

Extraction, Prediction and Compulsion: M. T. Anderson's *Feed* and the Anatomy of Surveillance Capitalism

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Abstract

M. T. Anderson's young adult dystopia *Feed* (2002) imagines a near-future America in which most citizens receive a brain implant, the “feed,” that fuses commercial data collection with cognition itself. Published seventeen years before Shoshana Zuboff coined the term “surveillance capitalism” in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) [6], the novel is nonetheless found to dramatize, with striking precision, the economic logic that Zuboff would later theorize: the extraction of human experience as raw behavioral data, its conversion into predictive commodities, and the resulting erosion of autonomous will. It is argued in this paper that *Feed* stages surveillance capitalism as a three-part process, extraction, prediction, and compulsion, that moves from the economic to the intimate, culminating in a portrait of a subject who can no longer distinguish grief from algorithmically anticipated desire. The novel is read through Zuboff's behavioral-surplus thesis [6] alongside Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power [4], Gilles Deleuze's account of “societies of control” [3], and David Lyon's surveillance-studies framework [5], and it is contended that *Feed* does not merely illustrate later theory but anticipates it, functioning as a work of speculative social critique in its own right. Close reading of the novel's corporate data-profiling exposition, Violet Durn's data-resistance project, and the novel's closing consumption sequence is used to ground this claim in textual evidence.

Keywords: Surveillance Capitalism, Behavioral Surplus, Young Adult Dystopia, Dataveillance, Biopolitics

1. Introduction

When M. T. Anderson published *Feed* in 2002, the smartphone did not yet exist, targeted online advertising was in its infancy, and the phrase “surveillance capitalism” had not been coined. Yet the novel imagines a United States in which most citizens receive, in infancy, a neural implant, the “feed,” that streams entertainment, information, and above all advertising directly into the brain, while simultaneously recording thought, emotion, and desire for resale to corporations. Seventeen years later, Shoshana Zuboff gave this economic logic a name in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) [6]: the systematic extraction of human experience as free raw material, its transformation into behavioral data, and its sale as a means of predicting and ultimately modifying human behavior. When read against Zuboff's framework, Anderson's satire is found to look less like exaggeration and more like early diagnosis.

It is argued in this paper that “Feed” dramatizes surveillance capitalism as a three-stage process that moves from the economic to the intimate: extraction (the harvesting of thought and feeling as a commercial resource), prediction (the shift from monitoring past behavior to anticipating and manufacturing future want), and compulsion (the point at which the extracted, predicted subject can no longer distinguish authentic desire, or even grief, from algorithmic suggestion). Read together, it is shown that these three stages trace a single trajectory that ends not in political catastrophe but in a quieter and more disturbing outcome: the evacuation of interiority itself. This argument is situated within surveillance theory more broadly, Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power [4], Gilles Deleuze's theory of “societies of control” [3], David Lyon's survey of surveillance as an ambiguous social practice [5], and Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum's theory of obfuscation as a resistance strategy [2], before close readings of three key sequences in the novel are offered. It is concluded that “Feed” offers an unusually precise and prescient literary dramatization of the surveillance-capitalist logic that Zuboff would later name, and that reading the novel through this framework clarifies both what the text is doing and why its critique of consumer datafication continues to resonate.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Panopticism to Instrumentarian Power

Surveillance studies as a field is often traced back to Michel Foucault's reading of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon in “Discipline and Punish” (1977) [4]. For Foucault, the panopticon's genius is found to lie not in constant observation but in the possibility of observation: because the watched cannot know when they are being watched, the disciplinary gaze is internalized and self-policing begins. Power, in this model, is understood to operate through visibility and the individual's own anticipation of being seen. Gilles Deleuze's “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1992) [3] argues that this disciplinary model, organized around discrete enclosed institutions, the family, the school, the factory, the prison, was already giving way by the late twentieth century to a different modality of power: continuous, modulating “control” that follows the individual across sites rather than confining them within one. In Deleuze's control societies, the subject is not disciplined at fixed intervals; behavior is instead modulated constantly, in something closer to a code that is always being rewritten.

