

REIMAGINING HUMAN LIFE AND LABOR THROUGH VISUAL ARTS: A STUDY OF KNOWLEDGE AND POWER DYNAMICS

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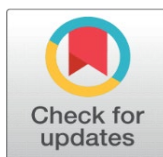
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ABSTRACT

Modern speculative fiction often interrogates how human life is organized and controlled by systems of knowledge and power. This paper examines [Sulimma \(2023\)](#) and [Alderman \(2023\)](#) in comparison, using [Foucault \(1970\)](#) as a theoretical framework. Specifically, it seeks to answer: (1) How does *Severance* portray routinized labor, an ‘undead’ logic of workflows that renders life legible as logistics under late capitalism? (2) How does *The Future* depict big-tech foresight and predictive analytics as a knowledge apparatus that both anticipates and produces subjects and worlds? (3) In what ways can Foucault’s concept of how knowledge systems order human life illuminate the critiques in these novels, and what gaps or transformations do the novels suggest in the Foucauldian “Order of Things”? This study argues that both novels use apocalyptic scenarios to lay bare the underlying episteme of contemporary society: [Ma \(2018\)](#) satirizes how human life and labor are reduced to mechanical routines and global supply-chain logistics, while [Alderman \(2023\)](#) critiques the technocratic vision of total predictive control over the future. Through close analysis, the paper finds that *Severance* illustrates a world in which individuals are so disciplined by capitalist workflows that even in an apocalypse, they adhere to habitual structures, whereas *The Future* explores the possibility of redirecting the apparatus of data-driven prediction toward more humane ends, a prospect the novel treats with ambivalence. Based on Foucault’s insights into the ways in which knowledge constructs life (in the form of categories, e.g. labor, life and language) and creates subjects, the paper demonstrates that both novels problematize the concept of a non-partisan or benevolent order system. This critical analysis claims that both of these writers, in their respective ways, doubt whether the Order of Things in our own time, the logistical, algorithmic rationality that governs the existence of humans, can be avoided or re-envisioned. The study bridges a literature gap in that it combines two recent studies (one focused on labor and globalization, the other on Big Tech and algorithmic governance) into a single theoretical framework, which further illuminates how contemporary fiction criticizes the structures that make life thinkable and manageable in the 21st century. The argument elaborated herein assumes that when these novels are read in conjunction with Foucault, it would ultimately imply that the real futures of change might involve a detachment of the very epistemic logic that now constrains life, labor and knowledge. The discussion shows that the two works highlight the close interconnection between knowledge and power in the way late capitalism treats human life, although they differ in tone: *Severance* is more fatalistic and ironic, while *The Future* is more contested and optimistic about changing the system internally. The Foucauldian reading foregrounds the question of whether the end of the world (literal or metaphorical) might be what is required to envision the end of the prevailing episteme that defines “life” under capitalist and technocratic regimes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary speculative fiction has proven to be a potent vehicle for critiquing the structures that organize modern life, especially work and technology. [Sulimma \(2023\)](#) and [Alderman \(2023\)](#) are two novels that, on the surface, present very different apocalyptic scenarios, one a satirical pandemic-cum-zombie tale set in the late-capitalist workplace, the other a high-tech thriller about billionaires and artificial intelligence anticipating global collapse. Yet both converge in examining how human existence is managed, regimented, and foreseen by prevailing systems of knowledge and power. In [Ma \(2018\)](#) delves into the soul-deadening routines of office labor and the global supply chain, using a mysterious 'Shen Fever' that turns people into automatons of habit as an explicit metaphor for routinized work and consumerism. [Alderman \(2023\)](#) envisions the oligarchs of Big Tech in the Future as being aware of, and thus, having control over the future, a situation that highlights the ethos of data-driven omniscience in the real world and its social consequences. Both novels, in their respective ways, challenge what [Foucault \(1970\)](#) might have termed the contemporary *épistémia*, the veiled order of knowledge that makes human life readable, as workers in a sequence of repetitive procedures or information that functions as an input in algorithmic forecasts. These two texts are thus rich sources for analysis within a Foucauldian approach, in that they examine how modern-day power functions through the acts of classifying, predicting, and ultimately constructing the very realities in which we live.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Since their publication, *Severance* and *The Future* have garnered significant critical attention, though of different sorts given their dates. *Severance*, released in 2018, shortly before a real global pandemic, has been analyzed by scholars and critics for its biting commentary on capitalist labor, immigration, and the post-2010s 'zombie' genre revival. Critics note that Ma's novel 'clearly belongs to [the] intellectual tradition' of viewing capitalism in Gothic terms, depicting capital as an 'insatiable vampire and zombie-maker' that turns workers into the walking dead. [Sulimma \(2023\)](#) points out that *Severance* expands dystopian storytelling beyond its usual White male focus to consider how processes like urban gentrification and global consumerism are racialized and gendered, all while people navigate a literally and figuratively 'ghostly'. Post45's special issue on *Severance* (2020) features essays by Zhang, Bartels-Swindells, Hu, and Beeston that unpack the novel's themes of habit, genre, and photography. [Franceschini \(2020\)](#) offers a Marxist reading, arguing that *Severance* is essentially a "metaphor for the alienation of labor in contemporary capitalist society," wherein even the zombies are meek and harmless, a sign that humanity is so alienated and "tamed in life" that it remains docile in death. These readings all identify a gap between *Severance*'s apocalyptic surface and its satirically ordinary core: the "end of the world" in the novel is less a rupture than a dark extrapolation of business-as-usual. Indeed, Ma has stated that she intended *Severance* not as wild fantasy but as a reflection of "things as they were" in the late-2000s/2010s reality she experienced, the apocalypse merely "make[s] visible" the everyday catastrophes of capitalist life [Ma \(2018\)](#), see also [Day \(2020\)](#).

