

RETHINKING DIGITAL IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE: KIMTAE-JOON'S UNLOCKED THROUGH DERRIDA AND ZUBOFF

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Abstract

This study investigates the South Korean film *Unlocked* (2023) as a cultural text that reflects the contemporary anxieties of the digital world. The film powerfully examines how technology offers not only convenience and information for people but also acting as a destructive tool of surveillance, manipulation, and control. The narrative revolves around a young woman whose Smartphone is hacked and her journey throughout the film underscores how the digital technology which seems a trustworthy object transformed into the most destructive weapon in the hands of the unknown. The narrative is critically read through the application of Jacques Derrida's concept to archive fever to argue that the Smartphone as digital archive that preserves memory and Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism that reflects how the data possess a power to manipulate and dominate the individuals. It also demonstrates how the film embodies the tension between convenience and risk in the digital era. Ultimately, the study argues that cinema functions not only as entertainment but as a cultural text that exposes the double faced digital society and dilemmas it imposes on human identity and freedom.

Keywords: Archive fever, contemporary digital world, data privacy, digital-age cinema, digital identity, surveillance capitalism

What happens when the most trusted object in our life that holds personal data suddenly transforms into a destructive tool that manipulates and threatens our safety and identity? More than half of all consumers have experienced a cybercrime, with around one in three falling victims in the past year alone. In today's digital world, smartphones shape every aspect of people's experience in society from personal life to professional space. People are able to socialize with anyone they want and have the convenience to do that from anywhere which seems good but dangerous at the same time. Even though these devices ensure to provide a secure database yet constantly create new ways to vulnerable space.

Directed by Kim Tae-joon, *Unlocked* is a South Korean psychological thriller film released in 2023. The story follows a young woman named Lee Na-mi who works in a start-up marketing company and also manages her father's cafe (Mizi cafe). Her ordinary routines are violently disrupted after she loses her smartphone on a public bus, an object that stores her entire life-time information ranging from private to professional data. The stranger who found the phone had a conversation over the phone regarding its return. In the beginning, everything seems fine until the crucial detail is revealed that the person who returns her lost phone is a man named Oh Joon-yeong, an actual hacker and also a serial killer. By installing spyware, he is able to track her activities on the phone by replicating and also gains full access to Na-mi's digital and personal spheres. His intrusion is not merely virtual but also stalks her physically by meeting at her father's cafe by introducing himself as a regular customer and shows the similar interest like her to grab attention. His influence extends gradually into tracking her movements, sabotaging her job and alienating her relationships with people around her.

The tension escalates when Na-mi seeks safety at her father's home, only to discover that the hacker was already there, having brutally assaulted her father and also attacked her, leading them to a life-threatening confrontation. When the police arrive, they uncover the truth that the killer has been living under the identity of another man whom he had murdered. The victim turns out to be the son of the very police officer confronting the killer. The officers hesitated to take lethal force because of law and protocols but that did not stop Na-mi. She seizes the opportunity to protect herself and her father by shooting him, ending his threat once and for all.

Cinema has been recognized as a powerful medium to reflect the social issues and anxieties including the changes happening in the technological world. Although the people cherish the advanced technology, they still become a victim in the hands of people who misuse it. The media started to explore these digital intrusions that offer critical insights into contemporary concerns about privacy, identity and behavioural manipulation. Through the concept of archive fever, Jacques Derrida emphasizes that archives whether it is physical or digital preserve memory but simultaneously expose vulnerabilities too. While several studies have explored digital archives and their preservation, there remains a gap in examining the risks and vulnerabilities of this personal digital data as depicted in contemporary cinema. Zahara and Salim (2022), in their systematic review of digital archives, highlight the significance of long-term storage, web archives and preservation strategies for digital information. Their study primarily addresses technical and organizational aspects of digital archive management, leaving the psychological, social identity-related consequences of digital intrusion. The applications of this

concept to the cinematic narratives are rarely examined. This aspect underscores the importance of how films like *Unlocked* illustrate how the misuse of digital information can threaten an individual's privacy, identity and social standing in a highly connected digital world.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine *Unlocked* as a cultural text that reflects contemporary digital anxieties. The film is examined from the perspective of Jacques Derrida's concept of Archive Fever and Shoshana Zuboff's theory of Surveillance Capitalism. Specific sequences, character interactions and narrative developments are closely analysed to demonstrate how personal data and digital identity have become increasingly vulnerable in society, especially highlighting the dual role of smartphones which, while once considered safe and convenient have transformed into the tools of manipulation and potential harm.

Jacques Derrida was a French-Algerian philosopher, well known for his theory of deconstruction and as one of the major figures associated with post-structuralism and postmodern philosophy. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* was published in 1995 in French under the title "Mal d'Archive: Une Impression Freudienne". It was originally a lecture delivered in 1994 at the Freud Museum in London during an international colloquium titled "Memory: The Question of the Archives". The origin of the word 'archive' comes from the Greek word *arkheion* (ἀρχεῖον). It refers to the house of the ruler or magistrate where official documents and records were stored. From Greek, it passed into Latin as *archivum* (a public record office), then into Old French as *archive(s)* and later in Middle English. By the 17th century, archives in English referred to both the documents themselves and the place where they were kept.

Derrida defines Archive Fever as a paradoxical drive that highlights its tension between the necessity of preserving memory and the inevitability of loss that entails in the process of archiving (Derrida, 14). He identifies that archives are never meant to be neutral but they are structured by power and influence that leads to the creation of space where the data can be controlled and manipulated across different mediums. He uses the term 'fever' to describe the intense emotions and compulsion to safeguard memory while also neglecting certain aspects that reflect the influence of power. In the digital era, the data are no longer stored as physical documents; they are existing in the form of online records, cloud storage and in social media platforms. These aspects similarly reflect the dynamics of Derrida's notion of what is stored, organised and erased by those who have an authority over data.

