

## It Sees (Notes Toward a Cultural History of Financial Vision)

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In recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of a new phase of capitalism. Thus argues Shoshana Zuboff, who coined the term “surveillance capitalism” to describe a new regime of accumulation according to which entrepreneurs mobilize new means of understanding online users, and directly intervene in their habits for profit. New, “born-digital” firms capitalize on users’ “data exhaust” – information unintentionally left behind that reveals something of their online habits.<sup>1</sup> Early on, for instance, Google – surveillance capitalism’s most prominent pioneer – reinvented its business model, after realizing that it could profit from the data exhaust it was already collecting as a byproduct of its activities. By offering ostensibly free email services to users, it could analyze users’ data, in order to entice advertisers with the promise of reaching highly specialized audiences. Users’ online interests and behaviors – data-sets analyzed into ersatz subjectivities – were effectively sold to Google’s advertisers, who would bid for prominent spots in online keyword auctions through Google’s AdWords program. Gmail users could then click on keywords automatically matched to their interests – with the AdWords auction winners’ sites listed most prominently. As Zuboff contends, surveillance capitalism’s “unexpected and often illegible mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control... effectively exile persons from their own behavior while producing new markets of behavioral prediction and modification.”<sup>2</sup> Zuboff’s theory counters those who would understand “big data” as a purely technological construct.<sup>3</sup> She insists that data analysis instantiates a power relation, and that it must be understood as part of a financial regime.

As surveillance capitalism takes hold (at least for the moment), what can be made of its aesthetic implications? The surveillance-capitalist regime instantiates new, impersonal ways of *seeing* users’ real-time flow of interests, and linking financial value to these acts of seeing – reconstituting and monetizing subjectivities through data-sets. Inevitably, these new ways of envisioning and intervening in subjectivity have shifted the cultural landscapes in which subjectivities take shape. In recent years, artists have responded to these shifts, agitating the borderlines between older and

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<sup>1</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, ‘Big Other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization,’ *Journal of Information Technology* 30 (2015): 79.

<sup>2</sup> Zuboff, ‘Big Other:’ 75.

<sup>3</sup> Zuboff, ‘Big Other:’ 75.

newer regimes through which habits come to matter, and through which subjectivity comes to bear significance. For instance, Erica Scourti's *Life in AdWords* (2012-2013) (which I have written about more extensively elsewhere<sup>4</sup>) stages an extended interaction between two apparatuses through which the artist's patterns of interest find witness and value: the diary and the AdWords algorithm. For nearly a year, Scourti emailed her diary to herself via her Gmail account, and performed to webcam the list of keywords that turned up in her inbox as a result. ("Lyrics lyrics. Feeling tired. Always feeling sad. Feeling depressed. Healthy eating food. Music and lyrics."<sup>5</sup>) Fragments of her interests and behaviours, refracted by an algorithmic witness into keywords meant to prompt possible sales, paradigmaticize the surveillance-capitalist moment. An automated analyst of Scourti's subjectivity steps in, precisely in the place where she puts it into her own words: in the seemingly private (but more accurately, privatized) space of the inbox. And yet, while this piece experiments with the ways in which subjectivity has been newly commodified, it by no means assumes that the links between commodification and subjectivity are new. Rather, it draws attention to a continual clash of literary and surveillance-capitalist technologies of selfhood; for the diary itself is also a tool for producing complex interiority, and if theorists such as Deidre Shauna Lynch are to be believed, literary constructs of complex, interior life are deeply tied to the expansion of commodity culture through international trade in the 18th century. Here, embedded in the deeper histories of commodification, we find yet another moment in which (in England, among other places) the capacity to see the world beyond the horizon – to look into the far distance for patterns of activity and exchange – was vastly expanded, through a newly international influx of objects. In Lynch's view, the subjective correlates to these conditions were new sets of crises and questions around what constituted private life – and how to render it truly private. The development of complex literary characters – exemplars of interior life – helped to reconcile the newly internationalized flows of commodities with conceptions of private life.<sup>6</sup> Scourti's work emblemizes the surveillance-capitalist moment – precisely by pointing to the deeper history of the continually-mutating field of financially-inflected ways of knowing the self. Her work shows how surveillance-capitalist ways of understanding (and, thus, reshaping) subjectivity come into strange, conflicted alignment with older technologies through which subjectivity was pulled into line with commodification.

