Surveillance Capitalist Aesthetics

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Abstract:

In 2015 Shoshana Zuboff coined the term "surveillance capitalism" to describe a new regime of accumulation, according to which analysing and intervening in behaviour becomes directly profitable. Companies such as Google offer free services (for example, email), but use these to collect information on their users. This information – analyzed into ersatz subjectivities – is then sold on to advertisers seeking highly targeted audiences. Although etymologically, surveillance refers to 'watching over,' surveillance capitalism's relationship to 'watching' is hardly straightforward. Information on online users may be directly operationalized (by a company's proprietary machine-learning algorithm, seeking to infer gender from online activity, for example). However, this information – and the subjects from whom it is expropriated – is hardly 'watched' or 'seen' in the strict sense – either by machines or by human attendants. Thus, surveillance capitalism has a paradoxical relationship to watching, and to the visible. In light of these complexities, what might a theory of surveillance capitalist aesthetics look like? How might artworks and other cultural artefacts try to make sense of the (in)consequential nature of the sensible within this regime of accumulation – with its hyper-visible subjects and hyper-proprietary means for their interpretation? This talk opens up a few avenues of exploration toward a surveillance capitalist aesthetics, by remarking on the aesthetics of reputational value, and the particularities of addressivity in surveillance-capitalist scenarios.

Full Text:

In finance, there is often a strange relationship between attempts to predict future outcomes and the actual course of events through which these outcomes arrive. Often, attempts to calculate future risk actively intervene in the very futures they purport to merely describe. These phenomena have already been studied for decades under the loose rubric 'the performativity of finance'. Sociologist Michel Callon's edited volume *The Laws of Markets* (1998) outlined several of the ways in which attempts to study markets in fact *did* something to them – intervened in that which they seemed to merely study. Picking up on this work, sociologist Donald MacKenzie has further interrogated the performativity of finance – detailing, for instance, how the development of the Black-Scholes options pricing model in 1973 actively contributed to producing the world which the calculation intimated (2003), and differentiating between general performativity (in which "an aspect of economics… is used by participants in economic processes") and effective performativity ("the practical use of an aspect of economics has an effect on economic processes") in finance (2005: 31). Scholars have continued to nuance these accounts of the complexities between measuring, predicting, studying and intervening in finance (for instance, LaBerge, 2016). Indeed, in his last book, Randy

Martin extrapolates on the entanglement of prediction and knowledge in finance, arguing that derivatives perform a limit of knowledge. Ostensibly mitigating risk, the predictions associated with derivatives "enhance volatility as they amplify risk" (Martin, 2015: 62); ubiquitous calculations of future value, seeking some kind of certainty, in fact produce yet more uncertainty, as they are unable to fully account for their own effect as measurements. Yet this uncertainty is far from a debilitating condition for finance; rather, it is derivatives' very horizon of opportunity. The derivative form thrives on volatility, turning "*the contestability* of fundamental value into a tradable commodity" (Martin, 2015:63).

If, in finance, attempts to measure and predict future value inevitably intervene in the very values they seek to determine – instantiating a complex dance between certainty and uncertainty – then what can be made of how these slippery, performative, predictive procedures enter into more and more registers of daily life – according to what Randy Martin termed "the financialization of daily life" (2002)?

One place to look, to answer this, would be to what Shoshana Zuboff termed "surveillance capitalism" (2015). Zuboff coined this term in 2015 to describe a new regime of accumulation, according to which analysing and intervening in behaviour becomes directly profitable – particularly for online platforms. Companies such as Google offer free services (for example, email), but use these services to collect data on their users. This information – analyzed into ersatz subjectivities – is then sold on to advertisers seeking highly targeted audiences for their adverts. Like the performative financial instruments alluded to above, surveillance capitalism, which financializes behaviour, might be understood as a series of apparatuses through which behaviour is actively intervened in, *by* being continually measured. Therefore, it becomes important to analyse how behaviour itself comes to be rendered *visible* and *actionable* – not only to companies and algorithms, but also to the people who use surveillance capitalist platforms. This pursuit involves developing an account of what I call surveillance capitalist aesthetics: the aesthetic particularities associated with the surveillance capitalist condition.

