

Review of the book Algorithmic Desire: toward a new structuralist theory of social media, by Matthew Flisfeder

BLACK, Jack <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-5083>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/32416/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

BLACK, Jack (2023). Review of the book Algorithmic Desire: toward a new structuralist theory of social media, by Matthew Flisfeder. Postdigital Science and Education.

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

*This is an author's accepted manuscript for "Postdigital Science and Education",
copyright Springer.*

Black, J. (2023). Review of the book Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New
Structuralist Theory of Social Media, by Matthew Flisfeder. *Postdigital
Science and Education*.

Dr. Jack Black, Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Faculty of Health and
Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Hall, Collegiate Crescent,
Sheffield, S10 2BP

Review of Matthew Flisfeder (2021). *Algorithmic Desire: Towards a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. 242 pp. ISBN 9780810143333 (Paperback)

Jack Black, Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom, j.black@shu.ac.uk

Keywords: desire/drive; psychotic; perverse; social/digital media; metaphor; hysteria

Navigating the Psychotic and Perverse Online

The contemporary study of digital media technologies continues to elicit robust debate as to the effects of the algorithm for both society and the subject. Whether the algorithm is to function as a source of political agency, or as the very tool for reproducing social inequality, the current lack of regulation has resulted in a number of concerns regarding its adoption (White and Lidskog 2022). Beyond the fact that social media algorithms have provided a unique space for perpetuating forms of online hate and discrimination (as denoted in the frequently cited, ‘online echo chambers’), the potential for algorithms to calculate, measure, and record your location, as well as your ‘mood’ and health status, is now being manifested in the growing importance of algorithmic technologies in our day to day lives. Here, technological innovation is increasingly exposing the subject to new assemblages of algorithmic automation, resulting in a reconsideration of how we define, make sense of, and approach the ‘human’ (Beer 2023; Black and Cherrington 2022; Haraway 1991).

Despite such uses, for many, it is this very technology that is believed to be deepening our current social antagonisms and divisions, resulting in new forms of identarian politics that have ended-up coalescing in an online libertarian philosophy and untenable, far-right conspiracies. As a result, the potential benefits afforded to the algorithm—most notably, the capacity for our digital technologies to encourage an emancipatory egalitarianism—is now more likely to be cynically derided by those openly decrying the influence of digital media, while all the while remaining active participants in its various platforms (on most occasions, such cynicism is easily recited by ‘us’, its users). Consequently, whether academic study remains tied to the potential benefits that can be sustained from our online activities, or whether it seeks to criticise ongoing adaptations of the algorithm within the ubiquity of our digital lives, what is perhaps lost, or worse, ignored in such debates, is that which remains an inherent characteristic of our social media—the *social* itself.

It is this very contention that sits at the heart of Matthew Flisfeder’s, *Algorithmic Desire: Towards a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media* (2021). In spite of the accusation that, today, our social media is in fact hampering democracy and subjecting us to increasing forms of online and offline surveillance, for Flisfeder (2021: 3), ‘[s]ocial media remains the correct concept for reconciling ourselves with the structural contradictions of our media, our culture, and our society’. With almost every aspect of our contemporary lives now mediated through the digital, the significance of the algorithm maintains a pertinent importance in making sense of the social and psychic investments that our interactions on social media, as well as other forms of digital media, rely upon and encourage. The socio-political tensions and contradictions that such interaction prescribes remains a reoccurring theme throughout *Algorithmic Desire*, with Flisfeder masterfully navigating the problems and pitfalls of a burgeoning digital infrastructure that is redefining our lives as social beings.

What becomes apparent from Flisfeder’s account is how debates and discussions regarding the algorithm can be couched in a number of pressing concerns, including the proliferation of online misinformation and the contradictions inherent to

our freedom and security. While these debates are drawn together through the prism of the algorithm, it is mostly with regards to the medium of social media that Flisfeder examines how our desire and enjoyment are algorithmically organized.

***Algorithmic Desire* and Hysterizing the Metaphor of Social Media**

Algorithmic Desire (Flisfeder 2021) sidesteps well-trodden debates regarding the Internet's political efficacy; debates that are too often marred by the proclamation that we should simply 'log-off'. Instead, through a number of helpful illustrations, drawn from politics and popular culture, Flisfeder develops his approach by providing a Marxist inspired account of how social media now functions as the very metaphor that both manifests and sustains neoliberal capitalism and its ideology. With inspiration from Marshall McLuhan's, 'the medium is the message' (1994), and Neil Postman's (1985) revised claim 'that the medium is ... the *metaphor*' (Flisfeder 2021: 7) (*italics in original*), Flisfeder asserts that it is not the medium that is the problem: rather, it is the very way in which the medium is incorporated and applied to existing forms of capitalist domination and exploitation. Much of this underscores Flisfeder's attempts to progress the metaphor of social media, which, while not simply articulating the totality of our social media system, functions as the very site through which our articulations of what is *social* about *our* social media can be brought to bear, and, hopefully, improved.

