CAPTURING THE TRAP IN THE SEEMINGLY FREE: CINEMA AND THE DECEPTIVE MACHINATIONS OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT

Shoshana Zuboff's concept of the Big Other offers a means to understand the paradigm shifts provoked by surveillance capitalism—by social networking systems collecting user data with little government oversight or end user understanding. The Big Other's inescapable annihilating power comes in part for how it evades legibility. In her analysis, Zuboff does not fully historicize the Big Other's rise, only broadly comparing its logic of total conquest to that of former imperial powers. Our paper disrupts the pervasive illegibility of the Big Other using three key examples in global cinema. In the process, we productively fill in historical blind spots in Zuboff's framework.

To underline the new subjugations of the Big Other, our interdisciplinary paper traces the line between what constitutes just and the unjust surveillance within business. Our examples feature enthused surveillance capitalists as well as confused, even terrified end users. We end by framing the historical roots of such an unquestioned form of mass surveillance by situating studies about the role of bureaucracies and Big Data in the Holocaust. Our comparison illustrates the troubling consequences of the Big Other's emergence: to be reduced to data is to accept the possibility of being deleted.

KEYWORDS: surveillance capitalism, cinema, big other, control, the holocaust, banality of evil.

1. INTRODUCTION

Shoshana Zuboff's concept of the Big Other offers a means to understand the paradigm shifts provoked by surveillance capitalism—by social networking systems collecting user data with little government oversight or end user understanding. For Zuboff, the Big Other represents "an intelligent world-spanning organism" which brings with it "new possibilities of subjugation... as this innovative institutional logic thrives on unexpected and illegible mechanisms of extraction and control that exile persons from their own behavior" (Zuboff, 2015: 85). The Big Other's inescapable annihilating power comes in part for how it evades legibility. In her analysis, Zuboff does not fully historicize the Big Other's rise, only broadly comparing its logic of total conquest to that of former imperial powers. Our paper disrupts the pervasive illegibility of the Big Other using three key examples in global cinema. In the process, we productively fill in historical blind spots in Zuboff's framework.

To underline the new subjugations of the Big Other, our interdisciplinary paper traces the line between what constitutes just and the unjust surveillance within business. Our examples feature enthused surveillance capitalists as well as confused, even terrified end users. We end by framing the historical roots of such an unquestioned form of mass surveillance by situating studies about the role of bureaucracies and Big Data in the Holocaust against Quentin Tarantino's WWII film Inglourious Basterds (2009). Our comparison illustrates the troubling consequences of the Big Other's emergence: to be reduced to data is to accept the possibility of being deleted. Cinema, we will ultimately show, is especially well-primed to visualize the trap in such seemingly free services, to make visible the often-invisible machinations of surveillance capitalism.

Our study employs a methodology which combines theories from social science with humanities-style close reading. Our framework, first developed in a study on the real-life security lessons in superhero media recently published in *Security Journal*, allows us to situate the formal construction of these media texts within an array of aesthetic and political contexts (Adams et al., 2019). Texts that may initially seem distant from debates surrounding surveillance capitalism gain vital relevance through such a prism, permitting for an expansion of the canon of surveillance-oriented cinema. Such highly textured viewing allows us to fully sus out of the contradictions and tensions in these cinematic examples. In so doing, we show how these films are not simple entertainment; rather, they frame a contradiction—the allures of unregulated surveillant power as well as the root horror of its dehumanizing potential.

2. *THE CIRCLE* – THE ATTRACTION OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

We begin our analysis by exploring the attraction of surveillance capitalism for the business world as expressed in the film adaptation of *The Circle* (2017) directed by James Ponsoldt and written by the novel's author Dave Eggers. The work focuses on the growing disillusionment of a young employee who begins a job at a Google-proxy known as The Circle. Her first encounter with the company's Steve Jobs-like executive, Eamon Bailey (played by Tom Hanks, a knowing perversion of his benign screen persona for the villainous role), centers on the introduction a line of hidden cameras that is sold with the slogan: "Knowing is good, knowing everything is better!" The way his words resonate with the (laboring) masses are made clear by how his employees leap out of their chairs to catch the cameras that he casually tosses out. This kind of vision is desired, worth fighting over.

