RECASTING THE FUTURE WITH AMAZON WORKERS

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Amazon: Whose future?

In Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon, literary critic Marc McGurl (2021) notes that the corporation, which in a short 25 years has become the world’s largest retailer and one of its largest private employers, has been guided by a self-aggrandizing science/speculative fiction (SF) narrative. The firm has in numerous ways been inspired and shaped by the favourite genre of its founder, Jeff Bezos, who has famously used his share of its massive profits to finance his own private space program (Levy, 2021). Amazon flatters itself as an angel of capitalism’s creative destruction, wielding the flaming sword of digital technology to liberate humanity from the clutches of the past (Delfanti, 2021).

The company has not only transformed the way we buy books but also how and what we read. Today it is by some measures the world’s largest publisher, with a jealous hold over tens of millions of Kindle readers as well as over writers who pen novels (typically genre fiction) on its exclusive platform (Davis, 2020). Via its subsidiary, Audible, Amazon is unrivalled in the realm of audiobooks (Doctorow, 2020). Beyond the written and spoken word, Amazon’s digital streaming services are among the most popular in the world. It has ambitiously sought to finance award-winning films and TV serials to announce itself as a leading content producer; once a platform to merely buy books, the company has become a content creator across multiple media (Brevini & Swiatek, 2021) and, as such, it shapes the stories we tell ourselves about our world. It is also quickly becoming America’s top retailer, gobbling up market share in the sale of everything from garments to video games, from household staples to office supplies (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2020). Tens of thousands of smaller businesses now compete with one another to use Amazon’s order and fulfilment platforms to sell their goods and services to the giant’s dedicated customers, a kind of walled garden version of the free market (Alimahomed-Wilson et al., 2020).

But the firm has not been content to stop there. It has leveraged its early success to become the world’s largest provider of web services and data management; Amazon servers are the back-end of a huge proportion of the internet and manage the data of many of the world’s top companies, public institutions, governments, and even military and security forces (Williams, 2020). It has transformed the logistics industry through its advanced employment of machine learning and revolutionized how warehouses work through its extensive use of robotics.
(Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020). The company has sought to become a ubiquitous presence in our lives: in 2017, it acquired the American grocery giant Whole Foods and in 2019, it introduced Amazon Care in that country, a digital healthcare service aiming to “disrupt” that industry as well (Huberman, 2021; Nosthoff & Maschewski, 2021).

While capitalist firms by their very nature compete by seeking to predict the future to capitalize on new opportunities and manage risk, Amazon is actively seeking to leverage its massive wealth and power to create a future in which it is dominant. Their corporate slogan “work hard, have fun, make history” indicates the kind of relentless, progressivist drive to shape human destiny that animates the company’s strategy. Beyond corporate rhetoric, communication scholar Alessandro Defanti and Bronwyn Frey’s recent study of Amazon and its subsidiaries reveals the wide array of patent applications held by the firm, indicating the type of mind-bending future it envisions for us all (Delfanti & Frey, 2021).

And yet who is building that future? Recent years have seen numerous stories about the horrors endured by workers throughout Amazon’s operations (Struna & Reese, 2020). Workers in the firm’s corporate offices report a culture of overwork, stress, and verbal abuse (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). But these white-collar workers have it relatively easy. Delivery drivers work punishing schedules, often forced to compete with one another to quicken their pace, at the expense of their own health, safety, and well-being (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020). Even the independent companies contracted to deliver packages endure punishing forms of self-exploitation in the name of the massive corporation’s profits (Gurley, 2022). In what could have been taken directly from Orwell’s dystopian 1984, warehouse workers toil under conditions of staggering surveillance and micromanagement, often at a pace set by robots, and are forced to wear sensors that track their every gesture and vital sign to maximize efficiency (Delfanti, 2021). Then there are the gig workers on the firm’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, who compete from home against one another for digital micro-contracts often denominated at cents-per-second ratios and usually taking the form of medial data entry or simple coding tasks (Irani, 2015; Sherry, 2020). Often this human work is intended to train the very algorithms that will eventually replace these and other workers.

