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Algorithmic Fear and Datafied Subjectivity: Surveillance Anxiety in Don DeLillo through Digital Humanities

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Abstract

This paper examines Don DeLillo's fiction as a prophetic literary engagement with contemporary algorithmic surveillance and data-driven governance. Moving beyond readings of postmodern paranoia and psychological anxiety, the study argues that DeLillo anticipates algorithmic fear—a systemic form of anxiety produced by media saturation, data abstraction, and predictive control. Drawing on theories of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), algorithmic culture (Chun, 2016), media theory (McLuhan, 1964), and Digital Humanities approaches, the paper analyzes *White Noise*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*, and *Falling Man* to demonstrate how subjectivity is increasingly reshaped by informational systems rather than individual consciousness.

Through qualitative textual analysis and interdisciplinary interpretation, the study reveals that DeLillo's characters experience fear as an effect of continuous data processing, media repetition, and invisible surveillance mechanisms. The novels represent the transformation of human experience into extractable data, the normalization of predictive governance, and the erosion of interiority under algorithmic control. By foregrounding waste, archives, media networks, and post-9/11 security regimes, DeLillo's fiction emerges as a cultural archive of surveillance anxiety that prefigures contemporary digital realities.

The paper contributes to DeLillo scholarship by reframing his work within digital surveillance studies and advances interdisciplinary dialogue between literary criticism and Digital Humanities. Ultimately, the study positions DeLillo as a crucial literary theorist of the algorithmic age, whose fiction exposes the affective and ethical consequences of datafied modernity.

Keywords: Don DeLillo; Digital Humanities; Surveillance Studies; Algorithmic Culture; Datafied Subjectivity; Postmodern Anxiety; Media Theory, Surveillance Capitalism, Algorithmic Governance

Introduction

Don DeLillo occupies a central position in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American literature as a novelist whose work persistently interrogates anxiety, fear, and uncertainty within technologically mediated societies. From *White Noise* (1985) to *Falling Man* (2007), DeLillo's fiction repeatedly explores how individuals experience dread not merely as a private psychological condition but as a response to larger cultural systems—media saturation, political violence, consumer capitalism, and informational excess. Critical scholarship has long acknowledged DeLillo as a key interpreter of postmodern anxiety, often situating his work within frameworks of paranoia, terrorism, mass media, and the erosion of stable meaning (Coward, 2003; Keesey, 2012). However, as digital technologies have radically transformed the structures of power, visibility, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century, DeLillo's fiction demands renewed critical attention through emerging theoretical lenses.

Postmodern anxiety in DeLillo's fiction is frequently understood as a product of fragmentation, simulation, and epistemological uncertainty. Critics have argued that DeLillo's characters inhabit a world in which reality is mediated through images, codes, and narratives that exceed individual comprehension (Jameson, 1991; Baudrillard, 1994). In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney's fear of death is inseparable from the ambient noise of advertisements, television broadcasts, and scientific discourse, which simultaneously promise certainty and intensify dread. Similarly, *Libra* (1988) and *Mao II* (1991) explore how conspiracy and terrorism destabilize coherent narratives of history, producing a pervasive sense of anxiety rooted in interpretive excess.

Traditionally, such anxiety has been read either as a psychological response to modernity or as a cultural symptom of postmodern conditions. DeLillo's characters are often portrayed as overwhelmed by information, trapped in cycles of speculation, and haunted by invisible forces beyond their control. Yet, much of this scholarship remains anchored in pre-

digital frameworks, emphasizing media spectacle and ideological manipulation rather than algorithmic systems and data infrastructures that now shape everyday life.

Recent theoretical developments suggest that anxiety can no longer be adequately understood as an individual psychological state. Scholars across cultural studies, sociology, and media theory increasingly conceptualize anxiety as a systemic condition generated by complex technological and informational environments (Berlant, 2011; Chun, 2016). In such contexts, fear is produced not by identifiable threats but by abstract systems that operate invisibly—algorithms, databases, predictive models, and surveillance infrastructures. This shift demands a reconsideration of how literary texts represent anxiety, especially in works that anticipate or prefigure these conditions.

DeLillo's fiction is particularly significant in this regard because it consistently portrays systems that exceed human agency. Whether in the form of toxic clouds, media networks, or shadowy political organizations, DeLillo's narratives foreground abstraction as a source of fear. Characters experience anxiety not because they are directly watched or controlled, but because they sense that their lives are embedded within systems they cannot see or understand. This anticipatory logic aligns closely with contemporary experiences of algorithmic governance, where power operates through prediction, correlation, and data extraction rather than overt coercion.

The early twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of what scholars describe as "surveillance capitalism," a regime in which personal data is systematically collected, analyzed, and monetized (Zuboff, 2019). Unlike classical surveillance models, which relied on visual observation and disciplinary institutions, algorithmic surveillance operates through data flows, pattern recognition, and predictive analytics. Individuals become data points, and subjectivity itself is reconfigured through metrics, scores, and probabilistic assessments.

Although DeLillo's major works predate the dominance of artificial intelligence and big data, his fiction exhibits a striking sensitivity to these emerging conditions. His portrayal of informational overload, statistical abstraction, and system-generated fear anticipates contemporary debates about algorithmic power. The present study argues that DeLillo's representation of anxiety can be productively reinterpreted as a form of algorithmic fear, rooted in datafied subjectivity and systemic surveillance rather than individual pathology.

