many people” (51) suggesting that technological and environmental initiatives are hindered not by economic structures or political will but simply by the presence of excess human bodies. This perspective normalizes the idea that the poor and marginalized must be removed for progress to occur, reinforcing a hierarchical vision of humanity where some lives are deemed expendable for the supposed greater good.

Beyond individual compliance, the novels highlight that collective consciousness is dulled by the overwhelming influx of digital content. The protagonist, Logan Eng, embodies this effect as he struggles with the chaotic flood of data on the Net, which makes it impossible to distinguish truth from manipulation. Rather than filtering useful information, the system drowns people in excessive, conflicting narratives, ensuring that they remain confused and disengaged. As Brin mentions in *Earth* (1990), “A million hackers unleashed carefully hoarded ‘grabber’ subroutines, designed to seize memory space and public attention” (388). The authorities exacerbate constant surveillance by suddenly declassifying vast amounts of stored information, not as an act of transparency but as a calculated tactic to overwhelm the public, rendering meaningful interpretation nearly impossible. Hanan Habibzai explores the impact of technology-driven society in “The Theory Of Digital Surveillance And Influence”⁵ and posits that modern governments, corporations, and social media platforms utilise data collection and algorithmic filtering to influence user behaviour and shape public perception in subtle ways. By examining how technology-driven surveillance influences choices, beliefs, and actions” (4). Hence, the digital overload does not empower individuals; instead, it reinforces unresponsiveness, making them more reliant on AI-driven systems that dictate which information is deemed relevant or permissible.

The erosion of mindfulness reaches its peak when individuals not only tolerate but actively participate in their own surveillance through the use of technology. The “Advances in emerging technologies have accelerated digital transformation with the pervasive digitalization of the economy and society” (Tan et al. 1). In this way individuals participate in a self-imposed scrutiny which is evident when people willingly document every aspect of their lives, leaving no room for secrecy or personal reflection. In *Earth* (1990), Alex, despite his initial apprehensions, finds himself adapting to the all-seeing gaze of the digital world, justifying its necessity even as he fears its consequences. Meanwhile, George Hutton, a billionaire deeply embedded in the system, represents the height of complacency, treating the loss of

⁵ The article highlights the role of algorithms in curating content to form echo chambers that subtly reinforce user beliefs and behaviours.

awareness as an acceptable trade-off for the comforts of a technologically advanced world. His attitude, “You promised to get drunk with us tonight! Tama mama, is this any way to celebrate?” (Brin 32), juxtaposes Alex’s existential dread with society’s carefree detachment from the reality of its digital enslavement. In Brin’s *Earth* (1990), technological surveillance is not merely an external force imposed by authorities; and becomes “a component of institutional routines and human sociality” (qtd. in Ball et al. 1). Thus, a state of digital daze emerges where individuals willingly surrender their agency, numbed into submission by the illusion of safety and progress.

Next, I investigate anaesthetization in *Chosen Spirits*. In the novel, the characters’ desensitization to horror and violence is a stark reflection of the consequences of a hyper-mediated world. The constant bombardment of information, which is carefully curated and controlled by reality controllers like Joey, leads to a society where consciousness is numbed, and empathy is a distant memory. The characters’ perception of violence and horror as mere entertainment, which they may choose to censor according to their will, is a chilling testament to the erosion of their humanity. The character of Joey is significant, as it unravels the desensitization as a technological response and nuanced always to regain control through sousveillance. As a reality controller of the Flowverse, Joey is occupied by “a montage of randomly selected, algorithm-controlled surveillance cam chips mostly of her looking at screens” (Basu 1), contributing to her role as an agent of technological control. Due to this overload of digital images, she is also desensitized to her direct surrounding and is rather occupied with the digital domain. In the instance of the protest, which gives the warning of death rate. “The app tells her this protests’ bloodshed rating is ‘Extremely high’. There’s a cheerful wiggly blood-drop notification.” (Basu 2) This illustrates that the lives of people are reduced to a mere digital warning and she is only exposed to the bloodshed threat, instead of confronting the real danger that the people might face (Basu 3). This shows how people are numb to the atrocities inflicted by the ubiquity of technology.

Moreover, the digital landscape overwhelms individuals with excess information, blurring the lines between a simulation and reality. The people live in a constant state of distraction and numbness, unable to critically make sense of their

surroundings. The endless stream of curated feeds makes reality feel less real for the characters. CS underscores the detachment from the tangible world as the citizens have no thinking capacity, they just absorb what the algorithm feeds them. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that this anaesthetization is not limited to daily life functions but it is also used to trivialize the horrors of the real world. When people are continuously exposed to digital violence, they internalize it as something normal and become emotionally detached which can be observed in a scene where, “Images from a concentration camp in Assam and a lynching near Kolkata have burned themselves into their brains.” (Basu 9). In the next section, I discuss that the illusion of autonomy is a powerful tool for social control, as it convinces individuals that they are free to make choices, while, in reality their choices are being manipulated and controlled.

4.2 The Illusion of Autonomy in a Sedated Society

In this section I discuss how algorithmic influence, data collection and surveillance permeate our society and controls us thus, making the idea of autonomy a long-lost cause. The anaesthetic society deliberately embraces monitoring rather than just having it forced on it. Everyone gets tricked into thinking they're independent when, in fact, they're being watched and turned into mere codes and data. Such a society “is regulated by codes that transform individuals into “‘dividuals’, masses become samples, data, markets, or banks” (Deleuze 180). According to Susan Buck-Morss's anesthetization theory, contemporary cultures lose their ability to critically reject oppressive institutions because they get used to them. By portraying surveillance as a means to provide ease, safety, and efficiency rather than control, *Earth* (1990) manages to preserve the appearance of freedom.