If Amazon is building the future, it is building it on the backs of its workers. And, indeed, many of its techniques seem to be the stuff of dystopian fantasy.

Around the world, workers are rebelling, forming trade unions and workers’ organizations (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2020). However, the infamous union-busting techniques of the firm in Bessemer, Alabama, which were condemned by the (by no means union-friendly) Labour Relations Board, indicate its violent and ruthless allergy to this kind of worker protagonism (Scheiber & Weise, 2022). All the more remarkable, then, that the independent Amazon Workers’ Union was able to successfully organize one of the firm’s Staten Island warehouses, repurposing the company’s claims to be an “essential service” during the covid-19 pandemic lockdowns as a justification for a reclamation of value by workers (Kantor & Weise, 2022). Other efforts are afoot to push back against these anti-worker strategies, efforts are afoot, under the banner of the global Make Amazon Pay coalition and the American Athena coalition, aiming to coordinate efforts of unions, workers’ centres, civil society organizations, and other progressive forces to challenge Amazon’s power (Rubin, 2019; Smith, 2021).

And yet these efforts, as their protagonists would likely be the first to admit, are so deeply in the trenches they have a hard time making space and time to see the horizon. Beyond defending worker’s rights and seeking to halt the relentless advance of Amazon, it is imperative to envision alternate futures. The technology and wealth that, today, Amazon and other “technofeudalist” firms monopolize can and should be used to liberate humanity from toil, not institute an even more punishing regime of exploitation (Dean, 2020; Varoufakis, 2021).
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How might such a future be envisioned, let alone instituted? What role will workers themselves have to play in imagining and stewarding its birth? What do workers have to say? Strangely, few people seem to ask. But we did.

Studying speculative fiction with Amazon workers

In November and December of 2021, we recruited around 24 rank-and-file Amazon workers to watch SF shows with us and talk about the future. We met on Zoom once a week and workers were remunerated for their time. Together, we watched films including *Snow Piercer*, TV shows like *Squid Game, Black Mirror*, and *Star Trek*, and played games from radical gamemaker Molleindustria that reflect on the conditions of digital workers. We asked the workers if and how this media content helped them reflect on their work at the corporation. The purpose wasn’t so much to gather data for academic research but to create a space where workers could theorize their experiences for themselves. It was open to both current workers and those who had recently left the company’s workforce, but not to managers. Participants were invited to use false names or no names to protect their identities.

The first thing we learned is that there are a lot of different kinds of workers at Amazon. In our group, we had warehouse workers, delivery drivers, content writers, MTurk workers, and data analysts from all across the United States and some from Canada. They had vastly different cultural, linguistic, educational, and economic backgrounds, which sometimes made dialogue challenging. Some were huge SF fans with encyclopaedic knowledge of the genre, but others were more casual consumers. While some had clear and strong political views on capitalism (both for and against), in general, they seemed happy to have respectfully neutral discussions framed by the collective desire for a better future. Most were forthcoming about how difficult it was to work at Amazon and how demanding they found the company’s management tactics and relentless surveillance. But many were also happy to have the work, either because it provided a stable income or, in other cases, because it provided flexibility and sometimes community.

Most of the participants tended to identify strongly with the dystopian themes in the films and TV series we watched and the games we played. They almost universally felt that the future looked fairly bleak for workers (not only Amazon workers) and that it was likely that technological changes would serve the interests of the rich. Revealingly, many questioned the relevance of wealth in a crumbling world: Would class make much of a difference in the dismal, ecologically ravaged, war-torn future? But others were exasperated by this pessimism and encouraged us to think about what could be done today to prevent both a terrible future and continued hyper-exploitation.