Here, I would like to continue what I see as the historical project in Scourti's work, and look a bit further into the deep aesthetic histories of this new regime of financial surveillance. Rather than staying with the twenty-first century moment that Zuboff focuses on, I would like to begin by looking for the unexpected cultural prehistories of surveillance capitalism. How have artworks and narratives, long before the age of big data, questioned how financial interests themselves "see" the world? Below are a few first steps toward what could be a much larger project: what I might term a cultural history of financial vision. To begin to get a sense of how financial vision might have shifted over the centuries, I'll isolate works from a few quite disparate cultural moments: Thomas Bridges' *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* (1770-1771), Mark Lombardi's *Narrative Structures* (late 1990s) and Amir Chasson's painted

<sup>4</sup> Emily Rosamond, 'Technologies of Attribution: Characterizing the Citizen-Consumer in Surveillance Performance,' *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 11(2) (2015): 148-164.

<sup>5</sup> Erica Scourti, *Life in AdWords: March 2012*, <https://vimeo.com/album/1944360/video/39677781>.

<sup>6</sup> See Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture and the Business of Inner Meaning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

diptychs of abject, slightly disproportionate businessmen, paired with abstract graphs and diagrams (2009-2010). These works, I argue, might be understood as part of a history of impersonal, financial vision. They are galvanized by the complex perceptual and conceptual tasks that accrue around a simple aesthetic/narratological conceit: “it sees.” If carefully analyzed with an eye toward how they construct a financial “it” that “sees,” these works might have the capacity to shift something in the way that we contextualize the new relations between acts of seeing and acts of valuation taking shape in our own time.

What follows comes from a strong sense of the importance of Zuboff’s theory, and of the urgent need to expand on its aesthetic and cultural implications. Yet it also necessitates a departure from Zuboff’s theorization and aims. For Zuboff, surveillance capitalism represents a fundamental departure from how the neoliberal-era market was envisioned (by Hayek, for instance) as something “intrinsically ineffable and unknowable.”<sup>7</sup> For her, the “informating” of the economy in the twentieth century – rendering it information-rich through smart machines – makes for a fundamental shift: for technologies of automation (say, scanner devices to automate supermarket checkouts) also produce data that can be used to change the very systems in which they function. Smart automation tools carry the capacity to “create a vast overview of an organization’s operations,” which can then feed back into the system, changing the ways in which its various activities are coordinated and conceived as a whole.<sup>8</sup> While in many ways, surveillance capitalism is indeed a fundamental shift, here I would like to consider an alternative to the above claim. Instead of assuming that the informating of the economy is entirely new, what if we imagine that at every turn in their development – from the first bank-notes to the first derivatives – ever-more abstract financial products were newly informatic, in that their circulation and use produced new ways of impersonally seeing the world, and creating views of systems as a whole? In the history of which I’d like to put forward a few, tentative fragments, surveillance capitalism is part of a much older trajectory: of imagining how finance “sees.” Below are a few fragments of a legacy of narrative and visual techniques which experiment with finance’s claim on impersonal vision.

### ***The Adventures of a Bank-Note***

If we were to search for an early precursor to surveillance-capitalism, no better candidate could be found than Thomas Bridges’ serial novel *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*. Bridges published the *Adventures* in two volumes in 1770, with a subsequent two volumes published in 1771.<sup>9</sup> In this series, a bank-note, narrated in the first person, tells of its travels as it is passed from pocket to pocket. Bridges’ tale was one of the 18th-century it-narratives: novels which featured first-person objects as protagonists. This work enacts both a desire to witness money’s social life, and a

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<sup>7</sup> Zuboff, ‘Big Other:’ 78.

<sup>8</sup> Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1988: 9.

<sup>9</sup> Around this time in England, there were several popular stories which featured coins and bank-notes occupying the first person, including Helenus Scott’s *The Adventures of a Rupee, Wherein are Interspersed Various Anecdotes Asiatic and European* (1772) and Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal, or, The Adventures of a Guinea* (published in 1760 with two subsequent volumes in 1765). There are also a number of more recent examples of narratives that follow a single bank-note or coin as it weaves between people, places and situations. These include Bresson’s last film *L’Argent* (1983), which loosely adapts the first part of Tolstoy’s novella *The Forged Coupon* (first published in 1910), and Marguerite Yourcenar’s novel *A Coin in Nine Hands* (1934).

fascination with the relationships between the circulation of money and the narrative form itself conceptualized as a kind of circulation. *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* and other stories like it from the mid-18th century explore narrative possibilities that, arguably, have been less accessible to writers since: both the depiction of money in the first person, and what could be seen from a contemporary perspective, at least, as a radical flattening out of human characters as they are seen from the perspective of money. As Deidre Shauna Lynch notes, the ability to think of bank-notes as having their own histories of circulation was readily available to mid-18th century minds due to the physical form of bank-notes at the time. Prior to 1797, when the Restriction Bill caused Britain to adopt a uniform, anonymous paper currency, bills of exchange would be produced by particular banks, and would require bearers to countersign them over to a third party, who would then be required to countersign them to another party, and so on.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the form of the bills themselves bore witness to their previous activities through the list of endorsements they accrued. Yet these narratives were also useful tools for “readers and writers who found themselves dwelling in a new commercial world, one altered by new trade routes and new forms of credit and full of strange commodities that invited the gaze and emptied the pocketbook.”<sup>11</sup> Money, Lynch notes, both acts as a vehicle for the narrative form, and stands in for a social agreement on a standard of value in this newly commoditized world.<sup>12</sup> The first-person bank-note humanizes the economic system, even as it subordinates individual human actors to an impersonal circulation.

