Nothing to Hide and Nothing to See

The Conditions of Narrative and Privacy in Jennifer Egan's *Black Box*

Af Kristin Veel

Abstract

Denne artikel undersøger ved hjælp af en læsning af Twitter-novellen Black Box *af den amerikanske forfatter Jennifer Egan relationen mellem information, narration og overvågning i samtidskulturen. En samtidskultur præget af store datamængder og totalovervågning, som har implikationer for vores opfattelse af privatliv. Artiklen argumenterer for, at de store datamængder, som vi lever i og med, frembringer en form for narrativ forhandling, der er født ikke ud af eksistentialismens fokus på menneskets og dets handlinger, men ud af en bevidsthed om den teknologiske kontekst, i hvilken vi er indlejret. Denne kontekst er medskabende for en forståelse af privatliv som en kontinuerlig forhandling mellem netop konteksten og det personlige, hvor det private i sidste ende kun fremstår som synligt i kraft af sin usynlighed.*

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"GARCIN: […] Could hell be described as too much of anything without a break? Are variety, moderation and balance instruments we use to keep us from boiling in any inferno of excess, whether it be cheesecake or ravenous sex?

VALET: What are you talking about?

GARCIN: Your eyelids. We move ours up and down. Blinking, we call it. It's like a small black shutter that clicks down and makes a break. Everything goes black; one's eyes are moistened. You can't imagine how restful, refreshing, it is. Four thousand little rests per hour. Four thousand little respites- just think! ... So that's the idea. I'm to live without eyelids. Don't act the fool, you know what I mean. No eyelids, no sleep; it follows, doesn't it? I shall never sleep again. But then- how shall I endure my own company?" (Sartre, 1944)

Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit* of 1944 depicts hell as three deceased characters locked in a room together for eternity, forced to observe one another - and themselves. The French title *Huis Clos* translates as "behind closed doors", connoting both the situation of entrapment, privacy, and what in English is called "in camera" - literally "in the chamber" - i.e. a courtcase without the presence of the public or media. This situation of constant visibility to oneself and others is described in Sartre's play as an "inferno of excess", exemplified by the above quotation in the imagery of a lack of eyelids, which prompts the question: "how shall I endure my own company?" In

this article I shall explore contemporary conceptions of privacy as explicated through the imagery of the black box as a closed room to which we are granted little or no access by turning to the contemporary short story *Black Box* (2012) by acclaimed American writer Jennifer Egan.

Information, Surveillance, Narrative

In a 2013 talk on the FBI files on Sartre and Camus given at the Maison Francaise, Columbia University, later published in *Prospect*, scholar of French culture and philosophy Andy Martin argues that:

> "Narrative, philosophy, and espionage share a common genesis: they arise out a lack of information. Sartre's expectation of a world of total information would kill them all stone dead. There would be no need of the FBI, novelists, or French philosophers. Existentialism and Absurdism insist on an asymmetry between being and information." (Martin, 2013)

This argument aligning narrative, philosophy, and espionage is interesting to take as a starting point for a consideration of the condition of privacy in an age of constant data harvesting and information excess. In his short piece in *Prospect*, Martin argues that J. Edgar Hoover's FBI of the post-war period, which investigated Sartre and Camus for their communist inclinations, displays the same modernist critique of narrative as does existentialism. From the conviction that being a communist was a *latent* (in the Freudian sense) condition, the bureau's agents became "psychoanalysts and hermeneuts" (ibid.) in the aim of understanding the subjects of their investigations - in this instance Sartre and Camus. But it is Martin's further claim that the FBI's approach also came to mirror the philosophy of existentialism and absurdism in turn. Martin points to the anti-conspiratorial inclinations of the FBI, for instance in accepting the theory of Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone rider who killed Kennedy, and explains this as a reluctance to look for plot or a great theory, and rather accept contingency and chaos. The FBI might search for secret coded meaning and operate in a world of potential paranoia and conspiracy theories, but they reject teleological narrative, echoing Satre's critique of narrative. "What they fear and object to is meaning, and finally, the plot-or narrative. They are anti-narrativists", Martin argues (ibid.).