In fact, it is in support of the claim that we should 'move past the view that algorithms are these "elegant" objects guiding our lives, into which we blindly place our faith' (Flisfeder 2021: 103), that Flisfeder examines how the algorithm remains a key site of ideological investment. Certainly, while online advertising increasingly relies upon the algorithm to help attract our desire, algorithms remain a technology that are forged through and shaped by a complex array of social processes—including the very excesses and tensions that frame the dynamics of twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism. Consequently, while 'social media platforms and algorithms are not themselves intrinsically positive or negative. ... [I]t is the way in which they are caught up in the class struggle that determines the use toward which they are put' (Flisfeder 2021: 188). On this basis, Flisfeder remains tethered to the claim that '[t]he same platforms and algorithms that now train us to comply with the status quo of consumer capitalism and neoliberalism, if put toward different, more emancipatory uses, could indeed enable more freedom, mobility, and democracy' (2021: 188). The conviction here is indebted to a (re)thinking of both the purpose and function of social media and its potentials.

This focus is expertly followed throughout the book's eight chapters, producing a critically engaging inquiry that continually considers the socio-political tensions and ambiguities that frame and sustain our digital media interactions. Ultimately, it is this contention that lends further support to Flisfeder's assertion that algorithms play a key role in reading our desire. In the discussion that follows, this reading will be critically considered by tracing and outlining a number of key significances underpinning Flisfeder's approach. Most notably, this will require a discussion of the Lacanian conception of desire; the effects of disavowal and cynical perversion; the importance of 'maintaining appearances'; and, finally, the significance of the social media metaphor.

It is also here that we can begin to approach some of the criticisms that have been afforded to *Algorithmic Desire* (Kornbluh 2022; Sieben 2022). Not only are these criticisms valuable in helping us to distinguish between the emergence of social media as a space for eliciting examples of online hate and abuse, as well as other forms of

paranoia and narcissistic projection, but also for distinguishing broader concerns within the psychoanalytic study of media and communications. In this regard, Flisfeder's (2021) focus on the Symbolic importance of the social media network helps to expose ongoing contentions in the apparent prevalence of a psychotic libidinal structure in online discourses (Dean 2009; Gunn 2018).

The Lure of Desire

Algorithmic Desire (Flisfeder 2021) draws heavily from a Lacanian account of desire. For Lacan, as much as for Flisfeder, desire is not beholden to the individual subject, but is instead socially forged and directed by what Lacan refers to as the big Other. As a result, 'we curate our identities, not to satisfy our own desire, but to satisfy the desire of the Other in the form of likes, shares, comments, follows, and so forth' (Flisfeder 2021: 67).¹ By following the Lacanian contention that 'desire is the desire of the Other' (Lacan 2004: 38) (italics removed), we can begin to determine how our social media interactions are not driven by our own individual, narcissistic attraction but are in fact interdependently curated for the Other's desire.

It is for this reason that Flisfeder argues that the algorithm functions to deliberately maintain our dissatisfaction. Whereas the key characteristic of desire is that the desired object must always fail to be obtained, it is this very practice that the algorithm proves adept at producing, thus keeping us both dissatisfied and online. This is perhaps best reflected in the use of online search engines: where, in completing our search, we are provided an unending list of pages, with the underlying sense that the various results may not necessarily be correct or even what we are looking for. The same experience is apparent in the relative ease in which we scroll through popular video channels, such as YouTube, or the recommended suggestions on Netflix. On most occasions, when subjected to the vast selection, we fail to select the video we were originally looking for or fail to find the very film we sought to watch. Though these examples demonstrate that our algorithmic systems may provide satisfaction—a quick listen to a favourite online video essay, for example—it is by ensuring that our desire remains unfulfilled that we remain a desiring, and 'clicking', subject.

This failure to deliver on desire ensures that, for Flisfeder (2021: 5), '[e]very successful and persuasive form of communication must ... take into consideration the form in which the medium organizes and structures our desire'. This form remains crucial: not only does it side-step a focus on the 'content' of what is desired, it also allows us to overcome typical individual and social dichotomies, most notably that which is enacted between the individual user and the medium itself. Instead, in organising and structuring our dissatisfied desire we can observe how 'every medium of communication bears witness to the "algorithm" of our desire' (Flisfeder 2021: 5).