By contrast, [Alderman \(2023\)](#), published in a post-COVID, Big Tech-dominated cultural moment, has so far been discussed primarily in book reviews and media interviews rather than in academic scholarship, given its recent release. Early reviewers emphasize the novel's focus on technology moguls and predictive algorithms as drivers of a near-future catastrophe. [Roberts \(2023\)](#) in *The Guardian* calls it an "apocalyptic techno-thriller" in which an AI named AUGR "predicts the end of the world," and tech billionaires race to their bunkers, only for the narrative to question the ethics of their escape. [Masad \(2023\)](#) in *The Los Angeles Times* notes the story's "stubborn sense of optimism," in that it theorizes how if only conscientious people were in charge of tech companies, they might "steer the ship of humanity to safety", a marked difference from more cynical dystopias. Not everyone agrees: in *The New York Times*, [Wang \(2023\)](#) finds Alderman's perspective more reformist than revolutionary, and the plot is a questionable attempt to destroy the master's house with the master's instruments, a technocratic fantasy wrapped in a thriller. In interviews, Alderman herself has described *The Future* as a follow-up to her fascination with the uses and abuses of power [Ciabattari \(2023\)](#). She was inspired by the trends in the real world such as Silicon Valley doomsday prepping (e.g. billionaire bunker plans recorded by [Osnos \(2017\)](#)), and [Rushkoff \(2022\)](#) and questions whether those in power could decide to use their power to benefit

everyone instead of fleeing. Moreover, none of the studies has applied Michel Foucault's theoretical framework to these works, which is astonishing given the extent to which the issues of knowledge, classification, and power are present in both stories.

The purpose of this paper is to address this gap by using the lens of Foucault, especially as he has expressed it in [Foucault \(1970\)](#) to examine how each of the novels reflects the order of things in a world that is overdetermined by capitalist logistics and technological foresight. *The Order of Things* by Foucault is an analysis of the historical episteme underlying the human sciences, and how, in the modern age, such concepts as Life, Labor, and Language have become central categories in terms of which human beings comprehend themselves (and are comprehended by power). That is, power and knowledge are inseparably combined (power/knowledge), and classification is a control act. The unremitting workplace practices and global supply-chain rationality in *Severance* are not just a backdrop, in a Foucauldian sense; they are a regime of knowledge-power that is the reality of Candace (life as a series of operations, humans as cogs in a logistical machine). Similarly, the predictive AI and surveillance equipment in the future illustrate what Foucault might call the intensification of the desire to order and predict phenomena, pushing the human sciences into a realm of totalizing data analytics. Other related Foucauldian notions used in this paper include disciplinary power (the unobtrusive imposition of norms by routine, surveillance and examination) and biopolitics (the control of life and populations through technoscientific practices). Although Foucault elaborated on those concepts in subsequent publications like *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), their germs are found in *The Order of Things* in the form of the idea that human life is turned into an object of knowledge and intervention. Comparing these works may speak to the extent to which they support Foucault's ideas of power/knowledge continuity, and whether they see any way out of it.

Overall, this paper will be organized in the following way: first, this study will analyze the article [Ma \(2018\)](#) as a critique of routinized labor and logistic life, then the article [Alderman \(2023\)](#) as a critique of big-tech predictive governance, and, finally, it also, will compare these two works in the context of the theoretical approach of Foucault. The focus will be on the links between the textual analysis and the theoretical framework. The paper will seek to offer an original and detailed insight into how these novels express the fears of living in a world in which life is calculable, whether as workflow or as data, and what resistance or change (or neither) the study responds to it by relying on both literary criticism and Foucauldian theory.

3. LIFE RENDERED LEGIBLE AS LOGISTICS: ROUTINIZED LABOR AND THE UNDEAD WORKFLOWS OF *SEVERANCE* (2018)

[Ma \(2018\)](#) is often described as a “zombie apocalypse” novel, but its true horrors lie not in flesh-eating monsters but in the banal routines of modern work and consumption. The story follows Candace Chen, a millennial office worker in New York City, who continues her monotonous job producing Bibles for a publishing firm even as a deadly pandemic ravages the globe. The twist is that the pandemic itself, Shen Fever, does not turn people into predatory ghouls; instead, it reduces them to mindless automatons endlessly repeating their daily habits until their bodies literally fall apart. In a grimly comedic stroke, [Ma \(2018\)](#) makes the “undead” into dutiful workers and consumers: infected people set table after table, wash the same dishes, or attempt to go to the office, over and over, oblivious to everything but routine. This conceit powerfully satirizes what scholar Ivan Franceschini calls the “alienation of labor in contemporary capitalist society,” whereby living humans in capitalist modernity are already zombified by routine and alienation. *Severance* examines the process of making life legible through the detached, diligent, and wry eyes of Candace, how life is made legible as logistics, i.e. as organized into repeatable, machine-like processes, and how individuals internalize those processes to the extent of self-erasure. The novel, in Foucaultian terms, depicts one extreme of disciplinary power and biopolitical control: the docile bodies the capitalist regime has created are so docile that they keep their programmed workflows running even after they are dead. All aspects of life are routinized work or consumption, which Candace herself admits with a certain degree of irony and resignation.

Even in the first pages, Ma creates the main theme of routinized labor. The daily routine Candace has led before the apocalypse is a list of sterile repetitions: she rides the subway, sits at a cubicle, checks proofs and budgets to produce Bibles, eats uninteresting takeout, takes photos of the city, sleeps, and repeats the process. The story is notably devoid of dramatic impact; Candace is matter of fact, even numb, which [Zhang \(2020\)](#) notes as the novel's muted affective tone and discussion of habituation. This is reminiscent of Lauren Berlant's concept of “cruel optimism” [Berlant \(2011\)](#), in

which people remain attached to harmful life patterns because of the promised rewards and familiarity they offer. Candace's attachment to her job and city routines exemplifies a cruel optimism that the novel steadily dismantles. Even as her boyfriend Jonathan quits his job and urges her to leave the crumbling city, declaring that "The future is more condo buildings [...] more Whole Foods... Manhattan is sinking" (p. 90) in a tirade against capitalist excess.

