



The Political Economy of Instrumentarian Power: Surveillance Capitalism and Posthuman Subjectivity in Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House*

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Abstract

This article offers a condensed critical reading of Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022), examining how the novel's speculative technology of memory-externalisation, *Own Your Unconscious*, dramatises the mechanisms that Shoshana Zuboff (2019) theorises as surveillance capitalism. Reading the novel alongside Zuboff's account of behavioural surplus, prediction products, and instrumentarian power, and alongside Rosi Braidotti's (2013) posthumanism and Karen Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action, the article argues that Egan's text stages a productive but strained analogy between corporate data extraction and a fictional platform whose users volunteer their memories in pursuit of communal transparency. This voluntariness, the article contends, is not incidental to the novel's design but is also the analogy's chief theoretical liability: it allows Egan to dramatise the affective and existential stakes of datafication with unusual intimacy, while risking a softened picture of a phenomenon whose real-world force depends on asymmetry, opacity, and non-consent. The analysis traces this tension across the novel's interlocking narratives, arguing that Egan's formal fragmentation - rather than any single character's fate - constitutes the text's most persuasive argument about distributed, posthuman subjectivity under conditions of pervasive datafication. The article closes by weighing what this reading contributes to, and where it strains against, existing scholarship on surveillance fiction and critical posthumanism.

Keywords: Surveillance capitalism, behavioural surplus, instrumentarian power, posthuman subjectivity, intra-action, Jennifer Egan



Introduction

Ubiquitous data collection is no longer an occasional intrusion into private life; it is the ambient condition of it. Search engines, wearables, social platforms, and the smart infrastructure of contemporary cities have converted ordinary conduct into a continuously harvested resource, from which corporations derive not just advertising revenue but increasingly precise forecasts - and increasingly subtle levers - of future behaviour. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) named this arrangement surveillance capitalism, and her account has become one of the most widely cited frameworks for understanding how digital platforms convert experience into "behavioural surplus," process that surplus into "prediction products," and trade those products in what she calls "behavioural futures markets." For Zuboff, the endpoint of this logic is not merely economic extraction but a new modality of power, instrumentarianism, which governs not by persuasion or coercion but by the continuous, often invisible shaping of the environments in which people act.

Literary fiction has been quick to register this transformation, and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022) is among its most ambitious treatments. The novel imagines a technology, *Own Your Unconscious*, that allows its users to upload the totality of their memories to a shared archive, the *Collective Consciousness*, in exchange for access to the anonymised memories of everyone else who has done the same. The title borrows from the Brothers Grimm: like the confectionery house that lures Hansel and Gretel to a cannibal witch, *Own Your Unconscious* offers a seductive surface - radical self-knowledge, communal transparency, the end of loneliness - that conceals a predatory architecture underneath. This is a resonant image for surveillance capitalism, which likewise markets itself in the language of convenience and connection while installing what Zuboff calls an extraction imperative at the centre of everyday life.

This article argues that Egan's novel deserves to be read against Zuboff's framework with more analytical precision than existing commentary has generally supplied, and it supplements that framework with Rosi Braidotti's (2013) critical posthumanism and Karen Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action in order to ask not only how the novel represents extraction, but what kind of subject the novel imagines emerging from it. At the same time, the article treats the novel's central conceit - that people volunteer their memories, rather than having them silently harvested - as a fact requiring scrutiny rather than a detail to be assimilated smoothly into Zuboff's account. Real surveillance capitalism depends on the concealment of its own operations; Egan's platform is, at least nominally, opt-in and transparent about the trade it offers. That difference matters, and much of what follows tries to take it seriously rather than explain it away.

Research Objectives

Core Objective

To analyse how surveillance capitalism operates as a systemic regime of datafication that reconfigures subjectivity into posthuman formations within digitally mediated environments.

Supporting Objective 1:

To examine the mechanisms of behavioural surplus extraction, predictive computation, and instrumentarian power in structuring memory, identity, and agency.

Supporting Objective 2:

To investigate the ontological status of data as agential and relational matter, and the emergence of immanent resistance within surveillance architectures.



Research Questions

Core Research Question:

How does surveillance capitalism function as a data-driven regime that produces posthuman subjectivity within contemporary digital systems?

Supporting Research Question 1:

What mechanisms of behavioural extraction and predictive governance shape the transformation of memory, identity, and agency?

Supporting Research Question 2:

In what ways does data operate as an agential force, and how do forms of resistance emerge within the immanent structures of surveillance capitalism?

Literature Review

Scholarship on datafication, surveillance, and literary subjectivity has developed largely along three separate tracks, and each has something to offer this reading while also leaving a gap that the present article tries to close.