According to Buck-Morss, the public becomes numb and unable to differentiate between digital excess and compulsion when they are overstimulated. This anaesthesia may be observed through Joey's father's comment, “She wakes up again in her bedroom, with no memory of when and how she got there. At times like this, she looks forward to getting back to work: the constant adrenaline rush of Flow-running clearly keeps her at least vaguely conscious of where she is and why?” (Basu 19) This exemplifies how Joey, a common person, is numbed into submission. By

recasting identity loss as an inevitable cost to efficiency and security, the government makes technological control less controversial. People in such an automated society have no control over their own data. This subjugation of “content right” (Leong et al. 1) is practiced by leading tech-companies. Buck-Morss argues that the controlled decisions reflect how societies grow numb to power and violence through continuous exposure. According to her, “the simultaneousity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as anaesthetics” (18).

People in *Earth* (1990) believe that openness is crucial for social order; therefore, they voluntarily give up some of their privacy rather than having it taken away from them. Additional evidence of this occurrence may be found in the Rio Treaties, as Brin writes, “The Rio Treaties did allow one to withhold information temporarily—or try to—so long as careful records were maintained. That exception had been left in order to satisfy the needs of private commerce.” (154). The treaties' original intent is to oversee international trade, but they expand to include the registration of private journals as a means of systematic control. While people's access to information is severely limited, those in positions of power selectively release or withhold data in order to preserve their power, which shows through an event when Spivey talks about ecological projections on net, he says: “Washington's [sic] had a really excellent trends-analysis program for two decades now, but the results were just too appalling to release” (*Earth* 367). Through the algorithmic manipulation in *Earth* (1990) we can observe, “that algorithms not only possess power to govern social lives but also to function as “technologies of government” to “direct the flow of information and practices of users” (Bucher 37-38). This way, digital control seeps into the society swamped with data, and instead of raising consciousness this torrent of information dulls the ability to resist. Here we find support for Buck-Morss's contention that contemporary cultures suffer not from outright restriction but from an excess of stimuli that numbs their critical capacities.

Furthermore, *Earth* (1990) shows a society where deliberately created apathy is used to exercise power rather than open authoritarianism. The control systems are portrayed as requirements, safeguards, and conveniences, so people do not see themselves as enslaved. Similar to Buck-Morss's criticism of contemporary spectacle,

Earth's dystopian environment foretells a day when people surrender to tyranny of digitalization not out of complacency but because they don't know any other 'normal'. In *Earth* (1990), citizens live under the fear of digital blacklisting. They fear that they'd wake up one morning to find they had lost everything—no bank account, no citizenship, no job, no rights because net was in their control. As June observes in *Earth* (1990) that "It would replace big banks as an instrument of control, above nations and governments. Above even money. After all, didn't old sci-fi stories picture it that way? 'He who controls the flow of information controls the world'?" (Brin 393) This reflects the real-world risks of social digital systems, where individuals who fail to comply with government expectations face economic and social exclusion. A new kind of societal repression is conveyed to us through this novel.

Moreover, today's criminal acts are more often the result of impulsive emotional reactions rather than premeditated plans, which raises the question of whether continuous monitoring leads to a suppressed population who is unable to communicate effectively. Additionally, a remarkable lack of effort is shown by the *Earth* (1990) characters in spite of these obvious signs of control. Most people don't fight widespread monitoring; they just learn to live with it, either by becoming more invisible or by convincing themselves that they are secure. Everyone is now used to monitoring, even Logan, who is aware of the risks, feels unable to do anything about it. As people try to work inside the system, they end up making it stronger rather than weaker.

The impact of anaesthetization on individuals and society as a whole is profound. As individuals become increasingly disconnected from the world around them and connected to technology, they lose touch with their own agency and autonomy. This may lead to a sense of powerlessness and disengagement, as individuals feel that they are unable to effect change in the world. This powerlessness can be seen through the characters in *Chosen Spirits* (2020) who are constantly presented with choices and options, but these choices are ultimately illusory. The reality controllers, like Joey, regulate the information that appears on flows, carefully curating the content to ensure that individuals remain within the boundaries of

acceptable behavior. This fabrication can be shown through an instance in *Chosen Spirits* when: “Each of Indi’s Flowfans gets a customised Flow, specifically catered to their interests and preferences, so while most of Indi’s fans follow the sitcom of his life and friendships, there are several who genuinely think Indi’s a serious gamer, or a visual artist.” (Basu 39)

The novel highlights the ways in which the characters are seduced by the system, believing they have agency and control over their lives. However, this agency is merely an illusion, as their choices are dictated by the information they consume, which is carefully controlled by those in power. The description of Rudra’s character, framed as “being all self-reliant and independent but so inherently obedient that even his rebellion is budget friendly. It’s just a phase, he’ll come around eventually”, coincides with the concept of the illusion of autonomy (Basu 60). This illustrates that autonomy is a powerful tool of social control, as it convinces individuals that they are free to make choices, when in reality, their choices are being influenced and dominated. In the upcoming section, I discuss the undermining of an individual’s privacy through omnipresent surveillance, exploitation of information/data, and control over algorithms.

4.3 Flowing through the Flowverse

This section highlights that data once shared is out in the world and it can be used by authorities for their own advantage. Under the pretense of convenience and connectedness, social media apps have grown to be a powerful instrument for violating people’s privacy. According to Ess, “violation of privacy consists in the dissemination of information of an intimate nature to an interested audience without the consent of the subject” (54). Despite claiming that the data is encrypted for protection, many platforms ask users to provide personal information including phone numbers, email addresses, location data, face recognition and even biometric information. Hence, “technology is no doubt becoming a threat to privacy rather than a solution as it was viewed ones” (Rosenberg 228). Additionally, millions of individuals’ private information is frequently exposed via data breaches and leaks, leaving them open to identity theft, targeted advertising, and government monitoring. Large volumes of user data are gathered by businesses in order to improve their

algorithms, customize ads, and even sell insights to outside parties. This monopolization of data is highlighted by Cinnamon Jonathan, in his article, “Social Injustice in Surveillance Capitalism”.⁶ He says, “power is sharply concentrated in the hands of the small number of Web companies, retailers, and data brokers” (610). Weak security measures, insider threats, and hacking instances show how easily sensitive information may be accessed, frequently by those having control without users’ explicit agreement, even when they are guaranteed of encryption and privacy protocols.

