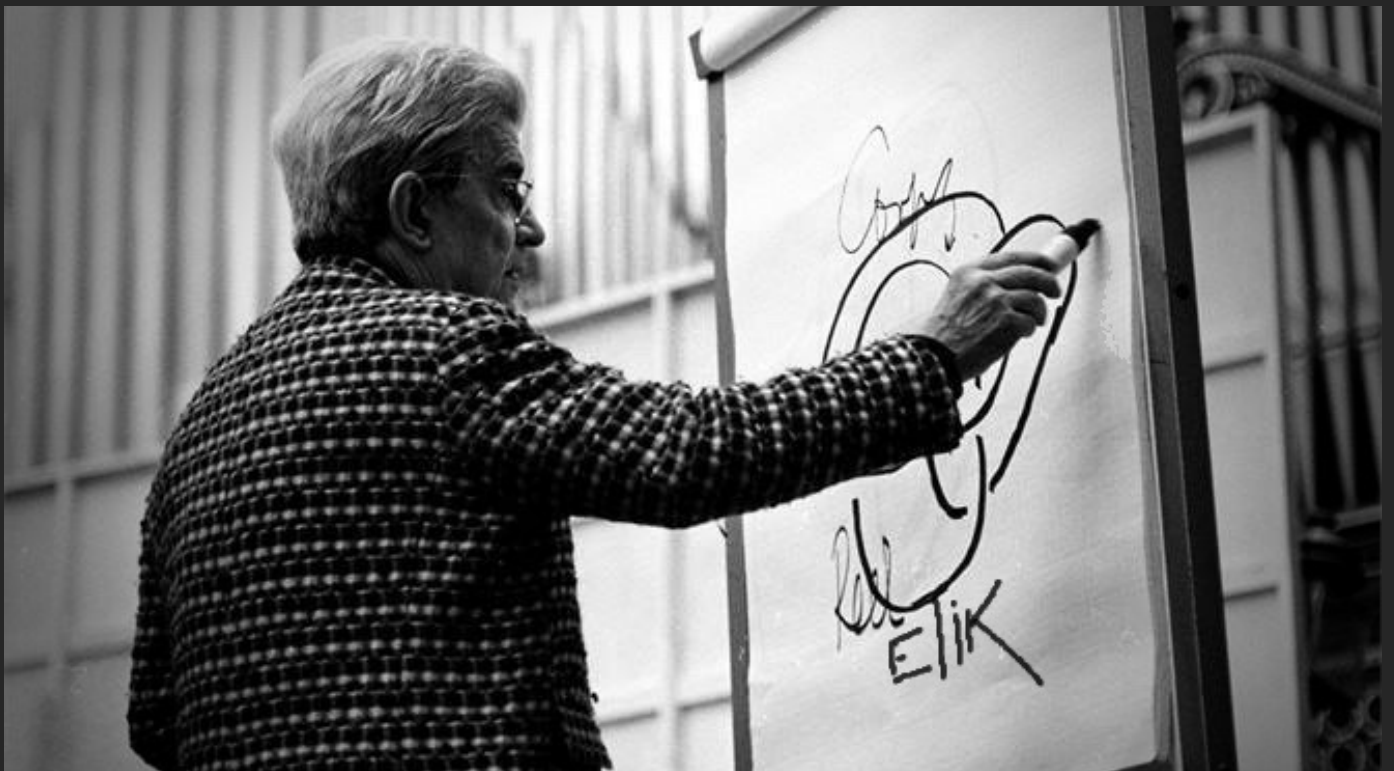


ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

INTEGRATED CIRCUITS — ABERRANT FORMS

SCROLLING TIK-TOK WITH JACQUES LACAN



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Scroll, Scroll, Scroll...

Merrily, Merrily Merrily, Merrily...

Life is but a dream...

—A bubble pops—**mpah**—as in a cartoon. A man appears who I’ve seen before, smiling at me like I should put the gun down. “Hold on! You’ve been scrolling¹ for way too lo”—I scroll past him.² It leaves a ripple in the current, an eddy, a tiny vortex making sense of itself after I’ve gone. Every time I scroll, I wake up, but only to a new dream. I scroll away—I roll over into every successive moment. Actually I roll every moment into succession. I paddle over the edge and then, as it turns out, I don’t.

(It’s 7:00AM and my alarm goes off It’s 11:30PM and I’m getting into bed (not going to sleep) It’s 10:45AM and I have fifteen minutes before I teach my next class It’s 1:00PM and I’m on the toilet It’s 4:33PM and I’ve just missed the bus home from my parking spot)

¹ FYP: the “for you page” is center of TikTok. Unlike most social media platforms where your main feed is either content you search for or content produced by users you ‘follow,’ TikTok centers the encounter of the FYP, continuously generated content curated by user-preference algorithms. Videos on the FYP can still be liked, commented on, shared etc. and can still lead you to particular user accounts.

² Official TikTok accounts (as well as advertisements) occasionally populate the FYP with products or “tips” like this one, designed to prevent users from scrolling aimlessly through the app at the expense of their mental and physical health.

—A girl in a blue bonnet, houndstooth slacks, Garfield socks, and sandals is squatting on the edge of her sink, barking at me. She’s not actually barking. Well, she might be. She points at her socks. Regardless, what I hear is something I’ve heard before—a trend, a micro-genre: seconds twenty-five through thirty-one of “Work REMIX” by A\$AP Ferg. It goes; she goes: *Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Coogi down to the socks like I’m Biggie Poppa (baby).* Again. Again. Again. Again. Okay. I scroll elsewhere.

—An orangutan is sitting on some grass, “eating” soap bubbles. The bubbles don’t make any sound when they pop. #orangatang [sic] #monkelove #monkeland #monke4life. “The Boys”³ are in the comments spamming “monke.” This isn’t where I want to be. How do I know? Not sure. The worst part is that this changes where I end up. I don’t know who’s on my tail. There are a billion egoic rocks in the river and some of them leave a wake like mine. Those ripples proceed us too. I scroll away—another locust shifting to the edge of a swarm, another castaway-captain paddling to the monotonous tune of the same dead waltz.

—**mpah** “Hold on! You—”

³ “The Boys” is an amorphous but consistent cloud of opinion and gesture that condenses in forms of user engagement that share an explicitly gendered, reactionary, right-wing, yet quintessentially unserious inflection. “The Boys,” for example, are partially responsible for making YouTube Rewind 2018 the most unliked video in the history of YouTube, in large part because users like PewDiePie were excluded from its featured cast of creators.