Even as the film captures the laudatory Silicon Valley rhetoric around such practices, it also winks at data mining's costs. The executives' admission that he "stuck [the camera] near the dunes. No permit, nothing," evokes the unregulated reality that many such businesses operate. Eggers' original novel places such invasive behavior in an even more personal sphere when the exec confesses to clandestinely placing the cameras in his mother's home, joking "Forgive me! Forgive me! I had no choice. She wouldn't have let me do it otherwise. So I snuck in, and I installed cameras in every room. They're so small she'll never notice" (Eggers, 2013: 68). Even the strictures of family bend to the whims of a capitalist – even a mother's eye cannot regulate or control him.

In both novel and film, Bailey goes on to frame such pervasive sight as a resistant political tool for accountability, noting how even human rights discourses can be co-opted by Zuboff's 'world-spanning organism.' He proposes a kind of just surveillance tied to accountability, even as he

runs a business that operates with impunity. The visual juxtapositions achievable in the cinematic medium permit the screen adaptation to sharply undermine the businessman's closing statement: "We will see and hear everything. If it happens, we'll know." While the executive heaps praise upon his company's total technological vision, the screen behind him shows footage of riot in a city. Fire extends across the frame, and the Silicon Valley executive seems to be at the urban inferno's center. Whistles from the recording lightly punctuate his dialogue, so that the film winks to its attempts to figuratively blow the whistle on such business practices. Moments after we see the city in flames the image fades out to a white background emblazoned by the initiative's name "Seechange." The crowd cheers – no one appears to see the true sea changes at work in conceptions of user privacy. With such a tension between the executive's valorizing words and the stark imagery of destruction that is ultimately effaced, the satirical film gestures to the unseen devastation of such unquestioned surveillance while signaling how difficult it is to see beyond the gloss of dataveillance technology.

3. *PULSE* – THE TERRIFYING DECEPTIONS ON THE END USER

Our second reading shows how cinema has represented how end users are deceived by technology corporations. Like the Spanish conquistadors before them, Zuboff argues that early surveillance capitalists, "relied on misdirection and rhetorical camouflage, with secret declarations that we could neither understand nor contest" (qtd. in Naughton, 2019). Kiyoshi Kurosawa's horror film *Pulse* (2001) features a haunted internet browser which serves as a metaphor for unscrupulous, intrusive corporations. The crude English pun inherent its name, UR@NUS or 'your anus,' implies that these entities seek to penetrate their users.

One scene portrays the user who must agree to the browser's Terms of Use Agreement. It is worth reiterating that the man believes he is downloading a standard browser and remains oblivious to its malignant supernatural intents. The film highlights his utterly naive status by showing him with an instruction manual for the Internet then searching for his modem jack before slotting in the installation CD. Before they begin their terrorizing, as with the Spanish conquistadors and the early surveillance capitalists that Zuboff references, the ghosts behind the UR@NUS browser force the unsuspecting user to agree to a contract that he can neither understand nor contest. A popup message appears that declares "Have Fun!" metaphorically suggesting how corporations begin to haunt the consumer via the promise of entertainment. Upon encountering the agreement, he asks, "What is this crap? Yes, I agree.". He then quickly clicks through it. The film adopts a point-of-view shot of the monitor from the user's perspective for the installation sequence, creating a visual monotony that evokes the boredom and confused reaction of the end user. It illustrates how corporations trick the consumer with the prospect of fun and overwhelm him with impenetrable legal language.

After consenting to the browser's terms, he faces the horror of surveillance capitalism. We see and hear the UR@NUS suddenly dial-up. There a brief shot where we see the user reacting with an unsettled expression as the computer seems to be acting on its own accord. The monitor's image suddenly fills the screen. The browser takes hold of the film's form indicative of its dominating force. The user clicks through a slide show of eerie Web-Cam videos, featuring anonymous persons sitting in spaces drained of color and filled with deep shadow. Several figures stare out at the camera. The user is now watched. Then, the screen fades to black as the question appears: "Do you want to meet a ghost?" Only after agreeing to the terms does the

true nature of the accord come to life. Troubled, the character shuts off the monitor, but he will not be able to shake off its ghostly hold.