Bridges’ tale gives a light-hearted account of a series of interactions between a bank-note and its owners, the tales they overhear, and the objects they encounter. In Volume IV, for instance, the bank-note describes its time with a Mr. Derbyshire, whose heart “was as light as a feather.”<sup>13</sup> As Mr. Derbyshire and a friend sit on a bench one evening, they observe a fashionable, comely woman walking with an exceedingly strangely dressed man; Mr. Derbyshire’s friend recounts the tale of how these oddly-matched figures came to meet. The man, being captain of a large ship that trades slaves on the African coast, had come to land on a rare occasion to pay a visit to his cousin, who had recently married the fashionable woman. Trying to look respectable, but unfamiliar with land customs, the sea captain had employed a tailor, a hatter, and a French barber to suit him up; the latter concealed his black locks with a strange white wig that he claimed was the height of fashion. When the captain called upon his cousins, he was taken into the parlour to wait. There, amidst all the unfamiliar objects of domestic life, he encountered a large mirror, which surprised him greatly, as he had not seen his own reflection before, and did not recognize himself in the new clothes and wig. Walking up to the mirror to see who was this strange person staring at him, he bashed into it and broke the glass, the surprise of which sent him barrelling backwards into an armchair, flattening a guitar. This caused him to upset the dessert glasses, sending them to the floor. On encountering this scene, the lady of the house admonished the servants for letting a madman into the house; finally, her husband arrived and explained that this was, indeed, his seafaring cousin. Being a discerning woman, she saw the captain’s honesty, sincerity and artlessness, and ever since relished her visits with him. Here, the narrative form

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<sup>10</sup> Lynch, *The Economy of Character*: 97.

<sup>11</sup> Lynch, *The Economy of Character*: 24.

<sup>12</sup> Lynch, *The Economy of Character*: 96.

<sup>13</sup> Bridges, *The Adventures of a Bank-Note, Vol. IV*, London: T. Davies, 1771 (reprinted by Nabu Public Domain Reprints): 2.

depicts a clash of commodities, customs and people brought together by exchange, and layered within three perceptual purviews (the friend's, Mr. Derbyshire's, and the bank-note's). These nested layers of recounted tales place certain actors, be they objects or humans, very "close up" (even too close, as in the mirror and the guitar), and certain others (such as the slave ship) in the extreme distance. The bank-note's impersonal vision picks out extreme foregrounds and backgrounds in these overheard tales.

How might we further understand the relations, in this tale, between money's way of observing the world and the narrative form itself as a kind of circulation? Alex Woloch's narrative theory might help. Writing on 19th-century realist novels, Woloch describes narrative spaces as competitions between many characters for limited narrative attention and import.<sup>14</sup> Minor characters, he contends, reflexively draw attention to the limits of the narrative's attention, and function as the proletariat of the novel. If we transpose this thinking into the narrative spheres of *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, we could conclude that all the characters (other than the bank-note itself) are minor, in a certain sense: none of them hold the plot's attention for long.

Together, they represent society as a multitude of particularities strung together by exchange, and economic exchange, in itself, as a chaos of encounter – always involving misunderstandings of objects and appearances. The shape of the narrative space is determined by the interplay between the bank-note's passivity and activity. It cannot determine into whose hands it falls; and often, it repeats the conceit that it would have liked to tell us more about a particular story, except that it was whisked away too soon. It passively perchances upon the narrative thread it recounts, moved by the collective agency of circulation. However, within this conceit of passivity, the bank-note clearly chooses which stories to focus on, and develops dispositions toward the characters it portrays. Thus, it produces an interplay between monetary exchange and moral affinity.