It may seem a surprising argument, in so far as we are habituated - no doubt induced by Hollywood narrative - to seeing intelligence services as grand conspiracy theorists, who hunt for imaginative plots.[1] However, the assertion that espionage in the heyday of the cold war in fact had an *anti*-conspiratorial streak that can fundamentally be conceived of as an anti-narrative inclination philosophically linked to existentialism and absurdism, and related to a cold war environment characterised by both a lack of exact information and the hovering potential of paranoid interpretation overload, points to an interesting constellation between *information*, *narrative*, and *surveillance*. This trinity and their complex interrelations may be used as an entry point for thinking further about our present cultural condition in terms of privacy and surveillance through looking at contemporary narrative fiction.

If Martin argues that the FBI of the postwar period displayed a shift from an interest in *meaning* and *interpretation* to *being* without an overarching teleological narrative or plot, then it is my hypothesis here that the shift from a focus on the human being to a posthuman conception of our embeddednesss in the world accentuates this movement beyond an interest in *being* towards an interest in *function* which, importantly, makes the personal visible through its absence. By unfolding the relation between information, surveillance, and narrative in Jennifer Egan's Twitter story, it is my claim that we can gain a deeper insight into the nature of this condition, and add valuable nuances to the contemporary debate on privacy.

The Woman without Qualities

Black Box centres on the character of Lulu from Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). In the last chapter of this novel we encounter her as a twenty-something college student who is described as "a living embodiment of the new 'handset employee': paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent" (Egan, 2011, p. 325). It is this character Egan explores further in *Black Box*, which can be read as a science fiction narrative taking place in the 2030s. Lulu is now 33, and her qualities as a "handset employee" have been radicalised in so far as she has herself become a transportable device with technology implanted in her body.

Our protagonist thus literally embodies the techno-logical development from the computer as a separate device to something more fundamentally embedded in our lifeworld. In an interview in the online journal *Dichtung Digital*, media scholars Roberto Simanow-ski and Ulrik Ekman (2014) discuss the necessity of a theory of information that takes into account the semantic notion of information in the face of what has been termed the "third wave" of human-oriented and context-aware computing, where technology is integrated into our everyday in increasingly invis-ible and *smart* ways. This means that the processing of information extends not only beyond humans, but also beyond computers, for instance in the swim-ming pool that heats up when it sees that there is bar-beque on the calendar, the fridge that self-restocks, or the asthma inhaler that detecs risk areas (Ekman & Simanowski, 2014). In light of this, Ekman argues for the need to develop a conception of informa-tion that is more adequate for dealing with things like "Material machines, embodiment, life, animal-ity, humanity, context, and semantics" (Ekman & Simanowski, 2014) than the classical conception of information and communication outlined by Shannon and Weaver in the 1940s. As we shall see, *Black Box* explores such a negotiation of what information en-tails and how it is processed in an age of ubiquitous and embedded computing.

Lulu processes information simultaneously as a hu-man and through her technological enhancements, and it is therefore interesting to look more close-ly at the way in which this duality is played out in the text. She performs the function of a so-called "beauty" who works as an undercover agent for her country, equipped with a series of technological en-hancements that makes her capable of, for instance, taking photos and downloading data with her body. Her function and her looks are thus apparently the main qualities of her character, making her a surveil-lance cyborg underneath a highly sexualised female exterior. However, the inseparableness of human and machine in the case of Lulu seems to serve to instrumentalise and place her in a tradition of ob-jectified female automata, rather than to provide her with the subversive feminist potential of the cyborg envisaged, for example, by Donna Haraway (Hara-way, 1991). The description of Lulu's body is highly objectified, both in its traditional sexualised capac-ity, and because her body has physically become interspersed with surveillance technology which can record images, audio, and transfer data from other pieces of technology.