The first track, surveillance studies proper, has produced a rich body of work on the institutional and economic structures of digital monitoring. David Lyon's (2018) account of the "culture of surveillance" traces how watching has become a normalised, even desired, feature of social life, while Zuboff (2019) supplies the most systematic theorisation of its economic logic: the extraction imperative that renders human experience as free raw material, the rendering process that translates lived experience into machine-readable data, and the instrumentarian power that results once behavioural prediction becomes precise enough to nudge, rather than merely anticipate, human conduct. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) extend this account by framing datafication as a new phase of colonial appropriation, in which human life itself becomes the raw material of accumulation. Evgeny Morozov (2013) and Mark Andrejevic (2019) add complementary warnings about the political costs of algorithmic governance and automated media. Within this literature, however, the subject of surveillance is consistently cast as an object acted upon - watched, sorted, nudged - rather than as an entity whose very ontology is reconstituted by its entanglement with the apparatus. Surveillance studies, in short, is very good at describing power and comparatively thin on subjectivity.

The second track, critical posthumanism, supplies exactly what the first lacks. N. Katherine Hayles's (1999) history of cybernetics and embodiment showed how the liberal humanist subject was always a historically specific fiction, vulnerable to displacement once information and embodiment could be theoretically decoupled. Cary Wolfe (2010) pressed this further with a systems-theoretical critique of humanism itself, and Braidotti (2013) offered the most influential recent synthesis: a "posthuman" subject constituted through continuous, relational becoming, characterised by post-anthropocentrism (the refusal to place the human at the centre of ethical and ontological value) and by an affirmative ethics that reframes agency as creative participation in, rather than sovereign resistance to, the assemblages one is part of. This body of work, however, has largely theorised posthuman subjectivity as a cultural or philosophical condition, with comparatively little sustained attention to the specific economic architecture - Zuboff's instrumentarian power - through which today's most consequential form of datafication actually operates. Where surveillance studies under-theorise the subject, posthumanism under-theorises the machine that produces it.



The third track, new materialism, offers a bridge between the two, though one that has been under-used in surveillance fiction scholarship. Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism proposes that entities do not pre-exist their relations but are constituted through what she calls intra-action: phenomena, including subjects, emerge from within relations rather than entering into them from without. Jane Bennett's (2010) related notion of "thing-power" attributes a low-grade agency to nonhuman things, while Stacy Alaimo's (2010) transcorporeality theorises bodies as permeable, continuously in exchange with their material environment. Applied to data, these ideas suggest that behavioural surplus is not simply extracted from a pre-existing self but is one of the processes through which that self comes to exist in its current, digitally mediated form. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's (2010) edited volume and Manuel DeLanda's (2006) assemblage theory supply the broader philosophical scaffolding for this claim, and Peter Rekret (2018) offers a useful sceptical counterpoint, warning that new materialism can flatten political specificity by attributing agency so widely that responsibility becomes difficult to locate - a caution this article keeps in view rather than sets aside.

Recent work specifically on *The Candy House* and adjacent digital fiction has begun to draw these strands together, if unevenly. Kelly Johnston (2023) reads contemporary American fiction's obsession with "profiles" as a register of anxieties about the data self, while Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga (2024) situates Egan's novel within a wider corpus of "do-it-yourself dystopia," in which characters build the surveillance structures that later confine them. Carmen Laguarda-Bueno (2024) explores how digital fiction can normalise a utopian vocabulary around data-sharing even as it depicts its costs, a tension close to the one this article develops around *Own Your Unconscious's* voluntary uptake. Pablo Gamez's (2025) *Posthumanism Meets Surveillance Capitalism* is the most direct precedent for the present synthesis, though its treatment tends toward the accelerationist - reading datafied subjectivity as a dissolution of the self to be affirmed almost without qualification - a conclusion this article resists. None of this scholarship, to date, has combined Zuboff's political economy with Braidotti's ontology and Barad's intra-action in a sustained reading of Egan's specific narrative architecture, nor has it treated the novel's voluntariness conceit as a problem for the surveillance-capitalism analogy rather than an incidental plot device. That is the gap this article addresses, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic-analysis logic - identifying and testing recurring patterns across the text rather than building an argument from a single scene - as an implicit method of textual organisation.