This interplay rests on the bank-note's "perception" and discernment of its owners' characters. Layers of perception and discernment link the perceptions of the bank-note with those of other characters, which are often nested within each other; for instance, the bank-note observes Mr. Derbyshire's conversation with his friend, in which is encased the observations of the sea captain and his land-dwelling cousins. The nested perceptual frameworks create a division of degrees of narrative containment between those who characterize and caricature others, and those who are caricatured. Roughly speaking, this differentiation between the characters who perceive, while having few features themselves (the bank-note, first and foremost, and secondarily, Mr. Derbyshire), and the characters who are merely perceived or caricatured within the novel's narrative spaces expresses their relative proximity to the bank-note – both perceptually and morally. The characters who make a purchase, thus acquiring the note, also have a purchase on the narrative's inflections, and are able to make a claim on its neutrality. However, this narrative proximity between the note's and its possessors' perspectives is not equally shared between owners; the bank-note takes a much more distanced stance toward its owner John the Ratcatcher than it does to Mr. Derbyshire (whom it "likes" better), for instance. (John is a character afflicted with an un-Christian anger toward rats.) In addition to proximity to money differentiating between the novel's observers and observed, a moral and

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<sup>14</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Novel*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

dispositional affinity between the bank-note and *some* of its owners – i.e. the bank-note’s perception of certain of them as *good* – creates a closer affinity of perspective. Thus, while the novel portrays economic exchange as a comedic clash of characterizations and encounters between disparate worldviews, it also portrays the economy as a relation between the bank-note’s circulation and an economy of representation based on an affinity with the good.

Within this comic clash of affinities, we find a theory of finance as focalization. The bank-note focalizes the story, outlines the range of its perceptual purview and moral affinities. The narrative space expresses new ways of understanding a whole system of exchange: from the extreme foregrounds of a bank-note’s companions, to the extreme backgrounds of slave ships – which are taken for granted, here, as part of the background conditions through which commodity exchange takes place, and scantily brought to attention by the sea captain’s travels, of which the bank-note overhears. Contrary to Zuboff’s claim that informed economies are new in their production of systemic information through data, if we look through the “eyes” of money in *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, we find a narrative expression of what was then a radically new way of understanding the world and its commodities, envisioned from the very perspective of monetary exchange. *The Adventures* are part of the long cultural prehistory of surveillance capitalism; they embody the conceit that money is a focalizer, that it produces new configurations of knowing, that *it sees*. Thus, although there are, of course, many novel informatic, economic and technological developments in the field of financial vision within our own surveillance-capitalist moment, the difference between these and the kinds of new systemic knowledge accruing around the early bank-notes is a difference of degree, and not one of kind. Further, within this diagram of financial vision emerges a set of questions around finance and focalization relating to power. Who gets to claim affinity to money’s impersonal gaze? With whose interests and perspectives is financial vision aligned – and who gets cast into the background?

### Mark Lombardi’s Narrative Structures

Now, let us try to think about how these questions, accruing around the narratives of financial vision, have been reshaped much closer to the present. In the past several decades, of course, the task of narrating international finance has become far more complex than it was in Bridges’ time. There has been a fundamental economic shift, away from the logic of exchange and toward logics of investment and credit. The development of derivatives – financial products that bundle many investments to hedge risk – are dizzyingly complex. As the Bank of England’s then Director of Financial Stability, Andrew Haldane, quipped in 2009, the emergence of financial innovations such as structured credit (designed to diversify investment and thereby minimize risk) result in a situation in which end investors are “no more likely to know the name of the companies in their portfolios than the name of the cow or pig in their exotic hot dog.”<sup>15</sup> Certain forms of structured credit, such as collateralized debt obligations (CDOs), would require over one billion pages of research in order for an investor to understand precisely where his or her money had been invested.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Haldane, ‘Speech: Rethinking the Financial Network,’ Bank of England, 28 April, 2009, <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/archive/Documents/historicpubs/speeches/2009/speech386.pdf>: 16.

<sup>16</sup> Haldane, 2009: 17.

Due to the complexity of international exchange, new forms of difficulty accrue around the questions: who can claim to narrate global finance? How can global finance be seen – and how does it see? Mark Lombardi's drawings of global financial networks attempt to intervene in these questions. If Bridges' *Bank-Note* narrative constructs a first-person, embedded economic viewpoint, focalizing economy in the exchanged note's range of abstract perceptions, Mark Lombardi's drawings do the exact opposite. They construct an omniscient perspective on an overwhelming range of financial transactions, contacts and influences. His diagrammatic drawings (which he referred to as *Narrative Structures*) document complex financial scandals, international money laundering schemes and other nefarious machinations of power. They were based on extensive research into events such as the Harken Energy scandal (which involved alleged insider trading by George W. Bush after his failing oil company was purchased by Harken, largely in order that it could make Bush a board member and take advantage of his extensive political connections) and the Savings and Loan scandal (in which several troubled American Savings and Loan institutions – many with high profile board members and close connections with the CIA – turned themselves into Ponzi schemes during the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of deregulation). Lombardi used a legend consistent across his mature work to indicate flows of money, influence and power between individuals and corporations. His drawings trace rhizomatic, diffused networks.<sup>17</sup> If the financial transactions chronicled by Bridges' bank-note represent an attempt to envision society as a whole, then Lombardi's drawings translate a similar concern into an era in which it is not a quotidian clash of (financially-inflected) encounters that might seem remarkable to readers and writers newly experiencing an unprecedented level of imported goods, but rather the emergence of complex transnational systems of structured credit, and with these, a global elite of key players from a web of seemingly "open", networked transactional structures. In their very diffuseness, these structures both conceal this elite, and help to replicate its privilege. These drawings are attempts to make sense of the simultaneous dispersion *and* concentration of power within globalized neoliberal capitalism, by producing a new way to see the complex networks of global finance.