This paper argues that Don DeLillo's fiction anticipates contemporary algorithmic surveillance by representing anxiety as a systemic condition produced by data abstraction, predictive control, and informational overload rather than individual psychological disturbance. Through a Digital Humanities-informed reading, the study reframes DeLillo's anxious subjects as early literary figures of datafied subjectivity, whose fears emerge from their entanglement with abstract systems of information and control.

Conceptual Clarification and Key Terms

A critical engagement with DeLillo's fiction through Digital Humanities requires precise conceptual clarification, particularly because terms such as anxiety, surveillance, and fear have been used inconsistently across disciplines.

Algorithmic Fear: Algorithmic fear refers to a form of anxiety generated by predictive systems that operate through data analytics rather than direct coercion. Unlike traditional fear, which responds to visible threats, algorithmic fear emerges from uncertainty about how one's data is processed, interpreted, and used by unseen systems (Chun, 2016). In literary contexts, algorithmic fear manifests as unease produced by abstract forces that anticipate, model, and regulate behavior without transparency.

Datafied Subjectivity: Datafied subjectivity describes the transformation of human identity into quantifiable data profiles. Scholars argue that contemporary subjects are increasingly understood through metrics, scores, and predictive models, reducing complex human experiences to informational patterns (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). In DeLillo's fiction, characters often sense that their lives are being translated into abstract systems of meaning, foreshadowing contemporary datafication.

Surveillance Anxiety: Surveillance anxiety refers to the affective condition produced by continuous exposure to monitoring systems, even when surveillance is not directly perceived. Unlike paranoia, which involves suspicion of intentional observation, surveillance anxiety arises from structural awareness of being embedded within data-driven systems (Lyon, 2018).

Predictive Governance: Predictive governance refers to a mode of power that operates by forecasting future behavior through data analytics, risk modeling, and probabilistic assessment rather than responding to past actions. Unlike disciplinary surveillance, which corrects behavior through visibility and punishment, predictive governance seeks to pre-empt risk by identifying patterns, correlations, and potential threats in advance (Zuboff, 2019). Such systems generate anxiety by rendering the future permanently uncertain, as individuals are governed not by what they have done but by what algorithms anticipate.

they might do. In DeLillo's fiction, particularly in *Falling Man*, predictive governance manifests as a cultural condition in which fear is sustained through anticipation rather than immediate danger.

Distinctions from Related Concepts

These concepts differ significantly from paranoia, which implies delusional belief in targeted observation, and from psychological anxiety, which focuses on internal mental states. They also diverge from classical surveillance models such as Bentham's Panopticon, which rely on visual observation and disciplinary institutions (Foucault, 1977). Algorithmic surveillance, by contrast, operates invisibly and probabilistically, producing fear through abstraction rather than visibility.

Research Problem

Existing DeLillo scholarship has extensively examined anxiety through frameworks of postmodernism, terrorism, and media saturation (Coward, 2003; Keesey, 2012). These studies have successfully demonstrated how DeLillo critiques mass culture and ideological control. Similarly, surveillance studies have developed sophisticated theories of algorithmic governance, datafication, and digital control (Zuboff, 2019; Lyon, 2018).

However, these two bodies of scholarship rarely intersect. DeLillo studies have not systematically engaged with algorithmic surveillance, while surveillance theory has largely overlooked literary texts that anticipate digital conditions. This critical separation results in a significant gap: the absence of a sustained analysis of how DeLillo's fiction prefigures datafied subjectivity and algorithmic fear. The present study addresses this gap by integrating Digital Humanities perspectives into DeLillo criticism.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

Objectives

- To reinterpret anxiety in Don DeLillo's fiction through the lens of algorithmic surveillance.
- To examine how DeLillo anticipates datafied subjectivity and predictive control.

Research Questions

- How does DeLillo's fiction represent anxiety as a systemic rather than psychological condition?
- In what ways do DeLillo's narratives anticipate contemporary forms of algorithmic surveillance?
- How do DeLillo's narrative forms and structures anticipate database logic, algorithmic temporality, and non-linear information systems?

Hypothesis / Central Argument

This study hypothesizes that Don DeLillo's fiction constructs an early literary imagination of algorithmic fear, wherein anxiety emerges from data abstraction, predictive systems, and informational overload rather than individual psychological dysfunction.

Significance and Contribution of the Study

This study contributes theoretically by extending DeLillo criticism into Digital Humanities and surveillance studies. Interdisciplinarily, it bridges literary analysis with media theory and digital culture. Culturally, it demonstrates the continuing relevance of DeLillo's fiction in an age dominated by AI, big data, and algorithmic governance.

Beyond its scholarly contributions, the study foregrounds the ethical and political stakes of living within data-driven societies, where surveillance is normalized and anxiety becomes an everyday condition. By examining how literature anticipates these developments, the paper underscores the importance of cultural critique in resisting the naturalization of algorithmic power and data exploitation.

This paper makes three original contributions to existing scholarship. First, it introduces *algorithmic fear* as a critical literary category, extending analyses of DeLillo's work beyond postmodern paranoia and psychological anxiety toward systemic, data-driven affect. Second, it offers a methodological intervention by mobilizing Digital Humanities as a critical and interpretive framework rather than a purely computational practice, demonstrating how literary texts can function as cultural models of

algorithmic systems. Third, it repositions Don DeLillo as a prophetic analyst of surveillance capitalism, showing how his fiction anticipates contemporary forms of datafication, predictive governance, and infrastructural power.