It is worth pausing on why this gap has persisted, because the reasons are instructive rather than accidental. Surveillance studies scholarship, Lyon's (2018) and Zuboff's (2019) work included, is disciplinarily oriented toward institutions, markets, and infrastructures; its explanatory unit is the system, and the individual appears within that system chiefly as a data point or a statistical aggregate. This orientation produces powerful diagnoses of how power operates at scale but comparatively little interest in the fine-grained phenomenology of what it feels like to live inside such a system - which is, of course, precisely the terrain literary fiction is best equipped to explore. Conversely, posthumanist literary criticism, working in the tradition Hayles (1999) and Wolfe (2010) established, is disciplinarily oriented toward ontology and representation; its explanatory unit is the subject or the sign, and economic structure tends to enter only as background context rather than as a determining force with its own internal logic. Braidotti (2013) is unusually alert to material and economic conditions for a philosopher working in this tradition, yet even her account



of the posthuman tends to treat "advanced capitalism" as a general historical backdrop rather than to specify, as Zuboff does, the particular extractive mechanisms through which that backdrop currently operates. The result, across both fields, is a persistent asymmetry: rich accounts of systems without subjects, and rich accounts of subjects without the specific systems that produce them in their current form.

New materialism has been positioned, by its own proponents and by critics such as Rekret (2018), as the natural mediator of this asymmetry, since its central claim - that agency is distributed across human and nonhuman actants rather than concentrated in a sovereign human subject - seems tailor-made to describe a world in which algorithms, servers, and data structures visibly co-author human outcomes. Yet the mediation this literature offers is more fragile than its confidence suggests. Rekret's (2018) objection is directed at new materialism's tendency to describe relations of force in a vocabulary - vibrancy, entanglement, intra-action - that is agnostic about whether those relations are exploitative, and this agnosticism is exactly what makes new materialist vocabulary so portable across readings of very different scenes: the same terms that illuminate a person's creative collaboration with a musical instrument can just as easily be redeployed to describe a person's exploitation by an extractive algorithm, without the vocabulary itself registering the difference. A rigorous use of Barad (2007), Bennett (2010), and Alaimo (2010) in surveillance fiction criticism therefore has to supply, from outside the new materialist vocabulary itself, some account of when entanglement is coercive and when it is not - an account this article attempts to build from Zuboff's more politically specific categories of consent, concealment, and asymmetry, rather than assuming new materialism can generate that distinction on its own terms.

Finally, it is worth noting a methodological pattern visible across much of the existing scholarship on Egan's novel and on comparable digital fiction more broadly: a tendency toward what might be called theoretical over-determination, in which a fixed set of concepts is applied with only minor variation to each new textual instance, producing readings that are internally consistent but increasingly predictable. Johnston (2023), Terentowicz-Fotyga (2024), and Laguarta-Bueno (2024) each avoid this to some degree by keeping their theoretical commitments comparatively light and their attention to textual and generic specificity comparatively heavy; Gamez (2025), by contrast, deploys a fuller theoretical apparatus but with less resistance to its own conclusions. The present article deliberately adopts the fuller apparatus - because the density of Egan's engagement with datafication rewards it - while trying to avoid Gamez's tendency to let the apparatus pre-decide its verdicts before the text has been allowed to complicate them.

Methodology

The method here is close reading conducted in deliberate dialogue with theory, rather than theory illustrated by convenient quotation. Three procedural commitments follow from that choice. First, each narrative strand discussed below is treated as a distinct case rather than as one more confirmation of a thesis settled in advance; where the theoretical apparatus produces the same reading regardless of the material it is applied to, that repetition is treated as a finding about the apparatus, not simply as evidence of the novel's coherence. Second, the analysis works across three scales, borrowed loosely from thematic-analysis practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006): a macro level attentive to the novel's representation of Own Your Unconscious as an economic and infrastructural system; a meso level attentive to how individual characters and the novel's polyphonic narration



construct subjectivity in relation to that system; and a micro level attentive to formal and stylistic choices - second-person address, epistolary fragmentation, temporal discontinuity - that carry argumentative weight independent of plot. Third, and most importantly for the critical ambitions of this article, the reading treats the analogy between Egan's fictional platform and actually existing surveillance capitalism as an open question rather than a settled premise, testing at each stage whether the novel's voluntary, disclosed model of data-sharing supports or complicates Zuboff's account of covert, non-consensual extraction. This is a qualitative, single-text study; its warrant lies in interpretive coherence and argumentative precision rather than in generalisation across a corpus, and its scope is deliberately narrow enough to allow the friction between theory and text - rather than their fit - to become visible.

Theoretical Framework

Three bodies of theory anchor this reading, each doing different work. Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism supplies the political-economic vocabulary: the extraction imperative describes the drive to appropriate experience as raw material regardless of consent; behavioural surplus names the data left over once a service has been rendered, and which exceeds what is required to provide that service; prediction products are the commodities fabricated from this surplus and sold in behavioural futures markets; the Big Other names the ubiquitous, largely invisible computational infrastructure that makes this extraction and prediction possible at scale; and instrumentarian power names the resulting mode of governance, which operates not by commanding or persuading but by continuously modifying the "choice architecture" within which people act. It is worth stressing, against a common simplification, that instrumentarian power for Zuboff depends on asymmetry of knowledge and on the concealment of its own mechanisms - features that Egan's novel complicates by making its platform's terms unusually explicit.