This is a concern that Lombardi's drawings explore through their experimentation with the narrative form itself.<sup>18</sup> They can be considered to be both realistic and abstract: realistic in their use of names as static poles within the narrative, and abstract in that the actions and events themselves are lacunae within the drawings, mostly replaced by mere lines and arrows. Hobbs notes that the abstraction of events in these drawings account for many viewers' frustration in trying to "read" them, as they have been given, as it were, an architecture of events but little explanation of them.<sup>19</sup> Yet by abstracting narrative in this way, Lombardi produces the meta-event – a structure

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<sup>17</sup> These works closely relate to Hans Haacke's earlier systems theory/institutional critique works (most famously *Shapolsky et. al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971), which were a major influence on Lombardi; however, here, the complexity Haacke envisions is taken almost unfathomably farther. As Herbert Ross puts it, these drawings "update history painting in terms of theories of globalism and rhizomatic schematizations of power. In these works, [Lombardi] replaces the taproot theory crucial to history painting – that great individuals are the initiators of important events – with a new model based on less centralized, more serendipitous channels of power" (Ross, in Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi*: 13).

<sup>18</sup> As Hobbs writes, "We might hypothesize that Lombardi's narratives correlate well with the enlarged scope of narrative studies and in fact expand them in a new direction, since his drawn arcs replace the core element of stories, i.e. their action" (Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi*: 47).

<sup>19</sup> Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi*: 47.

of power and influence – which is represented, here, as a *character structure* of sorts; an associative play of recognizable individuals and institutions. By reducing events to lines, he can also tackle multiple “plots” within the same narrative structure. Lombardi’s *Narrative Structures* grapple with financial liquidity’s challenge to narrative structure, which must be presented as a hybrid between literary and pictorial modes of experience. The arrows and lines in Lombardi’s drawings, which describe flows of exchange and influence, are roughly analogous to the narrative itself in Bridges’ *Bank-Note*. Yet, responding to the demands of a highly complex international financial world, Lombardi produces a meta-transactional narrative. His *Narrative Structures* imagine a new kind of impersonal gaze on finance – one that can make a synthetic claim on the totality of complex transactional webs, and thus, perhaps, provide a perceptual ground on which an activist stance can be founded. By “zooming out” in the extreme, and synthesizing transactions and influences into diagrams of power, Lombardi constructs an impersonal other who takes in the entirety of a hidden financial flow. From this position – and with this act of witnessing – comes the possibility to act against the centralization of financial power, hidden by so many gossamer strands of influence and exchange.

### Amir Chasson and Fractured Financial Vision

This cumulative impulse – this urge to totalize elements of the financial sphere – represents one way in which the impersonal claim to financial vision has been mobilized within late capitalism (in Lombardi’s case, before the surveillance-capitalist turn as such). Yet another possible approach is quite opposed to this totalizing aim: one which posits a fracturing of financial vision, and isolates a point of contact at which the exigencies of human perception and the ways in which financial apparatuses “see” each undo the grounds on which the other stands. In Berlin-based Israeli artist Amir Chasson’s paintings, we find another form of analysis of the role of individuals within the narratives of business and finance. His series of painted diptychs from 2009-2011 feature quasi-realistic portraits of slightly awkward looking men: presumably businessmen, most often against a plain background, as if posing at a portrait studio. Next to the portraits are textured, layered canvases portraying abstract diagrams and charts, which look as though they might convey financial or sociological information – except that there is no contextualizing information or legend with which to understand them. These works operate by means of stark contrasts: between portrait and diagram; between the rough, painterly texture of the diagram canvases and their “cool”, precisely-rendered objects; and, more minutely, between the photorealistic conceit the portraits entertain and their deliberately awkward handling upon close examination.

Awash with contrast, the eye seeks similarity. Darting back and forth between the pairs of canvases, it formulates transitions (formal, narrative, conceptual) between face and diagram. An arrow jutting out of a tetrahedron seems to answer to something of the upward tilt of a middle-aged man’s jaw; a topographical diagram, describing spiky irregularities emerging from a relatively flat surface, stands in for an idea of the portrait as a spatial descriptor, a device that morphs a flat surface, transforms a spatial plane into a facial plane by pulling out nose, cheek and brow. The diagrams’ spatial cues pull on the portraits, as if applying a bit of makeup to the latter’s spatial gestures.