Terms of Service

“Welcome to TikTok (the “Platform”), which is provided by TikTok Inc. in the United States (collectively such entities will be referred to as “TikTok”, “we” or “us”). You are reading [**Hello?**] the terms of service (the “Terms”), which govern the relationship and serve as an agreement between you and us [**The following is a series of notes concerning**] and set forth the terms and conditions [**the social media app TikTok and Lacanian Psychoanalysis.**] by which you may access and use the Platform and our related websites, services, applications, products and content (collectively, the “Services”). Access [**During the past year of epidemiological crisis,**] to certain Services or features of the Services (such as, by way of example and not limitation, the ability to submit or share User [**while cloistered inside my one-bedroom apartment near UW-Madison’s campus,**] Content (defined below)) may be subject to age restrictions and not available to all users of the Services. Our Services are provided for private, non-commercial use. For purposes of these Terms, “you” and “your” means you [**I became yet another denizen of this digital space**] as the user of the Services. The Terms form [**These notes are a product**] a legally binding agreement between you and us. [**of my engagement with the app, their fractured form**] Please take the time [**an echo**] to read them carefully [**of the hundreds of seconds-long tiktoks I consume on any given day.**] If you are under age 18, you may only use the

Services with the consent of your parent or legal **[In the following, I read Lacan]** guardian. Please be sure **[—especially his influence by 20th century cybernetics—]** your parent or legal guardian has reviewed and discussed these Terms **[through the lens of TikTok, assessing how the appearance of]** with you.

ARBITRATION NOTICE FOR USERS IN THE UNITED STATES: THESE TERMS CONTAIN **[anxiety,]**AN ARBITRATION CLAUSE AND A WAIVER OF RIGHTS **[desire,]** TO BRING A CLASS ACTION AGAINST US **[sociality, and space]**. EXCEPT FOR CERTAIN TYPES **[on the app]** OF DISPUTES MENTIONED IN THAT ARBITRATION CLAUSE, YOU AND TIKTOK AGREE THAT DISPUTES BETWEEN US WILL BE RESOLVED **[change the way we understand]** BY MANDATORY BINDING **[both social media and]** ARBITRATION, AND YOU AND TIKTOK WAIVE ANY RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN A CLASS-ACTION LAWSUIT OR CLASS-WIDE ARBITRATION **[Lacanian Psychoanalysis]**.

Cybernetic Lacan

*The symbolic world is the world of the machine.*⁴ Lacan's assertion seems almost to destabilize the nature of psychoanalysis itself. What are we to make of this if, as Lacan also claims, psychoanalysts are essentially, "practitioners of the symbolic function"?⁵ What is the status of "the talking cure," the all too human neurotic, and indeed, the unconscious itself if we are to take Lacan at his word here? What is required to do just that? To understand the implications of Lacan's symbolic order one needs to read within the frame of his cybernetic influence. Such a reading is also important to understanding the psychic significance of TikTok.

Strong evidence exists to suggest that Lacan's work was influenced by post-war developments in cybernetics, game theory, and information theory.^{6, 7, 8, 9} Lydia H. Liu advises that our ability to recognize this influence is impaired by the conventional lamination of a Saussurean understanding of language onto Lacan. Barring this uneasy

⁴ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "a Materialist Definition of the Phenomenon of Consciousness," 47.

⁵ Lacan, Jacques (2006). "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," 235.

⁶ Liu, Lydia H. "The Cybernetic Unconscious: Rethinking Lacan, Poe, and French Theory." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 36, 2010.

⁷ Johnston, John. "The In-Mixing of Machines: Cybernetics and Psychoanalysis." *Allure of Machinic Life - Cybernetics, Artificial Life, and the New AI*. MIT Press, 2010, 65–103.

⁸ Matviyenko, Svitlana. "Graphocentrism in Psychoanalysis." *Lacan and the Posthuman*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 113–127.

⁹ Wright, Colin. "Lacan's Cybernetic Theory of Causality: Repetition and the Unconscious in Duncan Jones' *Source Code*." *Lacan and the Posthuman*, 2018, 67–88.

indebtedness to structural linguistics, what does Lacan mean when he says the unconscious is structured like a language?

For Lacan, “the question is precisely to know what minimum number of signs is needed to make a language.”¹⁰ That is to say, Lacan conceives of language in a combinatorial sense. Meaning is secondary to syntax. “What is the meaning of meaning?” Lacan asks. “Meaning is the fact that the human being isn’t master of this primordial, primitive language. He has been thrown into it. Committed, caught up in its gears.”¹¹ While an expansive sense of the word “meaning” can sometimes accommodate directionality alone, Lacan is precisely interested in language without meaning as such, this to the end of describing the mechanics of the subject’s determination by the symbolic order. The subject “is inscribed in” a “concrete, universal discourse” (the discourse of the Other) which “is how he is already determined”¹²—by “the itinerary of the signifier.”¹³ In other words, Lacan analyzes the causal and combinatorial effects engendered purely by “t[ying] the real to a syntax.”¹⁴ If the subject is determined by the letter, what are the probabilistic bounds of this determination: “what is the chance of the unconscious, which in some way lies behind man?”¹⁵

¹⁰ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Where Is Speech? Where Is Language?” 287.

¹¹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics, or on the Nature of Language,” 307.

¹² Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Where is Speech? Where is Language?” 283.

¹³ Lacan, Jacques (2006). “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’,” 7.

¹⁴ Lacan, Jacques. *Ibid.*, 305

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

This is an important point. When Lacan affirms the determination of the symbolic order yet simultaneously asks about the chance of the unconscious, we observe chance itself to “cease [being] radically aleatory, becoming instead an effect of structure.”¹⁶ As Colin Wright points out, this “has not to do with an Oedipal guarantee of psychoanalytic hermeneutics, but with...the central cybernetic insight into information...that ‘meaningful’ patterns are progressively constructed, via feedback loops, out of randomness.”¹⁷ These patterns are and effect chance within a signifying structure.

A cybernetic reading of Lacan serves, in some ways, to isolate a continuous thread in the work of an otherwise irreducibly difficult and disjointed thinker. The gap of displacement, the dialectic of being and lack, of presence and absence—whose relations define desire¹⁸ and thereby structure the human world—*Fort and Da*, even and odd: each of these concepts (without flattening their differences) relate to the emergence of a binary syntax which, being established, is determining of the symbolic order.¹⁹

¹⁶ Wright, Colin. “Lacan’s Cybernetic Theory of Causality: Repetition and the Unconscious in Duncan Jones’ *Source Code*.” *Lacan and the Posthuman*, 2018, 72.

¹⁷ Wright, Colin. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Desire, Life and Death,” 223

¹⁹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “The Purloined Letter,” 193

The Purloined Life

Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" is among his most (in)famous works. Given a privileged position as the first of his *Écrits*, the seminar explains the "major determination the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier."²⁰ Lacan's explication of this process, his focus on a "pure" non-semantic signifier, and his diagramed illustrations of the symbolic chain make this seminar a touchstone for scholarship on Lacan and Cybernetics.

In his reading of Poe's story, Lacan critiques Baudelaire's translation (Lacan calls it a betrayal)²¹ of the title. "The Purloined Letter," in Baudelaire's version, becomes "La Lettre volée" or, "The Stolen Letter." Following an etymological excursus, Lacan concludes that, "we are quite simply dealing with a *letter* which has been *detoured*, one whose trajectory has been *prolonged*."²² What is the significance of this? This detour is precisely the engine of the subject's determination—the reason (motion, displacement, flight) that Lacan figures the subject as taking place in a game²³ (the play of signifiers) or being caught up in the gears of the symbolic.²⁴ If the letter was

²⁰ Lacan, Jacques (2006). "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," 7.

²¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Ibid.*, 20.

²² *Ibid.*, 21.

²³ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "The Purloined Letter," 192.

²⁴ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics, or on the Nature of Language," 307.

to be found always in [the same place, its place], if “the alternating operation at its core” of presence and absence, did not “require it to leave its place,” the subject would not be caught up by it nor would it be, by definition, symbolic.²⁵ This, Lacan suggests, is Freud’s discovery: “that the signifier’s displacement determines the subjects’ acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate...”²⁶

For Lacan, life itself goes the purloined way of the letter. He says as much: “that is what life is—a detour, a dogged detour, itself transitory and precarious, and deprived of any significance.”²⁷ In that desire “emerges with symbolism,”²⁸ life is an indefinite quest for the object of desire, for which man “never ceases generating substitutive objects.”²⁹ A quest hollowed out by the tunneling of detours—a quest constituted by absence. TikTok, too, is an interminable detour.

Lacan’s emphasis on detour finds resonance with the undirected nature of TikTok, as well as its mappability or algorithmic spatialization. Unlike other social media, one can never be “caught up” on TikTok. The feed is never exhausted. While the limits of a user’s social circle or declared interests can occasionally lead to content depletion on other platforms, TikTok’s central feature, the For You Page, is detour without end. Still, there are destinations along the endless way. A Tiktok posted by the user

²⁵ Something that is always found in the same place or that is always in its place wherever it is, is of the order of the Real. An exception is the symbol which is always in its place—as a landmark of the real—but which would not be wherever it was. It is precisely the symbolic cut in the real, the presence of absence, that structures desire in the first place.

²⁶ Lacan, Jacques (2006). “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 21.

²⁷ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Desire, Life, and Death,” 232.

²⁸ Lacan, Jacques. *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Introduction to the Entwurf,” 100.

@swoov presents a “map” of TikTok: “okay we all start off here on Straight TikTok, right? And eventually we find Gay TikTok, which either puts us in Gayboy TikTok or Lesbian TikTok, which can send us to Thirst Trap TikTok, which is just right back to Gay TikTok.”³⁰ The map continues, replete with ideological “keys”—which serve to transform identity-oriented destinations into coded aesthetics i.e., “stoner-witch, cottage core, or goth”—detours within detours (bisexual tiktok), dead ends which of course aren’t actually dead ends, and worm holes to “rare” spaces like frog TikTok. The implications of user qua aimless algorithmic explorer are many. For now, however, we will focus on the technical intersection of Lacan’s map of the detoured signifier and a possible map of user navigation on TikTok.

Lacan’s symbolic chain has something in common with user preference algorithms. Lacan explains the purloined letter as leading to a particularly generated and generating structure ordered, “along the same lines as the chain that interested...Markov.”³¹ Characteristically, Lacan leaves it at that; but it is worth digging a little deeper. A Markov chain is a stochastic process in which a system of states S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n is defined by a set of transition probabilities corresponding to the chance of the system in state S_a moving to state S_b .³² As Friedrich Kittler observes in “The World of the Symbolic—A World of the Machine,” “Lacan’s analysis of Poe works with

³⁰ <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMJb9YVc2/>

³¹ Lacan, Jacques (2006). “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’,” 38.

³² A definition derived from engineer Claude Shannon’s writing on Markov processes as quoted in “The In-Mixing of Machines” by John Johnston.

precisely these types of transition probabilities.”³³ This kind of modeling demonstrates how “straightforward encoding transfers unlimited chance (the real) into a syntax with requirements and exemptions.”³⁴ Markov chains can be used not only to demonstrate the structure of syntax in an abstract, predictive sense (Lacan), but also to model the navigation of users on digital media, whose movements can be conceived of within a framework of transition probabilities.

John Johnston’s monograph, *The Allure of Machinic Life - Cybernetics, Artificial Life, and the New AI*, features an extended meditation on the intersections between Lacan’s symbolic chain—conceptualized as the “discourse of the Other”—and Markov processes. He asks, “could Markov chains, in revealing a pattern of probabilities, provide a model for understanding the ‘discourse of the [O]ther,’ which is neither random nor simply determined...?”³⁵ In that Markov processes might be used to model the behavior of users on a platform like TikTok—their transition to different algorithmic spaces—which for Lacan would be indicative of their determination by the displacement of the signifier (itself modeled in the abstract by a Markov-like process), I venture a hesitant yes. Indeed, the question is not whether there is a coincidence between user preference algorithms and Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”—that much is concrete. The real question regards the nature of this coincidence. To what extent and in what ways do the endless waters of TikTok speak to the

³³ Kittler, Friedrich (1997). “The World of the Symbolic—A World of the Machine,” 140.

³⁴ Kittler, Friedrich. Ibid.

³⁵ Johnston, John. “The In-Mixing of Machines: Cybernetics and Psychoanalysis,” 85.

determination of the subject by the symbolic order? What is the significance of TikToks like the one we saw earlier (@swoov), which attempts to make sense of this determination in spatial terms? If digital media welds the symbolic and the spatial, renders the algorithm navigable, to what extent does this inflect the psychoanalytic aim of “shift[ing] the automatic repetition of fate, traditionally meted out at the whim of the gods, towards the tychic repetition of a *destiny* that can be assumed by man in defiance of the gods”?³⁶

³⁶ Wright, Colin. “Lacan’s Cybernetic Theory of Causality: Repetition and the Unconscious in Duncan Jones’ *Source Code*,” 71.

No Hashtags

Users sense the determination of the symbolic and co-op it; internalize it as cyber-fate. “No hashtags. This was meant to find you.”

Wiederholungszwang

“Look at me I put a face on, wow! Look at me I put a show on when I go ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” For a while a trend was popular on TikTok which sampled these lines from Lil Darkie’s song “HaHa.” Creators would cut their video off right before the “wow!” and cut back in with a full face of makeup, a mask, a cosplay, new lighting, etc. Some creators made use of the sound to highlight the trials of being on stage over and over again, emphasizing the monotonous, repetitive laugh with looks of muted pain. This trend is indicative of many others that depend on “transitions” or “cuts” that split the video across a moment of tension or suspense in a “sound.”³⁷ It was also the perfect trend to be co-opted by Synth Rat. Synth Rat is a trend/community/phenomenon/prime-mover (kidding) that hi-jacks the “cut” in other trends to return the viewer to Synth Rat TikTok, from which, the trend informs us, we never escaped in the first place. “You are still in SYNTH RAT TIKTOK//YOU NEVER ACTUALLY LEFT//ALL TIKTOK IS SYNTH RAT TIKTOK//do not deny the decisions that led you here.”³⁸

³⁷ The audio and the video portions of TikTok are split from each other. Users can save specific sounds without saving the video itself, and trends arise through the repetition either of the gestural content of a video or of a commonly used sound—often both. Organized in a library, sounds often become micro-genres in themselves. Occasionally they feature hidden messages beyond the time-limit of the video (which does not apply to the sound itself) or in the title of the sound.