In *Unlocked*, Lee Na-mi's smartphone serves as a digital archive functioning as a storage space of personal, professional and social information. Likewise, in the traditional archives, this digital record both preserves and exposes memory. It contains a comprehensive record of her daily life, including her movements, social connections, conversations, routines, preferences, interests and upcoming plans. It may appear as an object that safeguards all information while serving as a constant companion. However, in reality, it also carries vulnerabilities allowing external factors to gain access and power over them.

The moment the hacker obtained Na-mi's smartphone, her entire life became accessible to him. By installing spyware on the device, he sustained full visibility to all kinds of data even after she regained the phone. He was able to track her movements digitally through GPS, monitors through social media and even observes physically by exploiting the camera to spy. This becomes an advantage for him to predict her every step that helps to exploit more. Beyond tracking her movements, he isolates her by creating misunderstanding and interpersonal conflicts that leads to her loss of relationships and also sabotages her credibility and work performance, illustrating how control over archived information can extend into social and organizational power.

To lure her into the vulnerable situation, he uses the findings of her hobbies to manipulate her by showing himself as a person who has similar interests and preferences as her that leads to gaining her trust. She realizes her smartphone is hacked. Yet, every attempt to act is predictable to the hacker that traps her in a cycle of helplessness. The generation of psychological anxiety gives space to make her feel paranoia, emphasizing Derrida's argument that archives are entwined with power dynamics and potential loss. Hacker's obsession over her data to have access and take control represents Derrida's notion of fever where the emotional and psychological intensity takes place. His exploitation of these vulnerabilities underscores the paradox of the archive where the device appears to be a reliable companion that turns into the source of threat.

Shoshana Zuboff (b. 1951) a distinguished American scholar, social theorist and Harvard professor widely recognized for her contributions to the study of information technology, capitalism and society. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019) is a non-fiction that examines the development of digital corporations including Google and Meta. She argues that their business model employs a new mode of capitalist profit-making rooted in data extraction. Zuboff contrasts this with industrial capitalism which exploited and controlled nature while surveillance capitalism

directs its power toward human experience and behavior that seems to extract, predict and shape.

Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism illustrates where data is no longer just information but a resource of power. By commodifying human experience, digital platforms convert their observed behaviour into predictive products that contribute to profit-driven systems. This logic establishes a profound inequality of power that people are becoming the victim of manipulation and unknowingly handing over decision-making authority to corporations. Beyond its economic dimension, surveillance capitalism also functions as a cultural influence. The frequent extraction of data from an individual's smartphones and social networks redefines the boundaries of privacy and their social identity.

In the framework of Digital Humanities, this theory paves way to analyse *Unlocked* where the personal information is constantly monitored, collected and leveraged, reflecting how this access to data can perform as a tool of domination and behavioral influence, supporting Zuboff's argument that human experience itself can be commodified and strategically manipulated. The protagonist Lee Na-mi who inadvertently lost her smartphone on the bus sets a stage for the systemic exploitation of her personal information. Hacker's installation of spyware on the phone demonstrates how the single piece of information may help to predict the behaviour of an individual in a digitally mediated environment.

The antagonist Oh Joon-yeong goes beyond simple observation by creating situations that seem coincidental but actually constructed by his observation about preferences and digital information of Na-mi. In this sense, her life is no longer entirely her own but deeply influenced by external agents by imposing what they need. The narrative underscores the layered consequences of these behavioral interventions by constructing the sequences of directing where she goes, shaping social engagements and controlling the timing of interactions that leads to evoke specific emotional responses from her. It resulted in gradually narrowing her sense of freedom. The spectators see her choices which may appear as self-directed but invisibly redirected through calculated manipulations. This reflects Zuboff's view that surveillance capitalism compromises individual freedom by extracting personal data that can be used to convert for multiple purposes.

The hacker shows up at her cafe pretending to be a friendly customer. Because of his knowledge about her tastes and interests he subtly integrates himself in her daily environment. To track Na-mi's father's activity, he sends spyware links from her number by imitating her. Zuboff stresses that surveillance capitalism operates not only on individuals but on the networks, they are embedded in. He spreads misleading information on social media about her workplace which leads to

her extreme isolation from colleagues and friends. She started to doubt the people around her and questioned her own decisions. This internal transformation highlights the psychological dimension of surveillance capitalism: once individuals become aware of being watched, their behavior self-adjusts under the imagined gaze, producing self-censorship and internalized control.

The unsettling intensity of *Unlocked* lies in how it translates abstract anxieties about data surveillance into a narrative that feels deeply personal, yet disturbingly plausible. Through the lens of archive fever and surveillance capitalism, the film illustrates how information systems can become instruments of domination that penetrate the routines of daily existence rather than presenting technology as a neutral tool.

Each intrusion into Na-mi's world reminds us that personal data is never merely descriptive but actively generative of new realities, shaping outcomes that extend beyond the individual into their social and cultural spheres. The constant monitoring of protagonist's movements and social interaction exposes her psychological consequences and identity crisis. The tension between preservation and exposure of data underscores the contrasting side of contemporary digital life, where information simultaneously protects and can be a source of threat. Ultimately, the film returns to the haunting question we began with: What happens when our most trusted device (smartphone) ceases to be a tool of safety but instead becomes a weapon that threatens our identity and very survival?

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