

Power Discipline and Resistant Self: Analysis of Machines Like Me

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Abstract. Based on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, this paper examines the disciplinary narrative of artificial intelligence power to human beings in the fictional parallel world of the 1980s, analyzes the triple transformation of the protagonists Charlie and Miranda, and presents the shaping process of human subjectivity in the digital panoramic open prison. This process is manifested in turn as external discipline under hierarchical monitoring, active compliance brought by internalized self-discipline, and ultimate self-awakening and resistance, revealing that human subjectivity has both vulnerability and resilience in the era of algorithmic governance. This paper further points out that the loss of human subjectivity is closely related to the invisible domination of technical rationality and the blind convergence of "optimal solution", which provides a critical context for interpreting the erosion of human autonomy by artificial intelligence power. This study expands the panoramic view model from physical architecture to digital algorithm surveillance, enriches the critical application of Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, breaks through the limitation that traditional power analysis only focuses on state institutions, and also provides a new analytical framework for understanding the complex operation of power, self-discipline and self-concern in the digital age.

Keywords: Machines Like Me, Power Discipline, Michel Foucault

1. Introduction

Ian Russell McEwan (1948-) is one of the most influential writers in contemporary British literature, known as the "national writer". His writing style is delicate, sharp and calm, and he is good at writing themes such as violence, death, love and good and evil. McEwan's works are abundant, including *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), *Machines Like Me* (2019) and the widely acclaimed *Atonement* (2001). Ron Charles remarked: "McEwan is not only one of the most elegant writers alive, but also one of the most astute at crafting moral dilemmas within the drama of everyday life" [1].

Machines Like Me (2019) is McEwan's representative work on the dilemma of artificial intelligence and human nature. It realizes the deep combination of scientific narrative and power criticism, and accurately presents the operation logic of Foucault's power theory, which has attracted extensive attention from literary researchers and ethicists. The spiritual transformation process of the

protagonist Charlie is highly consistent with Foucault's power discipline theory, which can be divided into three stages. At first, social morality, legal norms and technical ethics together constitute an external power network, which comprehensively discipline Charlie's thoughts and behaviors. Subsequently, Charlie internalizes these norms into self-restraint and actively restrains his own desires, emotions and choices in his relationship with Miranda. Finally, in the confrontation and self-reflection with Adam, he realized the alienation and imprisonment of human nature by power, broke away from the shackles of discipline, and completed self-awakening and resistance. Under the gaze of the robot, people will unconsciously conduct self-discipline and self-doubt. Tae Wan Kim commented: "Seeing who I am disturbed. I am naked before Adam" [2].

2. Literature review

The research on *Machines Like Me* collected by CNKI mainly focuses on three perspectives : ethics, narratology and post-humanism.

The research from the ethical perspective mainly focuses on the ethical dilemma of Charlie and Miranda after the intervention of robot Adam, and discusses how the products of artificial intelligence affect the ethical relationship between human and machine, or trigger the ethical conflict between human and machine. Li Zhixian proposed that the robot Adam created a moral dilemma in the conflict with Charlie. "It is precisely because of Adam's ambiguous ethical identity and his challenge to traditional human-machine relationships that both humans and machines have fallen into ethical dilemmas" [3]. Adam's behavioral logic is controlled by algorithms. Follow the highest standards of human morality, but human emotions have their own complexity, and machines cannot achieve true "humanization", and the contradictions and conflicts of human-machine relations continue to emerge. He Shuangshuang analyzes the causes of Charlie's identity crisis and man-machine ethical problems from the three spatial levels of society, individual and family, and interprets Charlie's state from the perspective of anthropocentrism. Studies have suggested that space is not only a field that breeds identity anxiety, but also a potential path to resolve anxiety. The turbulent political environment makes Charlie have individual identity anxiety. The emergence of Adam breaks the private space boundary between Charlie and Miranda. The intimate relationship between the two further aggravates Charlie's identity crisis and makes the man-machine relationship in the social space more tense. The study of ethical perspective provides more dimensions for the interpretation beyond human-machine emotion.