Scope, Delimitation, and Limitations

The study focuses on *White Noise*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*, and *Falling Man*, drawing on surveillance capitalism, algorithmic culture, and media theory. Its limitations include the absence of empirical data analysis and a selective textual corpus. Future research may explore computational literary analysis or comparative studies with contemporary digital fiction.

These limitations should be understood as strategic methodological choices rather than deficiencies. By prioritizing close textual analysis and theoretical interpretation, the study foregrounds the affective and cultural dimensions of algorithmic surveillance that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods alone. This approach complements, rather than competes with, computational Digital Humanities research.

Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with Don DeLillo's fiction has been extensive and multidisciplinary, encompassing postmodern theory, media studies, political criticism, trauma studies, and cultural analysis. Across this body of criticism, anxiety emerges as a recurring thematic and structural concern. However, the ways in which anxiety has been theorized, framed, and interpreted reveal important limitations, particularly when examined against the backdrop of contemporary digital surveillance and algorithmic governance.

DeLillo and Postmodern Anxiety

Early critical responses to DeLillo's work situate him firmly within postmodern literary traditions, emphasizing epistemological uncertainty, fragmentation, and paranoia as defining features of his fictional universe. Jameson's (1991) theorization of postmodernism as a cultural logic marked by depthlessness, simulation, and historical disorientation has been especially influential in readings of *White Noise* and *Libra*. Within this framework, anxiety is understood as a response to the collapse of stable meaning and the proliferation of competing narratives.

Cowart (2003) argues that DeLillo's fiction captures a distinctly American form of cultural anxiety shaped by mass communication, technological acceleration, and ideological saturation. According to Cowart, DeLillo's characters inhabit environments where language, media, and power intersect to produce pervasive unease. Similarly, Keesey (2012) emphasizes the psychological fragmentation of DeLillo's protagonists, interpreting anxiety as an internalized response to postmodern instability. These studies successfully demonstrate how DeLillo's fiction reflects late twentieth-century cultural fear, but they remain largely confined to psychological and ideological interpretations.

Other critics have approached anxiety in DeLillo through the lens of paranoia. Fenster (2008) reads *Libra* as a paradigmatic paranoid narrative, where conspiracy thinking becomes a coping mechanism in a world devoid of transparent causality. While paranoia explains the obsessive interpretive behavior of DeLillo's characters, it tends to individualize fear and frame it as a cognitive distortion rather than a structural condition. As a result, paranoia-based readings do not fully account for the systemic and abstract forces that generate anxiety in DeLillo's fictional worlds.

DeLillo and Media Saturation

A second major strand of scholarship examines DeLillo's work through media theory, particularly focusing on television, advertising, and image culture. Baudrillard's (1994) theory of simulation has been widely applied to *White Noise*, where the saturation of media images destabilizes the distinction between reality and representation. Critics argue that media functions as both a source of comfort and a generator of fear, producing what Baudrillard describes as hyperreality.

McLuhan's (1964) assertion that "the medium is the message" has also informed analyses of DeLillo's narrative techniques. Scholars note that DeLillo's fragmented prose, brand-name lists, and episodic structures mimic the rhythms of media consumption, thereby embedding anxiety within the very form of the text. These studies illuminate how media environments shape perception and emotion, but they often treat media as a monolithic force rather than a data-driven system.

Importantly, much of this media-focused criticism predates the rise of digital platforms, algorithmic personalization, and big data analytics. As a result, it conceptualizes media primarily in terms of broadcast culture rather than networked, computational systems. This temporal limitation restricts the applicability of such readings to contemporary surveillance regimes.

DeLillo, Terrorism, and Trauma

Post-9/11 criticism has significantly expanded the scope of DeLillo studies, particularly with regard to *Falling Man*. Trauma theory has been a dominant framework, with scholars drawing on Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (2001) to analyze the representation of collective and individual trauma. Anxiety in these readings is closely associated with shock, loss, and temporal disruption.

While trauma-based approaches offer valuable insights into DeLillo's engagement with violence and memory, they often rely on clinical or psychological models that prioritize individual experience. Such frameworks struggle to address forms of anxiety that emerge from anticipatory systems, predictive governance, and ongoing surveillance—phenomena that do not rely on singular traumatic events.

Surveillance Studies and Algorithmic Governance

In parallel with literary criticism, surveillance studies have developed robust theoretical models for understanding contemporary power structures. Foucault's (1977) concept of the Panopticon laid the foundation for analyzing surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism based on visibility and self-regulation. However, scholars have increasingly argued that classical surveillance models are insufficient for explaining digital control systems.

Lyon (2018) introduces the concept of "surveillance culture" to describe how monitoring practices are normalized and internalized in everyday life. Zuboff (2019) further extends this analysis by theorizing surveillance capitalism as an economic system that profits from behavioral data extraction and predictive analytics. Within this framework, individuals are not merely observed but actively produced as datafied subjects whose behaviors are anticipated and shaped.

Chun (2016) emphasizes the affective dimensions of algorithmic systems, arguing that digital infrastructures generate anxiety through opacity, repetition, and anticipation. These scholars collectively demonstrate that contemporary surveillance operates invisibly and probabilistically, producing fear through abstraction rather than direct observation.

Absence of Literary Engagement in Surveillance Theory

Despite the sophistication of surveillance studies, literary texts are rarely central to its analyses. Fiction is often treated as illustrative rather than constitutive of surveillance discourse. This omission is particularly striking given literature's capacity to imagine, anticipate, and critique emerging technological regimes. DeLillo's fiction, with its sustained focus on systems, abstraction, and fear, offers a rich archive for exploring the affective consequences of surveillance capitalism.