The faces infuse the diagrams with possible narratives. Are these the faces of the thinkers “behind” the sociological, mathematical or financial work presented in the diagrams? Are they the repressed of the diagrammatic image – the abject,

psychologised individuals who bear the privileges and burdens of such impersonal exactitudes of information? The portraits in Chasson's paintings carry out the aspirational tendencies that the form of the businessman's portrait implies, which is based, in part, on the projection of confidence (which, as Sianne Ngai puts it, is the affective tonality of capital itself<sup>20</sup>). But confidence – or perhaps we could say orbits of confidence, belonging to both face and diagram's forms of assertiveness – break down, here, as they play out on faces and surfaces overfull with ambivalence and distortion. Over-fullness – as it pulls apart faces or dances in diagrams awkwardly forced onto pockmarked surfaces – disallows the unanimity of feeling that the confident demeanour must display. These faces, so full, come in and out of comprehensibility; at times, they come into focus as a face, and at other times, the strange autonomy of features pulls them beyond recognition.

What happens to perception in Chasson's portraits seems oddly akin to the perceptual operations Oliver Sacks chronicles in his narratives about encounters with patients suffering from rare neurological disorders. For instance, Sacks describes a patient who, owing to a tumour or pronounced degenerative process localized to the visual cortex of his brain, could see well, but was often completely unable to make the cognitive leap from seeing to recognition. He could distinguish features but could not get a sense of a face as a whole, a persona or a picture.<sup>21</sup> Sacks' narratives pull apart so-called "normal" perception, reveal something of the layers of complex relational and cognitive procedures that must be in place in order for people to be able to take for granted how they *know* about what they see.<sup>22</sup> In undoing normal perception, these narratives create fertile soil for thought experiments: what might it mean to subtract the persona from the person, to perceive the world abstractly?

Do Chasson's abstracted diagrams have a physiognomy? The portrait – a device that, in the slow obstinacy of its features' relations to the whole face, dismantles normal, transparent perception – inflicts *its* abstraction on the diagram. It asks us to recognize the tasks of understanding finance and other forms of informational power as physiognomic in ways in which we are not necessarily equipped to perceive. It asks anew what kind of perception might naturalize the physiognomy of finance, might pull its "face" into focus. In an era of information oversaturation, as Frederic Jameson describes it, the task of understanding globalized finance is one of unprecedented magnitude: "to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves."<sup>23</sup> In response to this complexity, Chasson's works

<sup>20</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005: 62. As Ngai points out, Melville's story demonstrates that confidence can circulate within scenarios of capitalist exchange as a feeling that nobody actually feels – as one agent falsely projects it to the next, and so on.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, when handed a glove and asked what it might be, the musician describes it as a "continuous surface... infolded on itself", that might be a container of some sort. When asked what, precisely, this infolded surface might contain, Dr. P. exclaims, "it would contain its contents!" with a laugh – and then speculates that perhaps it could function as a coin purse for coins of five different sizes. As Sacks remarks, he "construed the world as a computer construes it, by means of key features and schematic relationships." Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, New York: Harper Perennial Library, 1990: 8.

<sup>22</sup> Though his work, of course, points to the importance of neural activity, Sacks never ascribes a purely neurological causality to his patient's experiences; on the contrary, he insists on house visits, pays close attention to the ways in which his patients navigate their worlds, their relationships, their objects.

<sup>23</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995: 2.

suggest that the task of synthesizing complex information into some form of understanding can be likened to the perceptual leap from information to *its* physiognomy. What might be required, these paintings seem to suggest, is to construct partial objects of study that denaturalize perception, and in so doing, might themselves produce means for constructing, dismantling and reconstructing physiognomies of finance, which ferry finance to the edges of the knowable. Unlike Lombardi, who responds to the complexities of international finance by constructing a totalizing perspective – an omniscient “it” who “sees” – Chasson fractures financial vision – inserting it into the act of looking at his diptychs in such a way that it undoes what is taken for granted in human perception. Thus, he invites us to question how financial vision goes beyond what some might tend to assume are naturalized human physiognomic capacities, and to think anew about what it might mean to grapple with the difficulty in imagining how, exactly, finance sees.

### Conclusion

In surveillance capitalism, we become, I think, more and more familiar with being subject to newly automated, impersonal, financial forms of vision. In this regime, the surveillant gaze is deeply impersonal, even as it exacts its vision on individual users’ most intimate habits, tendencies and interests. As Erica Scourti’s *Life in AdWords* (which shares some similarities with Chasson’s approach above) posits, in order to understand how subjectivity is currently being reconfigured in relation to these evaluating apparatuses, there is a new sort of perceptual task coming to the fore: that of imagining the points of contact between various types of perception that have already come to be understood as part of the “personal,” and the ever-evolving financial systems which exercise their own forms of impersonal vision on personal lives. This task, I argue, demands a theory of the deep histories of financial vision. Such a theory must continually keep in mind the recalcitrant impersonality of vision – the autonomy of the financial “it” who “sees.” Yet it must also keep in mind that narrative claims to be aligned with finance’s autonomous ways of seeing are, in themselves, succinct expressions of power. Who claims proximity to, or affinity with, the impersonal gaze of finance? In order to understand how new forms of financial power operate aesthetically, such questions must be kept in mind.