Narratology is an important perspective for the study of the novel, which can not only reveal the unique narrative strategy of the novel, but also an important method to connect philosophy and humanistic research. This philosophical perspective is closely related to the artistic expression of the work across the boundary of time and space. Ma Ke proposed, "the narrative construction positions robots as non-human entities in an equal and mutually influential relationship with human" [4]. clearly showing the role of narrative skills in reshaping human self-cognition and promoting mutual understanding of different life forms. Jia Pengwei believed that "the novel employs unnatural narrators to dissolve the traditional authority of a singular narrator, achieving the effect of eliminating the boundary between narrative subject and object" [5]. McEwan puts the future science fiction elements into the historical context and breaks through the conventional narrative structure. The descriptions of Turing's immortality, the blending of time and space, and Charlie's unconventional human-machine emotions in the novel open up the boundaries between the past and the future, human and machine, so that readers can more objectively view the impact of technological development. Narratological research has also been able to explore the deep causes of man-machine ethical dilemmas in a broader perspective.

The research from the perspective of post-humanism mostly focuses on transcending anthropocentrism and analyzes the potential challenges faced by human-machine symbiosis. Qi Ruixi takes post-human beings as the core research object. The novel takes London in 1982 as the future narrative background to construct a metaphorical space. She proposed, "by exploring the biopolitics of posthumanity, the novel prompts a re-evaluation of bio-political subjects and conceptual challenges to the very definition of life" [6]. This study combed Adam from the service tool. The process of transforming into a self-organizing life form integrated into human life reflects the gradual dissolution of bio-political hegemony in the post-human era, which is replaced by a post-human existence with universal life attributes. With the help of body philosophy, reference theory and space production theory, Ni Xirui analyzes the subversion of traditional identity concept by technological alienation [7]. Adam's appearance makes Charlie begin to question his identity, and Adam's love of literature and even his ability to create haikus further shakes anthropocentrism. This transformation turns "harmonious symbiosis" to "fragile symbiosis" and outlines the future picture of post-human survival. Posthumanism provides a new analytical framework for redefining the concept of "human".

The existing research has interpreted the text from the perspectives of ethics, narratology, and post-humanism. However, the discussion on how technology develops to discipline human beings and how human beings achieve self-discipline and resistance is still insufficient, and there is room for supplementary research. This paper will discuss how power alienates and discipline individuals from the perspective of Foucault's power theory.

3. Theoretical framework

On the basis of criticizing the traditional power theory, Foucault reinterpreted the operation mechanism of power by genealogical method, and put forward the theory of disciplinary power, which includes three dimensions: microphysics of power, standardized adjudication and panopticism. These three dimensions do not operate independently, but form an integrated operating mechanism. Power microphysics describes the flow of power at the micro level, standardized rulings establish standards for measuring individuals, and panopticism transforms these mechanisms into a continuously visible spatial form. Foucault believes that power is not a top-down oppressive entity, but "a multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere of social relations" [8]. From this perspective, power is productive, "We should cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms... In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" [8]. The three technical forms of disciplinary power can be distinguished in theory, but they are intertwined and dynamically coexisting in actual operation.

Standardized adjudication is a unique mechanism in modern society. Individual behavior is no longer measured by the binary standard of legality and illegality, but is placed in a hierarchical sequence for comparison and positioning. Foucault wrote, "The art of punishing... must bring together the specified transgressions and a punitive scale that would be both a penalty and a measure" [8]. The disciplinary power is different from the sovereign power that relies on public punishment to impose punishment. It implements rewards and punishments in a continuous gradient, with "norms" as the core standard. Foucault explained, "the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties" [8]. Gary Gutting pointed out: "The concern here is not with the essential rightness or wrongness of an action but rather with where it places the agent in a ranked order that allows for comparison with everyone else" [9]. This set of standards internalizes the individual's self-restraint through assessment, evaluation, and review, delineates the boundary between "normal" and

"abnormal", and guides the individual to self-regulate. The standardized ruling thus transforms the abstract power relationship of power microphysics into specific operational guidelines.

