Whither Symbolic Efficiency? Social Media, New Structuralism, and Algorithmic Desire

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Responding to the book symposium on his Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*, Matthew Flisfeder engages with the thoughtful responses made by Clint Burnham, Jamil Khader, and Anna Kornbluh, expressing appreciation for the provocations and productive disagreements being generated. The author highlights previous work regarding the decline of symbolic efficiency, his intended meaning of algorithmic desire, and the implications of subjectivity in a social media age in which the subject is apparently aware of the big Other's nonexistence. He reveals* Algorithmic Desire *as implicitly correcting for a critical- and cultural-theory landscape that has not fully absorbed the Slovenian school's (Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič) psychoanalytic interventions into the critique and development of Althusserian theories of ideology and subjectivity. The essay concludes that this methodology reveals the perverse nature of twenty-first-century neoliberal logic and reiterates that a truly social media is only possible under conditions of universal emancipation.*

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1.

The earliest parts of my book, *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*, were written close to ten years ago when I first began theorizing social media, primarily through a Lacanian and Žižekian lens. I believed then, and I still believe now, that media theory operates for us as one wing in the framing of our understanding of the formal and structural contours of ideology. Since the book was written over several years, beginning around 2012, with the final manuscript completed in 2019, I know that dimensions of the book surely require clarification and elaboration, as well as elements of reconceptualization, given the rapid pace of technological acceleration. Nevertheless, I stand behind what I believe are the central insights of the book, most notably my point outlined in the introduction: studying the formal and structural features of the dominant

medium of any particular historical period renders for us an understanding of its dominant form of consciousness and of the forms taken by its dominant ideology. Media are therefore historical metaphors for ideological structures and in this way help us to map the totality of the existing system.

Algorithmic Desire is thus intended as a book about ideology and its structure—which is why I focus on the *metaphor* of social media—more than it is a political economy of social media platforms and capitalism or an investigation into the immediacy or flatness of the digital. A dialectical and materialist understanding of ideology cannot, of course, ignore the material aspects of the class struggle—a point I develop in chapter 3. Although focusing on the metaphor of social media may be perceived by some as an idealist gesture, in my view—as Fredric Jameson (2008, 380) once put it—it is "better to grasp Marxism and the dialectic as an attempt to overcome not idealism by itself, but that very ideological opposition between idealism and materialism in the first place." My conception of the metaphor of social media is not intended as a strategy for ignoring the materiality of the class struggle; it is rather conceived, through a strategy of immanent critique, to surface the real existence of the material contradictions that *prevent the realization* of the concept of social media itself. This is why I take up social media as an ideological metaphor to also aid our representation of the *totality* of twenty-first-century capitalism. In contrast to many of the flat materialisms currently in vogue—influenced by Foucauldian biopolitics and Deleuzian immanence, for instance—the materialism I espouse in *Algorithmic Desire* is first and foremost dialectical.

Reading the well-thought-out responses to my book by Clint Burnham, Jamil Khader, and Anna Kornbluh, it seems to me that *Algorithmic Desire* is already proving provocative in the areas of media theory, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and the historical- and dialectical-materialist analyses of media, culture, and ideology. In writing the book, I knew that at least two of my proposals would receive some pushback from others who write in these fields.

The first of these disagreements—coming despite arguments made by Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson, and Jodi Dean regarding the thesis of the supposed "demise of symbolic efficiency"—stems from *Algorithmic Desire*'s defense of what Khader (2022, 401) refers to as "an unorthodox thesis on the [Lacanian] big Other." Specifically, I argue (and I still stand by this claim) that social media can be understood as a representation of the reconstitution of the symbolic order and the big Other for the age of twenty-first-century capitalism. Both Khader and Kornbluh agree that my claim is at odds with other Lacanian media theorists on this point. Kornbluh in particular finds this point far from convincing; however, as I will elaborate below, I believe that this relates in part to the fact that, by her interpretation of the book, my concept of algorithmic desire pertains to the desire of the algorithm (the desire of the machine?). In fact, what I call algorithmic desire does not involve the algorithm's desire but that of the dynamics between subject-user and the online social network. As Lacan claimed, the

subject's desire is always the desire of the Other, and, as Burnham (2022, 392) puts it in his response, "desire is social."