It is on this basis that, in our contemporary period, '[w]e have come to inscribe our desire in a substantial big Other that has been materialized through the network form of social media, but also through the form of the platform aesthetic and the algorithmic logic that works as its lure' (Flisfeder 2021: 186). Importantly, this lure is not one in which our desire is merely delivered by the algorithm: Flisfeder's account is not one in which the desire of the algorithm is transposed into the desiring online subject, or, more simply, that our desires are merely 'read' and reproduced by the algorithm.

The sociality of our desire is itself forged through the very fact that we desire what the Other desires. The crux of this relation is that we can never fully determine what the Other's desire is, leaving us dependent upon a metonymy of desire, without solution (key here is that such desire remains unknown to the Other itself) (Lacan

2006).² Indeed, to desire is to desire exactly what the Other desires, inclusive of the very fact that this desire remains unknown, yet continually sought.

Crucial to this approach is that desire is sought amidst an *apparent* decline in social forms of authority and an online social media system that seems to give us nothing else but an unprohibited space for desire to be fulfilled. When online, '[a]ccess to one's desire is no longer prohibited by time, or by the delay required to attain the lost object: everything is present, locatable in the database' (Flisfeder 2021: 158). What is essential to this lack of prohibition is that such a proliferation of desire is only possible through its very suffocation. It is here that Flisfeder identifies a perverse core to our digital media interactions.

Perversion is Not Subversion

In perversion, it is the suffocation of our desire online that occurs alongside a lack of trust in traditional media institutions, most notable when we consider the array of contravening perspectives and explanations that can be easily accessed and followed online. With reference to the work of Žižek (2008), it is this lack of trust that serves to characterises the demise of shared spaces of communication and traditional forms of authority. This may, at first, run counter to Flisfeder's (2021) thesis: surely, today, online forms of communication provide the very space for global forms of communication, where the desire to believe in any form of authority, not least in the virtuality of some prohibiting online authority, can be easily dismissed or undermined?

While this argument is taken-up in Jodi Dean's account of communicative capitalism (2009), for Flisfeder, such a decline in Symbolic efficiency is only apparent, and what is more, this decline is *cynically acknowledged by the subject*. That is, rather than our desire being suffocated by an online infrastructure that traverses time and space, it is instead sustained through an Other whose very prohibition is required in order to be transgressed. By reasserting the Other, our desire is upheld through an act of disavowal that subsequently allows our desire to be sustained. In other words, we cynically acknowledge the Other's non-existence, only for this acknowledgement to be disavowed in order to maintain our enjoyment.

Accordingly, in referencing Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009), '[c]ynicism is', for Flisfeder, 'inherently perverse since it operates by acknowledging failure, but nevertheless disavows this fact in order to go on enjoying' (2021: 186). It is in this sense that our online interactions function to maintain the network of social media users—or, the virtual big Other. Here 'it is the agency of the Other for whom we perform our Symbolic identities in social media, which is increasingly connected to the world offline' (Flisfeder 2021: 86). A prolific tweeter himself, for Flisfeder, 'I tweet, therefore I exist; and the compulsion to (re)tweet is the symptom of our need to feel affective recognition from the Other' (2021: 86).

The path Flisfeder follows helpfully navigates those assumptions that assert that the online user is nothing more than a cultural dupe, beholden to forms of surveillance capitalism that encourage one to simply click here and select that (Zuboff 2019). Rather, our desire for acknowledgment online, a desire tied to the Other's desire, is what perversely reinstates a desire for the Other: 'In order to save her desire, the subject requires (at least the fantasy of) some figure of prohibiting agency whom she can transgress, whose gaze she wishes to impress. Today, we transpose this gaze onto the form of social media.' (Flisfeder 2021: 66)³

Appearances Matter: Social Surveillance, Cognitive Mapping, and the Social Media Metaphor

This points to an important distinction in Flisfeder's account: namely, the very form of social media is what 'takes on the form or structure of the Lacanian big Other, the Symbolic order, operating as a lure of sorts for the user's desire' (Flisfeder 2021: 134). It is, therefore, at the interstices of desire that our algorithmic desire takes hold. As represented in the technological infrastructure that constitutes the Other, and which subsequently undergirds the 'lure' of desire, what the algorithm seeks to learn is how to maintain the very ambiguity between the subject and the Other's desire. Bearing in mind that we remain cognisant of the fact that there is no Other, this in no way dislodges or undermines desire's ambiguity: specifically, the ambiguity of determining what this Other (the network of social media users) desires. Instead, it is the inherent sociality of the social media network—the variety of fellow users that one curates oneself for and for whom one interacts with—that underscores the fact that '[a]ppearances ... do matter', and, what is more, that one's presence is acknowledged and registered by the Other (the network of users): 'It is on account of this that "social surveillance" really is the primary lure for all of our activities on social media.' (Flisfeder 2021: 134)