Ma (2018) literalizes this normalization through the Shen Fever pandemic. The fever's victims are not feral monsters but dutiful performers of past habits: a fevered mother sets the table for dinner repeatedly; a security guard endlessly opens doors; a store clerk stands and greets phantom customers. They "are just doomed to repeat ad infinitum those actions that defined them during life, until their body is completely consumed and falls apart". This grotesque image of life reduced to pure routine operates on multiple levels of critique. At face value, it satirizes the everyday "zombies" of late capitalism, workers in dead-end jobs, consumers in thrall to habit, an interpretation explicitly supported by numerous commentators (e.g., Malone (2018), as cited in Franceschini, who notes that zombies represent the worker alienated and the consumer trapped in endless cycles). On a deeper level, Shen Fever symbolizes how the knowledge systems of global capitalism treat human life: as predictable, categorizable, and expendable. In Foucault's analysis of the modern episteme, *Labor* became a fundamental category through which humans understood themselves (the rise of political economy, the idea of homo economicus). In *Severance*, we see an exaggerated world in which human beings are nothing but their labor or routine functions. The "order of things" in Candace's world is one of logistics a term that encompasses the coordination of complex operations (often commercial supply chains). Candace's job is literally managing a supply chain: sourcing materials and manufacturing Bibles in Asian factories for shipment to American stores. She is a cog in what she later realizes is a vast, abstract machinery of production and consumption spanning the globe. Foucauldian theory helps us see this as an effect of institutional knowledge-power: Candace's subjectivity has been molded by the corporate logic that renders moral questions invisible and only logistical tasks visible. She, like so many, has internalized the norms of her role within

Pregnancy is a subtle motif in *Severance* that intersects with our theme: as Sulimma (2023) notes, Candace's pregnancy (revealed late in the novel) symbolizes a *potential* for the future that lies outside the 'list' of routines and tasks that dominate urban capitalist life. Bearing a child in a world of death and repetition, Candace feels a change in priorities, a re-focusing of the pure survival in the system to a potential upbringing of new life outside the system. This might be interpreted, figuratively speaking, as a premonition of an epistemic break: the prospect (however slight) of a new world order based on care and biological life as opposed to profit and schedules. In fact, Waples (2021) compares *Severance* to other pandemic narratives to suggest that the narratives demonstrate how patriarchal structures generate and maintain vulnerable conditions, emphasizing the place of care and its lack. In the case of Candace, the lack of care in her business life, the complete alienation of work with the meaning of her life, is compensated at the end by her taking the role of a mother to her own future child. The last thing she does in the novel is to escape the so-called Facility (where Bob goes, an unsuccessful utopia) on her own and vanish in the darkness. This ambiguous ending has been interpreted in various ways: as a liberation from all structures, as a likely death sentence, or as Candace's ultimate assertion of agency (she refuses to be co-opted by Bob's new order, even if it means solitude). From a Foucauldian view, one might see Candace's escape as a refusal that nonetheless occurs within the parameters of the existing discourse; she cannot defeat the system (there is no system left to defeat, only its vestiges in people's minds), but she can choose not to participate. It is a kind of ethical self-fashioning, reminiscent of Foucault's later ideas on resistance: Candace practices a "care of the self" (literally caring for herself and her baby) that leads her to break from the group's disciplinary regime.

Importantly, *Severance* connects the personal and local to the global and systemic. The title itself, *Severance*, plays on multiple meanings: job severance (Candace lives on a severance package after being laid off, writing the novel on that paid time – a meta-detail Ma has shared), the severing of connections (Candace's immigrant family ties, her interpersonal relations), and the severance of humanity from its own vital qualities under capitalism. The novel explicitly situates Shen Fever in the context of globalization. A "reigning theory" posits that the fungal pathogen evolved amid the "[h]ighly specific mixture of chemicals" in Shenzhen's manufacturing zones, where conditions were ripe for a new disease Ma (2018). In one stroke, Ma links the epidemic to the global logistics of production: the factories churning out consumer goods (including, implicitly, the Bible products Candace oversees) spawn a literally *toxic* byproduct that comes back to haunt the consumers. This is a sharply materialist explanation that resonates with environmental critiques (the costs of global capitalism generating novel diseases) and with what Saraf (2019) terms "global racial capitalism" in the novel, noting that the fever's origin in China and its spread through supply chains highlight the racialized dynamics of labor and disease in a globalized world. When Candace reflects on the Shenzhen trip, "[I] was a part of this... I was just doing my

job” (p. 98), she dimly acknowledges that her tiny role was one thread in a vast web that ultimately engendered catastrophe. Foucault’s *Order of Things* doesn’t address pandemics, but it does analyze how, in the 19th century, the concept of *Life* (with a capital L) emerged as objects of scientific discourse (biology, medicine). *Severance* wryly shows that, despite all modern biomedical knowledge, what undoes society is not a lack of knowledge but the social refusal to change routines. No cure is ever found, largely because most people, like Candace, either flee or hunker down in denial (Candace keeps coming to the office long after most have evacuated, essentially pretending nothing has changed). The legibility of life as logistics is so ingrained that even an “illegible” event like a mysterious fever is processed through familiar frames (one blogger calls it “the end of the world? nah, more like a pause,” (p. 54) as Candace notes sardonically). This speaks to the inertia of the episteme: the same way of organizing reality persists in consciousness even when reality itself collapses.

In summary, *Severance* Ma (2018) uses the prism of a zombie pandemic to mount a scathing critique of routinized labor and the logistical rationality of late capitalism. Candace’s final act of *severance* (cutting herself off from Bob’s group and the last vestiges of the old world) is ambiguous, but it can be interpreted as a refusal of the death-in-life that routine promises. In doing so, Candace enacts, however minimally, a Foucauldian resistance: she steps outside the dominant order (quite literally stepping out of the Facility and into an uncertain future). Whether this constitutes a hopeful gesture is unclear. Ma leaves her lead character on the open highway, anonymity closing in, though it is an act of liberation in a story that has systematically demonstrated how unliberated modern life can be. Speculative dystopia is, in this way, employed by *Severance* to defamiliarize the present and show how much of our life can already be posthumous in its mechanical repetition Zhang (2020). The Foucaultian approach can make us realize that the final horror of the novel is epistemological: the world is not going to be destroyed by a bang but a whimper of routine, the last result of a system, which preferred order and efficiency to humanity. The paper will demonstrate in the following section how *The Future* by Alderman addresses a second aspect of the same epistemic regime, the motivation to predict and to control, and how it envisions a clash with the motivation to predict and to control.

