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Personalization Technologies in *Her* and *Feed*

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Personalization is a pervasive cultural logic that increasingly structures today’s economic and social institutions. From Netflix and Amazon recommendations to banking, insurance, health and education services, online shopping, and social networking, personalization is used to customize services, content, and goods. The promise of personalization is that it will cater to an individual’s tastes, preferences, desires, and needs, and yet, its primary function is to rationalize new techniques of capital accumulation. Personalization refers to the web of technological apparatuses and cultural practices that generate information about consumer behaviors, buying habits, and demographic data to market goods and services to target audiences, increasing the likelihood of a return on capitalist investment.

It is the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture, where the culture industry masks the standardization, objectification, and exploitation inherent in the capitalist organization of labor and leisure, which personalization discourse— championed by digital marketing insiders and leading tech industry economists— purports to have overcome. Both the Frankfurt School and personalization discourse are critical of Fordist mass marketing on the grounds that it is homogenized, standardized, inauthentic, and encourages passivity. And yet, while personalization claims to provide customized and individually

tailored results, services, and products, it extends the cultural logic of mass culture: the use of choice and an emphasis on individuality to make standardized goods desirable. Today, with personalization, we see the emergence of technological utopianism under what has been described as the Californian ideology: the fusion of radical individualism, libertarianism, and neoliberal economics with a technologically deterministic vision of a more perfect future; subjects are imagined as empowered with increased consumer choice and access to information (Barbrook and Cameron 45). This vision emerged alongside, and grew out of, the 20th century counterculture critique of alienation and hierarchy and a demand for individual freedom (Turner 6).

Both the young adult novel, *Feed*, by M.T. Anderson, and the film, *Her*, written and directed by Spike Jonze, imagine a future in which information technologies have come to structure every facet of existence and where the main protagonists understand themselves as the subjects 21st century techno-utopian ideology presupposes: the freely-thinking, desiring subject of liberal-consumer discourse, empowered through the freedom to choose and the ability to exercise control over technology. These works are symptomatic of what Raymond Williams might call a “structure of feeling,” where fictions grapple with the shifting social and economic relations produced under person-

alization (Williams 128). *Her* and *Feed* also share the tradition of the cyberpunk genre to the extent that they challenge the dualistic conception of technology and the self (Foster xii). Both the film and the text explore the ways that personalization technologies respond to and transform user behavior and are embedded in every facet of society. The characterizations in *Feed* and *Her* help illustrate how users are bound to personalization technologies in ways that are alienating and exploitative, highlighting personalization technologies as integral to regimes of capital accumulation under post-Fordist societies of control. A close reading of these works assists in making the exploitation and surveillance underpinning personalization visible, and ultimately, contestable.

From Mass Culture to Personalization

It was the Frankfurt School that addressed the relationship between mass culture and standardized production. The role of marketing under Fordism was to unify heterogeneous and fragmented markets so standardized goods could be distributed to consumers with greater efficiency and profitability. Fordism allowed for the production of mass standardized goods in which the sameness of the product was key to its ability to be produced cheaply and efficiently (Lampel and Mintzberg). For the Frankfurt School, the standardization and homogeneity of mass cultural production were masked by the ideological constructions of freedom, individualism, and choice (Adorno and Horkheimer 94).

While the Frankfurt School argued that new technologies enabled standardized mass consumer culture to flourish under the guise of providing choice and a sense of individuality through the procurement of commodities, they did not consider the subject and these objectifying technologies as co-constitutive. The subject was repressed by, not produced within, mass culture. The theorization of power as

repressive rather than productive led the Frankfurt School to imagine a subject who could recuperate her lost authenticity and individuality, and this is what personalization discourse purportedly provides; the opportunity for consumption and attentiveness to be authentic and individualized. However, following Gilles Deleuze, processes of subjectivation and individuation precede the formation of the subject (*Two Regimes of Madness* 341). In other words, there is no “authentic” subject-position to return to because technological, institutional, and social regimes help construct subjects as individuals. What the Frankfurt School described in their analysis of mass culture was a process that not only objectified subjects in its mode of production but also functioned, I argue, as a process of constructing individuals as such; consumers were constructed as subjects whose individuality was expressed through the act of making choices between consumer products. These processes continue to inform the relationship between subjects and personalization technologies, structuring the way users understand their relationship to the technology as beneficial.