David Lyon's “Surveillance Studies: An Overview” (2007) [5] extends this genealogy into the domain of consumption; it is argued there that the routine collection of behavioral data by retailers and marketers constitutes one of the fastest-growing and most under-examined surveillance sites, precisely because it is experienced by its subjects as convenience rather than control. Shoshana Zuboff's “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism” (2019) [6] synthesizes and extends this trajectory into an explicit theory of a new economic order. In her foundational definition, it is written that this new market form “unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data,” data that are then “fabricated into prediction products that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later” and “traded in a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions” she calls behavioral futures markets [6]. The most consequential move in Zuboff's argument is her claim that this economic logic increasingly seeks not merely to predict behavior but to guarantee outcomes by shaping the conditions under which behavior occurs. This mode of power is named instrumentarianism, a form of power that “knows and shapes human behavior toward others' ends,” distinct from the disciplinary and totalitarian forms of power that dominated the twentieth century [6]. Elsewhere the apparatus through which this power operates, “Big Other,” is described as accomplishing a historic substitution: “replacing the engineering of souls with the engineering of behavior” [6]. Finally, Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum's “Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy

and Protest” (2015) [2] offers a theory of resistance appropriate to this landscape: rather than opting out of data collection, which is rarely possible, the obfuscating subject is understood to deliberately produce ambiguous, excessive, or contradictory data in order to become illegible to the systems that sort and target it.

“Feed” is found to be unusually well suited to this theoretical constellation because it collapses Foucault's external architecture of visibility into an internal, biological one. The panopticon watches its subjects from outside; the feed is implanted inside the subject, fusing Deleuze's modulating control directly with the nervous system. What follows traces how the novel is seen to dramatize extraction, prediction, and compulsion as successive, escalating stages of this fusion.

3. Extraction: The Corporate Harvest of Feeling

The clearest statement of the novel's extraction logic comes early, when the narrator, Titus, explains in his own vernacular how the feed actually functions as a business. It is stated plainly that “everything we think and feel is taken in by the corporations, mainly by data ones like Feedlink and OnFeed and American Feedware,” which assemble a “special profile, one that's keyed just to you,” before trading or selling that profile to affiliated companies (Anderson, 2002, “eden”) [1]. The passage is remarkable less for its content, which any reader of Zuboff will recognize instantly, than for its casualness: the description of total behavioral extraction is delivered in the same breath as a complaint about being bored, with no sense that anything other than the unremarkable furniture of everyday life is being described. This is precisely the affective register that Zuboff (2019) [6] identifies as central to surveillance capitalism's success: its normalization. The standard critique is even rehearsed and then dismissed, “everyone is like, da da da, evil corporations, oh they're so bad,” before it is concluded that resistance is pointless because the corporations “keep like everyone in the world employed” (Anderson, 2002, “eden”) [1]. What is staged, in miniature, is what Zuboff [6] calls surveillance capitalism's rhetoric of inevitability: the sense that a particular economic arrangement is simply how the world works, rather than a historically contingent and contestable choice.

This extraction is not limited to consumer transactions; it is found to constitute the substance of Titus's inner life. Because the feed streams advertising directly into cognition, ordinary experience arrives already interleaved with commercial messaging, what the novel calls being “bannered.” Lyon's (2007) [5] observation that consumption has become one of surveillance's most routine and least examined sites is dramatized literally: for Titus, no experiential space is left uncontaminated by data collection, because the sensorium itself has become the collection apparatus. Where Foucault's disciplinary subject internalizes an external gaze, Titus's extraction is shown to require no internalization at all, since the watching apparatus is not external to be internalized; from birth, it is already inside.

4. Prediction: Anticipatory Power and the Manufacture of Want

If extraction supplies the raw material, prediction is where the novel is found to most explicitly anticipate Zuboff's theory of instrumentarian power. The pivotal statement comes from Violet Durn, the novel's dissident love interest, during a scene at a shopping mall. It is explained that “everything we do gets thrown into a big calculation,” that the corporations are “watching us right now,” and that “they want to know what you want” before the customer knows it (Anderson, 2002, “utopia”) [1]. A form of algorithmic demographic sorting is then described in Violet's own terms: marketers, it is explained, run “demographic studies that divide everyone up into a few personality types,” then target advertising “based on what you're

supposedly like,” a feedback loop that gradually homogenizes personality itself to make audiences easier to sort and sell to (Anderson, 2002, “utopia”) [1]. This is, in effect, a lay description of what Zuboff (2019) [6] calls prediction products: outputs manufactured not simply to forecast behavior but to narrow the range of behavior available, so that the prediction becomes self-fulfilling.