*The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, Lombardi’s *Narrative Structures*, and Chasson’s diptychs represent three possible approaches to these questions surrounding financial vision: an embedded, first-person view of money, personified; narrative structures enveloping global finance in an omniscient perspective; and a calling into question of the perceptual schisms between feature and physiognomy, and between two seemingly distinct kinds of complex information: face and diagram. In Bridges’ narratives, the economy possesses perception; in Lombardi’s, the economy is rendered perceptible. Chasson’s paintings point to the inadequacies of human perception when it comes to understanding financial vision. By constructing financial imaginaries that draw attention, in various ways, to the impersonality of financial vision, these works challenge many of the ways in which art has previously been understood to relate to political economy: either, reductively, as a mere “reflection” or “expression” of monetary interests; as expressive of a reified set of signifiers and practices demarcating class positions through taste and conspicuous consumption; or, more broadly, as expressive of a “pan-capitalist” alienation. With surveillance capitalism comes the need to study in far more detail the impersonal, financial “it” that “sees.” Paying attention to the complex narrative and visual constructs according

to which financial vision has been understood draws much-needed attention to how regimes of accumulation themselves identify their subjects.

In 2014, Trevor Paglen remarked that there is an urgent need for cultural practitioners to rethink how we understand vision – and to consider what might be at stake in trying to imagine how machines see:

those of us who are interested in visual literacy will need to spend some time learning and thinking about how machines see images through unhuman eyes, and train ourselves to see like them. To do this, we will probably have to leave our human eyes behind.<sup>24</sup>

As Zuboff might add, we must also think carefully about how new regimes of accumulation accrue around these acts of mechanical seeing – or, as I might put it, to shift the paradigm from mechanical to financial vision. And further, we must remember that impersonal, financial vision is neither purely mechanical, nor purely financial. By beginning to assemble some fragments toward a cultural history of financial vision, I hope to draw attention to the complexities of visual, subjective and narrative conceits that will inevitably be intertwined in any attempt to understand how “it sees.”

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<sup>24</sup> Trevor Paglen, in Jorg Heiser, “Safety in Numbers?” *Frieze*, 12 March, 2014, <https://frieze.com/article/safety-numbers>.