³⁸ <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMJbpsEvH/>

For Freud, the *wiederholungszwang*, or repetition compulsion, is related to what is beyond the pleasure principle: an intrinsic inertia towards inanimacy and death which he calls the “death drive.” Freud associates repetition with that which is repressed, an original trauma which the subject cannot escape. This is the crux of the matter for Lacan too: “The line of cleavage doesn’t pass between the unconscious and the conscious, but between, on the one hand, something which is repressed and tends simply to repeat itself, that is to say speech which insists, ...and on the other hand, something which is an obstacle to it, and which is organized in another manner, namely the ego.”³⁹ However, there is a crucial distinction. Lacan figures repetition as the product of the symbolic order—as “speech which insists.” Repetition is a product of the “circuit in which I am integrated”⁴⁰—“it’s all to do with the intrusion of the symbolic.”⁴¹

Synth Rat TikTok defamiliarizes this intrusion of the symbolic to the point that it is immediately noticeable, not in parapraxes or neuroses, but in the fact that you are not where you thought you were. It exists as something between a manifestation of and an allegory for the insistence of the symbolic order. But Synth Rat is also a novelty, an idiosyncratic instantiation of this insistence. Repetition on TikTok extends far beyond the intrusion of this chimeric musician.

³⁹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “A, m, a, S,” 321.

⁴⁰ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “The Circuit,” 89.

⁴¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Ibid.*, 88.

TikTok is fundamentally structured by repetition. TikToks themselves repeat over and over till paused or passed. Many TikToks integrate this repetition as a formal device, lining up their first and last seconds to achieve a seamless loop. The actions of the user, too, can only be repetitive, an incessant detour of scrolling, liking, commenting, linking. As a digital media with particular “rules” of engagement, TikTok emphasizes the subject’s determination by the symbolic order. It reenacts it, over and over again.

One of the most significant manifestations of repetition on TikTok is virality. It is worth noting here that *wiederholen* can reference either repetition or *replication*. Indeed, virality is an insistence of the symbolic in terms of both TikTok trends and ‘literal’ viruses. At this very second, a +ssRNA virus is wreaking havoc across the globe, replicating its code within the bodies of hundreds of thousands of humans. So too are particular TikToks proliferating across hundreds of thousands of screens, repeating again and again. The question is, where is the symbolic order in all this?

In a lecture titled “The Circuit,” Lacan speaks to the intersection of determination and repetition. “The discourse of the Other” he claims, “is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links...and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else.”⁴² Drawing on our reading of the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” we can say that the displacement of the signifier—that which constitutes determination within the discursive circuit—is also the quality of infectivity

⁴² Lacan, Jacques. *Ibid.*, 89.

that allows this transmission. But at least in this lecture, the discourse of the Other is transmitted only to “someone” else. The symbolic is not human, *per se*, but manifests with the speaking subject. That which opposes the symbolic, the ego, creates a “frictional effect” without which “the effects of communication at the level of the unconscious would not be noticeable.”⁴³ How can we conceptualize the unconscious on TikTok within this framework, where the human imaginary in some ways mediates the symbolic? Is repetition on TikTok really “speech which insists”? Or is it only a quirk of the app?

This is where a cybernetic reading of Lacan can shed light on an answer otherwise obfuscated by a structural-linguistic reading of his work, and also where we gain some insights into Lacan’s claim that the world of the symbolic is the world of the machine. In the context of TikTok and the symbolic we have ≥ 2 machines. Syntax as a machine itself, and the technology or machine(s) of TikTok. Even as it oversimplifies, this difference is important: while the symbolic might in a sense be a machine, it is not itself *the* machine that writes or speaks or explodes or goes Ding! Ding! Ding! We have a winner! Rather, as Lacan says, “through cybernetics, the symbol is embodied in an apparatus—the apparatus being just its support. And it is embodied in a literally trans-subjective way.”⁴⁴ The term “trans-subjective,” employed in the context of the machine, seems to suggest that the “transmission” of the discourse of the Other is not

⁴³ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “From the Entwurf to the Traumdeutung,” (120).

⁴⁴ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics, or on the Nature of Language,” 304.

limited only to human subjects. The symbolic, indeed the unconscious, is viral.⁴⁵ It snubs, in its machinations, the distinction between life and non-life. TikTok is a vector, perhaps even an especially efficient one. Repetition as it manifests on TikTok is “speech that insists.” The frictional effect of the ego is not a precondition for the flight of the signifier; it leaves only a residue, the meagre stuff of meaning.

⁴⁵ Luca M. Possati, a researcher at the University of Porto published, this year, an interesting article titled, “Algorithmic Unconscious: Why Psychoanalysis Helps in Understanding AI.” Possati’s central claim is that developments in AI warrant a psychoanalytic perspective and that AI can be understood as “a new stage in the process of human identification” alongside imaginary and symbolic identification. Fusing Latour’s Actor Network Theory with Lacanian psychoanalysis—a fraught intersection to say the least—Possati makes the insightful claim that “the unconscious is at the same time the effect of a technological mediation and the origin of a new form of technology.” I make reference to this article because I don’t think the Latourian fusion is necessary. A cybernetic reading of Lacan makes clear the a-human, trans-subjective qualities of the symbolic qua unconscious. Lacan’s insight that the unconscious is an effect of the symbolic circuit in which I am integrated, and that the discourse of the Other is constituted by/as the emergence of syntax itself, is the insight that the unconscious emerges as the effect of technological mediation and engenders a new form of technology. If, as Lacan suggests, it is our unavoidable “duty to transmit [the chain of discourse] in its aberrant form to someone else,” and if the symbolic emerges in the play of + and -, 0 and 1, then a cybernetic reading of Lacan is already prepared to assess the ways in which AI and other digital technology may ‘conduct’ the unconscious.

Don't Move

“Duet⁴⁶ this video in the exact position you're in now.”

Okay. I click into the duet and flip my camera to face me. It shows you someone slouching low in a brown, faux-leather chair. They haven't shaved. Stubble sticks out at angles from where the skin of our neck wrinkles and folds over the bottom of his chin. It's dark. A little light—the only light—comes some from the hall, some from the screen. I'm itchy. Did you forget what time it is? Their lips hang open ever so slightly, dried out from the meagre air of breath on autopilot. Her eyes are red. I mean, where would they go? The virus rages outside.

...

“He's already been saying he's dead for six months, but when he is awakened, M. Valdemar is no more than a disgusting liquefaction, something for which no language has a name, the naked apparition, pure, simple, brutal, of this figure which it is impossible to gaze at face on, which hovers in the background of all the imaginings of human destiny, which is beyond all qualification, and for which the word carrion is

⁴⁶ A “duet” on TikTok is a feature that allows a user to pair their TikTok with that of a different user, featuring both on a split screen.

completely inadequate, the complete collapse of this species of swelling that is life—the bubble bursts and dissolves down into inanimate putrid liquid.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Desire, Life and Death,” 231-232.