The theoretical significance of this scene lies in its departure from the Foucauldian model with which surveillance studies typically begins. Foucault's (1977) [4] panopticon disciplines by making the subject aware, after the fact, that they might have been watched; power is understood to operate retrospectively, through the threat of documented transgression. Violet's account of the feed is found to operate in the opposite temporal direction: the system does not wait to observe a choice and then correct it, but attempts to determine the choice before it is made, to “make you want things” that are not yet known to be wanted (Anderson, 2002, “utopia”) [1]. This is closer to Deleuze's (1992) [3] societies of control, in which power is understood to operate as continuous modulation rather than discrete correction, a “sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point,” always adjusting rather than confining. This shift from a logic of correction to a logic of anticipation is dramatized in the novel years before either Deleuze's vocabulary or Zuboff's had entered common academic use in relation to consumer technology.

Violet's response to this diagnosis is to attempt what Brunton and Nissenbaum (2015) [2] would later theorize as obfuscation: rather than trying to opt out of the feed's data collection, which is repeatedly established in the novel as physiologically impossible, a contradictory, incoherent consumption profile is deliberately manufactured in order to become, in her words, unmarketable, “I'm not going to let them catalog me. I'm going to become invisible” (Anderson, 2002, “utopia”) [1]. The novel is unusually clear-eyed about the limits of this strategy. Later, after her health begins to fail, it is admitted that a customer-service algorithm has correctly anticipated her taste in music despite her resistance: “I've been sketched demographically. They can still predict things I like... They're really close to winning” (Anderson, 2002, “slumberland”) [1]. This admission of defeat is significant for how it reframes resistance: Violet's failure is shown to be not personal but structural, an illustration of Zuboff's (2019) [6] broader argument that individual-level data resistance, however sophisticated, cannot by itself counteract a system built at infrastructural scale. Obfuscation, in “Feed,” is found to be a rational tactic and an insufficient one, a distinction the novel insists on rather than resolves.

5. Compulsion: Grief, Consumption, and the Evacuation of the Self

The novel's institutional backdrop reinforces that this extractive-predictive apparatus is never purely commercial. It is mentioned casually that School™, having been purchased by “the corporations,” now teaches students primarily “how to use our feeds” and “how to find bargains” (Anderson, 2002, “eden”) [1], an image of pedagogy fully subordinated to consumer formation. Later, after the group's feeds are hacked, the teenagers are detained by the police not principally out of concern for their welfare but in order to “decrypt the feed history to get information to use against the guy in court” (Anderson, 2002, “eden”) [1], a small but telling instance of the state drawing on corporately held behavioral data for its own purposes, anticipating contemporary debates over third-party data access that now occupy Lyon's (2007) [5] field directly. The critique of corporate power is extended by Anderson to the political sphere as well: a fictional president is shown dismissing “corporate ‘watch’ organizations” and denying any link between industry and a nationwide epidemic of skin lesions, a satirical gesture toward the capture of public information by the same corporate interests that profit from extraction (Anderson, 2002, “utopia”) [1].

The clearest statement of extraction and prediction's human cost, however, is found in the fate of Violet's body. When her feed begins to malfunction and free repairs are sought by her father, FeedTech's silence is explained by one blunt fact: "her feed's warranty had expired years ago" (Anderson, 2002, "slumberland") [1]. Because the feed has replaced "too many basic functions" to be removed, and because medical coverage does not extend to a commercial product, Violet's survival is made contingent on her ongoing value as a customer rather than her claim as a person. This is found to be the logical endpoint of an economy built on behavioral surplus: a subject's worth to the infrastructure sustaining her body is measured by her continued profitability to that infrastructure, not by any independent claim to care.