As I develop it in the book, the user's desire is driven by the way social media algorithms learn practices of keeping our desire—the desire of the Other—always at a distance, how they learn to curate our online digital social networks in ways that ensure our constant dissatisfaction (this point is drawn out in my rethinking of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model in chapter 4). As I put it, "Algorithmic logic is built, not by giving us what we seem to desire, but by constantly denying us this" (Flisfeder 2021, 105). Algorithmic desire is a strategy, enabled by corporate social media platforms, for ensuring that we remain interpellated by constantly seeking recognition in the form of likes, shares, follows, retweets, comments, and so forth. This algorithmic desire works best by maintaining a moving target.

However, the dilemma—and this speaks to the second argument I find resonating with my respondents, though perhaps somewhat in disagreement—is found in the subject of twenty-first-century postmodern capitalism, a subject who already knows that the big Other does not exist. That is, for Lacan, the process of the psychoanalytic cure is meant to lead the subject toward the realization that the big Other—the virtual agency guaranteeing meaning—is itself alienated, incomplete, fissured by gaps. But the apparent popular knowledge of this fact would seem to undermine its subversive edge. How, then, can the big Other operate on social media, as I claim, when it appears that no one believes any longer in its efficacy?

I claim—and this is the point that Burnham (2022) picks up and develops further—that the form of postmodern subjectivity is perverse in the Lacanian sense: that is, faced with the potential demise of symbolic efficiency, the postmodern subject of twenty-first-century capitalism seeks to reconstitute the Other as the only possible means of procuring enjoyment. As Lacan (1981, 185) puts it in his eleventh seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, perversion is, in a way, an inverted effect of fantasy: "It is the subject who determines himself as object [for the Other], in his encounter with the division of subjectivity." As both Žižek (1989) and Todd McGowan (2011) describe, present in this subject is an inherent cynicism that overlaps with the mechanism of perversion in the form of fetishistic disavowal: the formula of "I know very well [i.e., that the big Other does not exist]; nevertheless, I act as if this were not the case." The subject knows, in other words, that the big Other does not exist but disavows this knowledge to maintain the structure of its enjoyment. Nevertheless, I believe this form of cynical disavowal demonstrates yet another way that belief in the big Other is maintained in relation to the Other's belief in itself.

Although every empirical (small) other person may know consciously that the big Other does not exist, the ambiguity of the big Other's own belief always remains. We don't know what the Other does or does not know; to maintain our own status—and this is particularly true of the entrepreneurial and curatorial ethics of neoliberalism, a point I develop in chapter 5—it becomes necessary to perform and keep up appearances for the Other. This is how ideology functions

today. It is this particularly cynical and perverse form of subjectivity that, for me, represents the material form of social media platforms and, more generally, the form that ideology has taken in twenty-first-century capitalism.

In the guise of maintaining appearances, this cynical form of neoliberal ideology persists on and through social media. In what follows, I thus aim to elaborate some of the points I make in the book and to provide another angle or lens through which its objectives may be understood. In the process, I hope to respond somewhat to the points made by my interlocutors.

2.

My first book, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (Flisfeder 2012), begins with a comparison of the Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010). *Inception*, I claim there, offers a better theory of ideology than *The Matrix*. Whereas *The Matrix* depicts the standard notion of ideology as a form of "false consciousness," *Inception* teaches that our attachment to ideology has less to do with the surface level of ideological appearances and relates more to the underlying dimension of the fundamental fantasy, to the way we experience *ourselves* experiencing the surface-level reality. *Inception*, unlike *The Matrix*, teaches that we cannot simply be "told what the matrix is" (to cite the famous lines from Morpheus); rather, the only way to grasp this is to get at the core dimensions of our jouissance, the underlying enjoyment that tethers us to surface-level ideological propositions—what Judith Butler (1997) refers to as passionate attachments—even and especially when we know that they are in fact false. Viewed from this angle, *Algorithmic Desire* may be read as a rewriting of the central premise of my book on film theory.

