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Figure 1: "Future Movement Future – REJECTED." Video available at <https://vimeo.com/654303920>.

Synopsis

In a not-too-distant future, an anonymous researcher and their team applied for funding to develop their newest invention: a new algorithmic model for smart cameras that would allow people to analyze the movement of cars at a previously unheard-of scale. This system was said to enable new forms of predictive capabilities to emerge: the algorithm would be able to, for example, predict the route drivers wanted to take but had not yet taken—including, for example, their occult inner desires for getting away with a secret lover. A panel of academic reviewers from three different universities audited and reviewed the proposed system.

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All that is left are segments of the video-report resulting from this meeting, which became an urban legend among technology researchers. The short film “Future Movement Future – REJECTED” is the story of a dystopian surveillance future that was barred by institutional refusal. It importantly reminds us about how total surveillance, the “almighty algorithmic eye,” may end up seeing-predicting much less than imagining-dreaming.

Research Statement

The hype of AI and computer vision continues to build (cf. Vinsel 2021). Such technological systems are increasingly implemented in cities, companies, and across different aspects of our digital lives (see Sadowski 2019; McCosker and Wilken 2020). However, although we are promised increases in efficiency and optimization, we often end up with systems that do not achieve their inflated promises while often causing a wide set of nefarious consequences (see Eubanks 2018). In response to the prompt from this special issue for imagining surveillance futures, be they utopian or dystopian, our goal was to speculate on: What if we could refuse surveillance?¹

Figure 2: "Future Movement Future – Rejected" poster. Graphic design by Guilherme Falcão.

¹ The use of methods of speculative practice (e.g., speculative fiction, critical fabulation) by researchers, scholars, and designers aims at intervening on hegemonic conceptualizations of technological production (for further discussion, see Markham 2020; Dunne and Raby 2013; Rosner 2018; Fiesler 2021).

In the future imagined in the film (see Figure 2), for better or worse, technological development is not uncontrolled and ever-expanding. We see this as a reviewing body of eminent academics is presented with a predictive system that extracts information from smart cameras tracking the movement of cars in the city. The three scholars can either approve or reject the existence of such emergent technology. They are unimpressed by the project's methodology, which relies on causal relations between "imagetic features" detected by smart cameras and the destinations that cars are (supposedly) going to go. The reviewers also take issue with the system's datasets, which originate from the tracking of cows in pastures. A further source of confusion is the project's goals, which remain undeclared despite the grandiose technological scaffolding. Could surveillance be the goal, even though the project claims to be decentralized and privacy-oriented? The committee members discuss their concern over how there is plenty of potential for this system to be used for manipulating drivers without their knowledge.

The committee is given the mandate to say "no," completely rejecting such a predictive system from being implemented and ever going into operation. After deliberation, this is what they do—in stark contrast with the current development of computer vision, which Vinay Prabhu and Abeba Birhane (2020: 1) defined as a "pyrrhic win" coming "at the expense of harm to minoritized groups and further aid[ing] the gradual erosion of privacy, consent, and agency of both the individual and the collective." In the film, the board is the watchdog for holding nefarious projects accountable, safeguarding rights and deciding what is acceptable or not. They act as metaphorical "emergency brakes" to uncontrolled technological development (see Mueller 2021).

This story may be a (somewhat naïve?) utopia. However, many troubling questions are left unanswered in the story, inviting the viewer to a critical reflection. What is this committee and who are its members? Are their decisions really impartial, fair, and accountable? Could the reviewers' concern that the project is just a ploy to protest against their oversight be an indication that they are actually not the heroes in this story? It is left unclear what kinds of utopian or dystopian consequences may emerge from such an envisioned "surveillance future."

The format of speculative fiction allows us to shift from realist and after-the-fact questions towards conjectural discussions. The future presented in the film is just one possibility. When faced with oppressive surveillance technologies, what forms of refusal do we actually want to see? Could we find ways through which the pernicious use of police surveillance dragnets (see Brayne 2017; Pereira and Raetzsch, forthcoming) be barred from existence? Activists in Seattle, for example, have fought for years to establish the Seattle Surveillance Ordinance, a key example of collective organizing to fight against the deployment of surveillance technologies in the public sector (Lee 2021; Young, Katell, and Krafft 2019). Could we globally restrict the use of facial recognition, which scholar Philip Agre (2003) already described two decades ago as an imminent danger to freedom (cf. Stark 2019; Roussi 2020)? Facial recognition technologies are indeed being banned in some cities (Roussi 2020) in a movement that seems to be spreading (cf. Mueller 2021). But who makes these decisions, and how? Who is at the table, grumpy academics (like us), politicians, businesspeople, or members of affected communities?

Questions about refusal abound for future surveillance studies research. What we hope to make visible in the film is that it is also up to our research practice to pave the way for refusing surveillance futures (Pereira 2021). Speculating what such refusing could be, we understand, is crucial as it both broadens our horizons beyond hegemonic imaginaries and reminds us that our future is actually up for grabs (cf. Markham 2020).

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