We learn the ghosts, otherwise described as the shade, will ultimately desiccate users. Resembling a morbid variant of Japan's Hikikomori, youth who isolate themselves, those subjected to the interference of the browser withdraw from real life and connect only to its shade. Notably, the shade draws on real life connections to pass on its haunting infection. What remains after the shade has sucked the life out of people is their "data shadow". The body (or corpse) "digitizes" and (sometimes) leaves a physical shadow behind, like a stain on the walls. Those being drawn in connect with the shadow of the person and are infected by the shade. The apocalyptic dimension of the horror film, its world essentially ends, functions as a kind of prescient allegory for the ways SNS systems like Facebook create "shadow profiles" where data is collected even on non-users. Director Kiyoshi Kurosawa has defined horror films as "that family of films that take as their subject matter the fear that follows one throughout one's life" (Kurosawa). For our purposes, it useful to note that he creates a horror representation of the "Big Other," one that follows user *and* non-user to the ends of the earth. No one is safe from its grasp, even those who resist the siren call to 'have fun' and who choose not to install its applications on their computers. While *Pulse* begins to gesture to the violence of the Big Other, Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* more fully reveals its insidious destructive potential.

4. *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS* – UNCOVERING THE BIG OTHER IN THE HOLOCAUST

Zuboff, as mentioned, sees the historical echoes of surveillance capitalism in the violence of Spanish colonialism. Through this paper's final reading of Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, we reveal how corporations' purposely occluded corrosive intention needs to be traced back to Big Data's not only colonial but genocidal beginnings during the Holocaust. At first glance, the war film seems very distant from AI or information ethics concerns. However, close analysis of the film permits us to historicize the development of the Big Other within Big Data's imbrication in the Holocaust.

IBM's complicity in the genocide has been well-documented. Their technology was used in everything from processes of identification to the management of German railway lines (Dillard, 2003: 5). Jessie F. Dillard notes that the actions of such data companies in the genocide reveals "the ability of ideology to control and destroy through the professionals who develop, implement and service technology" (Dilliard, 2003: 3). They are not morally blameless for the technology they develop. Dillard argues that IBM pursued profit without any consideration or care for the ways their technology would be deployed or "the ultimate social or human consequences." (Dillard, 2003: 5). His emphasis concerning IBM's privileging of profit above all else recalls the aforementioned scene of *The Circle* wherein images of obliteration were projected behind the smiling surveillance capitalist.

For her part, Zuboff does not situate the Big Other within such histories. Zuboff employs Karl Polanyi's idea of 'commodity fiction' where people are subordinated to the market. Polanyi noted that such fictions "disregarded the fact that leaving the fate of soil and people to the market would be tantamount to annihilating them" (qtd. in Zuboff, 2015: 83). Zuboff continues, "in the logic of surveillance capitalism there are no individuals, only the world spanning organism and all the tiniest elements within it" (Zuboff, 2015: 83). Here, while ignoring any specific examples from the past, Zuboff points to an over-riding logic of annihilation where users are reduced into the Big Other's tiniest elements. Her language acts as a starting point for our

analysis of how Tarantino allegorically depicts historian Raul Hilberg's Bureaucratic Process of Destruction. By culminating upon a film about the Holocaust, we show how being a good businessman under surveillance capitalism may have the same ethical standing as a good bureaucrat in a destructive surveillance state.