At the same time, we are, however, made aware of the presence of these technologies as something *other*, as objects that can be distinguished from her human body. The gadgets are described as "im-plants", but the integration is far from seamless, and it proves an important narrative point that these technological implants can be identified as entities in and of themselves, and often in conflict with the human body. Although the technology enhances her capacities as a recording device, it often obstructs the movement of her human body. For instance, the flash of the camera embedded in her eye blinds her, the recording device makes undesired noises that need to be camouflaged so as not to blow her cover, and the data transfer exhausts her body and interferes with her senses in a way that make her less aware of approaching danger. Only towards the end of *Black Box* does the technology merge with her human flesh to get her out of a gunpoint situation. She combines the repeated flash of her camera with an animal roar and makes an escape: "The Primal Roar must trans-form you from a beauty into a monster" (Egan, 2012, box 38). Lulu is ostensibly a living embodiment of the "calm" ubiquitous computing Ekman refers to as changing our conception of information. However, in line with contemporary debates regarding the actual functionality of ubiquitous computing (rather than its utopian potential), the text problematises the seam-lessness of such integration.[2]

In understanding this and the *calm* embedment of technology that we encounter here, the concept of the *black box*, which is also the title of the short story, might be helpful to us.[3] In several branches of cul-tural theory, such as Science and Technology Studies and Actor Network Theory, what is called *black-boxing* is regarded as increasingly pervasive in con-temporary culture.[4] Bruno Latour writes:

> "Black-boxing: an expression from the sociology of science that refers to the way scientific and tech-nical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and tech-nology suceed, the more opaque and obscure they become." (Latour, 1999, p. 304)

The black-boxing of technology is thus part of the process of making technology invisible and calm, and, as I shall argue, is in dialogue with what Andy Martin identifies as FBI's inclination to focus on the facts at hand, even if they display contingency and chaos, rather than taking on the role of hermeneuts looking for meaning and plot. In his essay "Black Box - Black Bloc", media theorist Alexander Galloway argues that:

> "The new sciences of behaviourism, game theory, operations research, and what would soon be called cybernetics put in place a new black-box epistemology in which the decades if not centuries old traditions of critical inquiry, in which objects were unveiled or denaturalized to reveal their inner workings - from Descartes's treatise on method to both the Kantian and Marxian concepts of critique to the Freudian plumbing of the ego - was replaced by a new approach to knowledge, one that abdicated any requirement for penetration into the object in question, preferring instead to keep the object opaque and to make all judgements based on the object's observable comportment." (Galloway, 2011, p. 239).

What is of interest to us at the present time, Galloway argues, is *function* - the input we give and the output that results, not the workings of the interior. This is an interesting framework to keep in mind when trying to understand the conditions of information processing as problematised and embodied by Lulu.

On the level of the narrative plot development, we can observe that although technology is meant to enhance Lulu's capabilities as an agent, and thus make her more effective in obtaining the desired information, this in fact becomes a narrative device that creates suspense by creating difficulties for Lulu's execution of the mission, thereby halting the progression of the plot. The advent of ubiquitous communication and information technology that pervades our everyday lives has had the effect that plot delays (in fiction, and in film and television) which were often previously orchestrated through the difficulty of one character being able to convey certain information to another character - shown for instance through the search for a phone booth - has now, in the age of ubiquitous communication, been replaced by malfunctioning technology, such as bad reception or faulty mobile phones, in order to prevent the protagonist getting hold of certain vital information that could advance the plot. In *Black Box* this obstruction takes the form of the less than seamless integration of Lulu's technological implants. They thus interestingly come to work in a way similar to that in which a "lack of information" did in 1970s espionage films during the heyday of the American intelligence services.

Whereas it can be argued that a lack of information was the traditional obstacle and thus drove the espionage or crime narrative in which the agent or detective tried to figure out the larger context of which s/he did not have priviledged knowledge (a position which often included the reader), in *Black Box* we are not really interested in understanding the intrigue in which Lulu is involved.[5] We get the impression that at the technological level she is able to gather more or less complete information through her visual, audiovisual, and data surveillance, but we do not get to see the information she collects, and we thus never gain any insight into the conspiracy plot she tries to uncover. This information remains unspecified data collection which is never conveyed to the reader. However, this apparent lack of information for the reader does not function as a narrative incentive - as readers we are never really that curious about the intrigue or in seeing the information she collects. We have no impetus to know more and search for meaning and plot. Decoding the black box of the conspiracy Lulu is uncovering is not what drives the plot forward: rather, our narrative desire is invested in seeing how Lulu acts that is, how she reacts to the input she gathers, and how it affects her further actions. In this sense it is *Lulu herself* who is the black box function and the vehicle for our narrative drive.