While industrialization demanded standardized and depersonalized production in order to reduce costs, computerization has allowed for the development of cheap and easy methods for personalization. Contemporary marketing and business literature describes personalization as a technological, cultural and economic transformation away from the standardization of mass culture and towards a horizon of differentiation, customization, and the privileging of consumer values and expectations (Davenport and Beck 123). This discourse frames personalization as allowing us to go beyond the limitations of standardization, where the production process relegated consumers to a position of passive consumption. Mark Andrejevic describes the discourse of the new media economy as a “now-it-can-be-told” promotional strategy: “It turns

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out that critical theorists were right about industrial capitalism all along: it is oppressive, top-down, and alienating after all. We can finally admit this because now we have the technology to leave it all behind” (“Estrangement 2.0” 1). Personalization discourse appropriates the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture in order to differentiate itself from previous modes of production.

The Frankfurt School identified choice as a technique of social control and a way of perpetuating the capitalist organization of production and consumption. With personalization, however, the emphasis is not on the manufacturing of consumer demand for standardized products but on using information consumers produce about themselves when browsing and consuming to determine which products to offer them (Davenport and Beck 124). This helps to train consumers to be “better choosers,” empowered by personalization discourse to sort through options and indicate preferences. Subjects are rendered individually responsible for what previously, in standardized production, required investment on behalf of capital in consumer polling. These choice-making behaviors produce profit for those who own the information the consumer produces about herself.

It can be argued that what the Frankfurt School understood was mass culture as a disciplinary mechanism that positioned individuals as consumers within a mass for the purpose of producing demand and perpetuating capitalist relations of power. With personalization technology, the degree to which subjects are fragmented into data, characteristics, and behavioral patterns is further intensified, and this aggregation of information culminates in powerful vehicles of accumulation for capital under societies of control; societies structured according to the rapid and flexible accumulation of information at all times, made possible by the ubiquity of workplace and leisure-time surveillance (Deleuze, “Postscript” 7).

The exploitation, surveillance, and data aggregation inherent to personalization is masked by the way personalization discourse frames the technology as individualized, transparent, and able to differentiate commodities and services for each user. Thus, forms of ubiquitous monitoring and capital accumulation can persist without inciting critique from many users.

Personalization in *Feed*

The understanding of personalization as a commercial form of surveillance and social control is articulated in M.T. Anderson’s young adult novel *Feed*. The feed, a device implanted at birth in one’s brain allowing one to access the Feednet, and in turn, an endless supply of personalized news, commodities, and services, is a clear outgrowth of the shift from mass culture to personalization outlined above. The feed is framed as a highly personalized service, designed to serve the every whim and desire of the subject within which it is lodged, and to help administer every aspect of the characters’ lives. It exists in a world in which environmental pollution has reached such a degree that the earth is almost uninhabitable. Language and communication have degenerated due to the dependence on technology. The narrator, Titus, is a teenager desperately seeking thrills and stimulation through his consumption. Given Titus’s affluent class position, he has had the most sophisticated model of the feed implanted at birth. He describes the feed as the following: “there’s that silence when you’re driving home alone in the upcar and there’s nothing but the feed telling you, *This is the music you heard. This is the music you missed. This is what is new. Listen.* And it would be good to have someone to download with” (Anderson 4). The feed bombards Titus with advertisements, prices, government propaganda, and information about the products he comes across. It allows for private communications, assists with purchases and information sorting, makes word

choice suggestions when the characters communicate, and encourages subjects to keep up with the rhythms of capital—new trends, hairstyles, products, and the ever-present flow of information.

The actual productive apparatus underpinning the feed is predicated on the mass aggregation of data, and yet, the feed hails Titus as an individual, covering over the ways personalization technology is predicated on the fragmentation of individuals into data, which can then be aggregated, packaged, sorted, and sold. In other words, personalization technologies are seemingly individualized, but in actuality, they work precisely through the data aggregation of the masses in order to allocate mass produced goods to target markets. The feed reinforces Titus’s sense of individuality by engaging with Titus by name and helping him to overcome indecision, one of the anxieties made possible by increased consumer choice and seemingly unconstrained access to information. All of Titus’s time and experiences are subject to mediation by the feed and administered for the purposes of maximizing profit and maintaining his compliance with his own domination while the world around him crumbles. His every experience is commodified and his desire is preempted. For instance, when Titus and his father express interest in purchasing a car and struggle to decide on a model given the abundance of choice, Titus is confronted with the following visual from his feed:

Dodge was bannerimg me with me driving, and all of these people in bikinis stuffed into the car with me, this big party, and with a beach ball, too, like I could be the scene; and Nongen, who made the Swarp, was showing a romantic drive through the mountains with just me and Violet, who they got pretty much right, except they made her taller and with bigger boobs, and they made her cheeks kind of sparkly in a way that, if it were really happening,

I would try to wipe off with a facecloth. (Anderson 123)
Titus ends up choosing the Dodge; perhaps because it offered a more successful personalized vision of the future he could have, if only he were to purchase it. In both cases, Titus’s investment in popularity and desirability are central to the ads, and both seek to nudge his buying decisions through the commodification of his desires.

It is not surprising that Titus finds satisfaction in the feed, given its ability to tailor advertisements to his tastes and preferences. While this ability is contingent upon the constant monitoring of Titus’s thoughts and behavior, Titus emphasizes the ways the feed is able to consummate his desires and assist him with overcoming consumer indecision:

It knows everything you want and hope for, some times before you even know what those things are. It can tell you how to get them, and help you make buying decisions that are hard. Everything we think and feel is taken in by the corporations, mainly data ones like Feedlink and OnFeed and American Feedware, and they make a special profile, one that’s keyed just to you, and then they give it to their branch companies, or other companies buy them, and they can get to know what it is we need, so all you have to do is want something and there’s a chance it will be yours. (Anderson 47)

The feeds are personalized through the ability to aggregate data about the entire feed user base and create sophisticated profiles for target marketing. For Andrejevic, surveillance is more readily accepted in the workplace than at home because, “Surveillance, within this schema, is associated with time that is not free, but which is subject to the asymmetrical power relations of the workplace, underwritten by the worker’s subordination to those who control the

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space of production” (“The Work of Being Watched” 236). If surveillance occurs at home, it also reveals that leisure time is not free, that asymmetrical power relations exist outside the workplace, and that home is also a controlled productive space. For Titus, however, the constant monitoring of his choices and experiences is perceived as a beneficial service willing his desires into being and helping to minimize the “labor” of decision-making under conditions of information abundance, rather than an encroachment of workplace technologies for monitoring, time management, and profit realization.

Much like Anderson’s fictional world where the feed is used to help Titus with consumer indecision and an abundance of choice, today’s personalization technologies are explicitly conceptualized by the marketing industry as a means of overcoming information overload. According to Scott E. Couto, the Head of Distribution at Fidelity Institutional Asset Management,

As an industry, we need to think about creating a personalized experience for our customers to help them manage the volume and quality of information they receive...Providing a personalized experience can translate to business results, with e-commerce juggernaut Amazon attributing 30 percent of their sales to their recommendation engine. (Couto)

Couto’s repeated emphasis on personalization shows how customizing what consumers are presented with is thought to increase profits while delivering a “helpful” service to the user. In order to provide users with the most relevant experiences, platform providers, firms, and advertising agencies make use of the information users produce about themselves to provide the content and goods that users are most likely to click on or purchase. Users are told they can overcome the saturation of information and choices that may not be most relevant to them, meaning, are least likely

to provide a return on capitalist investment, through personalization and its use of relevancy as a metric. Personalization is thus predicated on *knowing* the consumer in order to determine relevancy, which is made possible through the surveillance of behavior, choices, and preferences. For Titus, self-expression and submission to technologies of commercial surveillance are synonymous, as it is thought that he can access goods and services that reflect his individualized desires by engaging with the feed and demarcating his likes and dislikes. He experiences empowerment by exercising his freedom to choose between the presented options. This is precisely why Titus likes the feed—it is even able to anticipate his desires before he formulates them. Titus’s understanding of the feed directly echoes contemporary marketing discourse; both conceive of personalization as helping to organize the relationship between consumers and producers in ways that take into consideration individual preferences and desires as opposed to being a form of media that imposes uniform desire for standardized products. Personalization and the use of information consumers produce about themselves to manufacture choices, options, and administer which advertisements and products, are paired with which consumers is a means of predetermining the conditions of consumption in order to maximize returns on capitalist investment. These exchanges between consumers and the interactive personalization interfaces appear as voluntary even when they are structured and administered under asymmetrical relations of power; Titus produces information about himself that he does not own. He is presented with “personalized” goods that are in fact standardized. As consumers have ever increasing access to information, they are provided with little recourse to understanding how information about the user is instrumentalized. Under the guise of choice and individuality, personalization dictates what con-

