

SLSP5368M

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Platform Societies:

AI, Algorithmic Cultures and Datafication

Coursework 1:

Group Project

A4 Creative Process Portfolio



BALLAD OF THE GLASS MILL

A DYSTOPIAN FOLK BALLAD ON AI,
HIDDEN LABOUR AND THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM

GROUP 17

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01 / Introduction

The rapid development of artificial intelligence has significantly enhanced the productivity of knowledge labour in a short time. From text generation, data analysis to creative design, AI has greatly reduced the time cost and technical barriers of knowledge production. In *The Intelligence Age*, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman (2024) defines AI as a historical force capable of generating “shared prosperity to a degree that seems unimaginable today”. Meanwhile, Microsoft’s promotional campaigns for its Copilot system describe the technology as “reducing the weight of work” to enhance human capability and accelerate creativity. Together, these corporate technobureaucratic narratives construct a teleological myth, shaping AI-driven productivity into an inevitable path towards individual autonomy and social progress. This has contributed to algorithmic imaginary. The public generally believes that this efficiency revolution should release labour time, expand individual freedom, and promote labour from tedious repetitive labour to more decent independent creation. Therefore, productivity will be automatically transformed into the freedom and well-being of workers.

However, the reality shows an obvious paradox: AI has significantly improved productivity, but knowledge workers have not gained the freedom they expected. While AI quickly produces manuscripts, codes and designs, knowledge workers undertake a large amount of invisible work such as proofreading, correcting errors and processing formats. Their working time has not decreased. Instead, they have generally experienced phenomena such as increased work intensity, continuous online,

performance pressure and occupational instability. The benefits brought by efficiency improvement mainly flow to platform enterprises and capital owners, not workers. Therefore, we raise the following question: Why do intellectual workers lose their freedom and fall into a deeper labour alienation in the era of AI significantly improving productivity?

In order to explain this problem, our team proposes an analytical framework composed of Marx's theory of labour alienation, Zuboff's "surveillance capitalism", platform materiality and Bucher's "algorithm imaginary". The framework explains the deepening process of labour control in the AI era from economic structure, capital form, technical device and subject consciousness. Based on this theoretical framework, we use AI tools to create a song named *Ballad of the Glass Mill*. In this document, we will also evaluate the usage process of the AI tools as well as the generated lyrics and melodies.

02 / Theoretical Framework

- **Marxist Alienation**

Marx (2018) points out that in capitalist production relations, technology is not developed to liberate labour. On the contrary, it serves capital accumulation and extracting surplus production value (Marx and Engels, 2009). Therefore, technological progress does not automatically bring freedom, but may become a tool to strengthen capital control.

In traditional industrial capitalism, the goods produced by workers belong to capital. Now in the AI era, the texts, codes, designs and ideas produced by knowledge workers are no longer disposable commodities, and the content they produce are the training data and algorithm assets that can be copied and expanded infinitely. Workers create an ever-enhancing model through their intellectual efforts, but the ultimate beneficiaries are capital and platform. Meanwhile, workers themselves are marginalised and can be optimised at any time.

Furthermore, the labour of traditional capitalism depends on time discipline and direct supervision. However, in the AI era, the labour process has been digitised. The systems such as performance system, work tracking and real-time data monitoring have made the labour process constantly under the algorithm evaluation. In this case, workers seem to have the right to work freely, but in fact they are locked in a rigid performance framework by algorithms.

Creative labour is the essence of human beings and the way people realise their self-

worth (Marx, 2009). However, in the AI era, labour has become a means to survive.

The copywriting created by workers should conform to the keywords, the design should match the style, and the creativity should meet the click rate. In this way, the originally free creation is broken down into quantifiable tasks. Under this circumstance, the cooperative relationship between workers has also been transformed into a competitive relationship by algorithm ranking and traffic distribution mechanism. As a result, the social relationship among workers has been further commercialised.

These theories of Marx answer the first core question: Why didn't technological progress bring freedom? Because in the capitalist structure, technology always serves capital accumulation.

• **Surveillance Capitalism**

Zuboff puts forward the concept of "surveillance capitalism". He points out that the core resources of contemporary capitalism have shifted from traditional labour time to human behaviour data. The current AI is not only a production tool, but also the core mechanism for new capital to obtain data (Zuboff, 2019). The platform converts human behaviour itself into predictable and tradeable commodities by collecting data such as clicks, browsing time and creative behaviours. The boundary between work and life gradually disappears, and the individual's behaviour outside of work also become a source of value.

In addition, Zuboff also puts forward the concept of "instrumentarian power". He emphasises that modern power is shaped through environmental design and algorithm

recommendations (Zuboff, 2019). The recommendation system, priority sorting and performance mechanism of algorithm all lead individuals to specific behaviour patterns in a seemingly free choice.