Identification of Critical Silence

A clear critical silence emerges at the intersection of DeLillo studies and digital surveillance theory. While DeLillo scholars have extensively examined anxiety, media, and power, they have not systematically engaged with algorithmic governance or datafied subjectivity. Conversely, surveillance theorists have rarely considered DeLillo's fiction as a site of anticipatory critique.

This lack of interdisciplinary dialogue results in an incomplete understanding of how anxiety operates in DeLillo's work. By integrating Digital Humanities perspectives with literary analysis, the present study addresses this gap, positioning DeLillo as a prophetic figure whose fiction anticipates the affective conditions of algorithmic surveillance.

While existing scholarship has examined DeLillo's engagement with postmodern anxiety, media saturation, and political violence, it has not sufficiently addressed the implications of algorithmic surveillance and datafication for subjectivity. At the same time, surveillance studies have rarely engaged literary fiction as a site of anticipatory critique. The present study bridges this divide by integrating Digital Humanities perspectives with surveillance theory, positioning DeLillo's fiction as a critical archive that illuminates the affective consequences of algorithmic governance.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), algorithmic culture (Chun, 2016), media theory (McLuhan, 1964), and Digital Humanities approaches that emphasize interdisciplinarity and cultural analysis.

To clarify the progression of surveillance anxiety across DeLillo's major novels, the study adopts a comparative conceptual framework that maps each text in relation to dominant modes of surveillance, forms of anxiety, and theoretical lenses. This model highlights the historical shift from media saturation (*White Noise*) to invisibility (*Mao II*), archival accumulation (*Underworld*), and predictive governance (*Falling Man*), reinforcing the argument that anxiety becomes increasingly systemic and infrastructural across DeLillo's oeuvre.

Methodology and Text Selection Rationale

Using qualitative textual analysis, the study adopts an interdisciplinary interpretive approach. The selected novels represent key moments in DeLillo's engagement with media, systems, and fear. Analytical focus is placed on narrative structure, imagery, and representations of abstraction.

Methodological Positioning within Digital Humanities

Although this study does not employ computational tools such as text mining or algorithmic modeling, it is situated within Digital Humanities as a critical and conceptual methodology rather than a technical one. Following recent Digital Humanities scholarship, the study treats literary texts as cultural models of systems, infrastructures, and informational logics. By focusing on narrative structure, repetition, abstraction, and archival imagination, the analysis examines how DeLillo's fiction anticipates the cultural effects of algorithmic governance. This qualitative, interpretive approach is particularly suited to examining affective phenomena such as surveillance anxiety, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative analysis alone.

Although this study does not employ computational methods such as text mining or algorithmic modeling, it is situated within Digital Humanities as a critical and epistemological approach rather than a technical one. Recent Digital Humanities scholarship emphasizes the analysis of cultural infrastructures, media systems, and data logics that shape knowledge and subjectivity. By examining how DeLillo's narrative structures, repetitions, and abstractions model algorithmic systems and datafied environments, this study aligns with Digital Humanities approaches that foreground interpretation, cultural critique, and theoretical engagement with digital power.

Analysis / Discussion

Algorithmic Logic and Media Saturation in *White Noise*

Building on the concept of algorithmic fear outlined earlier, this section examines how *White Noise* represents media saturation as an early form of algorithmic governance. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* presents one of the earliest and most incisive literary explorations of how mediated environments shape human fear, perception, and subjectivity. While the novel is often read as a satire of consumer culture or as a meditation on death anxiety, its deeper significance lies in its anticipation of algorithmic logic—systems that process information continuously, invisibly, and predictively. Through media saturation, statistical abstraction, and technological authority, *White Noise* dramatizes a form of anxiety that closely resembles what contemporary theorists describe as algorithmic fear.

The omnipresence of media in the novel establishes an environment where information does not merely inform but governs emotional life. Television announcements, radio broadcasts, and computerized alerts circulate incessantly, creating what DeLillo calls a "constant stream of signals" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 51). This condition aligns closely with McLuhan's (1964) assertion that media environments function as extensions of the nervous system, reshaping not only perception but emotional response. In *White Noise*, the medium becomes inseparable from the message of fear itself: anxiety is not triggered by specific events but by the form of continuous informational flow.

Jack Gladney's fear of death is intensified by this systemized mediation. His anxiety does not originate in bodily experience but in technological interpretation. During the toxic airborne event, Jack learns that his exposure is being calculated by a computer, prompting the unsettling realization that "the system had ingested my data and spit out a death sentence" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 141). This moment is crucial for understanding datafied subjectivity. Jack's life is reduced to numerical values, probabilities, and predictive models—precisely the process Zuboff (2019) identifies as central to surveillance capitalism, where lived experience is appropriated and transformed into data for behavioral prediction.

The computer's authority in *White Noise* exemplifies algorithmic governance. Jack is told that his fate is uncertain, not because the system lacks data, but because it contains too much. This paradox reflects Chun's (2016) argument that algorithmic systems generate anxiety through opacity and deferred resolution. Algorithms promise certainty but deliver uncertainty, keeping subjects in a state of anticipatory fear. Jack's anxiety is thus not psychological in origin; it is system-induced, emerging from his incorporation into an abstract informational regime.