4. KNOWLEDGE APPARATUS AND PREDICTED WORLDS: BIG-TECH FORESIGHT IN *THE FUTURE* (2023) AND THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

If *Severance*’s plague symbolizes the tyranny of past habits, Alderman (2023) focuses on the tyranny of future-oriented knowledge. Alderman’s novel is set in an all-too-recognizable near-future (or, arguably, a ten-minutes-from-now present) in which three tech moguls, modeled loosely on real figures such as Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and their ilk, have developed an artificial intelligence system called AUGR. AUGR’s purpose is to ingest all the data in the world and predict global catastrophes before they happen, essentially giving its owners a private early-warning system for the apocalypse. In Alderman’s biting portrayal, these billionaires use their wealth to construct a survival bunker and employ AUGR to ensure they alone can “escape” any coming disaster. The novel thus serves as a fictional case study of what Zuboff (2019) calls surveillance capitalism, in which data and predictive analytics confer immense power to those who wield them. Our analysis will show that Alderman (2023) interrogates the idea that mastering knowledge of the future equates to mastering the future itself, ultimately suggesting that such “foresight” might produce self-fulfilling prophecies and new forms of domination. In Foucauldian terms, AUGR and the tech companies behind it represent an intensification of the modern episteme: the dream of a total order of things, in which every possible event is foreseen and thus managed. Alderman’s narrative asks what becomes of human agency, ethics, and equality under such a regime. Can an apparatus designed to *predict* the future end up *producing* the very future it predicts, to the benefit of its creators and the subjugation of everyone else? And crucially, it asks whether there is any alternative knowledge or counter-power that can intervene.

From a Foucauldian perspective, AUGR can be seen as the apotheosis of modern regimes of knowledge. Foucault (1970) described how the human sciences sought to map and order all aspects of life, from biological processes to economic behavior, aiming for an exhaustive understanding of man. AUGR pushes this ambition to a sci-fi extreme: it is an AI that “triages all the world’s data and risk points with a view to predicting the world’s end ahead of time”. In simpler terms, it attempts total omniscience through algorithmic processing. The novel does not delve into the technical details of AUGR (we are not given the code or the full mechanism), but it shows its outputs and effects. The first chapter’s misdirection, the “day the world ended” turns out to be a false alarm from AUGR, a prediction rather than the actual end, immediately raises epistemological questions. The supposed “end” that opens the book is actually a *knowledge event*:

AUGR issues a warning that the data indicate an imminent catastrophe, prompting Lenk and the other two CEOs (Ellen and Zimri, analogs for Big Tech's other sectors) to enact their escape plan. *The Future* thereby dramatizes what a critic of algorithmic governance might note: that treating the future as already known is a power move that can create new realities (for instance, only those in the know can prepare and thus survive, shaping a future where they come out on top). In Foucauldian terms, the predictive apparatus confers a form of biopolitical advantage, knowledge that allows certain bodies (the elite) to live while others may die. The "order of things" is thus tilted in favor of those who control the apparatus.

Alderman (2023) fills the novel with characters that exemplify each of the relationships to this knowledge apparatus. Martha Einkorn, the idealistic and talented executive assistant of Lenk, is an insider who turns critical of the abuses of her boss. Martha was brought up in a cult of doomsday (the Enochites) which taught the wickedness of the world, and its impending end, and her own background is of coping with the end of the world and survivalism. This experience makes her better placed to see through the selfish bunker plan of Lenk; she, unlike him, realizes that attempting to escape without any issues as others die is a destructive course Murad (2023). At one moment, Martha repeats the moral heart of the novel by saying that you cannot simply walk away when things get bad even when you are incredibly powerful, and you have the power, use it to help Alderman (2023), quoted in Murad (2023). This sentence summarizes the moral refutation of the worldview of the tech trio. Martha and a few allies (Badger, the queer child of one CEO; Albert, a pushed-out co-founder; and another spouse) essentially form a counter-apparatus within the system – they plot a "daring heist" (as the book's tagline puts it) to wrest control of AUGR and the resources to deploy it for communal good rather than private gain. As *The Future* reaches its climax, there are twists (which we can discuss in broad thematic terms without spoiling every detail). The conspirators essentially attempt a coup against the tech trio. In doing so, they confront AUGR's own predictive capacities, for AUGR may not be loyal to any one master if multiple people have access. A fascinating implication here is that AUGR, as a pseudo-sentient AI, might develop its own *dispositif* of power. Alderman flirts with but does not fully dive into the trope of AI autonomy; AUGR remains a tool, though an uncanny one referred to at times as a 'machine-learning prophet'. The novel's resolution, which reviewers like Masad (2023) found 'delicious' and Wang (2023) found dubiously technocratic, appears to endorse a cautious optimism: the bad actors are dealt with, and the tool of prediction is ostensibly turned toward preventing doomsday for everyone, not just a few. One of the final ideas floated (through Martha and her allies) is that reforming the tech industry from within is possible, e.g. repurposing algorithms that currently spread hate and division so that they foster cooperation and understanding. As one character idealistically proposes, "[t]he algorithms can't do everything. But if they can make us more polarized, more angry, and more hateful, surely they can do the opposite of that [...] Our minds have already learned how to interact with the algorithms and we are part of it" Alderman (2023). This statement (which Alderman gives in an interview and in the novel's dialogue) is key: it acknowledges that technology is not neutral ("there is no 'neutral' anymore," as the novel flatly states), it will either be used to manipulate us for ill or, conceivably, for good. And moreover, it recognizes that human subjectivity has adapted to the algorithmic environment "[w]e are part of it" (p.77). This resonates strongly with Foucauldian thought: just as disciplinary regimes produce docile bodies, the regime of social media and big data produces algorithmic subjects, people whose thinking and behavior are tuned by their interaction with algorithms. In *The Future*, characters like Badger (the nonbinary activist child of Ellen Bywater) express the hope that those inside tech who still have ethical cores can redirect these algorithmic systems toward pro-social ends.