The objet in the (a)lgorithm

Ironically, desire for Lacan is exactly that which is beyond the pleasure principle. Reading Freud's text of the same name, Lacan asks us to see how Freud locates desire "beyond any instinctual cycle definable by its conditions."⁴⁸ Desire, he suggests, is somehow pre-vital: "life doesn't want to be healed...all life is concerned with is seeking repose...while awaiting death."⁴⁹ For Lacan, then, desire is strangely aligned with the death drive, and therefore with repetition and the symbolic. But even as Lacan claims that "the death instinct is only the mask of the symbolic order,"⁵⁰ it is important that the eminence of the symbolic order not collapse the subject into something manageable, impossible, or both. If cybernetics "clearly highlights...the radical difference between the symbolic and the imaginary orders,"⁵¹ then desire brings them back into knotted relation. It is the structuring of desire (emerging with symbolism as "a relation of being to lack"⁵²) that demands we address the "joint" between the imaginary and the symbolic. This joint can be understood as the objet petit a.⁵³

⁴⁸ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "Desire, Life and Death," 229.

⁴⁹ Lacan, Jacques. Ibid., 233.

⁵⁰ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "A, m, a, S," 326.

⁵¹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics, or on the Nature of Language," 306.

⁵² Lacan, Jacques (1991). "Desire, Life and Death," 223.

⁵³ As the objet petit a will later figure as the center of the Borromean knot, it might be considered as the joint between all three orders—imaginary, symbolic, and Real.

The objet petit a first appears as the specular (relating to the mirror stage) image of the ego in Lacan's L schema. It designates the other which "isn't an other at all, since it is essentially coupled with the ego."⁵⁴ In this sense, the objet petit a is resolutely imaginary. From the introduction of the L schema in 1955, it will be another two years before Lacan separates the objet petit a from the specular image. Yet, from even before the L schema to well after the differentiation between the objet petit a and the specular image, there is a continuity in Lacan's language that can help us to understand the nature of this "joint."

In 1960 Lacan suggests that the partial object of desire (objet a) has no specular image, but that it appears nonetheless "in a net of shadow," which constitutes the "clothes" of the specular image which are "lent" to the partial object.⁵⁵ Here we see how the objet petit a appears as the specular image of the ego despite its own vampiric inability to be reflected. Five years earlier, Lacan has already written that "the objects of [man's] world are always structured around the wandering shadow of his own ego."⁵⁶ It is this egoic shadow of the imaginary which simultaneously obscures and presents the objet petit a to the subject. The objet petit a appears in the imaginary as the obfuscated figure of man's "dehiscence within the world...object which by essence destroys him, anxiety...his perfect complementarity on the level of desire."⁵⁷ In other words, it appears in the imaginary as the representation of the rift or cut

⁵⁴ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "A, m, a, S," 321.

⁵⁵ Lacan, Jacques (2006). "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," 693.

⁵⁶ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "The Dream of Irma's Injection," 167.

⁵⁷ Lacan, Jacques. *Ibid.*, 166.

initiated by the emergence of symbolic syntax. This cut, the relation of being to lack which structures the subject in the symbolic here appears in the imaginary as the objet petit a, object of desire and anxiety.

Why this long-winded and risky reading of the objet petit a backwards in Lacan's writing to before it was named as such? Because it might otherwise escape the gravity of Lacan's most cybernetically informed work, and in a sense, of the symbolic. This is precisely what happens in Lucas Pohl's recent article on "Object-disoriented geographies" and the objet petit a.⁵⁸ Pohl limits the objet petit a to a discussion of anxiety, removing it from desire and therefore from the structuration of the symbolic. Still, Pohl asks the right questions, questions that will guide us out of this excursus and back to TikTok.

For Pohl it is crucial that anxiety does not lack a proper object—as philosophers from Kierkegaard to Heidegger have suggested—but that it has as its object the objet petit a, which "lacks a proper place."⁵⁹ That is to say, the object of anxiety is profoundly disorienting, neither inside or outside, winking out from within the shadows of specular identification, and existing somewhere, nowhere, in a state of profound unsituatedness. It is in part this absence of place which destabilizes the subject to such a degree, which emulates for the subject (as we have already seen) their dehiscence in the world.

⁵⁸ Pohl, Lucas. "Object-disoriented geographies: the Ghost Tower of Bangkok and the topology of anxiety." *Cultural Geographies*, 2020.

⁵⁹ Pohl, Lucas. *Ibid.*, 74.

Pohl gives us the objet petit a qua unplaced menace, to which we must add motor. Restoring the dimension of desire, I want to suggest that the non-place of the objet petit a may be indexed by the algorithmic space of TikTok. This is not to say that the objet petit a was secretly hiding in bean TikTok, frog TikTok, or enby TikTok. Rather, the place of the objet petit a is indexed by the spatialization of the symbolic as such. This all depends on the unremarkable assertion that a user-preference algorithm drives and approximates desire and anxiety. What else does such a model represent, if not the compass of human desire and anxiety? We are led, on TikTok, by these affects which are themselves products of the machinations of the symbolic order. As we have seen, our anxious, desiring movement through the algorithm has been already been conceptualized spatially by users who “map” TikTok. The algorithm, however, does not have the dimension of space. The spatialization of the symbolic is virtual. As Slavoj Žižek points out in *Organs Without Bodies*, this is not the “virtual” of virtual reality. To distinguish, he makes use of the mathematical concept of an attractor: “all positive lines or points in its sphere of attraction only approach it in an endless fashion, never reaching its form —the existence of this form is purely virtual, being nothing more than the shape toward which lines and points tend.”⁶⁰ Similarly, space on TikTok emerges only with the convergence of users—what we might call a convergence of discursive circuits. This space, then, which exists but is virtual—is amorphous, constantly reforming and breaking the labels which users attribute to any

⁶⁰ Žižek, Slavoj. *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*. Routledge (2004). 12.

particular “zone”—is the space which I suggest indexes the non-place of the objet petit a as the object of both desire and anxiety.

The spatialization of the symbolic on TikTok allows us to reconceptualize the joint between the symbolic and the imaginary, and to refigure the un-situatedness of the objet petit a.

Convergence

Everyone in the comments is surprised; the video seems so random.

...Ice carving; inside jokes we're out on; an eight-year-old does a back flip; crayons dripping down a canvas; a potentially post-ironic trad-wife makes dinner; another cat-boy; another maid outfit; medical emergency story-time; a Michelin star chef cooks mac-n-cheese from home...

"are we really all here at the same time?"

"anyone here at 3am?"

"why are we all awake?"

Swarm, Rhizome, Stock

Who or what populates the “dense clusters of radio waves [that] leave our planet every second”?⁶¹ This question begins Hito Steyerl’s 2012 article “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation.” Her answer, in short, is image spam. Image spam for Steyerl is, “one of the many dark matters of the digital world...they advertise pharmaceuticals, replica items, body enhancements, penny stocks, and degrees.” The people in this image spam are not really the people, rather, “they are the dream team of hyper-capitalism...horny, super skinny, armed with recession proof college degrees, always on time for their service jobs courtesy of their replica watches.” Image spam is addressed to people (incessantly so) but fails to actually represent them. Real people, Steyerl observes, are disappearing from the circulation of image spam altogether. As our technology for catching and sorting spam improves, image spam is increasingly speaking only to itself—or to whatever is listening to our earthly emissions, far beyond our world.