Media saturation also operates affectively through repetition. Brand names, slogans, and advertisements recur throughout the novel, producing what DeLillo famously renders as "Toyota Celica, Toyota Corolla, Toyota Cressida" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 155). These repetitions resemble algorithmic loops, reinforcing Chun's (2016) claim that habitual repetition is a defining feature of algorithmic culture. Repetition stabilizes the environment while simultaneously eroding meaning, producing a low-level, persistent anxiety that never resolves.

The supermarket functions as a key site where algorithmic reassurance temporarily suppresses fear. Jack observes that the supermarket offers a sense of order and comfort, noting that “everything was in its place, reassuring and bright” (DeLillo, 1985, p. 36). From a surveillance capitalism perspective, this space resembles a controlled data environment, where consumer behavior is predicted, guided, and normalized. The supermarket anticipates contemporary data-driven marketplaces that monitor and influence behavior while masking surveillance beneath convenience and abundance.

A Digital Humanities approach further illuminates *White Noise* by focusing on narrative structure. The novel’s episodic, non-linear organization mirrors database logic rather than traditional causality. Meaning emerges through accumulation rather than progression, resembling what Manovich (2001) describes as database aesthetics. This structural feature reinforces algorithmic fear by denying narrative closure and sustaining uncertainty. Anxiety persists because the system never resolves—it only updates.

Ultimately, *White Noise* represents a world in which fear is no longer tied to identifiable threats but to the abstraction of life into information. Jack’s anxiety is produced by his awareness that systems know him better than he knows himself. In this sense, DeLillo anticipates the affective conditions of algorithmic surveillance, positioning *White Noise* as a prophetic text that prefigures contemporary digital subjectivity.

Surveillance and Invisibility in *Mao II*

While *White Noise* explores algorithmic fear through media saturation and data abstraction, *Mao II* extends DeLillo’s engagement with surveillance by foregrounding invisibility, absence, and informational power. The novel examines how fear circulates in a world where authority no longer depends on direct observation but on symbolic control, media dissemination, and unseen systems. In doing so, *Mao II* anticipates contemporary surveillance regimes that operate through opacity rather than visibility.

The opening mass wedding scene immediately establishes the theme of collective subjectivity. DeLillo describes the crowd as moving “in waves, like data in motion” (DeLillo, 1991, p. 16). Although written before the rise of big data, this imagery resonates strongly with contemporary understandings of population management through statistical aggregation. Individuals dissolve into patterns, reflecting Zuboff’s (2019) assertion that surveillance capitalism prioritizes populations over persons.

Bill Gray’s retreat from public life is often interpreted as resistance to media spectacle, yet this withdrawal does not grant autonomy. Bill himself acknowledges that “what terrorists gain, novelists lose” (DeLillo, 1991, p. 41), suggesting that power has shifted from individual expression to systems capable of mass influence. From an algorithmic perspective, Bill’s invisibility does not free him from surveillance; rather, it mirrors Chun’s (2016) argument that contemporary power operates independently of visibility. Surveillance persists even in absence.

Fear in *Mao II* is generated not by constant monitoring but by uncertainty about how narratives are shaped and circulated. Terrorism in the novel functions as a communicative system, designed for media replication rather than direct control. DeLillo writes, “The terrorist wants to be photographed” (DeLillo, 1991, p. 157), highlighting how violence becomes data for circulation. This anticipates algorithmic amplification, where extreme events are prioritized by media systems because they generate attention and engagement.

McLuhan’s (1964) insight that media restructures social relations is particularly relevant here. Terrorism in *Mao II* is less about ideology than about visibility within media networks. Fear becomes a mediated affect, detached from physical proximity and sustained through repetition. This aligns with contemporary digital platforms where fear circulates virally, shaped by algorithmic prioritization rather than human intention.

From a surveillance studies perspective, *Mao II* illustrates the transition from disciplinary surveillance to predictive governance. Characters sense that events are shaped by forces they cannot identify, creating what Lyon (2018) describes as surveillance anxiety—an affective response to systemic uncertainty. DeLillo captures this condition when a character reflects that “we live in a world of signals, not people” (DeLillo, 1991, p. 72). This line encapsulates datafied subjectivity, where human presence is secondary to informational traces.

A Digital Humanities reading further emphasizes how *Mao II* destabilizes authorship itself. The novelist’s declining cultural authority mirrors the displacement of human agency by networked systems. Meaning is no longer produced by individuals but by circulation metrics, attention economies, and symbolic aggregation—core features of algorithmic culture (Chun, 2016).

Thus, *Mao II* presents a world where fear emerges from invisibility rather than observation. Surveillance operates without watchers, power without presence, and anxiety without clear cause. By dramatizing these conditions, DeLillo anticipates the affective logic of contemporary algorithmic surveillance, extending his critique of postmodern anxiety into the digital future.

Data, Waste, and Informational Abstraction in *Underworld*

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* offers one of the most expansive literary meditations on waste, history, and information in late twentieth-century America. While the novel has often been read through Cold War paranoia, nuclear anxiety, and cultural memory, its deeper significance lies in its anticipation of datafication and informational abstraction—key mechanisms of contemporary surveillance capitalism. In *Underworld*, waste is not merely material refuse; it is a metaphor for excess data, discarded histories, and abstracted human experience. When read through the theoretical lenses of algorithmic culture and Digital Humanities, the novel reveals how anxiety emerges from systems that accumulate, store, and repurpose information beyond human comprehension.