This focus on 'social surveillance' steers clear of an assessment that would simply emphasise the narcissistic tendencies underlying our adoption of social media (Sodha 2021). Instead, Flisfeder's account redirects attention to the Symbolic functioning that our interactions on social media sustain. Importantly, this does not ignore the various ways in which data is expropriated from our social media usage under capitalism, but rather, through Jameson's (1984) conception of 'cognitive mapping', allows us to understand how the dominant medium of a particular historical period can shed light on the dominant form of ideology for that period. While, for Jameson, cognitive mapping allows us to identify, and possibly remedy, the levels of subjective disorientation that take shape under the conditions of late capitalism, in Flisfeder's (2021) hands, the concept is helpfully applied to the possibility of remedying, or at least *representing*, the contradictions inherent to social media—most notably, the inherent failure of the social in 'social media' under capitalism.

Along these lines, it is the operationalizing of capital through social media that lays bare the totality of our neoliberal capitalist society. Echoing the work of Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2012), Flisfeder highlights how today's social media functions as a metaphor that provides a cognitive mapping of the social totality of twenty-first century capitalism. In effect:

'Social media,' ... operates both as the metaphor that gives structure to the flow of digital information and as our way of perceiving it, but it also structures our information today, technologically, through the design of the platform and the algorithmic apparatus in a much more concrete way. (Flisfeder 2021: 180)

Accordingly, while '[t]he metaphor helps to formalize the totality, to make it comprehensible[,] ... provid[ing] a platform upon which we may act within the coordinates of the dominant consciousness' (Flisfeder 2021: 12), it is only by grappling with the metaphor of social media that the exploitations inherent to communicative capitalism become clear. In other words, it is through eliciting the contradictions inherent to the social that the social media metaphor can be realised. Flisfeder elaborates:

When we enunciate the term, 'social media,' what this implies is an emphasis upon the social dimensions of interactive communication and democracy. ... [B]y sticking to the social media metaphor (of not giving way to our desire for

social media, so to speak), and taking it all the way to its limits, we are able to more clearly appreciate the failures of social media to realize the social, which is also evidence of a failure of the social itself. ... And perhaps, the most appropriate way to challenge and to critique social media is by identifying it, by claiming it as the correct concept, and by working to see it through to the adequacy of its own notion. It is only by sticking to the social media metaphor that we are made capable of understanding the contradictions and the antisocial dimensions of capitalism. ... We should ... impose a structure on society that creates the conditions of possibility for social media to be truly realizable. (Flisfeder 2021: 193-194)

It is in this way that the metaphor functions as a way of making clear the very real material contradictions that prevent the social from being enacted in our *social* media. Ultimately, what is proposed by Flisfeder is not a change to social media but a change to the very form of our existing neoliberal structure and liberal democratic society itself.

An Imaginary Imprisonment

We are now better placed to conceive how Flisfeder's (2021) proposal does not negate desire, but, rather, encourages us not to give ground relative to our algorithmic desire. Here, the 'metaphor's creative spark *is the subject*' (Fink 1997: 70) (*italics in original*), so that while 'metaphor lies at the genesis of all symbolization' (McGowan 2019: 61), it is in accordance with the metaphor that the desiring subject is founded (Fink 1997). Accordingly, it is this 'creative spark' that Flisfeder's (2021) application of the social media metaphor encourages us to observe. Echoing Richard Boothby's account of metaphor, as eliciting an 'open ... space of meaning yet-to-be-determined' (2019: 175), it is this 'open space' that renders clear the Other's lack, revealing that '[t]o realize a truly social media, we must use the concept to bring to the surface the lack in the realm of the social itself' (Flisfeder 2021: 3).

It is, perhaps, interesting therefore that what goes amiss in such an account is the evocation of an 'act' that would, beyond exposing the Other's inherent lack, help to transform the social structure itself. This transformation is helpfully articulated in Pluth's (2007) account of the act and metaphor, and their role in the creation of a new signifier. Pluth explains:

A metaphor exploits signifiers that are already recognizable by the Other. It just deploys them in an unusual way. An act ... creates a signifier whose place in the Other itself is not assured, a signifier without well-established links to other signifiers that might be able to provide it with meaning. (Pluth 2007: 156)