That said, developing an account of surveillance capitalist aesthetics cannot merely fetishize the 'aesthetic' – as if only the visible and sensible mattered to this regime of accumulation. Indeed, the relationships between surveillance capitalism, the behaviours from which it gleans value, and the regimes of *measuring, predicting, calculating* and *seeing* are quite complex, for a number of reasons. Although etymologically, surveillance refers to 'watching over,' surveillance capitalism's relationship to 'watching' is hardly straightforward. Online users' data may be directly operationalized (by a company's proprietary machine-learning algorithm, seeking to infer gender from online activity, for example), without ever having become 'visible' to any sort of watcher (whether human or machine). Neither information, nor the subjects from whom it is expropriated, is 'watched' or 'seen' in the strict sense – either by machines or by human attendants. Further, there is often a marked tension, in surveillance capitalist platforms, between hyper-visible signs of behaviour (for instance, star ratings on online sharing platforms, or Fitbit behavioural graphs), and the hyper-proprietary means for their calculation. Thus, surveillance capitalism has a paradoxical relationship to watching, and to the visible. Further, in attempting to develop an account of surveillance capitalist aesthetics, there are many pitfalls to be avoided, associated with the study of surveillance more generally: for instance, over-

reliance on mid-twentieth century accounts of surveillance (notably those of Orwell and Foucault) – which, though rich and nuanced in their own right, are insufficient to account for more recent developments in surveillance. Further, critiques of surveillance often tend to focus on the right to privacy, which presupposes that privacy is, in fact, a public good – without in any way accounting for the historical, cultural, raced and gendered complexities of the construct of privacy itself (Osucha, 2009; Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015). These pitfalls exert a certain gravity on the discourse, and tend to construct a paranoid account of surveillance ("they are watching us!"), often coupled with a nostalgic recourse to a privacy that never was either a straightforward right, or necessarily beneficial in the first place.

In light of these complexities, how might it be possible to move toward a theory of surveillance capitalist aesthetics that shifts attention to a more nuanced account of the *performativity of prediction* within surveillance capitalism? How might artworks and other cultural artefacts try to make sense of the (in)consequential nature of the sensible within this regime of accumulation – with its hyper-visible subjects and hyper-proprietary means for their interpretation? In what follows, I attempt to open up a few avenues of exploration toward a surveillance capitalist aesthetics, by remarking the recursive visual and data cultures of reputational value, and the particularities of addressivity in surveillance-capitalist scenarios. Both of these elements of surveillance capitalist aesthetics can be understood in terms of a tension between the consequentiality and inconsequentiality of the visible – the strange admixture of highly visible reflexive cues of one's value to surveillance capitalism, and the hiddenness of their calculation.

Surveillance Capitalist Pasts and Futures

Before discussing surveillance capitalist aesthetics, however, it is first necessary to say a bit more about surveillance capitalism itself – and to briefly try to understand how this regime of accumulation might fit into a larger picture of financial and business innovation. Shoshana Zuboff traces the development of surveillance capitalism to the beginning in the early 2000s, when new, "born-digital" firms learned to capitalize on users' "data exhaust" – information that they unintentionally left behind while using platforms, which revealed something of their online habits (Zuboff, 2015: 79). For instance, Google – surveillance capitalism's most prominent pioneer – became profitable when it reinvented its business model, after realizing that it could profit from data exhaust it was already collecting accidentally as a by-product of its activities. Offering email and search services to users meant the incidental collection of user data; finally, Google realized it could monetize this data, analysing it in order to entice advertisers with the promise of reaching highly specialized audiences. From that point forward, users' online interests and behaviours 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" (Zuboff, 2015: 75).

Even before Zuboff coined the term surveillance capitalism in 2015, there were others who had begun to look at the operationalization of predictive practices, and their effects on subjects, along similar lines to Zuboff's analysis. For instance, in 2011, Karl Palmås wrote about the American casino chain Harrah's' real-time calculation of 'pain points'. Gamblers, tracked via loyalty cards, are automatically assigned 'pain points': a hypothetical amount of losses they would have to incur in order to leave the casino, and possibly not come back for a while. When a gambler goes over their automatically assigned pain point, 'luck ambassadors' arrive on the floor to intervene in the gambler's mood, by treating them out for a steak dinner on the house (Palmås, 2011). Evgeny Morozov has written about a Barcelona comedy club's use of pay-per-laugh technology to avoid a tax hike on ticket sales. Customers come into the club for free, are analysed using facial recognition technology, and then are charged 'per laugh' according to how funny they found the show (Morozov, 2014). Already in 2008, Nigel Thrift argued that there was a new "political economy of propensity (2008).