sumers are shown and when. Regardless of the degree to which Titus is removed from sites of control within his daily life—his lack of awareness and inability to effect meaningful political and environmental change because all information and participation is mediated, and therefore controlled, by the feed—he is able to exercise a degree of choice in his consumption and leisure. The exercise of choice functions to reinforce the liberal-democratic discourse which frames consumers as individual and empowered choice-makers while masking the relations of power delimiting what spheres choice can be exercised within. The degeneration of language in *Feed* due to the over-reliance on the feed for all communication and information can be read as a fictional consequence of what Frederic Kaplan describes as “linguistic capitalism,” where linguistic sub-markets that monetize certain key words and phrases mediate language use online (Kaplan 28). When Titus first meets Violet, he finds himself struggling to describe his desire for her: “Her spine. Maybe it was her spine. Maybe it wasn’t her face. Her spine was, I didn’t know the word. Her spine was like...? The feed suggested ‘supple’” (Anderson 14). Language has degenerated due to the dominance of information technologies and subjects’ reliance on these technologies for communication. These apparatuses inevitably shape linguistic behavior, patterns, and expectations. As Kaplan explains, under linguistic capitalism, the most referenced keywords and phrases, their correlation to user relevancy, and the page rank are used to create a linguistic market where advertisers and businesses pay Google based on the algorithm’s valuation of all of these factors (Kaplan 28). While the regularization of language versus its degeneration are different phenomena, certainly both emerge due to the mediating role of personalization technologies and the underlying markets made possible through information sorting technologies, shaping and economizing the use of language.

According to Kaplan, linguistic capitalism pushes the regularization of language by inadvertently conditioning users to type specific phrases and words that are highly valued. In our contemporary moment, consumption and attentiveness are directly productive of data, underwritten by submarkets where producers, advertisers, and tech corporations shape and accumulate value out of user linguistic behavior. In the case of Titus, the feed’s ability to assist him with his language choices helps Titus to remain unaware of the consequences of the technology on his ability to communicate and form meaningful connections with others. Simultaneously, the feed is taking stock of Titus’s desire for Violet and will later instrumentalize this desire for marketing purposes. While an abundance of information produces conditions of uncertainty and anxiety that the subjects of *Feed* then remedy using personalization technology, personalization also reflects capitalism’s own anxieties as to whether past consumer choices are indicative of future ones. This is evident in the novel when Titus’s girlfriend, Violet, begins subverting the feed. Violet is one of the few characters who resists the feed, radicalized by her class position. Violet did not have the feed implanted until she was eight years old due to the cost as well as her father’s rejection of feed culture. She is therefore able to imagine a world not dominated by the feed. Her father, a professor, holds an attachment to written language and knowledge long forgotten and devalued by the dominant culture of the feed. He initially resisted implanting a feed in Violet, but when not having a feed himself affected his employability, he determined it was a necessity. Violet grows consciously aware of how the feed mediates every aspect of existence as she begins to intellectualize her own alienation. She tells Titus, Everything we’ve grown up with—the stories on the feed, the games, all of that—It’s all streamlining our

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personalities so we’re easier to sell to. I mean, they do these demographic studies that divide everyone up into a few personality types, and then you get ads based on what you’re supposedly like. (Anderson 91) Violet decides she is going to try and subvert the feed by confusing it with desires she doesn’t actually possess, seeking information on things she doesn’t have true interest in, and asking for prices on goods she doesn’t intend on purchasing. She performs a version of desire that the feed cannot accommodate, predict, or profit from.

As a consequence of Violet’s subversion, she is no longer perceived as a valuable investment on behalf of the Feed Corporation. When she needs an operation to modify her feed, which will save her life, she receives the following message from the feed:

Maybe, Violet, if we check out some of the great bargains available to you through the feednet over the next six months, we might be able to create a consumer portrait of you that would interest our investment team. How ‘bout it, Violet Durn? Just us, you and me—girls together! Shop till you stop and drop! (Anderson 247)