One contradiction that came up again and again was that, while many workers spoke to the dystopian present and future, they also expressed an abstract optimism about their own personal circumstances. Several participants expressed the sentiment that people ought to stick together and help one another in facing an oppressor: not necessarily Amazon but systems of inequality at large. The value of teamwork and working together to overcome challenges were major recurring themes in our conversations, and often reflected in the media we watched together. Most workers also told us that feeling part of a team was the best thing about their job. They were almost all sceptical that Amazon management would ever recognize or appreciate their hard work. They talked a lot about how unfair they found the system of rewards and punishments on the job, which they often associated with the incompetence of local managers, rather than the corporation. In its warehouses, Amazon brought back the 80s management fad of the “employee of the month” award to encourage hard work through internal
competition. But the workers we talked with felt this was a largely dystopian gimmick. They also resented the constant technological “nudging” toward reward-seeking behaviour. For example, employees with repetitive positions were encouraged to fill out surveys while they work to earn minutes of vacation time.

Many watched or read SF, or played SF-themed games as a way to escape from the demanding world of work, and so were less enthusiastic about taking critical positions on the SF content we watched or played together. Compounding this, some reacted so strongly to the dystopian themes (a few even calling it “triggering”) that they admitted to having difficulty engaging with the texts we had selected. And yet, there was a clear sense that SF, especially dark and dystopian SF, was appealing to the group. Were a traveller from labour’s past to visit our time, they would likely see an Amazon warehouse, or the condition of its digital workforce as a SF dystopia. Did this explain why Amazon workers were so drawn to the genre? What interest did these texts offer to workers who are relentlessly surveilled, measured, controlled, and pitted against one another by a huge corporation that literally uses their exploited energies to realise the megalomaniacal fantasies of their CEO to go to space?

In our discussion, it became clear that engaging with SF texts was most prominently a form of escapist entertainment, a way of winding down after a hard day (or night, or week) of work. But why not romcoms, or period drama, or soap operas? Or why not more optimistic SF, like Star Trek? Certainly, the answer was different for all of the workers we spoke to, but we wonder if, on some level, the dystopian SF was somehow validating.

Methods for fictioning the future of work

In approaching this project, we wanted our research methodology to enable us to collectively think and discuss with Amazon workers to think about and discuss the emerging paradigm of “platform capitalism” under which they work. Under platform capitalism, the profit motive of increasingly concentrated corporations is augmented by the use of digital technology (Srnicek, 2016). Furthermore, workers access employment through the mediation of digital platforms, a process often related to the “gig economy” (Jones, 2021). Far from the dream of robots liberating humans from toil, this shift has seen an increase in worker precariousness and a diminishment in workers’ capacity to organize collectively for their rights, as well as increased power in the hands of investors and senior management (Bananav, 2020).

Recently, a number of scholars have shown that Amazon is a pioneer in the use of digital technology for the discipline and exploitation of labour (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2020; Moore & Robinson, 2016). Amazon’s use of digital surveillance, robotics, and metrics to gain ever more productivity from their workers has become notorious as emblematic of the exploitative potential of today’s technology and a grim harbinger of the future of work (Delfanti, 2021; Zuboff, 2019). As numerous scholars argue. Beyond the very material struggles workers face in platform capitalism, the paradigm also places the future itself in the hands of corporations that increasingly appear to act outside the scope of public regulation and take decisive actions with fundamental consequences for the future of society (Dyer-Witheford, 2015).

Our project seeks to contribute to an effervescence of research on Amazon, and on platform capitalism more broadly in a completely new way. While some scholars have focused on workers’ sentiments (Briken & Taylor, 2018; Irani, 2015), no study has examined their approach to the future. While other studies have used surveys or focus groups, none has explored cultural texts as a focal point for transformative conversation. And while SF has been theorized as a vehicle for critical consciousness raising, this has rarely been attempted with groups of workers.
In order to develop our approach, our project draws on and combines in new ways three broad and established methodological approaches and theoretical areas of study.