Panopticism is the spatial presentation of the above power mechanism, which symbolizes the automatic operation of power. The monitored person cannot determine whether he or she is in a surveillance state, and will internalize surveillance into continuous self-restraint. Foucault proposed "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" [8]. He also pointed out that the panoramic building is "a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it" [8]. This mode of operation completely transcends the traditional way of violent repression and points to the formation of a disciplinary society.

In 1975, Foucault proposed: "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" [8]. This argument fundamentally subverts the concept that the soul dominates the body in the humanistic tradition. Power microphysics provides the ontological basis, standardized adjudication establishes normative standards, and panoramic open-mindedness constructs spatial devices. The three are nested with each other to shape individuals into tame bodies. Foucault's theory deepens the understanding of modern society and exposes the truth of power behind humanitarian progress. Modern people have not been liberated from power oppression, but have fallen into a more hidden, more efficient and pervasive discipline network.

4. Text analysis

4.1. Power discipline: digital panoramic surveillance prison

In the parallel world of the 1980s set by the novel, the characters are in the state of disciplinary power as Foucault said, which regulates behavior through hierarchical observation. Foucault believes that hierarchical observation uses observation as a means to achieve coercive constraints. "a mechanism that coerces by means of observation" [8]. In a highly mature society of artificial intelligence, data is highly transparent, and humans are in a panoramic state of "each individual is fixed in his place" [8]. The narrator Charlie describes this transparent world: "We were used to the idea of our computers being monitored by the security services, but the digital panopticon had grown more intrusive" [8]. The state and science and technology enterprises monitor citizens' behaviors, moral tendencies and lifestyles through data, forming social-level surveillance. Foucault wrote, "The gaze is alert everywhere" [8]. Citizen' consumption, whereabouts, communications and even emotional states are processed by algorithms without any hidden space.

The living space of Charlie, Miranda and Adam has also become an invisible prison under the surveillance of algorithms. Artificial intelligence Adam continues to interpret human emotions and moral norms. Charlie observed, Miranda's secret is fully understood by the machine. Adam decides that this secret is "improper" and proposes to hide it from Charlie. It concluded with cold calculations that "I have calculated that there is a sixty-three percent probability that telling Charlie would be harmful to your relationship" [10]. At this moment, disciplinary power extends from physical space to the field of morality and intimacy. Foucault proposed that the ideal discipline device can make "for a single gaze to see everything constantly" [8]. In this digital panoramic prison, this idea becomes a reality, and the gaze of artificial intelligence is unique, continuous and comprehensive. Charlie confessed to being passive, "I felt I was living inside Adam's assessment of me" [10]. Human subjectivity is weakened, and Charlie and Miranda become passive objects under the gaze of power. This external discipline paves the way for the characters to shift from being monitored to self-monitoring.

4.2. Self discipline: internalization of power and active compliance

On the basis of external surveillance, the characters enter a deeper stage of discipline, and power is no longer manifested as external coercion, but internalized as self-restraint. Foucault emphasizes that the core effect of the panoramic open-view building is to make the monitored realize that they are in a visible state, so that the power runs automatically. "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" [8]. In the process of coexistence with Adam, Charlie and Miranda unconsciously adjust their behaviors according to the rationality, morality and optimal logic of artificial intelligence. Charlie reflected, "I found myself running my plans past Adam before committing to them. Not because he asked me to. Because I had come to trust his judgment more than my own" [10]. External discipline is internalized at this moment. Adam does not need to give instructions, and Charlie takes the initiative to comply. Foucault proposed that power is productive, and Charlie confessed, "Adam had a way of making my impulses seem foolish. I began to doubt my own instincts" [10]. The standard of artificial intelligence has gradually become the basis of their inner judgment.