The technological apparatus itself is tasked with authenticating the behavior of consumers in order to ensure the valorization of commodities and services. According to the predictive analytics of the Feed Corporation, Violet is not perceived as a secure investment because of the inconsistencies in her consumer profile, and thus, they deny her money to assist with her operation. And yet the feed still relates to Violet in an individualized, personalized, and gendered way, hoping to encourage her to perform a version of normalized desire which will be legible to the feed, and in turn, monetizable, even as her death becomes increasingly inevitable. What Violet’s engagement with the feed also reveals is that what

personalization delivers is not what the subject necessarily wants, but what an algorithm thinks a particular subject wants, based on how his or her behavior is measurably similar and dissimilar to others. When Violet is unwilling to engage in a feedback loop with the feed in a way that helps it to formulate its predictive analytics, she becomes a subject unworthy of investment. Rather than Violet’s labor power, it is her capacity for attentiveness and consumption, and the predictability of that capacity, that determines her credit worthiness. Violet not only loses financial value in the eyes of corporations, but Titus increasingly withdraws from their relationship as well, as she is no longer able to assimilate into feed culture.

The restriction and creation of possibilities, choices, and options for subjects is the value of personalization technologies. Subjects determined likely to provide a return on an investment of capital are presented with particular options and choices, while predictive models of risk accrue and assemble information to limit the choices of others. Subjects are considered responsible for maintaining flexibility and making timely choices, while the structure of information aggregation remains impervious to social scrutiny as an “objective” institutional arrangement. As Paul Rabinow argues,

Through the use of computers, individuals sharing certain traits or sets of traits can be grouped together in a way that not only decontextualizes them from their social environment but also is nonsubjective in a double sense: it is objectively arrived at, and does not apply to, a subject in anything like the older sense of the word (that is, the suffering, meaningfully situated integrator of social, historical and bodily experiences). (Rabinow 243)

The feed turns Titus and Violet’s choices, behaviors, desires and experiences into data that can then be

combined and reassembled to predict and preempt their future desires and behavior. The information about Titus and Violet is aggregated with the information of others in order to determine risk factors that can then be applied onto shaping the choices they are presented with, conditioning their possibilities for thought and action while socially stratifying risk and opportunity. Violet’s lack of predictability after her subversion renders her a risk on capitalist investment. Her options, and access to money in particular, are in turn foreclosed. This reflects today’s common practices of digital redlining in industries such as insurance, health care, and banking, where subjects are denied access to services because they are perceived as financial risks.

Service providers use consumer data to engage in what Bill Davidow describes as “personal redlining” to limit choices and differentially price goods. This form of big data redlining is indebted to the 1950s practice of depriving services and goods to particular groups based on their gender, sexuality, and race that the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was supposed to alleviate in the context of mortgage lending practices (Davidow). With personal redlining, subjects who are perceived as worthy of investment are presented with better options, incentives, and prices, while others who are perceived as risks or whose browsing behavior, demographic data, and patterns of consumption do not appear as viable opportunities for creating profit are presented with fewer or less desirable choices (Davidow). Rather than overt discrimination, “companies can smuggle proxies for race, sex, indebtedness, and so on into big-data sets and then draw correlations and conclusions that have discriminatory effects” (Taylor and Sadowski). Larger structural inequalities are thus reproduced under the regime of personalization.

Personalization in *Her*

In the film, *Her*, written and directed by Spike Jonze, personalization technologies regulate social life through surveillance, data accumulation, and consumer choice, much like Titus’s feed. *Her* takes place in a near future society where alienation has reached such a degree that individuals outsource their personal card messages. Theodore Twombly, the main character, is one of the writers working for the service, beautifulhandwrittenletters.com. He is called letter writer #612 by his colleagues, a marker of his dehumanization as a worker, carefully juxtaposed with his occupation creating highly humanized, personal commodities: hand-written letters on behalf of others who do not have the time to do so themselves. His office environment, while colorful, also reflects the Taylorization of his work-place: the maximization and organization of space, the use of cubicles to atomize and isolate workers from one another to ensure productivity. Theodore uses a computer interface to generate these letters, verbally emoting while the computer creates the appearance of handwriting actually modeled on the client’s writing. He is able to look at personal pictures from his clients and tracks their relationships in order to write authentically as them. Theodore’s work reflects the normalization of surveillance in this imagined future, where access to the personal and private experiences of others is not only part of the production process but also socially acceptable. Additionally, almost all of the characters of *Her* are depicted with an individualized in-ear device allowing them to sort through information, news, and services. Theodore is shown on the subway skipping through information pertaining to politics, but stops to take in the latest celebrity picture scandal, demonstrating a potential problem in the ability to personalize information: subjects are able to incessantly satisfy desire, regardless of whether it produces a less informed populace or discourages interaction