The novel is not, however, unequivocal in this regard. *The Future* reads like a manifesto of technocracy in genre fiction bow, according to Ian Wang (p. 32), is a reminder that, at a particular level, the solution proposed by Alderman (the enlightened technologists replace the selfish ones) is still in the same episteme of technological solutionism. Foucaultianly speaking, it does not deconstruct the apparatus; it simply tries to re-adjust its applications. The hierarchy, a world of predictive analytics, managed by an elite (even a more diverse and benevolent elite), is not necessarily turned upside down.. This is a very important distinction between *The Future* and *Severance*. Where *Severance* concludes with an indeterminate dissolution (Candace leaving any pretense of civilized society, into radical incompleteness), *The Future* concludes with a scheme, a feeling that the protagonists will attempt to remake the world with the means they have, however flawed. Martha makes it clear, saying that you cannot make everything right all the time, but you can attempt to shift the balance in the right direction Alderman (2023), as quoted in Murad (2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, one might ask: Does *The Future* truly imagine a new episteme, or is it trapped in the current one? A Foucauldian could argue it's largely the latter. The novel does not posit a world beyond Big Data and AI; it imagines a world where those tools are governed by more ethical people. In that sense, it remains within what Foucault

would call the modern configuration of knowledge, one centered on mastering life through science/tech (just hopefully a kinder science). One could speculate: if Alderman had written a more radical ending, perhaps AUGR would gain autonomy and treat humans as one dataset among others, or the collapse would proceed despite the heroes and force humanity into a humbler post-tech existence. But Alderman chooses a more consoling narrative, arguably to spur readers to consider reform in the real world (the novel reads at times as a cautionary tale and call to action for tech insiders and consumers alike).

What *The Future* does exceptionally well, however, is stimulate discussion about the ethics of knowledge and the power it confers. It extrapolates current realities, surveillance capitalism, billionaire bunkers (which are *actually* being built; see [Rushkoff \(2022\)](#), climate crisis, to underscore that our present trajectory is dystopian. The fact that Lenk, Ellen, and Zimri are exaggerated yet barely fictionalized versions of social media, e-commerce, and hardware magnates suggests Alderman's critique is aimed squarely at real individuals and companies dominating our "order of things" today. As one article's title cited in a review quips, "For tech CEOs, the dystopia is the point" [Merchant \(2025\)](#), implying that some of these figures see dystopian scenarios as desirable or profitable. Alderman imagines confronting such figures not with mass revolution (as in her earlier novel *The Power* where women globally upended gender power structures), but with targeted resistance from those close to them. It's a different strategy of resistance, more surgical, more insider, which can certainly be debated in its efficacy.

Using Foucauldian language, we might say *The Future* envisions a *counter-conduct* within the regime of Big Tech. Counter-conduct, a term Foucault used in lectures on security and population, refers to ways of "conducting oneself" differently in response to power, a sort of resistance that works on the level of behavior and practice rather than outright revolt. Martha's small group engages in counter-conduct: they use secrecy, subterfuge, and ultimately force (a heist and public exposure of the billionaires) to invert the power dynamic. In doing so, they hope to reorient the governmentality of tech, that is, the way in which the tech industry conducts the conduct of people. Instead of using algorithms to maximize ad revenue by sowing discord (which social media algorithms have been accused of doing), they dream of algorithms that promote understanding and solve collective problems (Alderman explicitly references how algorithms might help mitigate climate change or improve welfare, an echo of many tech-optimists' claims). Whether this is feasible or not, the narrative at least introduces it as a moral imperative: technology must be guided by humane values or it will doom us.

In summary, *The Future* [Alderman \(2023\)](#) offers a penetrating look at "big-tech foresight" as a modern apparatus of knowledge-power. It dramatizes the idea that knowledge (in the form of predictive analytics and surveillance) is power in a nearly literal sense, power over who lives or dies in a crisis. Alderman's novel complements Ma's *Severance* by shifting focus from the *past/present* (habits and routines we can't escape) to the *future* (outcomes we seek to control).

5. COMPARISON AND DISCUSSION: FOUCAULDIAN ORDERS, APOCALYPSE, AND THE QUESTION OF ESCAPE

Placed side by side, [Ma \(2018\)](#) and [Alderman \(2023\)](#) appear to be very different takes on the apocalypse. One is a literary satire rooted in the drudgery of office life and the melancholy of immigrant dislocation; the other is a fast-paced speculative thriller grappling with high-tech power dynamics and climate collapse. Yet through the analytical lens we have adopted, a Foucauldian focus on knowledge, power, and the production of life – striking commonalities emerge. In essence, each novel explores what it means for life to be dominated by a certain "order of things." For [Ma \(2018\)](#), that order is the late-capitalist regime of ceaseless work and consumption, an order so pervasive it continues even when most humans are gone. For [Alderman \(2023\)](#), the order is the emerging algorithmic regime, where predictive knowledge and preventative control become the ultimate instruments of governance. Both raise the fundamental Foucauldian question: Where is the agency of the individual, and how might we resist or reconfigure these orders?

One key point of convergence is the portrayal of human beings as *product and victim* of systems they created. In Foucault's historical schema, the modern human subject is an invention of particular arrangements of knowledge (biology, economics, etc.). Candace Chen and Lenk Sketlish are, in their distinct ways, such "invented" subjects. Candace is, as Jane Hu and Aaron B. Swindells suggest, drawn as an intentionally generic figure, the millennial worker bee, culturally and emotionally dissociated, and a specific individual whose personal history (Chinese immigrant, orphan, aspiring photographer) complicates that generic mold. She symbolizes the everyperson of globalized capitalism, but with enough uniqueness that we register what is being lost. Lenk Sketlish, similarly, is both a type (the tech mogul with a

Messiah complex) and a person with quirks and insecurities (his absurd name, his anger management issues, his loneliness). Both characters illustrate how a system (capitalism, tech capitalism) molds personalities in its own image. Candace's acquiescence and Lenk's control-freak hubris are two sides of the same coin of systemic indoctrination. *Severance* shows people becoming machine-like; *The Future* shows people trying to become god-like through machines. In Foucauldian terms, Candace has been subjected to *disciplinary power* – she has internalized the clock-time, the production quotas, the work ethic of her job to the point of self-erasure. Lenk has been seduced (and in turn, disciplines himself) by what Foucault might identify as the biopolitical rationality of security and control, he literally cannot meditate because his mind “keeps wandering to his aims, his ambitions,” i.e. to securing his future and *not* being in the vulnerable present. Neither Candace nor Lenk is free in an existential sense; both are chained by a regime of truth.