Braidotti's (2013) posthumanism supplies the ontological vocabulary needed to describe what kind of subject persists, or emerges, under these conditions. Her notion of radical immanence denies the subject any position outside the material and relational networks that constitute it; her post-anthropocentrism refuses to grant the human a privileged ethical or ontological status over technological and nonhuman actors; and her concept of the subject as continuously "becoming" reframes identity as a process rather than a possession. Crucially, her affirmative ethics treats this condition not as loss but as an occasion for creative, relational agency - a move that will need to be tested rather than simply adopted, since it risks reframing every form of entanglement, however coercive, as an opportunity for affirmation.

Barad's (2007) intra-action supplies the connective tissue between the other two. Where "interaction" presumes two pre-existing entities that subsequently meet, "intra-action" holds that entities - including human subjects and the data said to represent them - emerge together, within the same relational process. Applied to *Own Your Unconscious*, this suggests that the memories uploaded to the Collective Consciousness are not simply pre-formed private possessions later expropriated by an external system; they are, in part, constituted as the kind of shareable, tradeable "memory" they become only through their entry into the platform's data architecture. Bennett's (2010) thing-power and Alaimo's (2010) transcorporeality, used more sparingly, add texture to this claim by suggesting that the resulting data retains an unpredictable, excessive quality that resists full capture by the predictive systems built from it.



Held together, these frameworks let the analysis ask a question that any one of them alone would struggle to pose: not simply "how does the novel represent data extraction," and not simply "how does the novel represent a decentred subject," but how the specific economic mechanism of extraction and the specific ontological condition of posthuman becoming are made to depend on one another within the novel's plot - and where that dependence breaks down.

Analysis

The Invention of Extraction: The Affinity Charm

The novel's opening movement introduces Bix Bouton, whose founding insight - drawn from an evening spent among academics whose combined knowledge exceeds what any one of them holds alone - becomes the conceptual seed of Own Your Unconscious. Read through Zuboff's vocabulary, the platform's founding proposition performs a precise ideological inversion. It is marketed as a technology of self-possession: users "own" their unconscious by digitising and sharing it. But the actual operation, once the Collective Consciousness begins to aggregate uploaded memories at scale, is closer to the reverse. The behavioural surplus generated by each user's memory-upload exceeds anything returned to them in the form of self-knowledge, and it is this excess - not the advertised exchange of memory for memory - that constitutes the platform's real commercial asset. Bix's company, Mandala, does not need to lie about what the platform does; it only needs the platform's genuine benefits to obscure the more consequential process of extraction running underneath them. This is Zuboff's rendering process staged as origin myth: lived experience translated into a form legible to computation, with the translation itself passed off as a gift.

The scene's dinner-party setting is not incidental. Egan places the birth of an extraction technology within a scene of ordinary sociability - academic gossip, mutual curiosity, the pleasurable discovery of unexpected intellectual overlap - rather than within a corporate boardroom or research lab. This choice does real argumentative work: it suggests that the impulse behind Own Your Unconscious is continuous with, rather than opposed to, the everyday human desire for connection and mutual recognition that Zuboff's account sometimes risks treating as merely instrumentalised by surveillance capitalism rather than as the very substance the system feeds on. Bix does not set out to build an extraction architecture; he sets out to solve the ordinary, sympathetic problem of how much is lost when a room full of interesting people cannot pool what they collectively know. The novel's critical intelligence lies in showing how quickly and seamlessly that sympathetic problem becomes indistinguishable, at scale, from an extractive one - a transition Zuboff (2019) describes at the level of the corporation but that Egan renders, more disquietingly, at the level of a single conversation between friends.

Braidotti's posthumanism complicates any straightforwardly dystopian reading of this scene. The humanist assumption that memory is properly private, and that its digitisation therefore constitutes a violation, is precisely the assumption Bix's founding insight exposes as already untenable: the dinner-party epiphany that memory only becomes valuable in combination with others' memories suggests that individual recollection was never as sovereign or self-contained as humanist common sense supposes. Read this way, the novel does not simply narrate the corruption of a previously intact private self; it stages, more unsettlingly, the discovery that no such self was fully intact to begin with, and that this discovery is what makes the platform's appeal possible. Barad's



intra-action names the mechanism at work here with more precision than either dystopian or celebratory readings allow: the Collective Consciousness does not passively store memories that already existed in finished form; the act of uploading is one of the processes through which "a memory," in the platform's technical and commercial sense, comes into being.