Black Boxed Privacy

If we take a step back and look at what we have established so far, we see that Lulu's character is composed of three elements: firstly, her physical body (part sexual allure, part animal monster), secondly, the embedded technology, and thirdly, her (recorded) thoughts which comprise the text, all of which perform different narrative functions. And as we shall see, it is within this constellation that an oscillation between the personal and the collective/contextual plays itself out, pointing to a conception of privacy

which, I argue, can be conceived of as indicative for a contemporary cultural constellation of surveillance, information, and narrative.

The text takes the form of a type of manual called "Field Instructions". They consist of the thoughts Lulu has while on the mission, which she judges might be of value for others and could be used by future agents on similar missions. We are told that these thoughts are stored in a chip beneath her hairline, and that recording is activated by Lulu pressing her left thumb against her left middle fingertip (Egan, 2012, box 15). So, while we get no meta-level knowledge of the purpose and scheme of the mission, we do get an insight into her (didactic) reflections on how to act in the situations in which she is placed. In fact, in the first section of the text Lulu advises: "If you're having trouble perceiving and projecting, focus on projecting" (Ibid, box 1). As we have seen, she is not portrayed as an informed participant in the mission. Her main purpose is to gather information, not to process it, nor to interpret or create meaning by herself. In this sense she comes to resemble the character of a computer game, the actions of whom we follow, hoping to see her advance to the next level of the game. The only place in which she is given some degree of agency and control is in the recording of the "Field Instructions". The narrative composition is thus an important entry point for our understanding of Lulu and the conception of privacy that the text advances.

The information we get regarding the selection process of what to include in the Field Instructions gives us a valuable insight into the degree of agency Lulu has:

> "For clearest results, mentally speak the thought, as if talking to yourself. /
> Always filter your observations and experience through the lens of their didactic value. /
> Your training is ongoing you must learn from each step you take. /
> When your mission is complete, you may view the results of the download before adding your Field Instructions to your mission file. /
> Where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them." (Ibid., box 15)

However, although this meta-level is articulated so explicitly in the text, we cannot be certain whether what we are reading are the uncensored Field Instructions or the edited mission file, in so far as the ending leaves us in the dark as to whether Lulu survives the mission or not. We do not know whether what we are reading is everything recorded or whether it has undergone an editing process at the hands of Lulu. The emphasis on the *possibility* of an editorial process is, however, significant, because it makes the layers of self-censorship and agency involved explicit to the reader, and points to the fact that something exists that might be deemed *personal*, and which can be edited out.

Nonetheless, the text thematises the porosity of the boundary between the personal and the collective, in so far as even that which appear to be personal confessions about Lulu's unknown father, her relationship with her mother, and her husband, come to take on more general meaning. A statement like: "Avoid excessive self-reflection; your job is to look out, not in" (Ibid., box 19) serves the purpose of making very personal and intimate reflections appear as specific examples of what may also occupy an agent's thoughts when on a dangerous mission. For instance, thoughts such as: "Reflect on the many reasons you can't yet die: / You need to see your husband. / You need to have children" (Ibid., box 20).

What is particularly interesting here is the way in which the text constantly negotiates exterior appearance and interior reflections, both of which hinge on *functionality*. As with the black box imagery as theorized by Galloway, it is input and output that are of interest, not the kernel. Lulu's body and thoughts are instrumentalized for the purpose of serving the mission she is carrying out - and this involves a diminishing of the interior subject and an accentuation of the collective function. This is explicitly articulated as an ideological subtext for the mission: "In the new heroism, the goal is to throw off generations of self-involvement. / In the new heroism, the goal is to renounce the American fixation with being seen and recognized. / In the new heroism, the goal is to dig beneath your shiny persona" (Ibid., box 21). From the point of view of the mission, there is an obvious interest in propagating the collective goal over the singular experience, where a focus on the individual is regarded a threat. This becomes perhaps most apparent when Lulu performs the so-called "Dissociation Technique", which is a form of meditative separation of her body and mind that saves her from

unpleasant physical experiences, such as bodily pain and having sex with target males. The technique allows her to leave her body and merge with the surroundings, and is thus the most concrete example we get in the text of her individual self becoming part of the contextual environment. The collective is a safe haven to which she can retreat, and towards the end of the story, when Lulu lies severely wounded in the bottom of a boat waiting to be picked up by her agency, she reflects on the option of not returning to her body, but remaining in this oneness with nature. She chooses to return, thus reaffirming her singularity and her individual needs rather than those of the collective, since her decision is without significance for the mission she is on, because the data she has collected can be obtained even if she dies, as long as her body as can be accessed as a data container, a black box containing the mission file.