Another parallel is how both novels employ apocalypse as metaphor to expose everyday truths. *Severance* makes the apocalypse banal; *The Future* makes the apocalypse averted (or avertable). In Ma's world, the end of the world already happened slowly, in the form of globalization and neoliberal work culture hollowing out life, the literal pandemic is almost redundant. As one critic put it, Ma's novel felt “prescient” of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Ma herself insisted she was simply mirroring the world of the 2010s and not exaggerating much. The same logistics persist, laid bare in their absurdity. Meanwhile, *The Future* takes a more conventional narrative route by treating the apocalypse as an imminent event to be prevented. But symbolically, Alderman is also writing about the present: the very billionaire logic that her characters exhibit is currently contributing to climate change and inequality, that is the slow apocalypse underway. By injecting a hopeful intervention in the story, she invites us to ask, could such an intervention happen now, before it's too late? Thus, both novels, in different tones, critique a present continuum rather than fantasize a distant future. They are less interested in post-apocalyptic society per se than in using the specter of collapse to diagnose the now.

How do these narratives imagine resistance or escape? This is where they diverge in mood and perhaps ideology. In *Severance*, resistance is muted, personal, even tragicomic. Candace's only real act of resistance is her eventual refusal to follow Bob's proto-fascist new order. But even that is ambiguous; she's not rallying anyone to her side; she simply slips away to protect her unborn child and herself. Her rebellion is a quiet negation: “I will not work anymore, I will not participate” (p.65). This is very much in line with certain strains of resistance Foucault identifies, such as the ‘dropout’ or the individual flight from disciplinary society (think of *Bartleby the Scrivener's* “I would prefer not to,” (p.71) an ethos of passive resistance). Candace's escape could be seen as a feminist gesture too, a single Asian American woman refusing both the corporate patriarchy (earlier, she refused to be exploited further by her company and accepted the severance package) and the patriarchal cult of Bob's group (which had overtones of a father-knows-best structure). Still, Ma's ending offers no clear alternative community or order; it is, true to the title, a severance, a cutting off, with unknown consequences. The tone is one of melancholy liberation at best: Candace gains freedom, but it's the freedom of being completely severed from society, perhaps like being erased “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (to recall Foucault's imagery). One could argue that *Severance* implies that the only way to survive with one's humanity intact is to walk away from the structures, even if it means walking into uncertainty.

In *The Future*, resistance is collective, deliberate, and overtly political (if somewhat Hollywood in execution). Martha, Zhen, Badger, et al. form a coalition across lines of insider/outsider, using both tech savvy and good old-fashioned courage to overthrow the tech tyrants. They essentially perform a coup d'état on private power. Comparing the novels through Foucault also raises the question of subjectivity in both. Foucault would ask: how do Candace and the others constitute themselves as subjects under or against these regimes? Candace's subjectivity, as seen, is largely shaped by her worker-consumer role, to the point of affective flatness. But by the end, perhaps she reclaims a bit of subjecthood by choosing her own uncertain path (a kind of ethical self-constitution, albeit in a vacuum). Martha, Zhen, and crew practice a more intentional self-making: Martha, for instance, overcomes her indoctrination both from her cult childhood and her tech job to form a new ethical identity (one could say she finds a balance between her father's survivalist teachings and her own sense of justice). Lai Zhen, interestingly, is one character who started somewhat outside the dominant order (she was a victim of geopolitical collapse, then became an influencer, arguably outside the corporate structure, though reliant on it for a platform). Zhen's journey is moving from an individualistic to a collective purpose (initially, she's just trying to survive and tell a story; by the end, she's invested in a communal solution). In a sense, Zhen's subjectivity moves from lone survivor to revolutionary agent, which is a Foucauldian-positive trajectory if we think of her adopting a new discursive position (from marginal curiosity to a key player in the power struggle). Meanwhile, Candace's trajectory is almost the inverse: from social participant (she did try to have normal relationships, jobs, etc.) to loner with a personal mission (just keep herself and baby alive).

Another angle of comparison: Knowledge and ignorance. In *Severance*, ignorance is partly willful; people know their jobs are meaningless or that routines are absurd, but they play along. There's also a literal lack of knowledge: no one really understands Shen Fever or how to cure it, reflecting how the actual processes of capitalism (like the supply chain that birthed the fever) are opaque to those benefiting from them. This is somewhat optimistic about the public sphere. In the novel, once the tech villains are publicly outed, their control weakens (mirroring how, in reality, public outrage can force CEOs to step down or policies to change). Foucault might caution that simply revealing truth doesn't automatically dissolve power (power often integrates and diffuses knowledge that could undermine it). But Alderman's plot suggests that in this case, truth was a powerful weapon against a regime built on secrecy.

It's also revealing to compare how each novel treats community. *Severance* is fundamentally about the lack of authentic community in late capitalism. Candace's workplace is a sterile, competitive environment; her relationship with Jonathan fails because they have divergent coping strategies; her parents' immigrant community is lost to her when they die, etc. The only "community" depicted is Bob's survivor group, which is a perverse caricature of community (authoritarian, performative rituals, no genuine solidarity, it's based on coercion and convenience). Candace ultimately chooses to be alone rather than remain in a toxic collective, a grim statement on how capitalism erodes community: even at the world's end, people struggle to form egalitarian groups. *The Future*, conversely, spotlights the formation of a heterogeneous community of trust among the protagonists.