The first, the Participatory Workers’ Inquiry (WI), was initially developed in Italy in the 1970s and saw scholars approach workers as partners in theorizing the changing nature of capitalism (Woodcock, 2021). Often, this took the form of collective reading and discussion circles and represented a long-term commitment by scholars to a process of personal transformation in the research participants. This was undertaken primarily to help workers better strategize around their struggle for rights and compensation, and to encourage a Marxist understanding of their exploitation. In recent years, WI has been widely used as a methodology where scholars collaborate with precarious workers and/or those in rapidly changing sectors to better to understand both workers’ lives and struggles and the broader systems of which they are a part (Brophy, 2017; Holland, 2020; Ovetz, 2020).

To our knowledge, WI researchers have yet to incorporate work with cultural texts, let alone SF. By focusing on workers that labour within Amazon’s emergent forms of platform capitalism, their actual experiences and struggles are revealed. Here, our project aims to access what Geoghegan (1990) calls the “negative memories” of exploitation that might animate new forms of cooperation and struggle for workers’ rights with what Bloch (1996) calls a “concrete utopian” dimension. As Kelley (2002) argues, future visions that are catalyzed by such struggles have great potential value to society at large as they provide alternative pathways to social change.

In the second place, our approach is informed by the “convocation” method for researching the “radical imagination” developed by Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) based on theories of Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) and Robin D.G. Kelley (2002). Here, the imagination is approached as a collective process, rather than an individual cognitive function. The radical imagination emerges from everyday life and the collective experience of struggle against dominant power relations. Accordingly, Khasnabish and Haiven argue the role of the researcher of the imagination ought to include efforts to “convoke” the radical imagination by bringing research participants together to learn, create, debate and, in the term provided by Harney and Moten (2013), “study.” The convocation method measures its success less by delivering data on research participants and more by how it supports them to theorize and reflect on their own experience. Since being introduced nearly a decade ago, the convocation method has been used many times by scholars working with social movements and communities in struggle. It has not yet been attempted with groups of workers and has not yet been integrated with SF or the practices of creative writing.

In the third case, our project draws on a strand of critical pedagogy that mobilizes the SF genre, including films, novels, and games, to stimulate critical collective reflection on contemporary society (Truman, 2019). While SF has struggled to overcome its assigned status as a “paraliterature,” not to be taken seriously relative to canonical literature, increasingly both critics and reading publics have come to appreciate the genre for its ability to challenge the imagination (Broderick, 1995; Moylan, 2018). While typically set in the close or distant future, SF inevitably reflects the worldly concerns of the writer and the reader in their own time. In doing so, it enables readers to explore their assumptions about how the world functions, the nature of political relations, social norms, and regimes of economic value. The critical power of SF is not that it provides blueprints for a future society, but that it invites the production of ideas and images that exist (Bloch, 1996) in opposition to the world that is (Suvin, 1997). At its best, SF can produce a generative estrangement evoked by the appearance of that which is “not yet” (Bloch, 1996). It can help “educate desire” to embolden resistance to the status quo (Levitas, 1997). While the SF genre was forged in the crucible of colonialism have often been...
used to reinforce and reproduce hegemonic ideologies, the genre has seen a rise of diverse and subaltern voices over the past 60 years. The genre’s powers of cognitive estrangement have been especially successful when mobilized by oppressed groups including LGBTQ2+ people, Indigenous people, and Black people (brown & Imarisha, 2015; Dillon, 2012).

SF’s critical powers are especially important in a moment of capitalism that, as Haiven (2014) argues, does not simply vanquish the imagination but seeks to harness it to make each social subject conform to its forms of value. As Jameson (2005) makes clear, SF is particularly useful in developing a critique of capitalism from within, a system that is uniquely structurally future-oriented. Amazon is particularly emblematic of capitalism’s orientation toward the future. Researchers like McGurl (2021) have suggested the centrality of generic SF narrative to the firm’s public image and internal vision. This is clearly evidenced in Amazon’s founding CEO, Jeff Bezos’ frequent declarations of the importance of SF to his life, vision, and corporate strategy and has redirected his massive fortune toward a private space program to make his dreams for humanity a reality (Means & Slater, 2019).