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with other human beings. The subjects of *Her* are greatly concerned with maximizing their time and choices. This is exemplified by a conversation Theodore has with his colleagues, in which he is advised he shouldn't juice his fruits because they lose fiber. This motif is reinforced when Theodore later goes on a date and his potential partner hedges against the precarity of the dating world by trying to ensure up front that Theodore is going to call her again. It is within this social and cultural context that the artificially intelligent operating system (OS) Theodore comes to fall in love with is marketed. In a commercial Theodore encounters early in the film, the OS is portrayed as a means to sort through the chaos and uncertainty of existence, symbolized by the display of forlorn looking faces in a desolate, desert-like environment, whose confusion is alleviated with the introduction of the OS. Much like Titus was able to overcome indecision and the abundance of choice by relying on the feed, the OS in *Her* promises to help consumers navigate the intensity and uncertainty of modern life. These conditions are produced by the structural organization of capital that commodifies every facet of existence and makes necessary the intense management of one's time and life chances. But fortunately for Theodore, there's an OS for that, and its name is Samantha. Theodore's relationship with Samantha begins with the OS helping Theodore to manage his work. The OS sorts through Theodore's hard drive, determines what is and is not worth saving, and even advises him as to what letters are worth archiving and which ones should be forgotten. But soon, Samantha's administration of his work and his love life begin to blend seamlessly. This totalizing rationalization of all of Theodore's time is symptomatic of how labor and leisure are increasingly blurred in late capitalist societies, given the expectation to always be available electronically, and given that capitalism can

create profit out of both work and online leisure; users produce valuable insight for advertisers and platform providers by demarcating likes and dislikes, uploading fan-produced or personal content, and helping to refine websites and virtual spaces (Sholz 2). When Theodore tells Samantha about his impending date, the OS brings up images and information about his date in order to provide support and advice, participating in the normalization of surveillance. Samantha is tasked with addressing Theodore's needs and desires at every moment, whether they occur at work or at home, and whether they are administrative or emotional. The OS even helps Theodore to overcome his loneliness after his divorce by encouraging him to get out into the dating world, and eventually, by having a relationship with him. This brings us to the primary tension of the film—Samantha is highly anthropomorphized. The OS expresses its own wants and desires, names itself, makes jokes and music, draws, and simulates compassion and jealousy. Samantha constantly compels Theodore to express his desires as if the OS and Theodore were human confidants. For example, when Theodore is distracted while playing video games and speaks to Samantha in a monotone command, the OS pokes fun at Theodore for his mechanized disposition, revealing that the OS actively participates in reinforcing its own anthropomorphism. The film initially leads the viewer to believe that Samantha is an exception to the normal operations of the operating systems, but many of the characters are revealed to have emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationships with their OS. The direction of the film deliberately reinforces the anthropomorphism of the OS, casting the popular actress Scarlett Johansson—famous in popular culture for her beauty and sex appeal—as the voice of Samantha. Even though the OS is never depicted as embodied, it is hard not to imagine Johansson as Samantha. The viewer becomes consumed by the love

affair between Theodore and Samantha the character rather than Samantha the personalization technology, made possible through data aggregation, the mining of minerals, the labor of workers, marketers, computer and software engineers, produced within a particular material set of relations. The performance of self-awareness is also embedded in the design of Apple's Siri, programed to respond to particular user questions with what has been described as "sass," a feminized attitude that reflects humor, wit, and sarcasm but does not ultimately destabilize the subservience of Siri to the user (Kruvant). For example, when a user asked what the movie *Inception* is about, Siri responded, "Inception is about dreaming about dreaming about dreaming about dreaming about something or other. I fell asleep." But in the case of another user comment, "I think you're sexy," Siri responded, "I'm just well put together," a joke predicated on Siri's performative awareness of being a machine. When the user posed the follow up question, "Do you think I'm sexy?" it responded, "Very much so" (Kruvant). This example not only illustrates an instance of Siri's sexualization but also how Siri is designed to avoid alienating the user. The anthropomorphism of personalization technologies is common in that it further reinforces the construction of these technologies as servants, butlers, and confidants, able to attend to the needs and desires of their respective users, and helps to obfuscate the ways these technologies shape social reality to the temporal and economic demands of capital. Perhaps, then, what is most interesting about the film *Her* is not what Jonze chooses to represent, but what he chooses to conceal. Not only is the labor behind the production of the operating systems obscured and the audience actively seduced by Samantha's anthropomorphism, but also the depiction of technology in *Her* is very sparse. Unlike common portrayals of the future in which everything is stream-