Raul Hilberg has argued about the importance of bureaucracy within Nazi genocide noting, "at first sight the destruction of the Jews may have the appearance of an… impenetrable event. Upon closer observation it is revealed to be a process of sequential steps that were taken at the initiative of countless decision makers in a far-flung bureaucratic machine" (Hilberg, 1985: 53)." In the opening scene in *Inglourious Basterds*, a Nazi colonel named Hans Landa transforms a French farmhouse into an office when searching for hiding Jews, closing the windows and carefully placing his bureaucratic tools on the dinner table (Ben-Youssef, 2017. 819-820).[1] He carefully lays out his papers and fills his fountain pen. The sequence enacts the three steps of Hilberg's Bureaucratic process – Definition, Concentration, Annihilation. First comes identification where the targeted people are bureaucratically identified on paper as Jewish (Hilberg, 1985: 18). A tight cut-in on his pen as he checks off the name of each Jewish person emphasizes the sharp point of his pen, its wield the power to cut those it checks off. Second comes concentration, where the targeted group is trapped in a ghetto and is controlled "through the watchful eyes of the entire German population" (qtd. in Hilberg, 1985: 50). Landa reveals his all-seeing eye when noting that he knows exactly where the Jews are hidden. Without blinking, he asks, "They're hiding under the floorboards, aren't they?" Finally, the third step is annihilation. As Hilberg sums up, "Most bureaucrats composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, signed correspondence…they could destroy whole people by sitting at their desks" (Hilberg, 1985: 288). In the film, the Jewish populace is executed by the soldiers. To be visible is to be capable of being part of the destructive process. The film thus illustrates the stakes when surveillance, be it on the state level or that of private enterprise, goes unchecked and unmanaged. It pushes us to reflect upon what banality of evil both the distant bureaucrat and the algorithm might share.

It is worth examining, for a moment, the film's vital play with language which recalls the ignorance of the consumer in the film, *Pulse*. Landa sets up the execution of the hiding Jewish family by speaking in English so that his French victims cannot comprehend. The film metaphorically indicates that the bureaucratic system driving the murder remains similarly incomprehensible. After hearing a confession of the Jewish family's whereabouts, the colonel says, "I am going to switch back to French, and I want you to follow my masquerade. Is that clear?" He says "Adieu" while directing his soldiers to fire their guns. Those affected by the system's violence cannot understand the true meaning behind the language of bureaucracy. They cannot make sense of the possibilities of subjugation that define mass surveillance by the state or in more unfettered forms of surveillance capitalism.

5. CONCLUSION

Our analysis of these key examples of world cinema confirm that the root danger of surveillance capitalism is that most consumers do not realize the trap they fall in—they do not realize their

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[1] This is an expanded reading of *Inglourious Basterds* which appears in Ben-Youssef's earlier article, "'Attendez la Crème!': Food and Cultural Trauma in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*."

status as data to be deleted. Like the workers in *The Circle* who scrabble to catch a new camera tossed out by an apathetic executive, consumers desire to be in such a web. As *Pulse* reminds us, they often just sign away their rights and agree to be haunted by corporations-to be reduced to phantoms that are mined for profit. The consequences of this kind of uncontrolled surveillance when humans are turned into data in an incomprehensible system, where the state takes on the categorizing logic of an IBM machine, has been powerfully visualized onscreen by Quentin Tarantino. Zuboff notes that "We were caught off guard by surveillance capitalism because there was no way that we could have imagined its action, any more than the early peoples of the Caribbean could have foreseen the rivers of blood that would flow from their hospitality toward the sailors who appeared out of thin air waving the banner of the Spanish monarchs. Like the Caribbean people, we faced something truly unprecedented" (qtd in Naughton, 2019). Her own violent imagery recalling a colonial past reminds us that it was not 'truly unprecedented' – business and colonialism share the same carnivorous appetites, a point only confirmed when lingering on Big Business and Big Data's complicity in the Holocaust. If people can be reduced to data, they can be both controlled and eliminated.

Our analysis renders newly legible the Big Other's illegible processes, highlighting how cinema can frame the allure and costs of such control. In so doing, these key films show how media drives home the paradigm shift of surveillance capitalism and unveil its under-explored history. We have moved from a substrate of mediated relations, a village society wherein the state had limited and exceptional access to encoded information, to a new stratum of communication with the emergence of social networks. Now we have platforms that can see everything, an unregulated entity that can access all. Cinema tracks these shifts and the ensuing danger when businesses follow mantras like: "Knowing is good, knowing everything is better!" In so doing, these films demand scholarly attention for how they offer the public a viscerally affecting and disruptive critical understanding: they permit viewers to see how our rights of privacy come to burn up in the light of seemingly free social networks. These films ultimately give scholars of surveillance, AI, and information ethics a new language to map out surveillance capitalism's trap.

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