

Green Line Oberstufe: Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother* (2018) – To go, or not to go...

Material

The situation: This is from the early pages in the novel, and serves as part of Marcus' self-introduction to the reader.

As far as I know, no court has yet determined whether these gait-cameras are any more legal [than facial recognition software], but until they do, we're stuck with them¹.

5 "Gait" is a very fancy word for the way you walk. People are pretty good at spotting gaits – next time you're on a camping trip, check out the bobbing² of flashlight as a distant friend approaches³ you. Chances are that you can identify him just from the movement of the light, the characteristic way it bobs up and down that tells our monkey brains that this is a person approaching us.

10 Gait recognition software takes pictures of your motion, tries to isolate you in the pics⁴ as a silhouette, and then tries to match⁵ the silhouette to a database to see if it knows who you are. It's a biometric identifier, like fingerprints or retina-scans⁶, but it's got a lot more "collisions" than either of those. A biometric "collision" is when a measurement matches more than one person. Only you have your fingerprints, but you share your gait with plenty other people.

15 Not exactly, of course. Your personal, inch-by-inch walk is yours and yours alone. The problem is your inch-by-inch walk changes based on how tired you are, what the floor is made of, whether you've changed your shoes lately. So the system kind of fuzzes-out your profile, looking for people who walk kind of like you.

20 There are a lot of people who walk kind of like you. What's more, it's easy not to walk kind of like you – just take one shoe off. Of course, you'll always walk like you-with-one-shoe-off in that case, so the cameras will eventually figure out that it's still you. Which is why I prefer to inject a little randomness into my attacks on gait-recognition: I put a handful of gravel into each shoe. Cheap and effective, and no two steps are the same. Plus you get a great reflexology foot massage in the process (I kid. Reflexology is about as scientifically useful as gait-recognition).

25 The cameras used to set off an alert every time someone they didn't recognizes stepped onto campus.

This did not work.

The alarm went off every ten minutes. When the mailman came by. When a parent dropped in⁷. When the grounds-people went to work fixing up⁸ the basketball court. When a student showed up wearing new shoes.

30 So now it just tries to keep track of who's where and when. If someone leaves by the school-gates during classes, their gait is checked to see if it kinda-sorta⁹ matches any student gait and if it does, whoop-whoop-whoop, ring the alarm!

From: Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother*. Stuttgart: Klett 2016, pp. 21-22. (439 words)

¹ to be stuck with = to have to come to terms with

² bob = go up and down

³ approach = come closer, step towards

⁴ pics = (short for) pictures

⁵ match = find a pair

⁶ retina-scan = *elektr. Identifikation über das Netzhaut im Auge*

⁷ drop in [inf.] = *vorbeischauen*

⁸ fix up = repair

⁹ kinda-sorta [kind of, sort of] = [inf.] *Pi mal Daumen*

Tasks

Comprehension

1. Give a brief summary of the passage in your own words.

Analysis

2. Identify the point of view, and describe the language of this passage: Is the style formal, colloquial, or slangy? Is Marcus's attitude ironic, neutral, or serious? Write a short essay and use quotes from the text to illustrate your general impression, and – if necessary – exceptions.

Evaluation

3. On the basis of the results from your analysis of this passage and the one in the textbook ("Freedom or security?", p. 187-188), write a characterisation of Marcus: Describe what you learn about his person, and interpret his interaction with other people.

Solutions

Textbook: *Green Line Oberstufe*, pp. 187

Fokus Literaturvermittlung: pp. 124-130

Task 1

Text summary

In this passage, Marcus muses about the surveillance software installed in his school environment. He describes how a gait-sensitive camera works, in order to help identifying any individual entering the school building. He describes many technical details about their biometric functions, but at the same time makes it understood that he tries to evade this surveillance measures. He used different means to randomize his walk, e.g. by putting gravel into his shoes, which makes it impossible for the system to identify him. In doing so, he caused the system to set off its alarm; in addition, the alarm started when innocent other people entered the school, and thus the gait-recognition system proved to be too easily distracted to operate reliably, and failed. Therefore, its functions are now reduced to a minimum, but they have been kept in service. (138 words)

Task 2

Language analysis

The first-person narrator Marcus uses not only the singular form of the personal pronoun ("as far as I know", l. 3, "I kid", l. 23), but also includes generalizing forms such as "we" ("we're stuck with them", l. 4) and "you" (e.g., "the way you walk", l. 5). It is his way of establishing a common basis for his own experience and the reader's, because many young readers will know, for example, what a "camping" (l. 6) is like.

The language Marcus uses may be described as colloquial. What he describes is both expressive and descriptive: For instance, he uses such words as "fancy" and "pretty good" (l. 5) for appreciations, "fuzz[-] out" (l. 16) for a system's failure, and "kinda-sorta" (l. 31) for an indefinite description. Also, he uses sound-painting in such a word as "whoop-whoop-whoop" (l. 33). Apart from these non-standard words, a few sentences are ellipses ("Not exactly, of course.", l. 14) or begin in an irregular way as new sentence, which usually is expected as a subclause ("Plus you get...", l. 22, cf. "What's more", l. 18). Despite this generally colloquial, informal style, Marcus also describes the technical operation of a gait-surveillance camera. In this paragraph, the style is suited to the content, and it contains various terms from the word field technology: most importantly, "database" (l. 10), "biometric" (ll. 11, 12) and "retina-scan" (l. 11). In some cases, Marcus also emphasizes what he thinks is important, for example when he refers to the individuality of a person's gait as "yours and yours alone" (l. 14)

Marcus' attitude towards the camera system is a serious opposition, because he criticizes not only that it is dysfunctional, but that it is generally inefficient. In order to show this, he uses an anaphora by which he lists the many cases of false alarms: "When the mailman came by. When a parent dropped in. When the grounds-people went to work fixing up the basketball court. When a student showed up wearing new shoes." (ll. 27-29) This repetitive usage also displays a sense of sarcasm because with it he demonstrates the system's repeated failure: Ironically, the system was installed to identify illegal intruders, but it only serves to identify students who leave the building without permission. (370 words)

Task 3

Characterisation

Marcus may be described as a youth, although his exact age remains unclear from these passages. He must be a young person who still goes to secondary school or college, and who is old enough to have a good grasp of advanced technological systems. Thus, he can describe how the complex software of the school surveillance system operates in terms that are simple enough to be understood by any young reader.

In the passage above Marcus is in command of what he tells, whilst in the textbook passage he is dependent on the information he receives by the Turkish coffee shop owner. This location seems to be one which he often visits, and it shows that on the one hand, he is open-minded towards immigrants, and on the other hand, by frequenting it although he is slightly below age, that he tends to act in rebellious ways. Also, in the coffee shop scene the owner openly treats Marcus in a patronizing way that shows he still does not belong to the world of adults. At the same time, the two share a critical attitude towards public surveillance systems, which has stopped the shop owner to accept credit cards as a means to pay for the products he offers. Both the colloquial style in the above passage as well as the way he responds to the coffee shop owner in the textbook indicate that Marcus shows eloquence, as well as tolerance towards others, in his communicative interaction, and he is politically critical towards authorities, whether school or state. (258 words)