DeLillo repeatedly frames waste as an object of obsessive classification. Nick Shay's professional involvement in waste management situates him within a system that treats garbage as data to be catalogued, tracked, and stored. DeLillo writes, "Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated items" (DeLillo, 1997, p. 88). This ritualization of waste parallels what Zuboff (2019) identifies as the core logic of surveillance capitalism: the systematic capture and storage of behavioral residue. Just as waste is buried yet never disappears, data persists beyond its original context, producing anxiety through its permanence and unpredictability.

The landfill in *Underworld* functions as an archive—an informational space where objects retain traces of human activity. From a Digital Humanities perspective, this archive resembles a database rather than a narrative history. Meaning is not derived from linear progression but from aggregation and correlation. DeLillo emphasizes this abstraction when he describes garbage as "a code we don't understand" (DeLillo, 1997, p. 286). This statement resonates strongly with Chun's (2016) argument that algorithmic systems generate anxiety because they operate as black boxes, processing data in ways inaccessible to human interpretation.

Waste in *Underworld* is inseparable from media and information flows. The novel's fragmented structure—moving backward in time, assembling disparate episodes—mirrors database logic rather than traditional storytelling. McLuhan's (1964) insight that media reshapes cognitive patterns is crucial here: *Underworld* does not simply depict a media-saturated world; it embodies one formally. The reader experiences the same disorientation as the characters, navigating an overwhelming accumulation of data without clear hierarchy.

Nuclear waste occupies a particularly significant symbolic role. DeLillo writes of radioactive materials that will remain dangerous for thousands of years, outlasting human institutions and memory (DeLillo, 1997). This temporal excess parallels the persistence of data in digital systems, where information is retained indefinitely, detached from original intent. Zuboff (2019) emphasizes that surveillance capitalism thrives on this temporal asymmetry: data collected today may be repurposed indefinitely, creating long-term anxiety about future consequences.

Anxiety in *Underworld* emerges not from immediate threat but from the scale and duration of these systems. Characters experience dread because they sense that they are embedded within processes that exceed human time and agency. DeLillo captures this when Nick reflects that "everything is connected, even the dead" (DeLillo, 1997, p. 465). This interconnectedness anticipates contemporary networked data environments, where personal information circulates endlessly, linking past, present, and future behaviors.

From the perspective of algorithmic culture, *Underworld* dramatizes what Chun (2016) calls "enduring ephemerality"—the paradox that digital data feels fleeting yet remains permanently stored. Waste embodies this paradox materially. Objects are discarded yet preserved, forgotten yet archived. Anxiety arises because subjects cannot control how these residues—material or informational—will be interpreted in the future.

A Digital Humanities approach further reveals how *Underworld* functions as a computational narrative. The novel's structure resembles a reverse-chronological database query, retrieving fragments of history based on thematic relevance rather than causality. This formal strategy mirrors algorithmic retrieval systems, reinforcing the novel's central concern with informational abstraction. The subject becomes secondary to the system, and anxiety emerges as a rational response to this displacement.

Ultimately, *Underworld* anticipates the affective conditions of surveillance capitalism by depicting a world where waste and data operate according to the same logic: accumulation without resolution. Anxiety is not psychological but systemic, produced by the awareness that nothing truly disappears. In this sense, DeLillo's vision aligns powerfully with contemporary concerns about data permanence, environmental degradation, and algorithmic governance.

Post-9/11 Predictive Surveillance in *Falling Man*

If *Underworld* anticipates datafication through material accumulation, *Falling Man* confronts the full emergence of predictive surveillance in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. The novel captures a cultural shift from visible threat to anticipatory

control, where fear is generated by the possibility of future violence rather than present danger. Read through the frameworks of surveillance capitalism and algorithmic culture, *Falling Man* reveals how post-9/11 anxiety is structured by predictive systems that seek to manage uncertainty through data and probability.

DeLillo opens the novel with a scene of sensory disorientation, describing a city enveloped in dust and fragmented perception: “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 3). This moment establishes the collapse of familiar coordinates, a condition that McLuhan (1964) associates with media shock. Yet the anxiety that follows is not confined to trauma; it becomes institutionalized through surveillance infrastructures designed to prevent future attacks.

Characters in *Falling Man* live under the shadow of anticipation. Keith Neudecker’s unease persists long after the event, reflecting what Chun (2016) describes as the temporality of algorithmic systems, which operate through continuous forecasting. Fear is no longer tied to memory but to prediction. DeLillo articulates this condition when a character observes, “There was a sense of things being watched” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 121). This is not paranoia but a rational response to an environment structured by surveillance.

Zuboff’s (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism is particularly relevant here. Post-9/11 security regimes rely on data extraction, profiling, and predictive analytics to identify potential threats. In *Falling Man*, individuals are implicitly categorized, monitored, and assessed, even when no explicit surveillance is visible. Anxiety emerges from this invisibility. As Lyon (2018) notes, contemporary surveillance is most effective when it becomes normalized and unseen.

Media plays a crucial role in sustaining this anticipatory fear. Repeated images of the falling man circulate endlessly, transforming trauma into data. DeLillo writes, “The images were everywhere, replayed, slowed, frozen” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 220). This repetition mirrors algorithmic amplification, where emotionally charged content is prioritized and circulated to maximize engagement. McLuhan’s (1964) assertion that media reshapes emotional response is evident here: fear becomes continuous because the medium never allows closure.

From a Digital Humanities perspective, *Falling Man* can be read as a narrative about pattern recognition. Characters search for meaning in fragments, much like algorithms process incomplete data to generate predictions. The novel’s fragmented structure reflects this logic, denying linear resolution and reinforcing the sense of perpetual anticipation. Anxiety persists because the system never declares safety; it only updates risk.