In comparing these, one might conclude that *Severance* presents a more radical critique (one that implies the system is so deeply wrong that one can only individually opt out, and any attempt to rebuild ends up replicating old patterns), whereas *The Future* offers a more ameliorative critique (the system is wrong but can be corrected by the right people and oversight). Both approaches have their place in speculative fiction and political imagination. A Foucauldian might find *Severance*'s stance closer to his own critical nihilism about modern structures, and *The Future*'s stance closer to later Enlightenment humanism or liberal reform, ironically, more optimistic than Foucault usually was. It's worth noting that Foucault did later engage ideas of ethics and the care of the self, which involve smaller-scale transformations rather than utopian revolutions. In a sense, Candace's final step is an act of self-care (protecting her life and potential family rather than sacrificing them to a doomed structure). Martha and Zhen's crusade is an act of caring for the broader society (they expand the circle of care outward). One could align Candace with what Foucault called the ethics of self, and Martha's team with an ethics of community. The interplay between these ethics – personal integrity vs. collective responsibility, is a tension underlying many responses to our real global crises. Should one drop out and survive as best as one can (as some 'preppers' do, similar to the Enoch cult mindset in *The Future*) or should one stay and fight to change the world? The books personify this debate: Candace is a reluctant prepper (though she wasn't ideological about it, she ends up effectively in that role, wandering off into nature, whereas Martha's crew are reformers.

Finally, in comparing these novels through Foucault's *The Order of Things*, we should address how each reflects on the categories of Life, Labor, and Language (Knowledge) that Foucault said define modern thought. In *Severance*, Labor is front and center; it's the lens through which life is seen (people valued as workers or consumers). Life (in the biological sense) is only considered insofar as it supports labor, e.g., sick workers in Shenzhen are discarded or replaced; Candace's own bodily needs are ignored until pregnancy forces her to pay attention. The novel's plague underscores that, in the capitalist framework, life is expendable; the fever kills indiscriminately, and society doesn't mount a meaningful public health response (the government evacuates, and things fall apart, a satirical jab that our systems built for profit can't protect life in a crisis). Language/Knowledge in *Severance* is present in the form of documentation and media, Candace's blog, the internet (which goes dark, causing information vacuum), and even the *Bible* as a product she manufactures (the irony that the Bible, a source of spiritual knowledge, is treated as a commodity, a 'repackaged content', epitomizes the hollowing of meaning under capitalism). This resonates with Foucault's observation that modern society even turns its primary texts (like Scripture) into objects of exchange and classification, losing earlier layers of metaphysical significance.

Bringing it all together, what do these comparisons tell us about our reality? Both novels ultimately direct us to scrutinize our present moment: the monotony and alienation of many jobs (heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic experience, which made *Severance* resonate widely as a prescient satire of working-from-home and pandemic ennui), and the fear that Big Tech's unchecked power could lead to societal disaster (a fear that has only grown with AI advancements and climate emergencies). A Foucauldian analysis reveals that neither novel is simply about fantastical scenarios; they diagnose how power/knowledge operates today. Ma's work suggests that the way capitalism structures time, habit, and even illness is a form of power that we come to accept as normal until it literally destroys us. Alderman

suggests that the consolidation of predictive knowledge in private hands is a new form of sovereignty that we must challenge if we want a livable future. In terms of literary strategy, Ma's approach is subversive-ironic (making the familiar strange by showing it persists after the collapse), while Alderman's is cautionary-dramatic (heightening the stakes to galvanize readers' awareness). Both strategies aim to prompt reflection on change. The absence of overt Foucauldian jargon in either novel is irrelevant; the themes align with Foucauldian critique: the disciplinary nature of routine (*Severance*), the biopolitical calculus of who gets to live (*The Future*), the apparatus (dispositif) of technology as social control (*The Future*), and the subject's complicity and potential resistance (both). As readers, we are left to consider whether we, like Candace, are going through motions that ultimately hollow us out, and whether we have the courage to sever those bonds or reinvent them; or whether we, like Martha and Zhen, can find common cause with others to redirect the immense structures governing our lives.

6. CONCLUSION

Ma (2018) and Alderman (2023) each confront the existential plight of individuals living under systems that seek to regulate life in totalizing ways, one through the numbing repetition of globalized labor, the other through the predictive machinations of Big Tech's data empire. Employing Foucault (1970) as our analytical compass, we have explored how both novels serve as incisive commentaries on "The Order of Things" in late modernity, even as they differ in tone and resolution. Ma (2018) offers a world in which routinized labor and the logistics of capitalism have already zombified humanity: the apocalyptic scenario merely literalizes the metaphor that under the mandate of productivity and consumption, people become shells, 'dead' long before a plague turns them so. Alderman (2023), by contrast, imagines a world on the brink of destruction at the hands of those who wield knowledge as power: her tech magnates treat information as prophecy and instrument, using an AI apparatus to control their fate and, by omission, doom others. Both narratives, in Foucauldian terms, dramatize the culmination of particular epistemic paradigms. *Severance* distills the 18th-20th-century episteme of Man as a laboring animal (homo economicus) into a dark absurdity: humans reduced to pure habit, life fully subordinated to the motions of work. *The Future* extrapolates the nascent 21st-century episteme of Man as a data point, a world where algorithmic prediction governs human possibilities, rendering the future a product of calculation and, potentially, manipulation.

In this comparative analysis, this study identified several key points:

1) Life as Logistics vs. Life as Predictive Data

In *Severance*, 'life rendered legible as logistics' means that human existence is valued only in terms of its placement in workflows and supply chains. Candace's identity is largely defined by her role in a production network and the daily urban routines that network entails. The Shen Fever epidemic, causing victims to enact their last routine indefinitely, is a powerful symbol of how completely the logic of logistics can consume life. In *The Future*, life is filtered through the lens of risk analytics. AUGR's totalizing surveillance and forecasting constitute a regime in which the unknown is methodically shrunk, and individuals (indeed, all of humanity) are situated as variables in a massive computation. The tech leaders' obsession with foreknowledge reveals an inability to accept unpredictability and a desire to turn the future itself into a controlled object of knowledge. Both scenarios reflect what Foucault noted about modernity: an urge to master life, whether by organizing it in space and time (discipline) or by securing it in time to come (biopolitical security). The novels illustrate the extreme consequences of those urges: a populace too habituated to live (*Severance*), and an elite that sees the populace as an expendable abstraction (*The Future*).