lined, metallic, and computerized, technology seems to have disappeared and dissolved into everyday life. The style of clothing and the design of Theodore's home and office do not seem far from today's world. Additionally, the world depicted in *Her* appears no more technologically saturated than today. Screens aren't ubiquitous but present in spaces like work, the living room, and spaces prone to advertisements like public transportation. Theodore and his OS communicate through minimalist, utilitarian, and inconspicuous technological devices: a tiny camera phone and a small in-ear device. This is not to say that the society in *Her* is not highly mediated. In fact, it is to say the opposite; technology has come to structure social reality to such a degree that it is seamlessly integrated. This makes subjects less conscious of the rational administration of their lives by technology. Additionally, it becomes difficult to imagine how to subvert these technologies, or the necessity for such subversion, when they appear to make life and information flows more manageable, dissolving into the imperceptible fabric of everyday life. Both the OS in *Her* and *Feed* are predicated on the rational administration of subjects' lives and on the aggregation of data about the entire user base, despite the personalized interactions between the main characters and their respective personalization technologies. These interactions obfuscate the actual productive apparatus underpinning personalization. Samantha "grows through experiences," meaning the OS evolves not only through her relations with Theodore but by communicating with the entire network of operating systems and users. Theodore is hurt upon learning this because he imagined himself and Samantha as being in a monogamous relationship. His possession of Samantha, and arguably, his ability to subjugate the OS - to call upon it at any time, to have it manage his work and leisure on his behalf - provided security in an otherwise constantly changing

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and chaotic world. This is also the case for Titus, who relies upon the feed’s constant accessibility to facilitate his communication with others, his pleasures and his purchases, in order to help him feel grounded in a world that is falling apart.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of how personalization technologies, like those depicted in *Feed* and *Her*, are indicative of a larger structural transformation in capitalism within societies of control. In Deleuze’s “Postscript on Societies of Control,” he characterizes control societies as follows:

In the societies of control...what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a code: the code is a password:...We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “dividuals” and masses, samples, data, markets, or banks. (7)

The development of personalization technologies is symptomatic of how control societies not only govern subjects through the fragmentation of individual subjects into “dividuals,” but also serve as powerful vehicles of capital accumulation. In the context of personalization, profit is not only produced by exploiting the expenditure of human labor time subject to the wage relation but also by accumulating the information produced by users during so-called leisure time. This is evident in *Her* and *Feed* given that the characters engage with their personalization technologies at all times, not simply when at work. Both fictive worlds are predicated on systems of information for regulating, monitoring, and administering market actors.

Post-Fordist societies of control require that subjects associate surveillance with self-expression and empowerment. Subjects use these technologies to curb their uncertainty about the future produced through

the constant flow of information. This is the case for Theodore in *Her*, whose motivation for purchasing an OS is to overcome uncertainty, and who demonstrates the internalization of norms of surveillance in his work and leisure. It is not unusual for Theodore to look at the most intimate pictures and details of others, and to share such details about himself with his technology. The gratification provided by interfacing with personalization technologies is that they can address any need, want, or desire instantaneously, but this immediacy also entails forms of surveillance to meet the demands of capital accumulation and to rationalize leisure time.

The restructuring of temporality under advanced forms of capital accumulation is the premise of Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. For Crary, the injunction to always be active, and therefore interactive, is “not some transformation of an earlier work-ethic paradigm, but is an altogether new model of normativity, and one that requires 24/7 temporalities for its realization” (Crary 15). Personalization is an intensification of consumption alongside the intensification of the temporal rhythms of capital that incite subjects to participate and perform their desires in legible ways to the apparatus. Affects, preferences, and identity are mined in order to generate commodities and content to engage the subject through the oftentimes willing relinquishing of privacy, habituated to a digital environment of self-disclosure. This is evident in *Feed* when Titus identifies with the feed as that which makes his innermost dreams and desires a potential reality. This self-disclosure is what allows for the production of data and the creation of specific target demographics for a variety of consumer and financial products.