The development of AI has lowered the production threshold and cost, and results in a sharp increase in the number of market competitors. The improvement of production efficiency has not reduced the amount of labour, but has intensified the pressure of competition and output. Therefore, the efficiency improvement brought about by AI development eventually turns into the capital's continuous pursuit of high profits, which eventually led to the increasing intensity of work.

Zuboff's theory answers the second core question: How can AI become a new exploitation mechanism? That is, capitalism has shifted its original operational mode to the comprehensive development of behaviour and data through AI.

• Platform Materialities

The platform is not a neutral digital infrastructure, but a social technological device with a clear power structure (Van Dijck et al., 2018). The interface design, function, data feedback and task allocation mechanism of the platform together constitute the material environment of current labour process. These designs transform the abstract algorithm into concrete daily constraints, so that the exploitation of surveillance capitalism can be implemented.

In the traditional industrial era, labour control relies on institutional rules and the direct command of managers. However, in the platform era, the control has been deeply

integrated into the platform interface and system process. Workers do not need to face managers, but they are always constrained by the platform rules. The command is replaced by the interface prompt, and the punishment is presented as data decline, ranking behind, profits reduction, etc. In this situation, the control method becomes milder and more difficult to detect.

The platform also presets the movement space of workers through technology. It is difficult for workers to adjust the workflow by themselves, and the working autonomy is locked by the system. They seem to have a choice, but the actual range of activities is strictly limited. Therefore, it is difficult for them to choose their working mode independently.

In such an environment, knowledge labour takes a form similar to a “digital factory”.

The platform works as the production line, the algorithm assumes the role of supervision, and real-time ranking and performance indicators have become a new discipline mechanism (Altenried, 2020). In this form, although the workplace is dispersed, it forms a close constraint through continuous online and instant response.

The platform materialities transforms the abstract surveillance capitalism into daily technical constraints.

Platform materialities theory answers the third core question: How can algorithmic control be realised in daily labour? That is, the technological devices have become tools for capital to control labour, so that exploitation can be integrated into every step of daily work.

- **Algorithmic Imaginary**

Bucher (2016) proposes the concept of “algorithmic imaginary”, which is a way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible. In daily practice, algorithms are generally regarded as neutral and rational technical systems due to the manipulation of capital. This belief makes the algorithm authority of capital gain social legitimacy. Therefore, it is difficult for workers to question the unreasonable aspects.

Under the influence of algorithmic imaginary, knowledge workers begin to actively study platform rules, analyse data and continuously optimise their own performance.

AI allows workers to actively accept, adapt and support the AI system. They think they are moving towards freedom, but in fact they enter the algorithm control to self-pressure and self-exploitation. When algorithm is regarded as objective mechanisms, workers will see it as the inevitable result of technology and market laws, and thus they voluntarily submit to such control. Therefore, the current situation of workers’ self-exploitation has emerged.

Bucher’s theory answers the fourth core question: Why do workers actively accept algorithmic control? Because they increasingly view this control as the result of technological development, and ignore the power relations in the process.

03 / Creative Process and Iterative Design



• Purpose of the Song

The main purpose of this song is to conduct a critical discussion of the relationship between artificial intelligence and labour. In many advertisements and public discussions, artificial intelligence is depicted as a technology that can save time and alleviate heavy labour. However, in reality, workers often encounter the opposite situation. The artificial intelligence system intensifies monitoring, speeds up the

completion of tasks, and creates intangible digital labour.

We hope this song can challenge the notion that technological progress inevitably leads to freedom. The core message of this song is that the growth of productivity does not always improve the lives of workers. On the contrary, in the current economic system, new technologies may reinforce the existing power structure.

This song also aims to create an emotional impact. Instead of providing a written explanation like traditional academic papers do, we use music and storytelling to make abstract theories more personal and emotional.

• Theme and Narrative Design

This song focuses on the themes of digital capitalism and labour control. The title *Ballad of the Glass Mill* is symbolic. The word “mill” represents the past factories and industrial labour. The word “glass” symbolizes transparency and surveillance. Workers in the “glass mill” are always in a visible and monitored state.

The narrative perspective of this song is very important. We do not adopt the perspective of experts or professors. Instead, the narrator is an ordinary worker who feels confused and exhausted. He does not fully understand academic theories, but he directly experiences exploitation.

This song also uses surreal and symbolic imagery rather than technical terms. We avoid direct words such as “algorithm” and “data extraction”. Instead, we use poetic imagery such as “glowing box”, “metal boy” and “glass prison”. These images make the song more creative and memorable.

• Reason for Song Length and Structure

The song lasts around four to five minutes. We choose this duration because we want to have enough time to build a clear narrative framework. Each verse focuses on different issues, including digital exploitation, ghost work, and labour alienation.

