

Financial Vision and the Disinterested Gaze of Power

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Paper for The Financial Gaze panel
Intersections of Finance and Society Conference
City, University of London, 2-3 November, 2017

In 1770 – 1771, Thomas Bridges published his serial novel *The Adventures of a Bank Note*. One of the eighteenth century “it narratives” – popular tales which featured sentient objects as main characters – this series features a first-person bank note, which observes human interactions as it travels from pocket to pocket. England’s economy, at this time, was becoming more fully internationalized, with influxes of overseas commodities and the spectre of slave ships in the far distance. In parallel, the banknote it-narrative invented new means to narrate liquidity, conceiving of narrative vectors as functions of financial equivalence, and reimagining the social from the perspectives of circulation and exchange. These novels focalize the world through the banknote’s “eyes,” thus making a powerful claim to depersonalized, financial vision. Yet such a claim is complex. In a sense, such narration radically decentralizes bio-centric conceptions of vision; yet equally, it has the potential to naturalize distributions of (all too human) financial power, by envisioning a means through which financial players might make a narrative claim on impersonal, financial vision. How might such complexities come to bear on our current capitalist moment?

This paper proposes that Bridges’ tale may be read as an early precursor to what Shoshana Zuboff has termed “surveillance capitalism:” a new regime of accumulation, particularly prominent among Silicon Valley start-ups, according to which surveilling online behaviour becomes directly profitable. Financial vision – once anomalously expressed in narrative form – has now become normalized as the financialized “vision” of surveillance capital. This paper situates Bridges’ tale in relation to some more recent expressions of financial vision, and argues that, given the ways in which the narrative construction of a disinterested financial gaze can normalize power differences, there is an urgent need to begin to construct a history of surveillance-capitalist aesthetics.