The psychological consequence of this arrangement is staged most directly in the novel's final pages. After learning that Violet is dying, Titus's grief is expressed not through any action addressed to her but through an unbroken sequence of compulsive online ordering: his clothes are stripped off and "pair after pair" of pants he does not need are ordered, each order tracked as it moves through "the warehouse," "the packing," and "the distribution," until the shipments are felt "in circulation all around me like blood in my veins" (Anderson, 2002, "slumberland") [1]. The distinction between the character's body and the commercial logistics system extracting from and predicting for it is collapsed by this image: grief itself is left with no available expression except through the very channel that helped produce the emotional deprivation in the first place. This is compulsion in the fullest sense intended in this paper: not simply habitual overconsumption, but a state in which desire, distress, and algorithmic suggestion have become genuinely indistinguishable from the inside. The disposition of the apparatus that produces this state is named by Zuboff (2019) [6] "radical indifference": it is written that Big Other "does not care what we think, feel, or do" so long as its sensors can "observe, render, datafy, and instrumentalize" the behavioral surplus that human experience continually generates [6]. Titus's shipment-tracking sequence is found to be the felt, first-person correlate of exactly this indifference: his grief is not registered by the system as grief, only as a further stream of orderable, trackable behavior, and its "circulation" is felt as though it were his own bloodstream precisely because, by this point in the novel, it functionally is. What Zuboff (2019) [6] describes as the substitution of "the engineering of souls" with "the engineering of behavior" is dramatized with unusual precision in Anderson's closing image, and the novel is ended not on political defeat but on the quieter and more disturbing note of a self that can no longer locate its own boundary against the market.

6. Discussion: Feed as Literary Anticipation of Surveillance Capitalism

Taken together, these three movements, extraction, prediction, and compulsion, are found to constitute a coherent dramatization of surveillance capitalism's operation at the level of a single adolescent consciousness, written a decade and a half before Zuboff supplied the theoretical vocabulary to name it. This is not merely a matter of thematic overlap; it is a matter of sequence. Precisely the stages that Zuboff (2019) [6] identifies as constitutive of the surveillance-capitalist business model are moved through by Anderson's novel: the discovery that experience can be rendered as data (extraction), the repurposing of that data into products that anticipate and shape behavior (prediction), and the resulting normalization of a subjectivity that experiences manufactured want as its own (compulsion, in this paper's terms, though this word is not used by Zuboff). When "Feed" is read alongside this theory, therefore, more is achieved than confirmation of the novel's continued relevance; it is demonstrated how closely a work of speculative fiction, working through image and narrative rather than argument, can anticipate the structural analysis that social theory would later provide.

It is worth noting, too, where the novel and the theory part ways. Zuboff's (2019) [6] analysis is closed with a case, however embattled, for democratic and regulatory intervention against surveillance capitalism. No comparable political horizon is offered by "Feed": Violet's resistance fails, the political sphere is shown to be captured rather than capable of intervening, and the novel ends in personal loss rather than collective mobilization. This divergence is itself instructive. Where Zuboff's theoretical framework, as social science, is obligated to gesture toward remedy, Anderson's satire is free to dwell in diagnosis without prescription, and it is arguably this refusal of easy resolution that gives the novel's critique its lasting force.

7. Conclusion

In "Feed," the extraction of experience as data, its conversion into products that anticipate rather than merely record desire, and the resulting collapse of the boundary between authentic feeling and manufactured want are dramatized by M. T. Anderson with striking specificity. When read against Zuboff's (2019) [6] theory of surveillance capitalism, Foucault's (1977) [4] and Deleuze's (1992) [3] accounts of disciplinary and control power, Lyon's (2007) [5] survey of surveillance as an ambiguous social practice, and Brunton and Nissenbaum's (2015) [2] theory of obfuscation, the novel is found to emerge not as a simple allegory for later theoretical concerns but as an early and remarkably precise literary anticipation of them. Future work might extend this analysis comparatively, situating "Feed" alongside other surveillance-themed young adult fiction, or empirically, examining how adolescent readers historically and currently understand the novel's warnings in light of the platforms that now occupy much of their own attention. What is suggested by this reading, at minimum, is that "Feed"'s satire of consumer datafication has only grown more legible, and more urgent, in the years since Zuboff gave its logic a name.

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