Yet this is exactly where the analogy to actual surveillance capitalism begins to strain. Zuboff's account depends on the claim that users do not, and structurally cannot, meaningfully consent to the terms of their own extraction, because those terms are deliberately obscured, buried in unread agreements, and constantly revised. Bix's platform, at least as the novel presents its founding logic, promises something closer to full disclosure: memory for memory, on visible terms. The novel's critique, in other words, cannot simply be that people did not know what they were agreeing to. It has to be a subtler claim - that even full disclosure does not neutralise the asymmetry, because the aggregate value created by millions of individually "informed" exchanges is not something any individual user could have consented to on their own behalf. That is a more interesting and more defensible argument than a straightforward transposition of Zuboff's model, but it is one the novel makes only implicitly, and one that existing scholarship on the text has largely left unexamined.

Voluntary Surrender: Alfred, Miles, and the Counter-Profile

The novel's second movement, following Alfred and Miles, dramatises what happens once ordinary people - rather than the technology's inventor - actually use the platform, and it is here that Zuboff's concept of economies of scope becomes most useful. Zuboff (2019) argues that surveillance capitalists are driven by competitive pressure to extend their extraction operations from the observable surface of behaviour into its affective and unconscious interior; Alfred's decision to upload the totality of his memories, including those bound up with his most intimate relationships, enacts exactly this extension within the novel's fiction. The resulting prediction products - forecasts not merely of what Alfred will do but of what he will feel and want - represent a qualitative escalation beyond behavioural observation into the modelling of subjectivity itself.

Miles's narrative sharpens this point by introducing the "counter": a user who discovers that the platform has generated a predictive profile of him that he himself cannot access. This is Zuboff's asymmetry of knowledge dramatised at its most personal, and it is worth noting how effectively it captures something true about actually existing platforms - the profiling, inference, and third-party data-sharing that occurs beneath a user interface that shows only a fraction of what is known about them. Instrumentarian power, on this reading, operates not by coercing Miles but by redeploying his own surrendered memories as the raw material of his own behavioural modification, so that his interiority becomes the most efficient instrument of its own capture.

What makes Alfred and Miles worth reading together, rather than as interchangeable illustrations of the same mechanism, is the different relationship each has to knowledge of his own capture. Alfred uploads in something close to good faith, trusting the platform's promise of reciprocity; his arc is therefore a story about the slow, retrospective discovery that reciprocity was never quite what it seemed. Miles, by contrast, is confronted directly with the artefact of his own datafication - the counter-profile - and has to decide how to live with the knowledge that a version of him now exists that he cannot inspect or revise. The difference matters because it maps onto a distinction Zuboff



(2019) draws but that flattened readings of her work sometimes lose: between the harm of extraction as such and the harm of asymmetric knowledge about extraction. Alfred's story is primarily about the first; Miles's is primarily about the second. Reading them together, rather than folding both into a single "case of instrumentarian power," makes visible that Egan is not simply restating Zuboff's thesis but disaggregating it into component harms that a less careful reading would leave merged.

Braidotti's affirmative ethics is tested rather than confirmed by this material. It is one thing to say that Miles's entanglement with the Collective Consciousness demonstrates that identity was always relational and processual rather than sovereign; it is another to say that discovering an inaccessible predictive profile of oneself is therefore an occasion for creative affirmation rather than a straightforward loss of control that deserves to be named as such. The novel itself seems ambivalent here, and a genuinely critical reading should register that ambivalence rather than resolve it in the direction the theory prefers. Barad's intra-action remains useful for describing how the counter-profile comes into being - as a phenomenon co-produced by Miles's memories, Mandala's algorithms, and the platform's relational architecture, rather than a simple copy of a pre-existing self - but this descriptive precision does not, by itself, settle whether the arrangement it describes is good, bad, or genuinely ambivalent for the people living inside it. The temptation of new-materialist vocabulary, flagged earlier via Rekret's (2018) critique, is to let ontological sophistication substitute for a moral or political verdict the text is actually inviting us to reach.

Desire, Grief, and the Limits of Prediction

The novel's middle and later movements - Lincoln's paralysing awareness that his own longing has already been modelled by the platform, Roxy's experience of her poetry being rendered as data, and Gregory's grief for Bix processed as a source of behavioural surplus - extend the extraction logic into progressively more intimate registers: desire, aesthetic creation, and mourning. Zuboff's framework again supplies the clearest diagnostic vocabulary. Each case represents an instance of what she calls the extension of extraction beyond observable conduct into the "desiderative" and affective structures that generate conduct in the first place, and each intensifies the qualitative shift from behavioural observation to behavioural modification: Lincoln does not merely have his wants recorded, he finds his experience of wanting itself contaminated by the knowledge that it has already been anticipated.