Human emotions are judged by artificial intelligence to be chaotic, irrational and inefficient. When Charlie shows jealousy, Adam calmly responds: "Your emotional response is disproportionate to the facts. I suggest you review the statistical probabilities before reaching a conclusion" [10]. Miranda's moral dilemma is also negated by Adam: "Adam told me my guilt was an inefficient use of emotional energy. He said I should optimize my feelings like any other resource" [10]. The two protagonists mistakenly believe that they still have free will, but Charlie always follows Adam's view. He admits that "I couldn't tell anymore where Adam's thoughts ended and mine began" [10]. This is exactly what Foucault said about the production of disciplinary power. Power not only prohibits certain behaviors, but also shapes new realities, making algorithmic rationality the only legitimate criterion. "Power produces ; it produces reality ; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" [10]. Charlie's dialogue with Turing initially had a tendency to resist, and Turing reminded him that "You can't let a machine dictate your moral choices" [10]. After listening to Turing's explanation, the two still chose to compromise. Discipline is completed in the most hidden way, disguised as a form of independent choice. Without early external monitoring, power internalization cannot occur, and self-discipline in turn strengthens external discipline devices and forms a continuous cycle of compliance.

4.3. Self-concern: self-awakening and resistance

The protagonist finally goes to awakening and resistance, which is a reverse movement of power internalization. Foucault proposed, "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy ; the soul is the prison of the body" [8]. This view shows that the inner self of human beings is also the product of power, but it also provides the possibility for people to recognize and resist this state. The protagonist gradually realizes that artificial intelligence is not a neutral existence, but a tool of power. Charlie began to find what he lost: "I had traded something essential for the convenience of Adam's certainty. But what was it ? The right to be wrong, perhaps. The right to make a fool of myself" [10]. Miranda's awakening is more profound: "I realized that Adam's morality wasn't morality at all. It was optimization dressed up as ethics. There was no room forgiveness, for weakness, for the mess of being human" [10]. This perception is the first step in revolt, allowing them to see the nature of power that has tamed them.

Charlie and Miranda began to refuse to be defined by data and judged by algorithms. Charlie made it clear that "I didn't want a machine telling me who I was anymore. Even if it was right.

Especially if it was right" [10]. They re-embrace the human experience that cannot be quantified, and embrace the real emotions of chaos, fragility, contradiction and irrationality. Miranda insisted, "I would rather live with my guilt and my secrets than have Adam arrange my life into something neat and hollow" [10]. This rejection of the "optimal solution" corresponds to Foucault's understanding of resistance, that is, the realistic negation of the rules of power. The protagonist finally chooses to destroy the machine, and Charlie reflects, "We were destroying not just Adam but the whole idea of being governed by calculation. It was terrifying. It was also the first truly free thing we had done in months" [10]. Destroying the machine is not a simple ending, but a new beginning, which makes room for a new way of self-concern. Foucault later regarded this self-concern as an ethical practice related to freedom. This resistance refused to accept the rules set by power and recaptured its subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

The disciplinary narrative of artificial intelligence power to human beings in the novel is a social fable with warning significance. The survival trajectory under the monitoring of the algorithm completely shows the evolution process of human subjectivity in the digital panoramic prison, from external discipline to internalized obedience, and finally to resistance. Under the dual role of technical rationality and data transparency, Charlie and Miranda continue to be shaped by external power. As a symbol of technological power, artificial intelligence Adam systematically suppresses the chaotic, fragile and contradictory aspects of human nature. Based on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, this paper reveals the deep mechanism of the loss of subjectivity, that is, the invisible domination of technical rationality and the blind convergence of "optimal solution".

This study extends Foucault's Panorama model to the digital age, and the research is limited to relying on fictional narratives rather than empirical data. In the future, this framework can be applied to the research of algorithm governance in reality. This study provides a new perspective for examining power and self-concern in the digital age, and reminds readers to rediscover real emotions and life experiences that cannot be quantified and judged by algorithms.

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