It is this failure to create something new that underwrites some of the criticisms that have been made towards the very structures that Flisfeder seeks to impose. According to Anna Kornbluh (2022: 408), Flisfeder's 'somewhat heady and counterintuitive' approach relies too heavily on a level of political agency that is based largely on one's realization of the problems associated with social media and the assumption that one would inevitably have the capacity to change them. For Kornbluh, '[t]he traversal implied here springs from a dialectical impulse (social media could live up to its name!), but its unelaborated and rather idealist character hints at some of the book's untraveled avenues' (2022: 410). Certainly, while discussions of online hate and abuse are absent in *Algorithmic Desire* (Flisfeder 2021), it is in view of such practices that Kornbluh (2022) levels a certain dissatisfaction with the reconstruction that Flisfeder provides:

algorithmic desire signals less the reconstruction of a new digital symbolic or new metaphor for our totality and more the ongoing degradation of the symbolic and our intensifying imprisonment in the imaginary, with its corollary ruptures of unmediated reals like sadism and paranoia, ecocide and expulsion. (Kornbluh 2022: 411)

It is in accordance with this ‘ongoing degradation of the symbolic’ that Kornbluh emphasises the importance of the Imaginary, and, specifically, of a Symbolic order, which, in our online interactions, is largely imagined:

Social media enables its users to fantasize a big Other but not to actually enjoy the presence of the big Other because there is no encounter with the enigma of the other’s desire: everything is transparent on the screen. ... We imagine that we are in touch with others. We may imagine this big Other is out there even when we are almost exclusively interacting with ourselves, trapped in a hall of mirrors, of our ego ideals, curating how we would like to be seen, honing how we demand to be recognized. (Kornbluh 2022: 410-411)

While Flisfeder grounds his account in the dissatisfactions that function to maintain our desire, for Kornbluh, it is ‘[t]he smoothness of the screen and its icons [that] immerse users in an imaginary realm of mirroring and efficacy and illusory transparency, without the drag of the enigmatic symbolic and the inscrutable other’ (2022: 411).

With the concluding conviction that ‘[t]he imaginary is a wretched vacuum for comrades, libidinally inhospitable to the shared signifiers and collective forms necessary for solidarity and communal power’ (2022: 412), Kornbluh’s critique doubles down on the ‘hall of mirrors’ that essentially entraps the subject in their own narcissism. Indeed, what seems to underly this account is a characteristic adherence to the failure of prohibition in our online interactions (a disappearance that is attributable to ‘the smoothness of the screen and its icons’). Amidst the ‘imaginary realm of mirroring and efficacy and illusory transparency’, there is no opportunity to realize or to question if the fundamental impossibility of desire is to ever be revealed or acknowledged, beyond our own acted-out frustrations and unrealized dissatisfaction. In the absence of such a realization, we are instead positioned in the course of the drive: routinely and incessantly projecting our fears and anxieties onto a digital world and its users.

On this basis, it is perhaps helpful to reflect upon the gap between Flisfeder (2021) and Kornbluh’s (2022) accounts. Indeed, while, for Flisfeder, the decline in Symbolic authority remains only apparent, marked as it is by examples of disavowal; for Kornbluh, the collapse of Symbolic authority denotes an emphasis on the Imaginary and its affects. Here, the smoothness of the online media experience, which Kornbluh incites, is one that can best be examined in accordance with the structure of psychosis.

Psychosis Online

Online, examples of psychosis can be observed in the extent to which our social media infrastructure bears no overarching oversight. Here, the decline in Symbolic efficiency occurs due to the foreclosure of an external authority; an authority whose very task is to provide stability to the Symbolic order. While it is the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, which, according to Lacan (1997), remains fundamental to the emergence of psychosis, examples of online narcissism and paranoia, as well as incidents of online hate and abuse, have been noted for collectively revealing a psychotic character in our

online discourses (Gunn 2018; Rambatan and Johanssen 2021). This stems primarily from the Other's lack of authority, where, instead of being disavowed, as per Flisfeder (2021), there resides an Other of the Other, secretly pulling the strings (Žižek 1999).

This Other of the Other provides a compensatory function to the Other's lack of authority and is best reflected in the proliferation of post-truth conspiracies, which function to reveal and assert the 'hidden truths' secretly controlling society. Here, the vast array of alternative theories and explanations that exist online, and which fundamentally prevent us from distinguishing fact and truth, are usually invested with a sense of moral righteousness and dogmatic certainty. More often than not, the very conviction that underscores their certainty is no less illusory than the forces they seek to expose. Marked by paranoia, such examples are also found in the extent to which AI algorithms are perceived to be creating their own knowledge, a knowledge that 'seems to know what we want better than we do' (Millar 2021: 145). This knowledge is endowed with a certain *jouissance* that becomes attributable to the algorithm itself (Millar 2021); a *jouissance* that now envelops our online activities in a manner akin to the 'hall of mirrors' that Kornbluh (2022) cites.