In the text itself, we also find instances where Lulu's individuality shows itself and which it seems more difficult to interpret into the context of general applicability, because of the specificity of such moments. For instance the pronoun "I" occurs twice in the text - in box 19, where Lulu addresses her unknown father:

> "Discovering that you are a movie star's daughter may prompt you to watch upward of sixty movies, dating from the beginning of his career. /
> You may think, watching said movies, you don't know about me, but I am here. /
> You may think, watching said movies, I am invisible to you, but I am here." (Ibid., box 19)

Here the "you" Lulu addresses continuously throughout the text is no longer only a collective "you", or herself, but becomes also a singular, specific person - her father - whom she only knows in the mediated form of the roles he has played on film. Lulu's vulnerability in this example pierces through the collective applicability of the narrative, and makes for an uncomfortable insight into her singular life. The text hereby tackles a reading experience distinctive to our contemporary cultural condition of social media, in which we constantly post private messages for public consumption - on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This form of communication aims at an unspoken consensus of what constitutes the accepted sphere of collective-privateness of social media, and the transgression of which through the exhibition

of a personal vulnerability, can feel intruding to the unprepared Facebook-user. The question of what is "private" in a culture that fluctuates between media performativity and surveillance camouflage is embedded in Egan's text in the different configurations of visibility and invisibility subtly thematized in this fragile relation between the absent movie star father and the daughter working as an undercover agent, only visible as a dot of light on the screens of those following her mission (Ibid., box 21). Lulu's father comes to represent American celebrity culture and its worshipping of the individual, which the ideology of Lulu's mission opposes yet makes use of for its own purpose of concealment: "Now our notorious narcissism is our camouflage" (Ibid.). Ironically, visibility, information and obsessive self-absorption become that which conceals and protects the things we do not want exposed.[6]

What is interesting about the conception of privacy conveyed here is the fact that it is so embedded in visibility. Lulu is completely exposed in this text in a number of senses. To the people she is sent to infiltrate, she is a beautiful, scantily clothed female, mainly interesting for her physical appeal, whereas the real purpose of her presence is only conveyed gradually. They are in the curious position of having too little information about her, while believing that she is fully visible as nothing more than the beauty she appears to be. For the people who sent her on the mission, she is an open book, since her physical and mental faculties are hooked up with a monitoring device - a black box that records every piece of information passing her way, storing it for later decoding. Yet despite this complete visibility, we have to realise that we know very little about Lulu. Her state appears to be one of "nothing to hide and nothing to see". As previously mentioned, there is a degree to which she resembles a character in a computer game. She jumps and falls and potentially dies. We follow her actions and engage with her mission. We even become privy to her personal life and psychological motivations, but she still remains something of an enigma. There is a core of privacy to which we - despite her visibility - are not given access, and which we only really see by not seeing it. We see the input and the output, but what happens in the black box that is Lulu remains a mystery. For Galloway this obfuscation holds the potential of resistance, and we can recognise it in the academic discourse on transparency that points to opacity as a political strategy.[7]

Egan's text thus seems to articulate central discussions in both public and academic debates about privacy and subjectivity, providing us with a space for appreciating the complexity of these questions.