Zuboff insists that data analysis instantiates a power relation, and fundamentally changes the behaviours it calculates and predicts (Zuboff, 2015: 75). Further, 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" (Zuboff, 2015: 78). In spite of these novelties, then, how might we understand Zuboff's surveillance capitalism as part of a longer trajectory of technological and informatic change? In her previous work, we might find something of a history of surveillance capitalism in what she terms the twentieth-century "informating" of the economy: the process through which the economy is rendered information-rich through the integration of smart machines into many businesses. The introduction of smart machines into business infrastructures makes for a fundamental shift, in Zuboff's view: for technologies of automation (for instance, scanner devices to automate supermarket checkouts) also produce data that can be used to change the very systems they measure. 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 (Zuboff, 1988: 9). Zuboff limits her analysis of informating the economy to the rise of the smart machine in the latter part of the twentieth century; elsewhere, I have argued that it might be better to think of a much longer development of new economic and financial products – from the first bank notes to the first derivatives – as having rendered the milieus in which they acted newly informatic (Rosamond, 2018).

Surveillance capitalism might be understood as part of a long, and slowly evolving history of 'informating' the economy; equally, in future, with the benefit of hindsight, its moment might prove to have been fleeting. Recently, Evgeny Morozov has argued that profiting from data collection used to provide targeted audiences for advertisements might best be understood as only a short-term game for companies like Google. The long-term game, Morozov contends, is Artificial Intelligence (AI). Tech giants like Google and Facebook can funnel their extensive revenue from expropriated behavioural data (or 'data extractivism', as he calls it) into research and development for AI infrastructures, so as to gain an unchallenged AI monopoly in future (Morozov, 2018). Briefly placing surveillance capitalism within a longer trajectory reminds us to look at the particularities of surveillance capitalist aesthetics,

while not overly fixing this account to a presumed-to-be stable set of conditions to which they are indexed. Instead, an account of surveillance capitalist aesthetics must have in mind an ever-changing political economy.

Why Surveillance Capitalist Aesthetics?

In a milieu in which the signs of performance and behaviour are directly operationalized, it becomes important to think through the aesthetics of the signalling and signing processes – while all the while keeping in mind that many of means through which these signs are utilised are not readily 'visible' to either humans or machines. In order to construct an account of surveillance capitalist aesthetics, it is important to acknowledge that there have, of course, been many accounts already of digital and post-digital aesthetics (to name just a few: Barry and Dieter, 2015; Cubitt, 1998; Koepnick and McGlothlin, 2009; Kwastek, 2013; Lovink, 2003; Manovich, 2013; Manovich, forthcoming 2020; Marks, 2010). These accounts of digital and post-digital aesthetics have varying foci; quite rightly, many of them focus on the effects of specific software forms, interactive digital media, and platforms. To add to this discussion, I have chosen to focus, here, on the performativity of measures and images of online persons, in tandem with the financialization of behaviour endemic to surveillance capitalism. My method involves drawing from literary theory – which has the potential to complicate accounts of the means through which behavioural measures skirt between the (in)visible and the (un-)narratable, and bring accounts of the aesthetics of online platforms into contact with the long histories of the production of the financial subject in literature (Roxburgh, 2016; Sherman, 1996; LaBerge, 2015).

Below, I briefly sketch two aspects of surveillance capitalist aesthetics, both of which I have written about at more length elsewhere (Rosamond, 2016; Rosamond, 2017): online reputation and online addressivity. I want to bring brief versions of these accounts together, here, in order to highlight the ways in which they share in highlighting the recursivity of measures; and combine proprietary and hyper-visible aspects of similar operations, which point to the simultaneous efficacy and irrelevance of visuality and sensibility within surveillance capitalist operations.

Section 3: Aesthetics of Reputational Value (600 words)

Many surveillance capitalist platforms involve the performance of reputation. Facebook likes, eBay star ratings and Airbnb reviews (among many other measures) perform reputability, and produce shared stakes and social ties within networks. The ubiquitous display of online reputation measures makes reputation seem newly *visible*, and directly consequential in its visibility. Thus, there is a need to analyse the complexities of this apparent visibility by developing an account of the conflicted visual and informatic dimensions of online reputation. How might it be possible to articulate an aesthetics of online reputation, given that many online environments render reputation's visibility highly consequential (as when, for instance, a customer chooses an Airbnb host because of their high host rating) – and yet, the exact mechanisms that measure reputation (such as online platforms' proprietary algorithms) remain hidden from view?