In our project, we are not only interested in consuming SF with workers but also supporting them to produce it. In future iterations of the project, we will invite workers to craft their own narratives about potential worlds (utopian, dystopian or neither) after Amazon. This approach follows and expands upon successful experiments by scholars and social movements and community educators who have used SF writing workshops as a way to catalyze a collective process of critical discovery. Perhaps best known is brown and Imarisha’s (2015) use of SF writing workshops to foster the imagination of social movement actors in the United States, which they have developed into a set of prompts for similar exercises. Similarly, Truman (2019, 2021) has written on how writing SF can contribute to a feminist and anti-racist pedagogy of liberation in the university and high school classrooms. Our project also takes inspiration from projects like New York’s Workers Writing Workshop, which recognize the importance of supporting the creative writing of working people as a project of social justice (Hsu, 2017).

Is resistance futile?

As noted, Jeff Bezos, indelibly linked to Amazon, is intimately connected to the SF genre. In particular, he has at many points identified Star Trek as his single most important inspiration (Roberts & Andrews, 2021). Indeed, he considered naming Amazon makeitso.com after the catchphrase of his hero, Captain Jean-Luc Picard of Star Trek: The Next Generation, which aired new episodes from 1987 until 1994, the year Amazon’s predecessor company was founded. Bezos even styles his appearance on that of Patrick Stewart and is unabashed in his embrace of the thriving and obsessive nerd culture around the franchise. According to his own testimony, and those of other founders and executives, Bezos would regularly refer to Star Trek episodes in corporate strategy meetings and the series was in some senses pivotal to the internal culture of the company (Stone, 2013).

In fact, it is strongly suspected that Amazon was really an effort by the former financier to generate the wealth to launch his own private space program. In 2000, these efforts became a reality with Bezos’s founding of Blue Origin, whose mantra is “Earth, in all its beauty, is just our starting place.” When the company was finally successful at launching rockets with human passengers in 2021, one of the first “guests” was the actor William Shatner, famous for playing the maverick Captain Kirk on the original Star Trek series, which a young Bezos watched with an almost religious devotion.

Ironically, the empire Bezos created in some ways resembles the kind of dystopian world that his idolized intergalactic explorers might encounter and seek to liberate. In each incarnation
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of the franchise, Star Trek has dwelled with the social and philosophical issues of its time, related to the prospects of freedom, the nature of exploitation, and the possibilities of peace and cooperation across cultures. The noble United Federation of Planets was dreamed up by the series’ founder, Gene Roddenberry, as an antidote to the culture of fear and xenophobia being fostered by the Cold War. He envisioned an interstellar alliance of species, including a multi-ethnic mix of humans, that, together, dedicated themselves to peace and exploration. In the journeys of their flagship starship Enterprise across multiple different series, the Federation encounters numerous planets and societies that act as allegories for our present-day earthly concerns.

Critics have noted that, in the Cold War, Star Trek often appeared as a benevolent fantasy of the American Empire, championing notions of individualist “freedom” in contrast to the collectivist pathologies of alien species, a cipher for the evils of “totalitarian” communism (Sarantakes, 2005). But as the series developed, it would also, at times, come to critique the kind of ruthless and reckless profiteering associated with capitalism (Hassler-Forest, 2016).

In any case, the Federation is, ultimately, most easily read as a postcapitalist fantasy based on the presumption that the development of technology will, by the 24th century, have largely eliminated the need for human toil and create a world of abundance and therefore peace.