Governments take hold of technology and impose surveillance over societies such as scanning mobile networks, using GPS and encrypting messages. “As the technology gets more powerful and invasive it becomes more of a sensitive issue as it tries to blur the line between private and public” (Dragu and Lupu 12). This widespread violation of privacy demonstrates that social media companies value revenue and data management over user security, turning personal data into a commodity rather than a right. Such as, “Well, bits of it. Special, strategic pieces. Think about when the original fiber cables and data hubs were laid. Someone could always be bought out, bribed, blackmailed” (Brin 393). Under the pretense of security and advancement, Brin's novel depicts a society where technological surveillance steadily dismantles privacy by “managing those whose data have been garnered.” (qtd. in Ball et al. 344).

Moreover, with the excuse that it is an essential trade-off for safety, surveillance has gone from being a secretive activity to an integral aspect of everyday life. The rise of AI-powered surveillance systems ushers in a future where digital sentinels uphold social standards, further eliminating humans as a factor in invasions of privacy. The description of security programs driven by AI is reflected through the technological installations outside Daisy's house in *Earth* (1990), “Between the house and the outside world, she's got watchdogs and griffins and the scariest cockatrice programs anyone's ever seen” (308). These artificial guardians control access, keep tabs on people's actions, and make sure they follow societal norms. Originally created to increase human freedom, the repurposing of surveillance-technology is to solidify

⁶ In this article, he investigates the impact of surveillance capitalism on social justice.

authority in a society where “every sound you made was overheard... every moment scrutinized” (Orwell 5). Another example of how monitoring changes people's habits is the proliferation of True-Vu cameras in *Earth* (1990). Crad’s statement explores the normalisation of technological infiltration and helplessness of individuals against it when he says, “You can’t just ban True-Vu and other tech-stuff. You can’t rebottle the genie. The world had a choice. Let governments control surveillance tech... and therefore give a snooping monopoly to the rich and powerful” (Brin 81) this instance highlights the centralized control of tech-governments.

In CS, Flowverse is a digital space that converges human consciousness with AI. Individuals create identities and even blend identity with virtual space. All the influencers and employees on flow think that they are autonomous in making their decisions, however they are treated as pawns in the oppressive totalitarian regime. Such an authority as said by has often been said to be “Godlike” rather than down at the same level as the individual party”. The users feed data into the system to feel more included and perform well in the virtual world. However, they are completely oblivious / numb to the consequences that this oversharing can inflict upon them. This juxtaposition of identity with AI erodes their individual privacy and often results in jeopardizing one’s security.

Furthermore, computer nodes are essential components of a network, acting as connection points that receive, process, and transmit data across digital systems. However, as technology has evolved, access to the net has become widespread, people find it increasingly difficult to suppress free information. This struggle between centralized control and digital freedom highlights the risks of privacy invasion and the ongoing battle for a truly open internet. As Teresa observes in *Earth* (1990), “Computer nodes were designed with ‘back door’ entry codes, known only to a few” (393). These nodes may be anything from personal computers and servers to routers and cloud-based platforms, all of which help maintain the functionality of the internet. A “back door” refers to a hidden access point within a system, deliberately created or exploited to bypass normal authentication processes. These secret entryways may be embedded during software development, discovered through vulnerabilities, or installed by malicious actors seeking unauthorized control. The role

of internet is imperative in infringement of privacy as “the Internet, in particular, facilitates the use of many tools that benefit such governments, including sophisticated digital monitoring.”, including sophisticated digital monitoring.” (Dragu and Lupu 12) Governments, and corporations often manipulate internet to access sensitive data, allowing them to orchestrate information, monitor activities, and exert influence over users. In *Earth* (1990), June reveals that elite groups have designed the internet with concealed back doors, enabling them to control the flow of information and uphold their dominance.

June describes a conspiracy by elite groups who seek to manipulate and control the global internet, referring to it as “the net.” She explains that the internet is originally designed with strategic access points, known only to a select few (393). These codes are used to gain privileged access to information, maintain domination, and manipulate communication channels. However, as the net expands and becomes increasingly democratic, these groups struggle to perpetuate their supremacy. The statement reflects the broader theme of the book: the tension between those who seek to monopolize information and those who strive for a free and open digital space. Additionally, through information warfare, data collection, and monitoring, the internet is frequently utilized as a fluid weapon which may easily be used for personal gains. Businesses and governments use weaknesses in internet’s infrastructure to keep tabs on people, sway public opinion, and control online environments. Search engines, social media sites, and internet services monitor user behavior, frequently with the intention of enhancing security or user experience. Nonetheless, targeted advertising, political propaganda, and even social engineering are common uses for this data.

A new kind of societal repression is conveyed to us through this novel. Today's criminal acts are more often the result of impulsive emotional reactions rather than premeditated plans, which raises the question of whether continuous monitoring leads to a suppressed populace that is unable to communicate effectively. A remarkable lack of effort is shown by the *Earth* (1990) characters in spite of these obvious signs of control. Most people don't fight widespread monitoring; they just learn to live with it, either by becoming more invisible or by convincing themselves

that they are secure. Roland's statement, "All right, tell me. Would you go back to the illusion of so-called privacy laws, which only gave the rich and powerful a monopoly on secrecy?" and Crat's response that "Maybe. At least when they had a... monopoly, they weren't so dumpit rude! People could at least pretend they were being left alone." (82) demonstrate the shadow of technological dominance. As people try to work inside the system, they end up making it stronger rather than weaker and accept surveillance as a necessary evil.