Thus, whereas Flisfeder (2021) calls for a return to the social media metaphor, in psychosis, it is the very 'process of metaphorization [that] fails' (Vanheule 2011: 34). What is foreclosed in psychosis is the Name-of-the-Father, the paternal metaphor, which, in its absence, 'creates a fundamental instability, both in terms of how the other is experienced and the way in which subjectivity takes shape' (Vanheule 2011: 34).⁴ Instead, where stability is achieved is in the 'imaginary identifications' that the psychotic elicits (Vanheule 2011: 34), or, in the case of Kornbluh (2022), in a Symbolic that is only ever imagined. This does, however, present the following question: if such an imagining is to take place, then to what extent does the Imaginary still require a Symbolic in order to exist?

To answer this question, we can return once more to the metonymy of desire, where, as Kornbluh acknowledges, '[m]etonymic contiguities propel the combination of signifiers into chains, with one signifier shifting to another signifier in a perpetual deferral of encountering the signified. Deferral is the movement of desire, which is always claiming "Not it!"' (2022: 407). Consequently, in Kornbluh's assessment, it is the very fact that:

We do *not* move on to the next object; we remain adhered to our input cycle; we scroll the same stuff every hour; we evince, in short, not desire but drive—precisely because there is no functioning symbolic, with its foundational cut, to introduce the difference of another not-it. (Kornbluh 2022: 411) (*italics added*)

While such debates can become entrenched in the theoretical nuances that encompass Lacanian interpretations of desire and drive, it is apparent that the lack of any 'functioning symbolic', any 'foundational cut', is itself attributable to the psychotic position—one predicated on the foreclosure of the paternal metaphor. Still, what fails to be acknowledged in such an assessment is how the apparent absence of the paternal metaphor 'give[s] it a greater power' (McGowan 2013: 66). It is this 'very structure' which McGowan attributes to our online interactions, noting how

the software that makes communication possible, the language in which subjects articulate themselves, and the rules that govern acceptable possibilities for identity, and so on ... bespeaks the workings of a paternal metaphor that underlies the metonymic world of cyberspace' (McGowan 2013: 66).

Indeed, if, as Kornbluh concedes, '[w]e may imagine this big Other is out there' (2022: 411), then such power is only ever imagined, and worse, there is no room for the hysteric's questioning and no recognition of the power that such an imagining may hold.

When psychotic appraisals of our online activity rely upon the apparent absence of authority and the subsequent turn to narcissism and hate, which becomes an all-encompassing characteristic of our online interactions, what is ignored is the fact that one's very online interactions elicit a fundamental dependency on a symbolic network of users and an algorithmic infrastructure that is nonetheless required in order to uphold and sustain our 'imprisonment in the imaginary' (Kornbluh 2022: 411). What this reveals, however, is that it is in psychosis that one's disbelief in the Other requires its own paradoxical belief in this very Other. Here, Zupančič emphasises how 'those who are obsessed with avoiding all deception, and naivety, are precisely those who ultimately blindly believe that the Other *knows* exactly what she is doing, that is, is perfectly consistent in her existence and actions' (2008: 85) (*italics in original*). In effect, '[d]isbelief is belief in one's own autonomy as guaranteed by the consistency of the field of the Other' (Zupančič 2008: 85). Thus, it is in accordance with their assured 'disbelief' that the psychotic remains the only 'true' believer.

Therefore, in understanding our online interactions the focus on psychosis runs aground upon the foreclosure it requires: a foreclosure which subsequently upends our capacity to locate and identify the Other online. Certainly, this is not to suggest that we do not find alternatives to this identification. For example, Sieben notes that '[t]o conflate the troll with the little other rather than the big Other is a form of paranoia' (2023: 164). With reference to the work of Clint Burnham, Sieben adds: 'we ignore the lulzing troll at our own peril, for this neighbor is the only sociality left' (Burnham 2018: 130 in Sieben 2023: 164). Yet, while '[t]he troll's unbearable enjoyment is the path through which any notion of digital sociality must proceed' (Sieben 2022: 164), Sieben grounds this assessment in Burnham's contention that the 'neighbor or Thing is not another user or subject: it is the Other *qua* the digital' (Burnham 2018: 122 in Sieben 2023: 164). What may be passed over too quickly in such assessments is the fact that 'the Other *qua* the digital' still remains. This reference to the digital can only ever be understood in accordance with the structure of the social media network: the technologies it requires, the network of international users it involves, and the algorithms that maintain its existence. The very fact that this 'Other *qua* the digital' exists, is what constitutes the digital network for whom this Other encompasses.