We also hope that this song would have similarities to Bob Dylan's classic folk protest songs. If the song were too short, there would not be enough space for storytelling and emotional atmosphere.

• AI Tools Used in the Project

ChatGPT is mainly used for lyric brainstorming, symbolic imagery generation, style imitation, structure planning, and rewriting lines.

Example prompt:

"Create an anti-utopian folk song inspired by Bob Dylan, with the theme revolving around artificial intelligence labour control, ghost work, surveillance capitalism, and digital alienation. Use symbolic imagery rather than direct academic language."

Suno's AI is used to create music demos and conduct experiments on the fusion of different musical styles.

Example prompt:

"Create a dark folk-style song featuring acoustic guitar, electronic textures, male vocals, and an atmosphere of melancholy. The inspiration comes from Bob Dylan and Radiohead."

During the poster production process, AI tools are also used. The prompt content

focuses on cyberpunk-style factories, workers inside glass structures, surveillance systems, and glowing machines.

- **Early AI Generated Materials**

Draft Example 1:

“Machines singing lullabies while workers count the dust.”

Evaluation: This version has a good atmosphere, but it sounds too generic.

Draft Example 2:

“The wires dream for millionaires while ghosts clean up the floor.”

Evaluation: This line inspires the final chorus: “While the wire does the dreaming, and the ghosts provide the feast.”

Draft Example 3:

“A prison made of mirrors where nobody can hide.”

Evaluation: This line inspires the “glass prison” imagery connected to surveillance theory.

- **Musical Design and Sound Symbolism**

The introduction uses electronic sounds, synthetic textures, and bell-like tones inspired by Radiohead. This reflects the charming yet cold image of digital technology.

After the introduction, the guitar sound and rough male voices enter the song. This part represents human emotions and labour. The contrast between the electronic sound effects and the original sound effects symbolizes the conflict between humans and

machines.

In the concluding part, most of the electronic sound effects are removed, leaving behind a sad cello melody. The cello symbolizes the loss of human autonomy in the age of AI systems.

• Iterative Design Process

Iteration 1:

Problem: The first AI-generated lyrics sounds too academic and direct.

Adjustment: We change the prompts and request symbolic storytelling.

Result: "Blind men painting shadows on a staircase to nowhere."

Evaluation: The metaphor expresses meaningless labour more effectively.

Iteration 2:

Problem: Some AI outputs sound too dramatic.

Adjustment: We simplify the language and focus on an ordinary worker's perspective.

Result: "It's a brave new something, is the only thing the boss can say."

Evaluation: The line successfully creates irony and humour.

Iteration 3:

Problem: Some verses lack connection to theory.

Adjustment: We add symbolic references to Foucault, Marx, and ghost work.

Result: "Some bald man from Paris said the prison's clear as glass."

Evaluation: The line connects to surveillance theory while remaining poetic.

Iteration 4:

Problem: Early choruses are weak.

Adjustment: We focus on the contradiction between AI creativity and hidden labour.

Result: "While the wire does the dreaming, and the ghosts provide the feast."

Evaluation: This becomes the central line of the project.

Iteration 5:

Problem: The first AI-generated music sounds too commercial.

Adjustment: We add folk protest music elements and darker instrumentation.

Evaluation: The new version better matches the political and emotional themes.

Iteration 6:

Problem: AI outputs repeat similar phrases and lack originality.

Adjustment: Human editing becomes more important. We combine different AI outputs and rewrite lines manually.

Evaluation: This process shows that AI can generate ideas quickly, but human judgement is still necessary.

• Critical Reflection on AI Use

This project itself serves as an example of the contradictions discussed in the song.

We use AI tools to criticize AI system. During the brainstorming and music experimentation process, AI increases efficiency, but many of the outcomes lack emotional depth and originality.

This indicates that AI creativity is still closely linked to human labor. Throughout the entire project process, human editing and critical thinking remain necessary.

04 / Lyrics Analysis

We will combine theory with the lyrics to conduct a detailed analysis of some of the lyrics. Due to space limitations, we have selected some key lyrics for analysis.

“Building up a castle on a stranger’s piece of land”

According to Marx, labour not only produces commodities, but also produces the labour itself as a commodity and the workers. When focusing on product alienation, one should consider not only the products themselves, but also the labour workers sell as commodities, the workers themselves, and the power relations between workers and capitalists (Li, 2023). Thus, in this dimension of product alienation, it also includes connotations such as the alienation of labour and the alienation between workers and capitalists. Based on the above considerations, we chose to include multiple symbolic meanings in a single lyric. In the lyric “Building up a castle on a stranger’s piece of land”, we not only interpret “castle” as the commodity produced by the workers themselves, but also understand “building up” as the labour process that the workers put in. Workers sell their labour in the form of commodities, while capitalists own the final product. At the same time, “stranger’s land” expresses that the workers do not own these products but are controlled by capitalists. This multiple symbolism enables the song to vividly depict the relationship between labour and products, and naturally integrates Marxist Alienation into the lyrics.