If it is Bezos’ dream to create such a world, he seems to be more than willing to sacrifice the lives, health, and well-being of millions of workers to achieve it. The exploitative and abusive practices of the company, combined with alarger-than-life corporate culture and megalomaniacal (former) CEO, all feel like they were scripted with a heavy hand in the Star Trek writing room: some producers evidently let the concept slide by, without sending it back with a note saying, “too on the nose: make the allegory for the evils of capitalism more subtle or we’ll lose the audience.”

If Star Trek has been such a large influence on Amazon’s development, perhaps there are clues within its plotlines and tropes that might help us unpack the firm’s deeper dimensions. In 1997, two years after it started selling books online, Amazon was publicly listed on the New York Stock Exchange. In that same year Star Trek Voyager, then in its fourth season of network syndication, introduced the character Seven of Nine. Seven was a cyborg that the ship’s crew rescued from the Borg, a hive-minded alien species that, since their first appearance in the series in 1989, have terrorized the Federation and its heroes. Like her counterparts in The Collective, before being “assimilated” Seven was once an intelligent, independent human. However, upon being abducted as a child by the virus-like horde, they were transformed into a powerful robotic drone dedicated to their collective mission of doing the same to all intelligent, independent lifeforms in the universe. Their monotone mantra, “resistance is futile,” has become so stitched into popular culture that its origins have been largely forgotten.

Separated from her fellow drones by her human rescuers, Seven eventually reclaims some sense of her individuality and morality and joins Voyager as part of its diverse crew. Her humanity recaptured, she becomes an invaluable strategic asset, not only for her superior strength, endurance, and intellectual capacities but also because, having once been part of the hive mind, she has special insight into and even contact with it. Now part of the resistance to the Borg’s endless, viral growth, her intimate, embodied knowledge becomes a source of hope.

Is Amazon The Borg? Will they continue their parasitic expansion to claim ever more spheres of life? Addressing their victims, The Borg promise to “add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own” and reassure them that their cultural particularities will “adapt to service us.” As more and more sectors of the capitalist economy fall to Amazon’s relentless, digitally augmented expansion or recast themselves around its model,
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the metaphor is tempting. Certainly, it resonates with scenes of warehouses where workers wear sensors linked to Amazon servers, measuring and subtly “nudging” their movements to ensure efficiency in the service of profit. Though they retain their individuality and are framed by the company as “entrepreneurs,” the image of thousands of MTurk workers at computer terminals around the world racing to fulfil endless, mundane digital microtasks fed to them by an Amazon proprietary data system transforms these workers into something not unlike drones. Amazon’s fleet of delivery drivers, who are constantly being nudged to do their work faster through arcane digital systems is reminiscent of the Borg’s modus operandi. Sure, all these workers are allowed to retain their sense of individual selfhood. Unlike the Borg, they are technically free to quit at any time. But how much does that matter in an economy where increasingly every firm is learning from or being “disrupted” by Amazon’s model?

We speculate that, like Seven of Nine, Amazon workers may have some special insight and intuition of how to resist and rebel not only at the level of their conscious intellectual reflections but encoded in their very bodies. Workers are, of course, categorically excluded from management decision-making and strategy. The algorithms that govern their bodies and time are opaque. And yet our SF-inspired conjecture is that workers intuit something about the firm and the future it is building by virtue of having been bodily assimilated into spaces and mindsets prescribed by Amazon’s structures. Though their access to and power over Amazon’s “collective intelligence” is limited, they are still in some sense possessed by it, as if by a parasite, and so have some preternatural awareness of it.

If that’s the case, then rank and file Amazon workers themselves may have the most important insights about how to challenge the company’s future-shaping machine. The wager of our project is that, by creating welcoming, convivial, and creative spaces, we can work with Amazon workers to awaken their secret insight into the future-making (or future-killing) power of their exploiter. By using the genre of SF, so pivotal to Amazon’s foundation and operations, we might be able to labour together to envision a near-future world beyond Amazon’s grasp, where the potential to co-create a future is shared democratically, rather than hoarded by a corporate oligarchy.

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