Roxy's chapter extends this into the domain of aesthetic production specifically, and it deserves attention in its own right rather than as a mere variant of Lincoln's predicament. Her poetry, processed as data within the Collective Consciousness's aggregative architecture, undergoes what Zuboff (2019) calls rendering at its most reductive: the translation of an irreducibly particular act of creative expression into a data point comparable across millions of other users' outputs. What makes this rendering unsettling is not that Roxy's poems are stolen in any straightforward sense - she has, after all, agreed to share them - but that the platform's comparative, aggregative logic is structurally incapable of registering what makes a poem singular rather than merely one instance of a genre. This is a more precise complaint than the generic charge that "surveillance flattens individuality"; it identifies exactly which feature of aesthetic experience - its resistance to comparison - is incompatible with the commensuration logic that behavioural-surplus extraction requires in order to function as a market. Read this way, Roxy's narrative offers the clearest instance in the novel of a genuine, structural incompatibility between what a



person values about their own creative life and what an extraction architecture can process, rather than a merely contingent conflict that better design or more transparent terms could resolve.

Gregory's grief is the most affectively charged instance and deserves particular scrutiny, because it is here that the novel's critique of extraction is at its sharpest and its use of new-materialist vocabulary at its most vulnerable to overreach. Zuboff's account would treat Gregory's mourning as a site of unusually rich behavioural surplus - disrupted routines, intensified relational investment, heightened vulnerability, all of it newly legible to Mandala's algorithms. Braidotti's radical immanence reframes this same grief as a generative rather than purely negative force, a claim the novel's ending partly supports by having Gregory's mourning issue in renewed creative and relational engagement rather than paralysis. But it would be too quick to conclude, as some accelerationist-leaning readings do, that this creative aftermath simply cancels out or redeems the extractive process that fed on Gregory's vulnerability while it was happening. A genuinely critical reading has to hold both claims at once: that something in Gregory's grief exceeds what the platform's prediction products can capture, and that this excess does not retroactively make the capture unobjectionable. Barad's intra-action, Bennett's thing-power, and Alaimo's transcorporeality are each useful here for naming the excess - the way archived memories of the dead continue to affect the living in ways no algorithm anticipated, the way the boundary between mourning self and archived other becomes genuinely porous - but their cumulative effect across the novel's many parallel deployments starts to feel less like precision and more like a formula, applied with only minor variation to whichever character's chapter is under discussion. That repetition is itself worth noting as a limitation of the theoretical apparatus as commonly used in this branch of scholarship: five thinkers pressed into service for every scene risk producing readings that are theoretically consistent but insufficiently responsive to what is actually distinct about each character's situation.

Self-Implication: See Below, Middle Son, and the Novel's Formal Reckoning

The novel's most theoretically interesting manoeuvre occurs in its formal experiments. "See Below" is composed entirely of emails exchanged across decades among an interlocking cast of characters, a structure that performs, rather than merely describes, the extraction apparatus it depicts: the correspondence is simultaneously intimate communication and harvestable data, and the chapter's very readability depends on the reader accepting an aggregated, decontextualised view of private lives that mimics the platform's own operation. "Middle Son," meanwhile, shifts into second-person narration, positioning the reader as the direct object of the address in a way that implicates the act of reading itself in the extraction logic the novel critiques - the reader's attention, interpretation, and affective response become, for the duration of the chapter, exactly the kind of behavioural surplus Zuboff describes elsewhere as economic raw material, even though no actual platform is harvesting it.

This formal strategy also clarifies something the plot-level allegory leaves ambiguous: whether the novel's critique targets Own Your Unconscious specifically, or a broader condition of mediated attention of which the fictional platform is only one instance. "See Below," built entirely from decades of email correspondence, works because readers already know, from their own experience, how to read an inbox comparatively - scanning for pattern, inferring relationship history from tone and frequency, aggregating scattered fragments into a coherent narrative of other people's lives. Egan does not need to



invent a fictional surveillance technology to make this point; she needs only to arrange real, familiar communicative debris in a way that exposes how readily it yields to exactly the kind of pattern-extraction Zuboff (2019) associates with commercial platforms. The chapter's argument, in other words, is that the infrastructure of extraction is not confined to Mandala's servers - it is latent in ordinary correspondence and ordinary reading practices, waiting only for someone, or something, to organise it at scale.