“Some bald man from Paris said the prison’s clear as glass” & “Handed me the padlock, watched the silent minutes pass”

In the lyrics, we also link to Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism as the theoretical foundation, and the panopticon theory of the philosopher Michel Foucault from Paris. Because Foucault's theory emphasizes that power controls workers through visual rules, while Zuboff emphasizes that capitalism controls workers through data guidance. Both of these concepts focus on the commonality of the behaviour patterns that workers seem to freely choose but are actually trapped in. Therefore, we use metaphors and analogies in the lyrics "Some bald man from Paris said the prison's clear as glass" and "Handed me the padlock, watched the silent minutes pass". The prison corresponds to the opaque mechanism of the platform, or perhaps a one-way transparent mechanism. The padlock corresponds to the self-restraint of workers under the algorithms and platform rules.

"Me? I got a broom here, sweeping dust out of the light " & "Polishing the mirrors just to keep the illusion bright "

In this lyric, "Me" refers to both the workers and the users. As a worker, people need to constantly maintain and correct the AI, making its operation smoother and more accurate. As a user, during the process of operating the AI, one needs to constantly adjust the input commands and re-correct the output content, in order to obtain the expected results. Regardless of the perspective, this lyric emphasizes that even though the AI seems glamorous and flawless, its operation and results still rely on the continuous intervention and efforts of humans. This is precisely the manifestation of the platform's material concept. The technical environment itself incorporates power and control, and both labourers and users must interact with the system in their daily operations to maintain the operation and effectiveness of the AI.

“Stitches made of nothing by a tailor in the square”

The concept of “algorithmic imaginary” mainly corresponds to the lyrics “Stitches made of nothing by a tailor in the square”. The “tailor” here represents a technology company, and the “nothing” refers to the idealized, artificially created world by AI that these companies offer. The users of AI will subconsciously believe that AI can automatically complete complex tasks, just as the technology companies claim and promote. The adjective “nothing” has two meanings. On the one hand, people think that algorithms may bring surprises, making them feel that the algorithms are powerful, such as being accurate in calculations or presenting only the content they like. On the other hand, people may also worry that algorithms track personal information, leak privacy, or make wrong predictions and even manipulate their usage, which makes them feel uneasy, disillusioned, or even fearful.

By analysing the above lyrics, it is possible to clearly see how the lyrics combine theory with reality. We employ many metaphors or symbolic techniques to write the lyrics, aiming to depict more vivid and impactful images, thereby better presenting the practical significance of concepts such as Marxist alienation, capital surveillance, platform materiality, and algorithmic imaginary. The core writing logic of this song’s lyrics is to explain the human labour behind the glamorous appearance of AI technology, emphasizing the existence and significance of human labour in the technical system. We believe that AI technology is not neutral. Although AI seemingly

enhances efficiency and convenience, there are complex labour and control relationships behind it. Marxist alienation explains how workers lose their labour achievements, capital surveillance explains the opacity of AI algorithms, platform materiality explains that workers are actually constrained by algorithms, and algorithmic imaginary leads people to have blind trust in the overestimated capabilities of AI.

05 / Conclusion

The creation of *Ballad of the Glass Mill* combines theory, music, and AI-assisted design into one creative project. The repetitive creative process has enhanced the balance between artistic expression and critical analysis.

Through the metaphors and symbolic imagery of lyrics, the project illustrates the human labour hidden behind AI systems, showing that while AI appears efficient and flawless, it relies on continuous human intervention. This song transforms abstract concepts such as Marxist alienation, surveillance capitalism, platform materiality and algorithmic imaginary into more visual forms, using musical expression to call on people to reflect on the relationship between workers and AI. The aim is to reveal that both workers and users are indispensable in the operation of artificial intelligence, but are also restricted by algorithms and platform rules.

Through this iterative design process, we have increasingly realized that AI is not neutral. Behind its seemingly perfect output lies a large amount of human labour. Our team repeatedly modify the output content of AI to conform to the content we want to express. Moreover, although we have established an outline for this project beforehand, we still encounter challenges during the creative process. For instance, AI algorithmic recommendations sometimes influence and constrain our creative decisions, shaping the way we express ideas. Through direct interaction with artificial intelligence during the creative process, we understand the indispensability of human intervention, as well as the way algorithms and platforms subtly shape work and cognition.

Finally, the project expresses its central insight through the lyrics. The last line of the

song summarizes the core of the entire project: “We built the bird, and we locked ourselves in the cage”. This line expresses the core paradox of the project. Humans create AI to improve life and increase freedom. However, if the deep structures of power and ownership are not changed, technological progress may instead give rise to new forms of control.

06 / Reference

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