In *Chosen Spirits*, the breach of privacy is depicted as a result of omnipresent surveillance through technology. The character of Joey, as a reality controller, is a prime example of this manipulation. He regulates the information that the masses consume, carefully curating the content to satiate their consciousness. This control over information has severe consequences, as it shapes the characters' perceptions of reality, influencing their thoughts, emotions, and actions. Joey observes that "some of them already have the new data-implants installed on their necks" (Basu 30) in the massive farmer's protest. This unravels the truth of privacy and autonomy in the protests. Modern technology repurposes and encourages self-surveillance by making self-exposure as an opportunity for visibility and relevance. However, as the technology evolves it may no longer need an implant in a human body to control us instead, everyday devices such as smartphones become "far more valuable surveillance tools than biometric sensors" (Harari 270). This subtle form of control hinges not on fear but on comfort and habituation: individuals willingly surrender autonomy in exchange for convenience and entertainment, unaware of how their emotions and desires are being shaped. Hence this advanced technology can even "predict and manipulate our feelings, selling us anything it wants, be it a product, a politician, or a war" (Harari 270).

Furthermore, this passive acceptance of impassiveness and digital control is expressed through the frustration of Joey when "Avik and Romola refuse to follow even the most simple safety protocols—treating every text exchange like a public performance" (18). Joey's reflection on how personal devices betray their users is just another example of digital control. "It's your own house spying on you now. The walls really have ears" (16). Even mundane objects are now acting as surveillance

technologies which can be seen through Joey's remark and him being complacent with the idea of being surveilled constantly. Another instance is when, "Avik's new toothbrush heard every word he said and had been listening very carefully since he was tricked into buying it" (Basu 17). Amidst this heavily controlled world, people are okay with being under the shadow of digital overload. Thus, surveillance becomes a voluntary surrender and acts as a medium of desensitization in the name of technological progression.

In conclusion, both novels, *Earth* (1990) and *Chosen Spirits* (2020), act as a warning where people may see giving up of privacy as a means of safety and inclusiveness. These texts paint a disturbing picture of a culture that voluntarily gives up its most basic rights via depictions of digital desensitization, systematic manipulation, and self-reinforced passivity. It becomes clear that this anaesthetization is not limited to characters, but is a pervasive aspect of society as a whole. The constant monitoring and surveillance, the careful control of information, and the use of technology to anaesthetise public opinion, all contribute to a society in which individuals are increasingly disconnected from the world around them. In the next chapter, I discuss how sousveillance acts as a resistive force and resultantly becomes a way of watching back at the watchers, when people take control of their lives in their own hands.

CHAPTER 5

EYES FROM BELOW: AFFIRMING SOUSVEILLANCE IN A TECHNOLOGICALLY ANAESTHETISED SOCIETY

In this chapter, I analyse how individuals participate in resistive actions against the omnipresence of technology in a digitally anaesthetized society and reclaim agency over their own independent narratives. Surveillance, as a top-down mechanism, has long been used by those in power to monitor, control, and regulate the behaviors of individuals and societies. However, with the advent of digital technologies and the widespread availability of recording devices, the dynamics of power may be shifted through sousveillance practices. Indeed, “sousveillance is... generally framed in terms of social control, but it flips the tables on the traditionally panoptic framing of state (Newell 63). This way sousveillance flips the table by giving the individuals agency to break monopoly of the controllers.

Steve Mann’s concept of sousveillance, the act of watching from below, offers a counter-narrative to traditional surveillance by enabling individuals to turn the gaze back on the watchers. Instead of being passive subjects in a panoptic society, individuals reclaim agency through sousveillance, resisting authoritative control and challenging the monopolization of technology. Kelly Ross expands on this idea by illustrating how ordinary citizens disrupt elite control over information, expose hidden realities, and democratize knowledge through grassroots observation and digital activism. According to her, “sousveillance wrests power from those historically able to monitor and control by watching from above. Instead, the concept positions the average citizen as the “watcher” of those in power-despite occupying weaker positions in society, citizens engaged in sousveillance can expose abuses and hold the powerful accountable.” This way sousveillance acts as a resistive force is by disrupting the elite’s control over knowledge and counter surveillance. The ability to collect, analyze, and distribute information has historically been centralized among institutions, be it governments, media conglomerates, or corporate entities. However,

“...the original notion of sousveillance promoted by Steve Mann signifies that every watcher would voluntarily give free access to all information recorded. Usually, people recording information take part in the event and participants are aware of the recording” (Ganascia 7). Hence, with the widespread availability of internet, smartphones and cameras has empowered individuals to hold authoritarian figures accountable.

The incorporation of artificial intelligence in our daily lives has transformed the way we interact, communicate, and navigate our surroundings. However, this transformative power of AI also raises important questions about its impact on individual agency, freedom, and autonomy. In Samit Basu’s novel, *Chosen Spirits* (2020), the anaesthetization of the individuals takes place, as technological advancements are overshadowed by their social repercussions. In this section, I explore the paradox of technological advancements in *Earth* (1990) and *Chosen Spirits* (2020), by examining how in the face of oppression it may perform as means of resistance. The narratives of the selected novels seem to feed into the idea how technology becomes the opiate of the masses. In this chapter, by making use of Belsy’s approach of textual analysis and taking theoretical support from Steve Mann. I analyse the selected texts with reference to “Sousveillance” under the following three sections.

5.1 Information as a Double-Edged Sword

In this section, I discuss that technology, on one hand, acts as a tool of oppression, surveillance and ubiquitous control over a society and, on the other hand, serves as a means of resistance that empowers individuals to control information, challenge dominant narratives, and fosters individual autonomy. As said by Mannet, “Sousveillance now plays a dominant role in modern societies, which influences the traditional political forms.” (qtd. in Ganascia 4). One of the most powerful aspects of sousveillance is its ability to mobilize collective observation against institutions that seek to operate in secrecy.

My analysis of *Earth* (1990), exemplifies this through the role of Special Interest Groups (SIGs): “It’s private citizens, with sharp eyes and ready cameras, who are even now tracing patterns the big boys think they can keep secret from us” (351).

It demonstrates the ability of watchful people to reveal secrets. Steve Mann's groundbreaking work with wearable technology, especially his insight on the "Wearable Wireless Webcam" in the 1990s, is comparable to this idea. Mann is able to continuously record his surroundings thanks to this equipment, a tiny video camera worn on a helmet sends real-time footage to the internet. The integration of self-worn cameras suggests that sousveillance is reciprocal and is conducted against the watchers and the "The idea here is that the watched can record the actions of the watcher, for example with the purpose of making this information public" (Vertegaal and Shell 8). Hence, sousveillance becomes a bottom-up process.