The notion of privacy hinges on the belief in an individual self, the idea that that there is in fact an interior kernel. This is a conviction Egan's text does not completely abandon despite Lulu's radical appearance as a merging of animal, human, and machine. We see the contours of this self in the option of editing out "personal thoughts", and the closest we get to what these might entail occurs in the pivotal scene of information excess, when Lulu performs a so-called "data surge", extracting the content of her target's handset by downloading it into her own body, a transfer which means that she loses consciousness:

> "The surge may contain feeling, memory, heat, cold, longing, pain, even joy. /
> Although the data are alien, the memories dislodged will be your own. /
> Peeling an orange for your husband in bed on a Sunday, sunlight splashing the sheets.
> / The smokey earthen smell of the fur of your childhood cat. /
> The flavour of the peppermints you mother kept for you inside her desk." (Ibid., box 35)

The downloading of an overwhelming amount of alien data triggers specific and affectively evocative sensuous memories that point to a conception of temporality as a field of simultaneity. The contours of the private in the form of personal memories thus become visible against the context of unspecified data, giving us a picture of privacy as characterised by, firstly, *contextual embeddedness*, and, secondly, a *temporal simultaneity*, where memories of the past come to constitute what is private in the present. Privacy is consequently not obliterated in the text, but it only becomes visible to us by not being articulated. Privacy becomes that which cannot be captured, neither by the surveillance technology implanted in Lulu's body, nor in the recordings of her thoughts, which are already mediated and performed for the collective as soon as she presses the recording button. Privacy is indeed the true black box of the text, the impenetrable centre which on the one hand is insignificant, because the plot moves forward and Lulu completes her mission. There is nothing to see. We know the inputs and the outputs, and as

such it is pointless to speculate about the mystical kernel. In this way, the text homes in on the conditions of privacy in a culture of constant data harvesting by making its absence visible, thus emphasising its contextual embeddedness in a field of information excess, and pointing to a temporality of simultaneity. Nonetheless, the small glimpses of Lulu's personal life speak to our narrative desire, and are part of the impetus that stimulates our reading. Even though the storyline and its protagonist's avatar-like qualities set forth a posthuman condition, the text does not completely abandon a more nostalgic notion of human subjectivity, with which we in turn can still identify and empathise. This points to an ambiguity with regard to subjectivity which can also be found in many contemporary academic discussions of privacy.[8] Significantly, the narrative genre of the novel, which encourage silent reading and introversion, share a history with the liberal humanist subject, and it is therefore interesting to consider the medium of Twitter as the specific forum for this text, and the way in which the formal structure of the narrative articulates this negotiation of privacy.

No Entry

We thus return to the question of narrative forms, information, and surveillance with which we began. Andy Martin argues that narrative and espionage both thrive on a lack of information, and in Sartre's 1944 play *No Exit* we saw a mid-century rendition of the type of anti-narrative existentialist scenarios that might emerge from envisioning a condition of information excess. With Jennifer Egan's *Black Box* in mind, we may now begin to consider the narrative forms and the conditions of reading in the twenty-first-century, and in this respect the choice of medium for the literary output in the case of *Black Box* is illuminating.

As a literary form, *Black Box* simultaneously builds on the narrative tradition of nineteenth century serialized fiction *and* takes a media-specific form linked to the Twitter-medium. Although Egan has explained that she has in fact written the text by hand, it was conceived for the Twitter medium from the outset, and its shape is closely linked to the output form of the digital platform. Although it now also exists as an ebook, its original release was on consecutive evenings at 8-9pm from May 24 to June 2 2012 on *The New Yorker*'s Twitter account. This form of dis-

tribution points to two important aspects that became apparent when considering the way in which privacy is portrayed in the text, and which are also pivotal for understanding the narrative form of *Black Box: temporality* and *context.*

As a medium, the logic of Twitter rests on the impetus toward constantly being up-to-date and toward collecting, distributing, and responding to new material.[9] The seriality of the text and the division of its distribution over ten days created a sensation of real-time immediacy for the text. The output form thus emphasises what I have previously called the computer game-like qualities of the text - the experience that we are present in the "now" of the action of the story, rather than having a story retold to us after the event. The nature of the Twitter platform is such that it operates through an expectation of *simultaneity* between the action and the reading experience, which in this case was accentuated by the choice of "field instructions" as the narrative voice. This also underscores the text's subversion of the narrative genre of espionage fiction identified above: the narrative desire of the text does not hinge on wanting to uncover the truth, a search for meaning and plot - but arises in the tension between, on the one hand, the game-like incentive to follow our avatar Lulu to the next level, and on the other hand, a more nostalgic hermeneutically driven curiosity to decode the black box that is Lulu.