Interestingly, Steyerl sees image spam as more than the discursive Kool-Aid of late capitalism. Instead of indoctrinating the people, spam shields them. Steyerl makes two main arguments here. First, that the “generic cast” of image spam have the ability to

⁶¹ Steyerl, Hito. “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation.” e-Flux, 2012.

“stand in for the people as negative substitutes...absorb[ing] the flak of the limelight on their behalf.” And second, “that the people [as such] might happen by jointly making an image and not by being represented in one.” It is the generic quality of image spam—its ability not only to speak to the condition of the people via negative representation but to replace the people *in* representation—that Steyerl celebrates. While Steyerl suggests that image spam provides our cover to get “off screen,” it seems that the generic modes of representation proliferating on social media like TikTok, far from inaugurating a crisis of surveillance, provide a similar kind of defense.

The separation of audio and video on TikTok and the subsequent rise of sounds as micro-genres highlights something about representation on social media in general: individual acts of representation can quickly flare into trends which, no matter how hi-def their constitutive images, dissolve representation into the polluted and murky waters of the generic. Meme accounts have long made notice of this in their (metatextual) use of stock photos⁶²—an archive closely related to Steyerl’s image spam. Under these conditions, representation itself has begun to acquire a rust of the generic, regardless of whether it employs stock photos, spam, or goes viral. All representation on social media is latently generic. But what is the structure of this process, that seems to oxidize the surface of every profile picture, every TikTok; how might we understand this process, which might be called stock-ification?

⁶² A creator especially notable for her use of stock photos is @gayvapeshark on Facebook and Instagram, who died last year. See this post by @Coryintheabyss for an apt description of her work and a moving eulogy for her life: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_Qp9ouFU3Y/?igshid=jizrr3f2ocga

The etymology of “stock” is telling. In botany, stock can be used interchangeably with “rhizome,” a name “given to the subterranean and horizontal stems of perennial plants, entirely or in part concealed underground.”⁶³ The rhizome carries a certain currency in the realm of philosophy, where it was popularized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as an alternative to more hierarchical, arborescent structures. I also want to introduce, to this mix, the term “swarm,” which as Deleuze and Guattari point out, is often rhizomatic in structure.⁶⁴ German philosopher Byung-Chul Han uses “swarm” to describe (pejoratively) the social media mass. While Han’s assessment of the swarm’s *inability* to organize might be quickly dismantled by either biologists⁶⁵ or information scientists,⁶⁶ he is right in employing this term to describe collectivity on social media. The coincidence between stock, swarm, and rhizome are productive for understanding the spread of the generic on TikTok.⁶⁷

The rhizome, which accommodates both the swarm and the stock, is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as a way of thinking multiplicity that is opposed to binary logic, which they see as “the spirituality of the root tree.”⁶⁸ It may seem strange to employ such a term in a series of notes that are firmly based in a cybernetic reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially as Deleuze and Guattari are explicit in declaring

⁶³ OED, Stock.

⁶⁴ In, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari observe: “rats are rhizomes...when rats swarm over each other,” 7.

⁶⁵ Dublon & Sumpter. “Flying Insect Swarms.” *Current Biology*, 2014.

⁶⁶ Wang, Tan & Liu. “Particle swarm optimization algorithm: an overview.” *Soft Comput* 2018.

⁶⁷ “it spreads like a patch of oil.” Deleuze & Guattari. *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁸ Deleuze and Guattari. *Ibid.*, 5.

that, “binary logic and biunivocal relationships still dominate psychoanalysis.”⁶⁹ That being said, the binary play of presence and absence in Lacan does not preclude the emergence of a swarm or rhizome on TikTok. Indeed, as we have already glimpsed previously, the structure of the symbolic manifests in a convergence of discursive circuits.

A look at algorithmic space on TikTok can clarify the relation of the symbolic order to the rhizome. Algorithmic space is a virtual zone defined only by the arrival of a multiplicity—a swarm, which is itself rhizomatic and represents the intersection of diverse signifying chains. In other words, algorithmic space on TikTok is a non-place, a distributed gap approximated by the writhing adjacency of signifying chains. It is the arrival of the collective swarm of users which defines algorithmic space on TikTok, and which demonstrates the possibility of symbolic intersubjectivity. If a rhizome is defined by a “ceaseless establish[ing] of connections between semiotic chains...and circumstances,”⁷⁰ then the symbolic order as seen in TikTok might be said to function rhizomatically. This is true even as the syntactic logic of the symbolic prescribes certain rules for the emergence of signifiers (that is, the relation of successive states); the binary logic of the symbolic does not necessarily lead to arborescence. This is especially the case in that the Markov processes we reviewed earlier—which may be said to structure the signifying chain—only take into account the directly preceding state and therefore have no reference to a trunk or tap root.

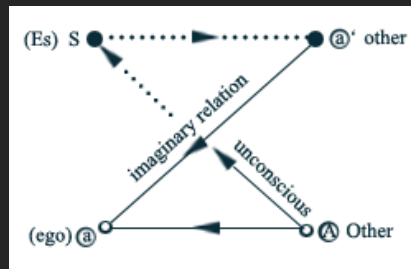
⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.

All representation on TikTok is generic to the extent that the structure of algorithmic space is rhizomatic. Trends do not serve as “unities” from which other TikToks spread as in a phylogeny. Rather, each TikTok is latently trending, depending on the coalescing of the swarm at any given point. In this sense, the line between identity and archetype is compromised. These dynamics present a strange intermixing of capture and camouflage. Steyerl is half-right: we both are and aren’t the stock-people that populate image spam. The people happen in the creation of an image *and* in being represented. Representation on social media does not recuperate the subject in any meaningful ways, as a liberal discourse might suggest, but rather melts the subject down into the quagmire of the generic. Here, we must become amphibian.

Wo Es War, Soll Ich Werden

Freud's famous phrase can be translated as, "where it (id) was, so I will be," and is conventionally read as an analytic goal: to make the unconscious conscious. For Lacan, the phrase can be dangerously co-opted by misguided analysts who seek to reconstruct a "whole" ego from the fragmentary cast of a subject's partial objects, partial drives, etc.⁷¹ To restore what he sees as the real meaning of the phrase, Lacan reads it along the lines of his L schema.



Lacan writes: "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden. This Es, take it as the letter S. It is there, it is always there. It is the subject."⁷² Here, Lacan replaces Freud's Id with the subject, which is in unconscious relation to, and determined by, the discourse of the Other. "He knows himself or he doesn't know himself. That isn't even the most important thing—he speaks or he doesn't speak. At the end of the analysis, it is him who must be called to speak, and to enter into relation with the real Others."⁷³ In other words, the

⁷¹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "Introduction of the Big Other," 245.

⁷² Lacan, Jacques. Ibid., 246.