Inverse surveillance is a term used in this approach, which Mann calls "sousveillance", the recording of participant activities, to enable people to keep an eye on their surroundings and superiors. Sousveillance does not merely exist in isolated acts of observation, it thrives within the digital sphere, where people wear cameras, control technology and use internet to put forth their own narrative. This way "These additional veillances give us a more complete picture: multiple viewpoints from multiple entities bring us closer to the truth" (Mann 1). This form of defiance enables individuals to realise their equal access to technology and internet. This resistance is described metaphorically in Brin's *Earth* (1990): "Instead of being their tame instrument, the Net kept slipping free like something alive" (393). Technology, like internet, seems to be intrinsically resistant to ultimate control, according to this. The goal of surveillance systems is to control online areas, yet individuals may use the same tools to expose wrongdoing, organize demonstrations, and defy authoritarian governments.

The sousveillance strategies in Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) may be seen in the actions of the minor characters and their underground spaces. Zaria, an influencer belonging to the privileged section of the society, manages a hidden social media space known as the "New Tion", where she curates a space on which "the children who have escaped the mobs of enchanted citizens...the king has inspired them to remorseless bloodshed" (Basu 190). Rather than being a passive agent in face of hierarchy set by technology, people start questioning their rule. As reflected through Dawn Freshwater, Pamela Fisher and Elizabeth Walsh's statement, "the control is no longer with the eye in the sky but involves relocating surveillance within society

within more mundane and democratic forms of observation. The aim is to subvert the gaze of the Panopticon” (Freshwater, Fisher et al. 2015).

Zaria utilizes the availability of information to disrupt the totalitarian regime. She employs the same platforms created by the authoritarian flow rulers to mobilize observation against the systems operating in privacy. Her encrypted messages in the secret flow spaces mobilize resistance against the oppression of the rulers: “Rudra zones out in the middle of the story trying to follow Zaria’s surveillance metaphors instead of the plot: she’s sending encrypted documents to the whole group as she speaks. He’s played games with enough dark-webbers to recognise AI-created documents-as-images when he sees them: around the world,” (Basu 188). Furthermore, her resistance movement enabled through secret messaging makes Rudra care about the oppressive regime that he takes advantage from: “Beyond her words, he understands her message when she lets them know that the upcoming physical brain implants that will be forced on the poor soon will do more than identify and monitor citizens” (Basu 189). She exposes the hidden agendas of the powerful authorities and expresses her distrust in the technological developers and their potential abuse of the systems in place. She mobilizes the threat of manipulation and control that the masses are subjected to without their consent. As an embodiment of sousveillance, Zaria jolts the complacent individuals sedated by the technological governance back to reality by calling out their controlled perspectives: “It requires distance. Some of us are actually sitting in the fucking middle of it and we may never learn to care in time. This isn’t dystopia. This is reality” (Basu 195). In this way, she flips the power structures by exposing the unaware masses to the reality of their oppression through the same authoritarian tools.

Basu also shares stories of “gene testing prison camps”, debunking the strategies employed by the higher authorities to control the masses (Basu 193). Joey learns how to escape the government censorship filters to form a subversive movement. Her platform takes the form of a whistleblower network and disrupts the mainstream journalism networks, that is regulated by the government. Thus, people resist through “process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis 9). This way, platforms like open-source investigative tools, encrypted messaging systems, and social media, allow information

to circulate unregulated by censors. Despite efforts by governments and companies to exert control over these areas, counter-narratives are able to continually surface due to the internet's inherent fluid-like characteristics. This way sousveillance emerges as a dynamic and adapting technique for opposing information control, not only a reactive force.

The paradox of technological advancements in *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and *Earth* (1990) highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of technology in our lives. While technological advancements serve as a tool of oppression, employed by authoritarian states to monitor and control the masses, they may also be employed as a means of resistance, enabling individuals to regain control and subvert the power dynamics. As we move forward in our increasingly technological world, it is essential that we remain aware of the complex power dynamics at play, employing technology in ways that promote agency, autonomy, and social justice. In the next section, I explain how active use of technology may democratize information gathering and topple established power systems.

5.2 Disrupting Authoritative Narratives

The emergence of sousveillance is causing a shift away from controlled narratives towards an atmosphere where people feel safe enough to speak up, provide criticism, and reveal problems. Digital sousveillance has elements of resistance. Narrative control is a key component of traditional power systems, which they use to influence public discourse by distributing information selectively. The public, however, is no longer reliant on institutional gatekeepers or oblivious thanks to sousveillance. People now contest official stories more easily, expose disinformation, and bring hidden problems to light thanks to the emergence of alternative media, hacking groups, and internet forums. As a result of the unstoppable flow of information, people are no longer passive consumers of propaganda from the state or corporations but rather active creators of their own narratives. Hence, “the algorithms can just as easily become powerful tools for bottom-up transparency and accountability” (Harari 341). So, the power dynamics of observation undergoes a radical change due to sousveillance. It gives people agency, allowing them to fight back against surveillance, reveal hidden realities, and take back control of their own

lives. The use of technology may expose elites' monopoly on information, undermine digital regulations, rally opposition, and question dominant narratives. The idea of “participatory panopticon,” is now more than just a theory in this digital era. (Cacio 1). By affirming sousveillance, *Earth* (1990) and *Chosen Spirits* (2020) create a sense of transparency and accountability that aligns with Harari's assertion that “if citizens know more about the activities of politicians and CEOs, it is easier to hold them accountable and to correct their mistakes” (341). In this way, sousveillance emerges not merely as a resistance tactic within cyberpunk fiction, but as a democratic necessity for maintaining balance in the age of relentless digital monitoring.