For this reason, when online, it is difficult to identify a foreclosure of the paternal metaphor (the Name-of-the-Father), and the subsequent recourse to the imaginary that such a foreclosure would prescribe. In fact, with regards to examples of Networked AI, Rambatan and Johanssen (2021) note that '[i]n spite of being an Other that constantly misrecognises the truth of our desires, we nonetheless respect its authority as the figure that would tell us what we should desire and through what kind of conducts we must do so' (2021: 28-29). As a result:

It is in this precise sense that Networked AI is a Name-of-the-Father. Just as it is with other Names-of-the-Father, our relationship to it is always a mixture of fear and love—fear for its potential for abuse, which has been proven to be true time and time again, but also love, for it never fails to bring us comfort by teaching us how to desire. (Rambatan and Johanssen 2021: 29)

Thus, it is in accordance with the Name-of-the-Father that our online ‘symbolic framework’ is sustained (Žižek 2012: 68).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in our social media interactions, where, in examples such as Facebook, the online projection of one’s personal information is, as Flisfeder (2021) asserts, knowingly presented to the network of social users who comprise the platform—one’s ‘friend list’. Indeed:

[It] is the list of others to whom the user is presenting herself as an objectified entity: a combination of the commodification of the Self and the entrepreneurial ethic of neoliberalism. ... [I]t is the ‘friends’ in social media that are the target of one’s activity, whether it is the operation of ‘liking,’ sharing, commenting, or updating one’s ‘status.’ (Flisfeder 2021: 85)

As seen in other social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, the process of ‘[l]iking and sharing act symbolically’, providing the ‘articulations of one’s subject position *within* the field of the Symbolic’ (Flisfeder 2021: 85) (*italics added*). It is on this very basis that our online interactions are, in the first instance, curated.

Whether or not this curation is established to help develop one’s professional network, to share photos with friends and family, or to troll a fellow user, in either case, it is this Symbolic network of curation that posits the Other. It is in accordance with this Other—an Other that is created by the social network and its users—that ‘[s]ocial media teaches us ... that our recognition of the level of appearances is sometimes the best way to create an impact’ (Flisfeder 2021: 139), and this includes whether this impact is used to announce a forthcoming engagement or to commit a racist act of online abuse. Indeed, despite the ‘seemingly unstructured space of the internet’ (Flisfeder 2021: 39), Flisfeder’s account reveals the very ‘structure’ that our social media establishes.

Conclusion: Hystericize the Metaphor!

Algorithmic Desire (Flisfeder 2021) affords a critical and much needed response to ongoing diatribes that function to denounce social media as the ruin of society, with Flisfeder’s account serving to expose the contradictions that remain inherent to both social media and society. This allows Flisfeder to trace the very way in which we are ideologically defined through the medium of social media and its technological components, explicating on how our relationship to desire constitutes an important role in how we enjoy online. It is thus in accordance with the metaphor of social media that we can see the very contradictions inherent to our social media: ‘contradictions that are present in the dominant, neoliberal capitalist ideology, and the form of its conscious self-affirmation’ (Flisfeder 2021: 185). What is left to answer, however, is in what sense are these contradictions made present?

As this review has asserted, if the alternative to Flisfeder’s algorithmic desire is that of psychosis, then, it is only through hysteria that the psychotic’s certainty can be resisted (a certainty that is best reflected in the convictions attributed to the online conspiracist theorist) (Black 2022; Flisfeder 2021; Sieben 2022; Žižek 2008).⁵ Where it is in the hysteric’s questioning of the Other that one’s Symbolic identity is resisted, eliciting a return to the ambiguity of desire, in the case of social media, such resistance is sustained by a *hystericization of the social media metaphor*. It is from this hysterical gesture that lack is averred—both in social media and society. Accordingly, while the hysteric functions to question its desire and that of the Other’s, the very crux of the hysteric position is that ‘[y]ou have to make the hysteric work’ (Baldwin 2016: 31). In the hope of imposing the very structure that would elicit a truly *social* media,

Algorithmic Desire: Towards a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media (Flisfeder 2021) establishes the very foundation for which this work can begin.

Notes

¹ Since publishing the book, Flisfeder (2022) has elaborated upon this contention with regard to the ‘Internet troll’. Here, the relation to the Other is reflected in ‘the character of the troll ... since their practice of reputation management is premised on the idea of tarnishing the reputation of others, an act for which trolls aim to satisfy the desire of their own friends and followers. Such examples show that the desire users engage to satisfy on social media is the desire of the big Other in the form of the social network, or the social surveillance of other users.’ (Flisfeder 2022: 421)

² Desire always occurs through an interpretation of the Other’s desire, or, in other words, from an interpretation of what an authority desires. There is no authority, however, who fully knows their desire, thus, the failure of interpretation is constitutive of desire. It is in how we relate to this interpretation that a sense of one’s desire is made (Ruti 2018).