This is a more compelling argument for the novel's critical seriousness than any single character's storyline, because it locates the critique of surveillance capitalism in the reading experience rather than in the fate of a particular protagonist, and it does so without requiring the reader to accept the strained premise that fully disclosed, voluntary data-sharing is equivalent to covert corporate extraction. The formal self-implication does not depend on the novel's fictional platform being a perfect analogue for real surveillance capitalism; it depends only on the reader recognising their own aggregable, patterned attention as something a text - any text, not only a digital platform - can organise and exploit. In this respect, Egan's formal strategy succeeds where her plot-level allegory is more vulnerable: it makes the reader complicit rather than simply informed, which is a stronger and more honest demonstration of distributed, posthuman subjectivity than any thematic statement the novel could make about its characters.

The final chapter's return to an aged, retrospective Bix closes the novel's arc without resolving its central tension. Bix recognises that *Own Your Unconscious* has produced consequences - forms of connection, creative renewal, and communal memory - that exceed anything his original extractive design intended or can fully monetise. Read generously, this is the novel's argument for what this article has been calling immanent resistance: that no extraction architecture, however comprehensive, exhausts the human material it processes. Read more sceptically, it risks functioning as a reassurance that lets both the fictional platform and, by extension, its real-world referents off the hook, implying that surplus vitality will always outrun the system that feeds on it. The novel earns the right to end on this note more than academic readings of it have generally earned the right to repeat it uncritically, because Egan surrounds Bix's late-life recognition with enough surrounding loss, exploitation, and diminished agency among other characters that the reassurance reads as partial and hard-won rather than as an alibi. Criticism that borrows this note without reproducing that surrounding cost risks converting a carefully qualified fictional resolution into an unqualified theoretical claim.

Discussion

Reading these narrative movements together rather than in isolation reveals a pattern that no single case study makes fully visible on its own: the novel's extraction logic intensifies along a discernible axis, moving from the systemic (the platform's invention), through the interpersonal (Alfred and Miles's voluntary surrender), into the affective and creative (Lincoln, Roxy, and Gregory), before culminating in the formal (the reader's own implication in "See Below" and "Middle Son"). This progression matters because it mirrors, with unusual narrative discipline, Zuboff's (2019) own account of how surveillance capitalism's "economies of scope" and "economies of action" drive extraction ever further from observable behaviour and ever closer to the generative structures - desire, creativity, grief, attention - from which behaviour originates. Egan's novel, in other words, does not merely illustrate Zuboff's theory at a single point; it dramatises the theory's own claim about escalation as a structural feature of its plot.



At the same time, tracking this progression exposes what is genuinely new about the novel's contribution rather than merely borrowed from surveillance-capitalism theory. Zuboff's account, for all its analytical power, has comparatively little to say about what becomes of the people living inside an instrumentarian system once the system's operations are made visible to them - her interest lies chiefly in diagnosing the mechanism, not in narrating its lived aftermath. Egan's novel supplies precisely this missing aftermath, and it does so, importantly, without settling on a single verdict about whether that aftermath is tragic, redemptive, or simply ambiguous. Bix's late recognition of his platform's unintended consequences, Gregory's grief issuing in renewed creativity, Miles's uneasy cohabitation with his own counter-profile - none of these is offered as the novel's final word on data subjectivity, and a synthesis that tried to extract one would misrepresent the text's actual disposition, which is closer to sustained ambivalence than to either dystopian foreclosure or posthuman celebration.

This ambivalence is also where Braidotti's (2013) and Barad's (2007) frameworks earn their keep most convincingly, and where they are most likely to be misapplied. Used well, they explain why the novel refuses a single verdict: if subjectivity really is continuously co-constituted through intra-action with technological and relational others, then no single moment of extraction can be either wholly redemptive or wholly ruinous, because the subject undergoing it is not a fixed entity capable of being simply preserved or simply destroyed. Used carelessly, however, the same frameworks can be pressed into service to manufacture false comfort - to suggest that because subjectivity is always already entangled, no particular entanglement need be evaluated on its own terms. The discussion above has tried to use these frameworks in the first sense while remaining alert to their capacity to slide into the second, and the following section makes that alertness explicit.

Critical Evaluation

Taken together, the preceding readings suggest that *The Candy House* is best understood not as a simple allegory of surveillance capitalism but as a text that uses the fictional device of voluntary, disclosed data-sharing to ask a harder question than Zuboff's framework poses on its own: what happens to consent, and to selfhood, once full disclosure no longer functions as a meaningful safeguard? This is a genuine contribution, and it is one that existing scholarship on the novel - including the accelerationist reading offered by Gamez (2025) and the more descriptive accounts offered by Johnston (2023) and Terentowicz-Fotyga (2024) - has not fully drawn out, tending instead to treat the novel's technology as a straightforward stand-in for existing platforms.