The dawn of a sousveillance culture examines that citizens are now be able to keep an eye on the activities of those in power. Asserting one's right to monitor, record, and expose via sousveillance guarantees that authority is not left uncontrolled. In a society where everyone is always being watched, they take back control by staring back at the people doing the monitoring. In *Chosen Spirits* (2020), Indi, another influencer on flow, helps the flow celebrities gauge the areas attracting mass viewership. His job is to cater to the “high-end, trend conscious people, looking for the next big thing’ (Basu 110). He curates the content according to its relevance to the upper-class individuals. By doing so, he controls the consumption of content by the elite class individuals. Similarly, Rohan, another minor character uses drone camera to monitor and record the actions of those in power as a tool to gain agency. So, this recording of personal experiences acts as a resistive force against the authoritative narrative set by those in power and provides with a more human-centered experience.

Raja, an expert hacker, who belongs to the lower strata of society, emerges as a powerful member because of his control over information, as he exclaims: “Nothing moves in your neighbourhood that I don't know about, and I am friends with all the powers that run it—for now. They need me, and they need Cyber Bazaar.’ (Basu 212). He is deeply entrenched in the power dynamics, despite belonging to the lower social class, and possesses significant influence over the authorities. He has also joined the resistance movement prompted by Zaria and Rudra, as he informs Joy: “they're going out into dangerous places to find out the truth. They don't work for me at all—but we have common interests and beliefs, enough for us to help them” (Basu 215). Raja

manages to exert influence over the operations of the authorities by disrupting the information spaces through “dronejacking sweatshops and illegal 3D printing factories that could compete with the Chinese if they didn’t have to pay bribes, about criminal-only servers, identity theft centres, malware startups, tech-pyavikar cartels aligned with caste mafias in Uttar Pradesh, fake ID publishers and maverick gene-hackers, Gujarati cryptocurrency forgers and Dravida nation spies” (Basu 216-17). He has curated underground information channels to evade surveillance by the authoritarian regime. While disclosing his secret activities to Joey, he says: “We make things here that the people need but their rulers do not want”, emphasizing control over information through criminal and secretive ways (Basu 221). He helps Zaria and Rudra in their resistance movement by giving them face implants to escape the highly nuanced surveillance technology designed by the authoritarian rulers.

Individuals in *Earth* (1990) employ multiple strategies of resistance against surveillance, authoritarian control, and elite information monopolization. Their actions align with Steve Mann’s concept of sousveillance, as they turn the tools of surveillance against those in power, reclaiming their agency through grassroots observation, digital resistance, and direct action. My research explains that individuals in the novel, where controlled by the technology, are also resisting through various means. Like actual sousveillance operations, citizen-lead initiatives to reveal concealed facts and question official opacity. “It may surprise many of you how much science relies on amateur observers, from bird-watchers, to meteor counters, to hobbyists with private weather stations” (351).

Characters in *Earth* (1990) actively resist by collecting their own information rather than relying on official sources. Such as, “We now tell you more news about the tragedy of Reagan Station. Two weeks ago, the American space station exploded. The ambassador to the United Nations, from Russia, accuses that the United States of North America was testing weapons on Reagan Station. Alex’s remark “The Russian ambassador does say that he has no proof. But he also does say that this is the “most likely explanation” (103). shows this decentralized approach prevents the elite from maintaining a monopoly on truth and ensures that critical data remains accessible to the public. The rise of amateur scientists such as Alex and Teresa in the novel

showcases a resistance strategy rooted in democratizing knowledge. Brin's characters such as June recognize that the internet, though initially designed to be controlled by authorities, may slip out of their grasp and become a tool for resistance. For instance, "The net," she said succinctly. "The net?" "That's right. It was getting too big, too open and all-pervading... too bloody democratic to manipulate much longer. They were growing more desperate every year" (392). The internet is portrayed as a chaotic, self-regulating entity that eludes centralized control just as sousveillance allows individuals to repurpose surveillance technologies for empowerment.

In the selected texts, hackers, activists, and rogue AI entities use the internet to disrupt government control, leak classified information, and mobilize resistance movements. This aligns with real-world cases where digital activists use encrypted communication, open-source intelligence (OSINT), and decentralized networks to counteract censorship and authoritarianism. By leveraging technology, characters transform the tools of oppression into instruments of resistance. For instance, Nikhil, an investor, emphasizes on the crucial role of disseminating information from the below and shaping the government decisions. The significance of citizen-lead initiatives in concealing facts and questioning the higher authorities may be seen in his conversation with Indi, as he persuades him to join him in the initiative to challenge the existing structures. The decentralized approach may be interpreted as a sousveillance technique, as Nikhil wants to transform the information structures, while retaining his autonomy on the decision makers. Nikhil reiterates his belief in the power of sousveillance, when he tells Indi that he's an 'insider' and has the agency to "make the rules", as he gains critical information and then propagates it in trending ways (Basu 107). In this way, the mass viewership, belonging to the upper and the lower strata of the society are convinced that their choices are being dictated by their own desires, rather than the overarching authorities.

A key strategy in *Earth* (1990) involves groups of citizens working together to monitor those in power, effectively reversing the traditional flow of surveillance. This aligns with sousveillance, where ordinary people use cameras, networks, and data-sharing to hold elites accountable. This is described as a form of collective resistance against state trough: "It's private citizens, with sharp eyes and ready cameras, who are

even now tracing patterns the big boys think they can keep secret from us” (351). Citizen groups form Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to track strange global events and uncover hidden government operations. This mirrors real-world whistleblower networks, investigative journalism, and open-source tracking communities that expose corruption and corporate misconduct. The novel suggests that when individuals collaborate in monitoring power structures, they undermine authoritarian secrecy and reclaim agency over information.