⁷³ Ibid.

imaginary relation between the ego and its specular object must somehow be short-circuited to allow for subject to discover the Others who are “his true interlocutors.”⁷⁴ There are two things at play here. First, the recognition by the subject of their symbolic determination. And second, the entering into relation with the Others; the subject is called to speak. But what is “speaking” on TikTok? How does the subject on TikTok enter into relation with the Other? Speaking, in the algorithmic space of TikTok feels almost redundant. The algorithm constitutes the discursive determination of the subject’s trajectory, and the subject’s trajectory constitutes the algorithm. Participation on TikTok is speaking. We have a subject that, by virtue of participation, cannot keep silent. Metadata speaks for them. And yet, this is not so different from the subjects of “The Purloined Letter,” whose actions determine their relation to the letter and thereby their trajectory within the narrative. So again, we are faced with the question of what it means, really, to enter into relation with the Other. Here we will answer one of the questions that rounded out our discussion of “The Purloined Letter” and algorithmic space.

In his lecture, “Introduction to the *Entwurf*,” Lacan reflects on subject’s relation to the symbolic circuit in which they are caught. This circuit, which is “external to the subject,” consists of a series of “supports...agents, in which the subject, the small circle which is called his destiny, is indeterminately included.”⁷⁵ In the gap between the subject’s determination by the circuit, and the subject’s *indeterminate* inclusion in the

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Introduction to the *Entwurf*,” 98.

circuit, we see the difference between “the automatic repetition of fate” and the assumption of a “tychic repetition of a destiny.”⁷⁶ Lacan says as much in the next few lines: “analysis is made for [the subject] to make out, for him to understand in what circle of speech he is caught, and by the same token into what other circle he must enter.”⁷⁷

This realization and subsequent transition can be seen to play out in an interesting way on TikTok. It is common not only for users on TikTok to make reference to algorithmic space (as in the map of TikTok) but also to make pleas to other users for passage from one discursive space to another. In this way, users recognize not only the circuit in which they are caught, but the series of human supports that constitute the circuit (and others).

Hai Domo by Cao White plays in the background of a TikTok made by the user @mistyzii. A collage of sticker letters appears one word at a time: “I’m stuck on straight TikTok.” The caption reads: “please interact if ur on alt, gay, BLM,⁷⁸ frog, indie, WEEB, meme tiktok I have so many breeders in my comments (vomit emoji) #alt #gay #indie #frog #anime #tla.”⁷⁹ The idea here is that if users who are themselves “in” other discursive circuits interact with the TikTok, their symbolic gravity will drag this user away from a space they cannot escape by virtue of the users currently interacting

⁷⁶ Wright, Colin. “Lacan’s Cybernetic Theory of Causality: Repetition and the Unconscious in Duncan Jones’ Source Code,” 71.

⁷⁷ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Introduction to the Entwurf,” 99.

⁷⁸ There is a danger, regarding the spatialization of the symbolic on TikTok which pertains to the cooptation of signifiers as signposts or labels.

⁷⁹ <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMJgjTKex/>

with their account. In other words, @mistyzii understands “the circle of speech” in which they are caught and seeks passage into another circle.

In this way, TikTok as a digital media allows the subject to “make out...what it’s about.”⁸⁰ Strangely, this is a fulfillment of Lacan’s own speculations. Speaking about the difficulty of making out and the necessity of analysis, Lacan mentions that, “with a recording machine, one could isolate [the symbolic], preserve it. For the most part it escapes the subject, who doesn’t possess the recording machines in question.”⁸¹ Of course, the recording machines in question, which could actually isolate and preserve the symbolic circuit, are impossible. Any such machine would, like Borges’ Ireneo Funes, drown under the impossible complexity of the mundane.⁸² TikTok, however, does something similar, allowing the subject to approximate (not isolate) the discursive circuit which contains them. The user as Ich speaks from the place of the symbolically determined subject. *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden.*⁸³

⁸⁰ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Introduction to the Entwurf,” 99.

⁸¹ Lacan, Jacques. *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸² The lack of memory in a Markov process is again relevant here.

⁸³ There are still unresolved questions here. First, what of the imaginary relation in the L schema? Lacan suggests that the success of analysis depends on the suspension of this relation and the evacuation of the specular image. Second, the “must” of “what other circle [the subject] must enter” is still unresolved. What gives direction to the user who pleads for passage into new algorithmic space? I have no answer to the second question, but as for the first I direct the reader to Joan Copjec’s essay: “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan.” In this essay, Copjec lambasts film theory for its understanding of the screen as a mirror and the imaginary entrapment that follows. Instead, she suggests, a Lacanian reading shows that the mirror is a screen. Parallel to the play of absence and presence in the signifier, it is desire (not the specular image) which “institutes the subject in the visible field.”

Checkpoint

* I'm on my own, I'm on my own
I'm on my, I'm on my, I'm on my own
I'm on my own, I'm on my own
I'm on my, I'm on my, I'm on my own*

“if this is on your fyp//you’ve reached a tiktok checkpoint//welcome to deep
fried/glitchcore/stoner tiktok//take a rip upon entry”⁸⁴

* Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'
Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'
Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'
Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'
Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'
Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'
Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'
Runnin', I'm runnin', I'm runnin'*⁸⁵

⁸⁴ <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMJg6MKJg/>

⁸⁵ Lyrics from “voicemail” by Poppy.

From Telephilia to Algo-Righteousness

There are some parts of TikTok where the fun isn't in the content itself, it's in being present. One of these spaces (among many) is "color TikTok," where users and accounts impersonate anthropomorphized pantone colors. I don't think it's un-rigorous to say that pantone colors, as a topic, are relatively boring. So why is it such a thrill to see @thecolourpeach pop up on one's FYP?

Francesco Casetti and Mariagrazia Fanchi's short article, "Cinephilia/Telephilia," may prove illuminating. Cinephilia (born in the 1960s) and telephilia (1980s) describe spectator-media relationships wherein the spectator adopts an exclusive, intense, and practically fetishistic stance towards a medium and its constitutive assemblage of content, apparatus, etc. Casetti and Fanchi explain that the cinephile/telephile's spectatorship is characterized by:

- (1) Regular attendance for a long time...so that it becomes a measure of passion and intimacy toward the apparatus and its works;
- (2) An encyclopaedic knowledge...of one's own chosen object, mainly focusing on less known, curious, and unusual aspects;
- (3) An intense pleasure rising from affinity toward and identification with the medium and its works, which often includes its technological devices...
- (4) A close interdependence between the viewing experience and identity-building projects...⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Casetti, F. Fanchi, M. "Cinephilia/Telephilia." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* (2004), 38.

Applying these criteria to spaces like color TikTok is both helpful and destabilizing. Regular attendance, encyclopedic knowledge, affinity with devices, and identity building are all a part of why it becomes exciting to find yourself on rare “ground” in TikTok. And yet, attendance can only be so regular; one does not simply buy a ticket to color TikTok, one finds oneself already there. An affinity for technological devices exists on TikTok, but not with regard to any particular smartphone—it is rather an affinity for the algorithmic machine that moves us.