While 'likes', ratings and reviews make online reputation highly visible, many of the exact methods used for scoring it remain hidden from view. For instance, legal scholar Frank Pasquale writes about the myriad ways in which private companies collect information on citizens, assigning analyses and scores that may have profound effects on people's lives, even while they remain entirely hidden from view. An error in a private database, such as a wrongful designation of "intent to sell and manufacture methamphetamines" – as Arkansas resident Catherine Taylor experienced – can have knock-on effects, preventing people from getting jobs, flats or loans for years (Pasquale, 2015: 33). Even if the wrongfully accused, would be meth dealer spots the initial error and gets it corrected – which is already highly unlikely – companies share their data with so many other companies that the wrongful designation is still likely to have an adverse effect on that person's reputation for years. For Pasquale, such "[r]eputation systems are creating new (and largely invisible) minorities, disfavoured due to error or unfairness. Algorithms are not immune from the fundamental problem of discrimination, in which negative and baseless assumptions congeal into prejudice" (Pasquale, 2015: 38). Algorithmic judgements of creditworthiness, hidden both from view and from much legal oversight, effectively amount to a "quasi-judicial system of algorithmically scored penalties" (Pasquale, 2015: 148). Thus, understanding the surveillance capitalist aesthetics of reputation involves accounting for both the hyper-visibility of reputation online – its visual efficacy – *and* its hidden existence at the edges of networked personhood: in private databases, analysed by proprietary algorithms, and shared between private companies, beyond both accountability and view. To understand the efficacy of signs of reputation within surveillance capitalism, then, is to see reputation's recursivity in both the surfaces of online platforms – in likes, stars and reviews – and also in the dispersed distances of reputation's proprietary measures. Both the hyper-visible and hidden layers of surveillance capitalist reputation share a performative dimension – a situation in which to 'like' someone is to *make* them likable, to designate something as reputable is to make it so. But these functions take place at various distances to the visible, the narratable, and the hidden from view.

Addressivity in Surveillance-Capitalist Scenarios

A similar tension – between the immediately obvious, highly visible aspects of online interaction and online platforms' hidden interactivities – animates addressivity in online platforms. I borrow the term 'addressivity' from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who defines it as "the quality of turning to someone" (Bakhtin, 1986: 99) – or an utterance's "quality of being addressed to someone" (Bakhtin, 1986: 95). For Bakhtin, addressivity is a fundamental constitutive property of any utterance. Yet despite being fundamental to the utterance, many analyses of linguistic expression either entirely miss or underemphasize addressivity, since it does not appear in any of the constituent parts of an utterance (Bakhtin, 1986: 95).

In his late essay "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bakhtin argues that a genre can be defined according to its "typical conception of an addressee" (1986: 95). What, then, would constitute a typical conception of an addressee, if we move from *character* and *novel* in Bakhtin, to *profile* and *platform* in surveillance capitalism?

Extending from Bakhtin's theory, we could say that surveillance capitalist platforms are typified by an imbalance of addressivity. Online users are broadly aware that their data may be collected and analysed, they are nonetheless more consciously aware of addressing others on social platforms, and less aware of addressing automated, algorithmic witnesses. For instance, on online dating sites such as OkCupid, automatic gathering and analysis of data is a background condition of all its users' activity; but users' generic understandings of online dating do not sufficiently account for this, as online daters are more focused on addressing potential dates through their profiles and messages. OkCupid cofounder Christian Rudder's continual efforts to make online dating data analytics understandable and palatable for users (via OkCupid's promotional material, TED-Ed talks, a blog, and a book on data) (Rudder, 2014) arguably aims to address this imbalance – staging the platform's way of understanding its users' utterances in aggregate. Through associated materials that present the data analytics of online dating, OkCupid encourages users to develop an interest in, and acceptance of, being automatically analyzed as part of large, aggregate data sets, in the background of their online dating activities. Insofar as they double the communicability of their users – enabling communication between users as they also aggregate and analyze those users in the backgrounds of their interactions – surveillance capitalist social media platforms produce a particular form of imbalanced addressivity between users and their many interpreters 'near' and 'far' – more and less proximal to the surface of communicability.

Conclusion

Within surveillance capitalism, both online reputation and online addressivity are hyper-visibile. Reputational measures and acts of addressing users are highly noticeable in the design and use of social media platforms. Yet these phenomena also have a hidden dimension; they extend to the edges of data analytics' highly dispersed, privatized networks for gathering and sharing information, strongly affecting people's credit and subtly shifting the paradigm of their address to other users. Thus, surveillance capitalism instantiates a paradoxical hyper-/in-visibility of social cues. No matter at which end of this hyper-visible/invisible spectrum, both are highly performative – directly operational. To 'like' someone is to *make* them reputable; to automatically score someone highly equally so. Similarly, the act of address instantiates the particular sociality of the online platform: its off-balance diagram of desires, affiliations and extractions. These nuances of what I term surveillance capitalism, I would argue, are essential for thinking through the newer iterations of the performativity of finance, in which behaviour itself becomes subject to prediction and active intervention.

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