³ This line of thinking has subsequently been applied to analyses of Algorithmic AI and ChatGPT. Johanssen notes: ‘ChatGPT is another, even stronger symptom for the desire for the existence of the big Other’ (2023).

⁴ With regard to the Name-of-the-Father, Vanheule (2011: 61) explains: ‘[w]ithin this logic of the paternal metaphor the father is not a real or an imaginary person, as is the case in the Oedipal myth, but a symbolic function to which all group members—mother, father and child—are subjected. It provides the human being with an internalized compass of culturally and socially viable principles, and facilitates understanding of the (*m*)other as well as the behaviour of *significant others*’ (italics in original).

⁵ As Žižek (2012: 68) asserts, ‘[t]he first task in the analysis of a psychotic is thus arguably the most difficult, but also the most crucial: that of “hystericizing” the psychotic subject, that is, transforming the void of his “depersonalization” into a hysterical dissatisfaction’.

References

- Baldwin, Y. (2016). *Let’s Keep Talking*. London, UK: Karnac.
- Beer, D. (2023). *The Tensions of Algorithmic Thinking*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.
- Black, J. (2022). “Love Thy Social Media!”: Hysteria and the Interpassive Subject. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 24(4), 1—10. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4019>.
- Black, J., & Cherrington, J. (2022). Posthuman to Inhuman: mHealth Technologies and the Digital Health Assemblage. *Theory & Event*, 25(4), 726—750. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2022.0039>.
- Boothby, R. (2019). Lacan’s Thing With Hegel. *Continental Thought & Theory*, 2(4), 164—179.
- Burnham, C. (2018). *Does the Internet Have an Unconscious? Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Chun, W. H. K. (2012). *Programmed Visions*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

-
- Fink, B. (1997). *The Lacanian Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Flisfeder, M. (2021). *Algorithmic Desire: Towards a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Flisfeder, M. (2022). Whither Symbolic Efficiency? Social Media, New Structuralism, and Algorithmic Desire. *Rethinking Marxism*, 34(3), 413—432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2022.2111959>.
- Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism*. Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books.
- Gunn, J. (2018). On Social Networking and Psychosis. *Communication Theory*, 28(1), 69—88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtx002>.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Cyborgs, Simians and Women*. London, UK: Free Association Books.
- Jameson, F. (1984). Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. *New Left Review*, 1(146), 79—80.
- Johanssen, J. (2023). ChatGPT is Human or Non-Human: Both Perspectives on AI are Wrong. *Sublation Magazine*, 30 April. <https://www.sublationmag.com/post/chatgpt-is-human-or-non-human#:~:text=The%20subject%20unconsciously%20longs%20for,existence%20of%20the%20big%20Other>. Accessed 30 April 2023.
- Kornbluh, A. (2022). Imagined Communities 2.0. *Rethinking Marxism*, 34(3), 406—412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2022.2111958>.
- Lacan, J. (1997). *The Psychoses, Book III, 1955-1956, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (2004). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. London, UK: Karnac.
- Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- McGowan, T. (2013). Virtual freedom: The obfuscation and elucidation of the subject in cyberspace. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 18(1), 63-70. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2012.40>.
- McGowan, T. (2019). The Psychosis of Freedom. In J. Mills & D.L. Downing (Eds.), *Lacan on Psychosis* (pp. 47—76). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Millar, I. (2021). *The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence*. Champagne, CH: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pluth, E. (2007). *Signifiers and Acts*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Rambatan, B., & Johanssen, J. (2021). *Event Horizon*. Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books.
- Ruti, M. (2018). *Distillations*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Sieben, A. (2023). Does the Internet Have an Unconscious? Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture & Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 28: 159—165. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-022-00314-z>.
- Sodha, S. (2021). Social media fuels narcissists' worst desires, making reasoned debate near impossible. *The Guardian*, 7 November. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/07/social-media-fuels-narcissists-worst-desires-making-reasoned-debate-near-impossible>. Accessed 19 July 2023.
- Vanheule, S. (2011). *The Subject of Psychosis*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

-
- White, J. M., & Lidskog, R. (2022). Ignorance and the regulation of artificial intelligence. *Journal of Risk Research*, 25(4), 488—500.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2021.1957985>.
- Žižek, S. (1999). *The Ticklish Subject*. London, UK: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2008). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London, UK: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2012). *Less Than Nothing*. London, UK: Verso.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. London, UK: Profile Books.
- Zupančič, A. (2008). *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.