As in cinephilia or telephilia, the pursuit of rare algorithmic spaces on TikTok is a quest for identity. Yet, where the cinephile or telephile finds rarity in locales (theatres) or devices (VCR), the questing TikTok user looks to find rarity on their FYP as a reflection of their own uniqueness. The pursuit of rarity is reborn on TikTok in new and auto-entrepreneurial forms.⁸⁷ I suggest the term “algo-righteousness” as a way to conceptualize this unique disposition towards media consumption. Algo-righteousness is the phenomenon of pride or fulfillment in achieving a “rare” portrait of one’s own self via the specular algorithm. As our interaction with media objects continues to become hyper-personalized, the “object” of our obsession morphs into a project of personal construction and projection.

There is certainly a narcissistic relation at play here. Of course, the imaginary is present. The imaginary is always present for the human subject and the symbolic is

⁸⁷ I borrow this term from Byung-Chul Han’s writing on “psychopolitics”: “today, we do not deem ourselves subjugated subjects, but rather projects...” *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Verso (2017). 1.

inseparable “from its imaginary support.”⁸⁸ But do digital media like TikTok imply, as Byung-Chul Han suggests, a dismantling of the real and a totalization of the imaginary?⁸⁹ I don’t think so. Algo-righteousness consists of a narcissistic identification with the spatialization of the symbolic, and with one’s own determination by the discursive circuit in which one is caught. The semblant blinks in and out of existence, unable to lock the algorithm into object-hood. And even in this flickering form, it is slowly eroded by the rhizomatic spread of the generic. Though the imaginary dimension of this identification is inherently problematic, the algo-righteous subject gains a certain, albeit skewed, perspective on their symbolic determination. Digital media have been critiqued for rendering the subject transparent to power. Yet, as much as the subject is rendered transparent, so too is the axis of the imaginary relation, through the distorted glass of which is now visible the symbolic determination of the subject.

Casetti and Fanchi remark on a particular aspect of the “philiias” they trace which has to do with the collection of “trash” programs which reveal “an estimate...of the value...of the medium itself.”⁹⁰ Here, their work is especially aligned with algo-righteousness. What is color TikTok (or bean TikTok, frog TikTok, etc.) if not a “trash” program? The medium which is valued by algo-righteousness is the symbolic as media. As Lacan writes, “if objects had only a narcissistic relationship with the subject,

⁸⁸ Wright, Colin. “Lacan’s Cybernetic Theory of Causality: Repetition and the Unconscious in Duncan Jones’ *Source Code*.” *Lacan and the Posthuman*, 2018, 72.

⁸⁹ Byung-Chul Han. *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*. MIT (2017), 22.

⁹⁰ Casetti, F. Fanchi, M. “Cinephilia/Telephilia,” 39.

they would only ever be perceived in momentary fashion...*the name is the time of the object.*"⁹¹ In other words, the symbolic mediates our relationship to the world. We must be careful here; as Joan Copjec reminds us, Lacan's "is not the idealist position of either Plato or Kant, who split the object between its real being and its semblance."⁹² The symbolic does not mediate the object from the Thing. Our analysis of digital media has led us almost to a place before media studies as such, where we are concerned with the mediation only of the letter. The symbolic mediates the subject in relation to the world, not by splitting the world but by instituting the dimension of time.

⁹¹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). "The Dream of Irma's Injection," 169. [my italics].

⁹² Copjec, Joan. "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," 69.

“Tick-Tock”

“Why don’t the planets speak?”⁹³ This is one of Lacan’s more esoteric questions. His answer, which comes in a subsequent lecture, is that the planets do not speak, “not only because [they are] real, but because [they don’t] have the time, in the literal sense. They do not have the time, not because they are late for anything, but precisely because they aren’t. “Whatever a circular form does, it is always equal to itself”;⁹⁴ It is like the Real, undifferentiated. This line of inquiry is somewhat demystified by its place within Lacan’s critique of ego psychology. Ego psychology attempts to re-integrate the subject into a whole by collecting its partial objects, confusing the ego for something real. The planet here is something of a straw man for the misshaped subject of misguided analysts. That being said, this is not the first or last time we see Lacan take up the question of time.

In his discussion of cybernetics, Lacan becomes interested in the coincidence of “two times,” the “very great clock, which is none other than the solar system,”⁹⁵ and slightly less great wristwatch. What is compelling, for Lacan, is the question of who is on time: “Is it nature? Is it man?”⁹⁶ The source of being on time, he concludes, can be

⁹³ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Desire, Life and Death,” 234.

⁹⁴ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Introduction of the Big Other,” 241.

⁹⁵ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics, or on the Nature of Language,” 298.

⁹⁶ Lacan, Jacques. Ibid.

nothing other than “the synchronization of watches.”⁹⁷ Being on time, therefore, is a fundamentally human concern. Haste is a human product. Colin Wright explains that, consequentially, the supposedly exact time of science, “was taking its cue from a different time of human interests, rivalries, and desires.”⁹⁸ ‘Accuracy’ in this sense, is a product of being on time. The temporality of “on time,” however, is not only a human construct—it also constructs the human subject: “with a machine, whatever doesn’t come on time simply falls by the wayside...this is not true for man...whatever doesn’t come on time remains in suspense. That is what is involved in repression.”⁹⁹ At first this feels foreign to everything we’ve read so far. What does Lacan mean when he suggests that this temporal axiom is “the fundamental relation of man to the symbolic order”?¹⁰⁰ *It is actually only the time dimension of the detoured signifier.* As we have seen, the subject is determined by the “purloined letter,” which is purloined only by virtue of the notion of the proper in relation to both space and time.

TikTok is not only an interminable detour, it also parodies the very idea of being on time. Content on TikTok is at once severely constrained by time—videos can only be between 1 and 60 seconds—and without a time dimension at all. TikToks are always already on loop. If a user doesn’t scroll away or pause, the TikTok will continue to play over and over again. Trends have evolved to accentuate this looping by aligning the

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Wright, Colin. “Lacan’s Cybernetic Theory of Causality: Repetition and the Unconscious in Duncan Jones’ Source Code.” *Lacan and the Posthuman*, 2018, 74.

⁹⁹ Lacan, Jacques (1991). “Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics, or on the Nature of Language,” 308.

¹⁰⁰ Lacan, Jacques. Ibid.

first and last seconds of the video. Like the aimlessly wandering user, the seamlessly looped TikTok has no destination, and therefore no beginning. Where the circular planet served as Lacan's straw man for ego psychology, the circular form of TikTok serves to ironize the very concept of being on time. In this way, TikTok subverts the time of capital, which, though totalized by the ever-receding boundaries of the workday,¹⁰¹ is nevertheless predicated on the synchronization of watches. "Tick-Tock"—a tapping foot—"Tick-Tock"—a wagging finger—"Tick-Tock"—a mischievous wink; nothing will ever come on time.

****mpah****

"Hold on! You've been scrolling for way too lo—"

¹⁰¹ As Observed by Jonathan Crary in, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*.

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