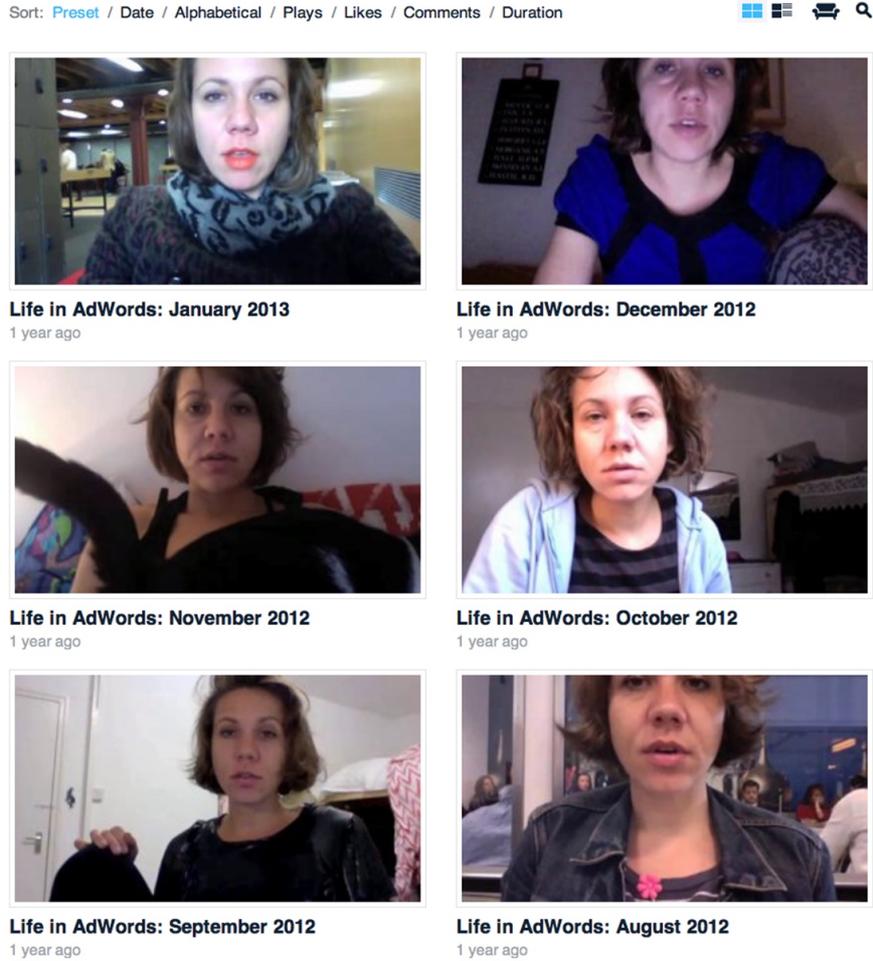


Figure 1. Erica Scourti, *Life in Adwords* (screenshot view), 2012-2013

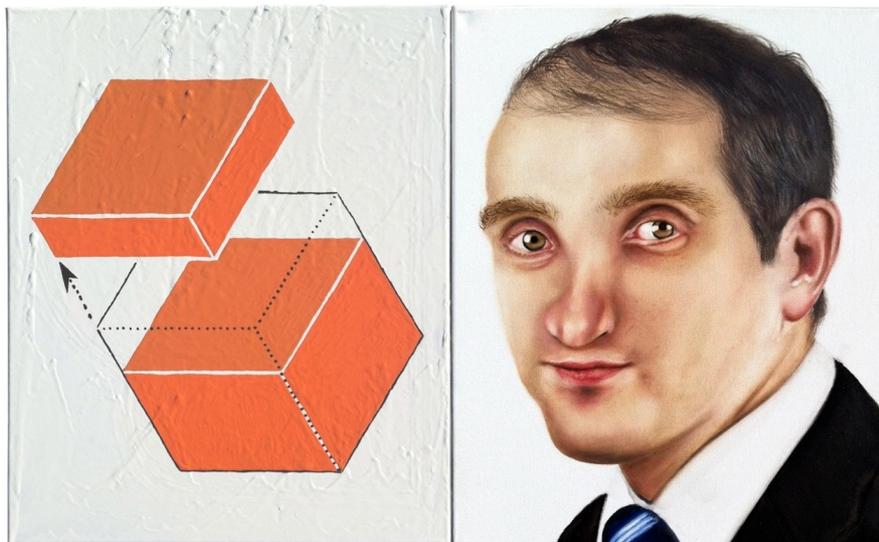


Figure 2. Amir Chasson, *Ten dimensional tetrahedron*, oil and household paint on canvas, 2011.

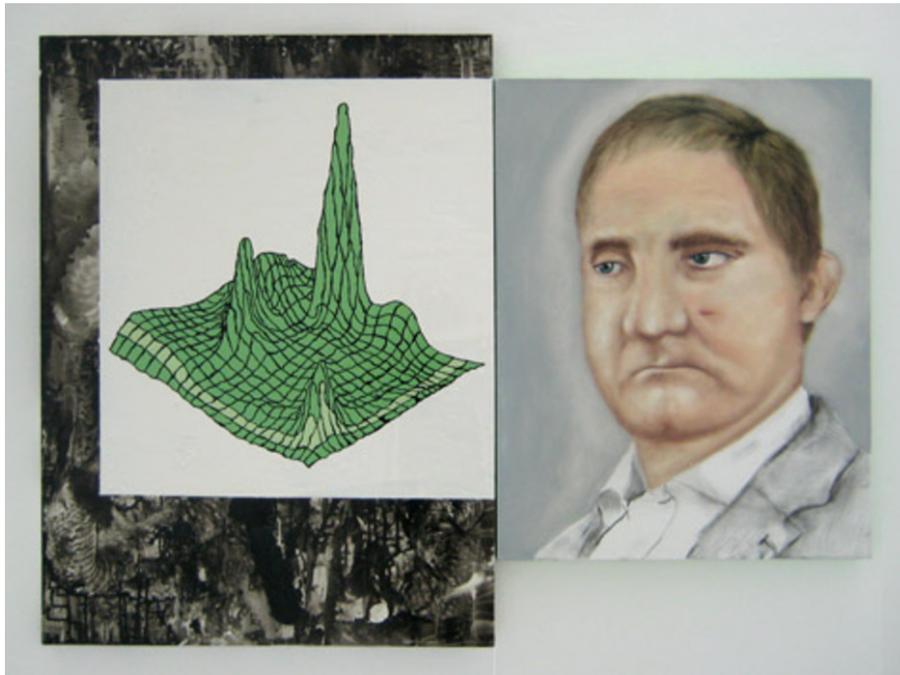


Figure 3. Amir Chasson, *Green Three Dimensional Topo Map Using Fishnet Lines*, Oil, charcoal and household paint on canvas, 2010

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