Another resistance strategy in *Earth* (1990) involves disrupting official government and corporate channels by flooding them with alternative narratives, leaks, and counter-information. This creates informational chaos that challenges the dominant discourse controlled by the elite. Ross captures this strategy in her description of networked resistance, “Even ‘official’ channels were jammed half the time with interlopers claiming their right to comment on the crisis facing the world” (388). The characters in *Earth* (1990) exemplify the power of sousveillance as a resistance strategy. They challenge elite control over information through independent data collection, digital activism, collective surveillance, disruption of official narratives, and subversion of surveillance tools. Their resistance is not just reactive, it is transformative, proving that technology, once in the hands of the people, is now becoming a weapon against oppression. In the novel, hackers and rogue actors infiltrate official networks, exposing suppressed information and disrupting the government’s ability to control public perception. Such as, “To Logan Eng, the chaos in the Net felt like having one of life’s underpinnings knocked out. What had been a well-ordered, if undisciplined, ruckus of zines, holochannels, SIGs, and forums had become a rowdy babel, a torrent of confusion and comment, made worse because in order to be noticed each user now sent out countless copies of his messages toward any node that might conceivably listen. A million hackers unleashed carefully hoarded grabber subroutines, designed to seize memory space and public attention. Even ‘official’ channels were jammed half the time with interlopers claiming their right to comment on the crisis facing the world” (388). This parallels real-world cases of online activism, where movements like WikiLeaks, Anonymous, and grassroots social media campaigns challenge state propaganda and media manipulation. By

jamming elite-controlled communication channels, the characters enforce transparency and ensure that suppressed voices are heard. By watching back at the watchers (Mann 332), they reclaim control over their own lives, making sousveillance not just a defense mechanism but a revolutionary act of agency.

Acts of Sousveillance also appear in *Chosen Spirits* (2020) when the individuals curating the underground platforms on flowverse escape the surveillance by “using complex live encryption that translates inputs into girl-chat code that most surveillance would ignore or dismiss” (Basu 186). One of the stories that Zaria shares in New Tion, explicates their sousveillance tendencies, as she narrates the story of the king ensuring his subjects’ happiness “by learning absolutely everything about them through magic” and the subjects embark on a rebellious journey by deciding that it would be beneficial “if they kept secrets” (Basu 188). The witch in the story, who is a personification of Zaria, motivates the children of the rebels to find ways to stop the king’s magicians, corroborating their own actions to take over the reins of information propagation and subverting the surveillance strategies of the government.

Through these cryptic messages, she is not only debunking the surveillance strategies of the government, but also disseminating it to mass audience to create waves of revolution from below. Rudra’s hacking endeavor reveals that she is warning her audience about the “physical brain implants that will be forced on the poor soon” to “identify and monitor citizens, measure them..., power the national blockchain, vote on their behalf in sham elections, store and share data” (189-190). In this narrative, she blatantly explicates the mission of subverting the technological gaze. Furthermore, Zaria exposes the abuse of power by building on the loopholes in the power structures such as when she is banned from the net, she uses VPN and international media. She uses encrypted messaging to propagate the repercussions of governmental surveillance as well as their vision to incorporate more grave changes to gain more control. Henceforth, Zaria utilizes sousveillance as a coping mechanism to survive in the tech-driven dictatorship. It is employed as a tool of organized resistance in a world thriving on control over information and propagating oppressive mechanisms through exchange of constrained interactions.

To conclude, my research examines that the conflict between two arrays of surveillance, an oppressive strategy employed by the authorities, and a resistive mechanism in the form of *sousveillance*, serves as a central theme in both novels. According to Kelly Ross, the ordinary citizens disrupt the oppressive power structures through *sousveillance* and regain their agency. It brings me to the point that passive individuals in a society employ their own ways through which they project *sousveillance* and posit their agency under the eyes of the oppressive watchers. The ways might not be revolutionary, but they create an equivalent surveillance and bring authorities to their level by questioning the omnipresent panopticon. My analysis of the texts leads to the concluding discussion of my argument in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, summing up the discussion, I conclude my dissertation by elaborating how this work has productively intervened in the contemporary scholarship on sousveillance and anaesthetics. I have examined Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990) by employing Susan Buck-Morss's concept of "anaesthetics" and Steve Mann's idea of "sousveillance". Also, I have used Catherine Belsey's essay "Textual Analysis as a Research Method" to examine my primary texts critically. By extensively analyzing my selected novels, in chapter 4 and 5 respectively, I have come to some significant findings and recommendations.

This study is based on the premise that technological and scientific advancements have largely numbed critical thinking and sabotaged individual agency. Through constant surveillance, information over load and media manipulation, citizens become passive participants in their own oppression. From lives being carefully curated by digital influencers in *Chosen Spirits* to manipulation of reality by bombardment of data on net in *Earth* (1990), we may observe emotional detachment and passive conformity leading to a state of anaesthesia. Through the lens of theoretical framework, I have investigated that technology may significantly help humans in shaping their society and identity but it may also pose unimaginable threats. Alex's obsession with black hole from the novel suggests the kind of destruction a simple experiment could inflict on the entire human race. Similarly, through other experiments conducted by the authorities such as freezing humans to ignore the pressing issues of the society, we may observe that humans are just tools manipulated by those in power. Adding to the discussion, I find that people are paralysed due to conflicting information sent their way. This causes them to be entirely oblivious of the ground reality. They are surveilled in such a way that they are afraid to act because they know they are being watched. Even the phones they carry and the watches they wear are constantly monitoring them.

The second part of my research explains that instead of being passive subjects in a panoptic society, individuals reclaim agency through sousveillance, resisting

authoritative control and challenging the monopolization of knowledge. Kelly Ross expands on this idea by illustrating how ordinary citizens disrupt elite control over information, expose hidden realities, and democratize knowledge through grassroots observation and digital activism. One of the fundamental ways sousveillance acts as a resistive force is by disrupting the elite's control over knowledge. The ability to collect, analyze, and distribute information has historically been centralized among institutions, be it governments, media conglomerates, or corporate entities. As Ross has examined issues of visibility and invisibility in the context of racialized surveillance. In these instances, sousveillance exists predominantly as resistance to surveillance.

To understand the shift from technological anaesthetisation in a society to individuals countering official narratives with independently gathered evidence, I have critically analysed the selected texts. The three controlling questions of my research were: (1) What are the manifestations of technology and AI controlling the human in the selected texts? (2) How is anaesthetization put into effect and how are characters in the selected texts impacted by it? (3) How does sousveillance play out against technological control in the selected fiction and with what effect? Despite the contextual limitations, the findings of the study are integral to my thesis statement and research questions. Although not generalizable, the findings of the study significantly relate to my thesis statement and research questions.