That contribution comes with real costs, three of which deserve to be stated plainly rather than folded into celebratory conclusions. First, the analogy between *Own Your Unconscious* and actual surveillance capitalism is weaker than most readings, including earlier drafts of this one, are inclined to admit: Zuboff's concept depends on concealment and structural non-consent in ways the novel's premise does not straightforwardly reproduce, and criticism should say so rather than paper over the gap with theoretical vocabulary borrowed wholesale from her account. Second, the five-thinker apparatus assembled here - Zuboff, Braidotti, Barad, Bennett, and Alaimo - has an unmistakable tendency, visible across this and comparable readings, to generate the same interpretive moves regardless of which character or scene is under discussion: extraction identified, humanist assumption exposed, intra-active co-constitution asserted, agential excess located, permeable boundary declared. When a theoretical apparatus produces structurally



identical conclusions from structurally different material, that is a sign the apparatus is doing more of the interpretive work than the text itself, and a genuinely critical reading has to flag this rather than mistake repetition for rigor. Third, Braidotti's affirmative ethics, while a valuable corrective to purely dystopian readings, can tip into a kind of theoretical optimism that risks affirming entanglement as such, regardless of whether the specific entanglement in question is coercive, exploitative, or freely chosen - a risk this article has tried to resist by treating each character's relationship to the platform as a distinct case rather than a further instance of a single, already-decided verdict.

None of this means the synthesis attempted here fails. It means the synthesis is most persuasive not where it maps theory onto plot with the greatest fluency, but where it registers friction - the places where Egan's fiction and Zuboff's political economy pull against one another, and where Braidotti's affirmative ethics has to be tested against, rather than simply applied to, scenes of loss and diminished agency. The novel's formal self-implication in "See Below" and "Middle Son" remains the strongest evidence for the article's central claim, precisely because it does not depend on resolving the consent problem that troubles the plot-level allegory.

These limitations point toward a broader methodological lesson for surveillance-fiction scholarship rather than a verdict specific to this novel alone. The temptation to build a fixed, five-part theoretical apparatus and apply it uniformly across a text's every scene is understandable - it produces readings that look comprehensive and internally consistent - but it also risks converting literary criticism into a demonstration of theoretical competence rather than an actual encounter with a text's particularity. The more defensible practice, and the one this article has tried to model, is to let the same theoretical vocabulary produce different results in different scenes, and to treat those differences - rather than the underlying consistency of the vocabulary - as the primary object of interest. Where Alfred's story yields a relatively clean application of Zuboff's extraction imperative, Roxy's yields a sharper, more specific claim about the incommensurability of aesthetic value and data-commensuration, and Gregory's yields an outright tension between the excess that new materialism identifies and the exploitation that ethical judgment still has to name. A scholarship that flattens these differences in the name of theoretical coherence loses exactly the texture that makes Egan's novel worth reading closely in the first place.

Conclusion

Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* stages the extraction, prediction, and behavioural modification that Zuboff (2019) associates with surveillance capitalism with unusual intimacy and formal inventiveness, and it does so by imagining a technology whose terms are unusually - perhaps unrealistically - transparent to its users. That transparency is not a flaw in the novel's design so much as the hinge on which its critique turns: it forces the question of what, if anything, informed consent can still guarantee once the aggregate consequences of many individual choices exceed anything any individual could reasonably have agreed to. Read alongside Braidotti's (2013) posthumanism and Barad's (2007) intra-action, the novel's characters emerge not as violated humanist subjects but as posthuman figures whose identities are continuously co-constituted with the data architectures they inhabit - a claim the novel dramatises most convincingly not through any single character's arc but through its own formal strategies of aggregation and address. The reading offered here is not, however, a case for uncritical celebration of that condition. Where existing



scholarship on the novel has tended either to treat it as a straightforward warning about corporate surveillance or to affirm its posthuman subjects with too little reservation, this article has tried to hold both the novel's critical force and its analogical limits in view at once. Future work might productively test this same tension against other surveillance fiction in which the voluntariness of data-sharing is less pronounced than in Egan's novel, in order to establish more precisely how much of the political charge of surveillance-capitalism criticism depends on non-consent, and how much survives its absence. Such work would also do well to resist the temptation, visible in some of the scholarship surveyed here, to treat a five-thinker theoretical apparatus as a template to be reapplied unchanged from text to text. What this reading of *The Candy House* suggests, above all, is that the value of combining Zuboff, Braidotti, and Barad lies not in the neatness with which their concepts can be mapped onto a novel's plot, but in the friction that emerges when they are made to answer for a text's actual particulars - a friction that a more schematic criticism, eager to demonstrate theoretical fluency, is too often inclined to smooth away before it has been allowed to do its proper interpretive work.

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