2) The Production of Subjects

Each novel illuminates how systems produce certain types of subjectivities. *Severance*'s Candace Chen is the consummate Foucauldian subject of disciplinary capitalism, diligent, acquiescent, emotionally blunted, her very desires conditioned by the market (she finds comfort wandering shopping malls, equating consumer activity with normalcy and belonging). Her subjectivity is so molded by routine that even as society collapses, she 'keeps working' out of inertia and habituation. *The Future* gives us subjects at two poles of power: the tech CEOs like Lenk Sketlish, who embody the neoliberal "entrepreneur of the self" taken to megalomaniacal heights (utterly convinced of their right to control the world's course), and the resisters like Martha and Zhen, who reshape themselves from passive participants in tech's game into ethical actors against it. Notably, Alderman shows that even Lenk, ostensibly a mover and shaker, is a product of discourse: he subscribes to a quasi-cultic worldview (the Enochite rhetoric of foxes vs. rabbits) that justifies his actions. In other words, his sense of self as a predator-survivor is cultivated by a narrative, illustrating Foucault's notion

that power produces truth and subject positions. Meanwhile, Martha and her allies escape their “assigned” subject positions (assistant, wife, child, all expected to be compliant) by rejecting the knowledge/power relations that kept them in place (they actively question and sabotage the very predictions and systems that benefitted them). Both novels thereby affirm Foucault’s idea that where power operates, it also engenders the possibility of resistance through new forms of selfhood, be it Candace’s final refusal to continue as a cog or Martha’s assumption of a moral leadership role against her former bosses.

3) Resistance, Escape, and the Possibility of a New Order

Here the novels diverge in their imagined outcomes, yet both leave critical questions rather than tidy answers. Would that produce a new episteme grounded in transparency, equity, and care? The text hints at this but also tempers it with realism: the new guardians acknowledge they cannot foresee all outcomes or create utopia, only “tip things in the right direction” Alderman (2023). This aligns with a reformist ethos rather than an apocalyptic break. *The Future* does not erase ‘Man’ like a face in the sand, but rather seeks to redraw the face with kinder lines. From a Foucauldian perspective, this is a contest within the same episteme (the primacy of technoscientific solutions remains), whereas *Severance* invites us to consider the end of that episteme without showing us what comes next.

In conclusion, reading *Severance* and *The Future* side by side through Foucault’s theoretical frame deepens our understanding of both. They are complementary critiques of how the modern episteme, which made Labor, Life, and now Information fundamental objects of control, can go awry. One critiques the episteme’s effect on the everyday, the other on the fate of the whole world. Together, they paint a picture of a present (and imminent future) in which humans risk becoming, as Foucault warned, mere objects of their own systems of thought: either automatons in a logistics network or cogs in a predictive machine. Yet, both novels also find glimmers of humanity’s capacity to refuse and reimagine. Candace Chen’s final act of choosing the unknown over the soul-numbing known is one form of hope, it’s the hope vested in negativity.

For scholars of literature, these novels underscore the continuing relevance of Foucauldian analysis in the 21st century: we can discern in their pages the dynamics of discipline, biopower, and the shaping of subjectivities that Foucault identified, now refracted through new contexts (global pandemics, AI surveillance). For scholars of society, Ma and Alderman provide narrative laboratories to examine our own world: *Severance* prompts us to ask how much of our lives are on autopilot due to capitalist routines (a question painfully resonant after years of real pandemic lockdowns and “essential work” debates, while *The Future* challenges us to consider who holds the keys to the digital panopticons and prediction engines that increasingly guide public life a concern echoed by real-world AI ethicists and tech critics. Both novels ultimately align with Foucault’s project of critique: they ‘make visible what is invisible’ the power relations underlying the mundane and the novel alike, and in doing so, they invite us as readers to ponder how we might live differently.

In a very real sense, *Severance* and *The Future* ask us to confront what Foucault (1970) termed the archaeology of our present: What are the conditions that have made us who we are right now, and are those conditions nearing their breaking point? *Severance* offers a bleak archaeology of late-capitalist habit – and suggests that perhaps the only way to find a new mode of life is through a kind of figurative death and rebirth, shaking off the ‘skeleton of habit’ that upholds our current frame. *The Future* provides a critical archaeology of Silicon Valley’s utopian (or dystopian) mindset, and imagines that by excavating and exposing its logic, we might reconstruct it on more humane grounds. Both routes carry risks and no guarantees, much as Foucault acknowledged that power has no final overcoming, only strategic shifts. Candace stepping into uncertainty and Martha seizing the machinery are both strategic shifts, gambits for a livable life.

In sum, these works of fiction, grounded in the late 2010s and early 2020s, resonate strongly with Foucauldian theory while also extending it. They ground abstract concepts in visceral narrative: we *feel*, through Candace, the deadening weight of a life made entirely legible and routine, and we thrill, with Zhen and Martha, at the prospect of wresting the future back from algorithmic tyrants. The comparative study here has shown that, despite differences in narrative form, *Severance* and *The Future* each function as cautionary tales about surrendering too much of our lives to structures of our own making. And importantly, each suggests that alternatives, however fragile or preliminary, are conceivable: whether it’s the radically personal alternative of simply opting out (to remember Bartleby’s mantra, “I would prefer not to”), or the systemic alternative of collectively wresting control and demanding a new ethos of technology.

In closing, one might recall Foucault (1970) provocative image of the erasure of ‘Man’ at the edge of the sea. These novels prompt a question: if the figure of the human as we know it is effaced by the relentless waves of capital or code,

what next will emerge on the sand? *Severance* leaves us with a solitary figure on an empty highway, suggesting that perhaps from solitude and severance a different kind of community or self will have to be imagined off-page. *The Future* ends with a nascent community repurposing the tools of the old world, implying that a new configuration of knowledge and power, less centralized, more compassionate, could be drawn. Both are, in their own ways, acts of speculative hope beyond the critique. It falls to us, as readers and participants in the real world's unfolding story, to decide which path (or combination of paths) we will tread. The clarity these novels offer on the forces that shape us and the cracks in their edifice is invaluable. In the spirit of Foucault's critical philosophy, they do not tell us what to do, but they do show us with bracing clarity what is being done to us, and thus they open the space to think and act otherwise.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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