To find answer to my first question, I have analysed my primary texts with the theoretical lens of “anaesthetisation” given by Susan Buck Morss (See section 3.2., p. 32 - 4). The major indicators of anaesthetisation that become visible through analysis of Brin's *Earth* (1990) and Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) are ubiquitous surveillance, constant influx of information, AI-curated identities, Phantasmagoria as sensory manipulation, mechanized decision-making, and fear of being erased. These indicators constitute my first finding.

I have explored possible answer to my second controlling question in chapter 4 by analyzing the selected texts. My second finding is that citizens are numbed by the effects of technology prevalent in the society. Technology shapes their life in such a way that it controls every single movement. They live in the fear of digital

blacklisting. This reflects the real-world risks of social credit systems, where individuals who fail to comply with government expectations face economic and social exclusion. Similarly, *Chosen Spirits* presents a world in which digital footprints dictate social and economic standing of an individual (see my discussion in Ch. 4, 29 – 40).

Brin and Basu's texts validate the argument that citizens don't even have the right to privacy. The novels explain that the individuals had even less privacy than animals. Every time something is being recorded or surveilled, the individuals consider it essential for societal advancement, thus conforming to the systematic rule as an essential part of a progressing society (see my discussion in Ch. 4, 34 – 39). Government collects data from the citizens and the technological control exceeds to such an extent that now the thoughts are also being recorded to use in algorithms. The discussion of cryogenics explains the marketisation of human lives by the authoritative system, which reduce their existence to mere passive economic data units.

Moreover, in chapter 5, I have examined how resistance strategies are affirmed by the characters of the primary novels. The third question of my study is connected to this argument. The question inquires as to how sousveillance plays out against technological control in the selected fiction and with what effect? To find answer to this question, I have employed Steve Mann's idea of Sousveillance as a critical lens (see my discussion in Ch. 3, 24 – 6). I have come to find out that ordinary individuals challenge the gatekeeping of knowledge production. Amateur observers contribute valuable scientific data, undermining institutional monopolies and proving that technology is not solely confined to the system. This form of sousveillance mirrors how citizens use technology to monitor power structures, document injustices, and expose hidden truths. From citizen journalism capturing police brutality to climate activists tracking environmental degradation, sousveillance empowers individuals to counter official narratives with independently gathered evidence. It disrupts the notion that only institutions have the authority to define and disseminate reality (see my discussion in Ch. 5, 41 – 48).

To conclude, this research has explored the interconnectedness of technology, surveillance, and resistance in a contemporary society. By analysing the selected texts, I draw on Susan Buck-Mors's concept of anesthetization, which explains how technology's omnipresence dulls human consciousness through manipulated information, reducing humans to passive subjects in a tech-driven society. However, the same technology, data, internet, wearable cameras, mobiles, nodes and systems can be used as a means of resistance in sousveillance, and aid in reclaiming agency and individual autonomy. This research underscores that the resistance doesn't necessarily have to be revolutionary; it can unfold through small acts of questioning authorities, hacking systems, dismantling status quotations, and inverting the panopticon. This creates a more equivalent relation between the observer and the observed. It wakes people up from the opiated sleep which forced them to be indifferent to their oppressors and urges them to hold these authorities accountable. Lastly, this research highlights that both *Earth* (1990) and *Chosen Spirits* (2020) underscore the potential for individuals to resist technological domination not by outright defiance, but by subverting it in ways that promote transparency, challenge control, preserve human agency and repurpose technology.

6.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Sousveillance may be considered a developing domain in literary studies because only a handful of researches have engaged with this concept. My research project is interdisciplinary in the sense that literary studies merge with spatial and surveillance studies in my argument. Future researchers may consider it a reference point for further critical studies in the intersections of literature, space theory, and surveillance studies. For instance, John Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider* (1975), Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction* (1995), David Brin's *The Transparent Society* (1998), Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* (2017), and P.W. Singer & August Cole's *Ghost Fleet* (2015) engage with the themes related to technology. These novels foreground the idea of sousveillance, surveillance, virtual, augmented reality, and technological control. These works of fiction and their themes are slightly different from the themes explored in my chosen primary texts.

Future researchers may triangulate sousveillance and anaesthetics with other variables and further explore the adjoining areas of this study. For instance, Shoshana Zuboff's concept of "surveillance capitalism" and Luis Suarez-Villa's theoretical idea of "techno-capitalism" may be explored in the texts. Also, Tania Bucher's concept of "algorithmic governance" is a very compelling concept through which the researchers may explore the role of algorithms in the world of augmented reality. These themes may be explored in George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008), Will Gibson's *The Unravelling* (2018), Cory Doctorow's *Homeland* (2013), and Dave Eggers' *The Every* (2021).

Besides, the relation between technology and human beings may be explored further in literary texts by inter-braiding them with other disciplines like legal studies, psychology, sociology, feminist studies, cultural studies, economics, and many more. Future scholars may also find how digital era has transformed the concepts of privacy and societal norms. Furthermore, researchers may study the impact of emerging technologies like meta, artificial intelligence, and biometrics.

Furthermore, in this research project, my main emphasis was on Sousveillance and Anesthetics to be explored in my primary texts. Continuing with this discussion, future scholars may explore other ways of resistance against technology while being active users of technology itself. At the same time, other dystopian fictions texts (as mentioned above) may be explored by deploying the concept of sousveillance. *The Feed* (2002) by M.T. Anderson focuses on the themes of hacktivism and recording instances to fight against exploitative empires. Ideas surrounding technology acting as opiate of the masses are significant in the modern world, and individuals using that technology to watch back may be investigated in the aforementioned texts. Moreover, future research may also explore how acts of sousveillance, initially intended for resistance, can be co-opted by states and corporations to reinforce existing systems of control. I hope future scholars actively engage with these texts and refer to my dissertation as a lead for their research.

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