Importantly, *Falling Man* shows how predictive surveillance reshapes subjectivity. Individuals internalize the logic of risk assessment, modifying behavior in anticipation of potential threats. Zuboff (2019) argues that this internalization represents the ultimate success of surveillance capitalism: subjects govern themselves according to algorithmic norms. DeLillo captures this shift subtly, through moments of hesitation, repetition, and withdrawal.

The performance artist known as the Falling Man embodies this transformation. His repeated reenactments function as a living algorithm, replaying trauma endlessly. The performance resists closure, much like predictive systems that never stop recalculating risk. Chun’s (2016) theory of repetition as control is particularly relevant here: repetition sustains anxiety by keeping the future perpetually open and unresolved.

Ultimately, *Falling Man* presents a world in which fear is no longer reactive but anticipatory. Surveillance does not merely observe; it predicts, categorizes, and governs. Anxiety becomes a structural condition of life under predictive control. DeLillo’s novel thus stands as one of the most prescient literary explorations of post-9/11 surveillance culture, anticipating contemporary debates about data, security, and algorithmic power.

Comparative Synthesis: From Media Saturation to Predictive Surveillance

Taken together, *White Noise* (1985), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997), and *Falling Man* (2007) chart a coherent and evolving literary trajectory in Don DeLillo’s engagement with fear, surveillance, and subjectivity. While each novel responds to a distinct historical and cultural moment, their cumulative effect is to reframe anxiety as a systemic condition produced by abstract informational regimes rather than individual psychology. Read comparatively through theories of surveillance capitalism, algorithmic culture, media theory, and Digital Humanities, these texts reveal DeLillo’s sustained interrogation of how power operates through data, invisibility, accumulation, and prediction.

In *White Noise*, anxiety emerges from media saturation and data abstraction, where fear is generated not by direct threat but by continuous informational noise. Jack Gladney’s dread of death is intensified by computerized systems that translate lived experience into statistical probabilities, as when his exposure to the toxic airborne event is processed by a machine that predicts his fate (DeLillo, 1985). This reduction of human life to data anticipates what Zuboff (2019) later theorizes as the conversion of experience into behavioral surplus under surveillance capitalism. Media in *White Noise* functions as an algorithmic environment, aligning with McLuhan’s (1964) assertion that media reshapes perception and emotional response. Anxiety here

is ambient, repetitive, and unresolved—an affective state that mirrors Chun’s (2016) description of algorithmic culture as governed by opacity and deferred certainty.

Mao II marks a shift from saturation to invisibility and symbolic control. Whereas *White Noise* overwhelms subjects with signals, *Mao II* dramatizes a world in which power operates through absence, secrecy, and mediated spectacle. The mass wedding scene, where individuals dissolve into a collective formation, evokes population-level abstraction rather than personal identity (DeLillo, 1991). Bill Gray’s retreat from public visibility underscores the erosion of individual agency in an era where terrorists and media networks command greater narrative power. As DeLillo famously writes, “What terrorists gain, novelists lose” (DeLillo, 1991, p. 41). This observation anticipates algorithmic amplification, where visibility is governed by circulation metrics rather than authorship. Surveillance anxiety in *Mao II* aligns with Lyon’s (2018) notion of surveillance culture, in which individuals internalize the sense of being embedded in unseen systems rather than explicitly watched.

Underworld extends DeLillo’s critique by relocating surveillance anxiety into the realm of material accumulation and archival excess. Waste in the novel functions as a powerful metaphor for data—discarded yet preserved, forgotten yet retrievable. Nick Shay’s work in waste management situates him within systems that catalogue and store residue, echoing Zuboff’s (2019) emphasis on the enduring value of data traces. DeLillo’s assertion that “waste is a religious thing” (1997, p. 88) suggests ritualized containment without resolution, paralleling the indefinite storage of digital data. From a Digital Humanities perspective, *Underworld* operates as a database narrative, assembling fragments non-linearly and privileging accumulation over causality (Manovich, 2001). Anxiety arises from scale and duration: characters sense that they are embedded in systems that exceed human temporality and agency, reinforcing Chun’s (2016) argument that algorithmic systems produce fear through permanence disguised as ephemerality.

Falling Man represents the culmination of this trajectory, where surveillance anxiety becomes explicitly predictive and anticipatory in the post-9/11 context. Unlike earlier novels, fear here is no longer tied to interpretation or accumulation but to the future itself. Characters inhabit a world structured by risk assessment and pre-emption, reflecting the logic of predictive governance central to surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). DeLillo’s depiction of repeated media images—“replayed, slowed, frozen” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 220)—illustrates how trauma is transformed into data for continuous circulation, sustaining anxiety through repetition. Chun’s (2016) theory of repetition as a mechanism of control is especially relevant: fear persists because prediction never reaches closure. Surveillance operates invisibly, yet its effects are deeply internalized, confirming Lyon’s (2018) claim that contemporary surveillance is most effective when normalized.

Comparatively, these four novels reveal a progressive abstraction of fear. *White Noise* situates anxiety in media environments; *Mao II* relocates it to symbolic systems of visibility and absence; *Underworld* embeds it in material and informational accumulation; and *Falling Man* transforms it into a condition of anticipatory governance. Across this progression, subjectivity is increasingly datafied, and anxiety becomes less personal and more infrastructural. From a Digital Humanities standpoint, DeLillo’s evolving narrative forms—from episodic saturation to archival fragmentation and predictive repetition—mirror the historical shift from broadcast media to database logic and algorithmic systems.