The simultaneity of the Twitter medium creates an affinity between the reader and the text that calls for a different kind of engagement and identification. Egan has described the Twitter medium as appealing precisely *because* it allows for the "intimacy of reaching people through their phones" ("Coming soon: Jennifer Egan's Black Box", 2012). This intimacy is, however, disturbed and challenged by the other main attribute of the Twitter form - the accentuation of contextual embeddedness. The text will potentially reach readers on their individual mobile phones, but it will do so amongst a series of other tweets that will interfere with the progression of the plot and which were beyond the control of Egan herself. The Twitter form thus also involves a significant accentuation of the *context* of the narrative, and an inherent danger of distraction from the progression of the narrative. We are thus dealing with a double loss of control and displacement of agency, on the parts of both the reader and the author: although the

author can control the intial text and its first distribution, there is no way of controlling when a certain piece of text is picked up, and in what contexts it is re-tweeted. Likewise, the reader has no control over when a new piece of the narrative enters their news feed, but once it is there, it is possible to re-tweet, add comments, and interact with other readers, thereby creating a sense of participation.[10]

The negotiation between the individual and the collective-contextual in the narrative itself is in this way reflected in the narrative form of the Twitter format, which creates a collective reading experience in which the presence of the wider context of the text is constantly present, potentially distracting. But also precisely because of this form, it creates a highly individualized reading experience, in so far as no two readers will have the same Twitter news feed.

I have argued that reading Egan's *Black Box* provides an entry point for understanding a contemporary condition of information procesing and its implication for our conception of privacy. *Black Box* gives a contemporary response to the question asked by Sartre's character Garcin in *No Exit*: "No eyelids, no sleep; it follows, doesn't it? I shall never sleep again. But then- how shall I endure my own company?" In a condition of perpetually open eyes - of information excess - we endure the gazes of others and our own company by black boxing them, letting them merge with the context in a state of perpetual simultaneity. There is nothing to hide, but also there is nothing to see, in the sense that interiority is black-boxed, and we remain on an ambigious footing as to how we relate to this interiority, oscillating between curiosity and indifference. Whereas existentialism focussed on the human being and its actions, and as in the quotation from Sartre, conceived the gaze of others as turning us into to objects to be observed even in our own eyes[11] - the condition of information excess in which we are immersed today seems to find an appropriate form in the Twitter-medium's contextually and collectively embedded form of communication, one that is able to capture the ambiguity with which privacy is surrounded today.

Notes

1. See also Michael Holzman's *The CIA, & the Craft of Counterintelligence* in which he argues how the method and approach to intelligence

documents in this period was influenced by the school of New Criticism and its preference for close reading, which Angleton had encountered as an English student at Yale (Holzman, 2008).

2. See for instance, Bell & Dourish, 2007.

3. In his seminal 1990s writings on ubiquitous computing, information scientist Mark Weiser presents the idea of technologies that become so integrated in the daily mesh of our lives that they no longer draw attention to themselves as technologies: "The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it" (Weiser, 1991). It is this conception of invisible technology which he develops into the notion of calm technology (Weiser & Brown, 1996).

4. For a more extended discussion of the black box imagery and its cultural implications for architecture and conceptions of the home, see (Steiner & Veel, 2015a, 2015b).

5. See for instance Hühn (1987) for a discussion of detective fiction as a thematization of narrativity itself.

6. A similar strategy can be observed in an artwork such as Hassan Elahi's *Tracking Transience. The Orwell Project* which takes the form of a website in which the artist is constantly traceable as a small red arrow on a google map, which is accompanied by images of the the meals he eats, the beds he sleeps in, the toilets he uses, see http://trackingtransience.net

7. See for instance Birchall (2014) or Galloway (2011).

8. See for instance the discussion in the journal *Surveillance & Society*, 8 (2011).

9. It is a format well attuned to what Katherine Hayles calls hyper-attention (Hayles, 2012).

10. As Grace Afsari-Mamagani has pointed out, it is the tweets that function as stand-alone aphorisms that get re-tweeted, rather than those driving the narrative forward. http://www.gafsari.com/images/thesis.pdf

11. See also Sartre on the gaze in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1958, p.256f).

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