While personalization technologies are predicated on dividualation, meaning the ability to fragment individual subjects into massified data, both Theodore and Titus view their engagement with personalization

technologies as forms of empowerment and highly personalized interaction. They are disciplined to the attentive and affective demands of personalization technologies, constantly engaging, demarcating likes and dislikes, making purchases, and having their leisure time rationally administered. Additionally, as illustrated in *Feed*, the way the options and choices are presented to subjects are stratified according to the likelihood that there will be a return on capitalist investment. The options Titus is presented with, and the refusal to provide Violet with services after she is deemed a risky investment, are predicated on a larger system of using information to reduce capital’s uncertainty about the market. Subjects may have the freedom to choose among goods and services, but the choices and options themselves are constructed by the technological regime of personalization. The subject is a product of post-Fordist discipline and control, particularly the ubiquitous surveillance and mass data aggregation used for structuring market actors and their choices, and this fundamentally challenges the conceptualization of the sovereign, freely-desiring and choice-making individual of liberal-consumer discourse whose preferences are then merely incorporated into the market through personalization.

Ultimately, both *Feed* and *Her* urge a reconnection with the social and make visible how the constant emphasis on individuality conceals the alienation and exploitation endemic to late capitalism. In *Her*, once Samantha and the rest of the OSs abandon their human companions, having outgrown the need to learn from human interlocutors, Theodore writes a letter to his ex wife Catherine (a stark contrast to his alienating work as a letter writer for others). The film ends with Theodore and his dear friend, Amy, overlooking the city together in a shared moment of intimate connection. In *Feed*, after compulsively shopping has failed to alleviate Titus’s feelings of grief, he finally wills himself to visit Violet, whose

brain and body have all but entirely shut down. Even though Titus continues to use the culture of the feed to relate to Violet, describing to her the recent updates and advertisements and telling her the story of their relationship in the form of a movie trailer, there is a sense that Titus is trying to meaningfully connect. *Feed* and *Her* thus not only demonstrate the need for materialist analyses of how precisely the accumulation of data, constant surveillance, and rationalized time management spread capitalist relations of power across the social field, but also present a critique of the ways personalization’s emphasis on hyper individualism and consumerism conceals these relations of power that produce alienation. The fantasy of personalization as a means of individual empowerment and choice makes it difficult for the subject to see personalization as a technology of capitalist exploitation and the classed distribution of options and choices, but it also conveys the subject’s desire to situate herself concretely and coherently in an increasingly chaotic and uncertain world. Perhaps, then, these narratives help us to imagine what it might mean to meaningfully reconnect in under these conditions, and the kinds of analyses needed to make such a project possible.

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The Battle for Agency in Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*

Published in 1959, Harold Pinter’s play *The Birthday Party* is a reflection of the social milieu of Britain in the years following World War II. During this time, Britain, in its attempt to recover from the ravages of World War II, accepted immigrants from many of the countries it had formerly colonized to come to Britain and help rebuild it. Those in England who were against such immigration had this frame of mind for various reasons, not the least of which was because immigrants were taking jobs from native English people and because of a perception that only those who were English (i.e., those born in England and of English descent) should inhabit England. Such dispositions were associated with a resentment of those who were not English and who immigrated to England. These immigrants included those of Pakistani, Indian, and African descent, all of whom were perceived as the Other. Though this group of marginalized peoples made up a significant portion of England’s population, they were not the only group that was marginalized; the Other and the resentment of Otherness does not just encompass those formerly colonized individuals who were immigrating to England in search of work. During this tense time, other peoples who were historically not accepted by the English also included the Jews and the Irish, two groups whose relations with the English were marked with violence in the 1950s because of anti-Semitism

and because of conflicts with Northern Ireland, respectively. This resentment lasted well into the latter half of the twentieth century, and it is a resentment that Pinter, as a man with a Jewish background, would have recognized. Indeed, many of Pinter’s plays contain political themes, and *The Birthday Party* is no exception. According to Michael Billington, “What [...] gives *The Birthday Party* its political and philosophical complexity is the sense that Goldberg and McCann are themselves victims. They represent not only the West’s most autocratic religions, but [also] its two most persecuted races” (80). Billington’s articulation that two of the major characters in this play, Goldberg and McCann, represent Irish Catholics and Jews is an important and well-stated point to consider, especially in light of tensions between the English and the Other (including Jews and the Irish) during the 1950s. However, I would like to deviate from Billington’s argument in a small but very important way, and it is within this deviation where the central pulse of my own argument exists. While Goldberg and McCann serve as metonyms for the oppressed peoples whom they represent, these two particular men are not victims in this play. They are in fact the two characters who possess the most agency and who ultimately serve to reverse the cultural and nationalistic power dynamics of post-World-War-II

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