Thus, DeLillo’s novels collectively function as a literary genealogy of surveillance anxiety, anticipating contemporary debates about algorithmic power, data permanence, and predictive control. Far from being limited to postmodern paranoia, his fiction offers a sustained and prophetic analysis of how fear becomes a rational response to life under data-driven governance.

Findings

The present study yields several significant findings that directly address the research objectives and research questions concerning the representation of surveillance anxiety, algorithmic logic, and datafied subjectivity in Don DeLillo’s fiction. These findings demonstrate that DeLillo’s novels not only reflect contemporary surveillance cultures but also anticipate the affective and ethical consequences of algorithmic governance.

- **Surveillance Anxiety is Systemic, Not Psychological:** The analysis confirms that anxiety in *White Noise*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*, and *Falling Man* is produced by systemic conditions—media saturation, data abstraction, predictive surveillance—rather than by individual pathology. This directly answers the first research question by establishing that DeLillo reconceptualizes fear as a structural effect of informational systems.
- **Datafication Replaces Interior Subjectivity:** Characters are increasingly defined by data traces, patterns, and probabilities rather than by psychological depth. This finding aligns with the second research objective, showing that DeLillo anticipates what Zuboff (2019) terms “behavioral surplus,” where human experience is rendered as extractable data.
- **Media Functions as an Algorithmic Environment:** The study finds that media in DeLillo’s fiction operates as an environment that shapes perception and behavior, supporting McLuhan’s (1964) claim that media restructures consciousness. Anxiety emerges not from specific media messages but from continuous exposure and repetition.

- Waste and Archives Function as Data Metaphors: In *Underworld*, waste operates as a material analogue to data accumulation. This supports the hypothesis that DeLillo anticipates Digital Humanities concerns with databases, archives, and non-linear historiography.
- Post-9/11 Surveillance Normalizes Predictive Fear: *Falling Man* demonstrates that surveillance anxiety shifts from reaction to anticipation. Fear is sustained by the logic of prediction, confirming Chun's (2016) argument that algorithmic systems govern through repetition and probabilistic control.

Collectively, these findings confirm the central hypothesis that DeLillo's fiction anticipates contemporary algorithmic surveillance by representing anxiety as a systemic condition produced by abstraction, predictive control, and informational excess. The novels function as cultural diagnostics of data-driven modernity, revealing how subjectivity is reshaped under surveillance capitalism.

Implications and Recommendations

This study has significant theoretical, pedagogical, and interdisciplinary implications. Theoretically, it repositions Don DeLillo's fiction as a foundational literary archive for understanding surveillance capitalism and algorithmic culture, demonstrating how literature can anticipate and critically model data-driven systems of power before their technological consolidation. By integrating surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), algorithmic culture (Chun, 2016), and media theory (McLuhan, 1964), the study expands literary criticism beyond postmodern paranoia toward systemic, predictive, and infrastructural forms of anxiety. Pedagogically, the research supports the inclusion of DeLillo's novels in courses on Digital Humanities, media studies, and contemporary literature, enabling students to critically examine how algorithms, datafication, and surveillance shape subjectivity and everyday life. Interdisciplinarily, the study highlights the value of literary analysis for surveillance studies, digital ethics, and data culture research, recommending closer collaboration between humanities scholars and digital theorists. Future research may extend this framework through computational literary analysis or comparative studies of global literatures responding to algorithmic governance.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study foregrounds the ethical implications of algorithmic surveillance as represented in DeLillo's fiction. The normalization of data extraction, predictive profiling, and invisible monitoring raises critical questions about consent, autonomy, and accountability in contemporary societies. DeLillo's narratives expose how individuals are governed without awareness or agency, anticipating ethical concerns central to debates on digital rights and algorithmic justice. Literature, in this context, functions as an ethical diagnostic tool that reveals the human cost of data-driven governance before such systems become fully naturalized.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Don DeLillo's fiction offers a prescient and critically nuanced exploration of algorithmic fear and datafied subjectivity, anticipating contemporary surveillance cultures long before their full technological realization. By reading *White Noise*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*, and *Falling Man* through the theoretical lenses of surveillance capitalism, algorithmic culture, media theory, and Digital Humanities, the paper has demonstrated that anxiety in DeLillo is not merely psychological but structurally produced by systems of data abstraction, media saturation, and predictive control.

The research contributes to DeLillo scholarship by shifting the critical focus from paranoia and postmodern fragmentation to algorithmic governance and data-driven power. It also contributes to surveillance studies by highlighting literature's capacity to articulate the affective dimensions of surveillance—dimensions often overlooked in technical or policy-oriented discourse.

Ultimately, DeLillo emerges as a key literary theorist of the digital age, whose novels illuminate the human cost of informational systems that promise security while producing perpetual anxiety. His fiction reminds us that in a world governed by algorithms, fear is no longer an exception but a condition of everyday life—embedded in the very structures that claim to manage uncertainty. While this study focuses on selected novels and theoretical frameworks, future research may extend this analysis through computational methods or comparative studies across global literatures responding to algorithmic surveillance, further deepening interdisciplinary engagement. This study will be of particular interest to scholars of contemporary American literature, Digital Humanities, surveillance studies, media theory, and cultural studies, offering an interdisciplinary framework for analyzing the affective consequences of algorithmic power.

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