As I try to develop it in *Algorithmic Desire*, our ideological conundrum does not consist in the fact that we know the matrix of (what Lacan called) the big Other does not exist—that is, in knowing the surface level of ideological propositions are indeed false. Rather, the problem is that we know but nevertheless continue to act as if this were not the case—why? The standard notion of ideology in contemporary media and communications studies often relies on the same premise as the one developed in Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's (1988) *Manufacturing Consent*. Herman and Chomsky's book develops their "propaganda model" of communication, which depicts content on mainstream mass media as the product of an advanced system of filtration that reproduces the dominant ideology in the interests of big capital. Herman and Chomsky seem to imply that, if only the people knew the truth, if only the people became aware of the agenda-setting mechanism—that is, if only the people knew about the matrix—then they would react and revolt. However, our problem today, I claim, is that we *do* know about the various systems of media filtration and propaganda. This is, in fact, the very setting in which the problem of so-called "fake news" and the

"posttruth" society has emerged. No one believes or trusts the media. This point is even brought to bear upon social media by claims often made that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and so forth do not in fact make us more social. Social media, we are often told, is constantly making us antisocial. It appears, through this dissolution of trust in the media, that the Symbolic order—in the Lacanian sense not only of a shared space of language and communication but also of our symbolic trust in dominant institutions—is dissolving and that no one believes any longer in the (virtual) agency of the big Other. But is this really the case?

One of *Algorithmic Desire*'s goals is to argue that the structure and form of social media demonstrates the opposite. Despite that so many of us avow our disbelief and distrust in the media, we continue to operate and act as if this were not the case. Social media, I argue, represents a willing back into existence of a big Other of a certain variety—understood as the virtual collection of all of the *small others* (plural), of community, nation, society; all of those others that we cannot account for empirically and instead substitute with the virtual agency of the assumed *big* Other—*because* the existence of this big Other enables the conditions of our enjoyment, built upon the continuous metonymical operation of desire as the constant searching out of that which we believe will help us to evade our existence as lacking beings. I argue that desire, in the Lacanian sense, is therefore only enabled by the presumed, if however disavowed, existence of the big Other.[1]

Our ideological condition today is based on belief, not (necessarily) in the *knowledge* but in the *ignorance* of the big Other—that is, in its own ignorance. Our problem consists not in believing in the existence of the big Other but in the need to maintain appearances in order to guarantee that the big Other *believes in itself*. We may know full well that the big Other does not exist, that it is merely a symbolic fiction; however, and paradoxically, we are only able to garner enjoyment insofar as it is registered by the big Other, and therefore our activity is premised on maintaining appearances that will the big Other into existence. The big Other's belief in itself is maintained as the very premise for our ability to garner enjoyment. Furthermore, this maintenance of the big Other as guarantor of our enjoyment is what enables corporate social media platforms to integrate us into its matrix, through libidinal investments, as part of its own practices of appropriating and extracting surplus value. Social media, like the matrix, is a machine for extracting jouissance, which it converts into surplus value. This, however, is also the proper situation in which we can come to grasp the ideological dimensions of

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1. According to Mark Andrejevic (2013, 150), the operation of the big Other in this way remains implicit in digital spaces. Rather than an externalization of overt decision-making processes, assumptions, biases, and preconceptions about stated ideological commitments, "These remain operative but largely invisible, inscrutable, and perhaps even more incomprehensible: the uncanny persistence of symbolic efficiency" persists "in the wake of its alleged demise."

contemporary neoliberal capitalism—a condition that, as I argue in my book, can be made readable through the analysis and critique of social media. These are points I draw out at length in my book and do not wish to rehash in their entirety here, but I foreground them to respond to Khader and Kornbluh, who disagree with this premise.

Both Khader (2022) and Kornbluh (2022) consider my take on the thesis regarding the apparent demise of symbolic efficiency to be somewhat unorthodox, and I admit that I part ways from the discussion of this thesis as it has been taken up in media studies and humanities scholarship more generally. I do so because, for me, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the claim that the big Other does not exist *has not* and must not lose its subversive edge. The problem is not that ignorance (i.e., "false consciousness") but that disavowal is the form or structure taken by contemporary ideology. This is a point I make specifically in chapter 2 of *Algorithmic Desire* (and throughout the book generally) through a discussion of Jodi Dean's (2002, 2010) conception of communicative capitalism.

Generally, my view is that the so-called demise of symbolic efficiency is *only* apparent and that the operation of ideology today still demonstrates a disavowed, nontransparent belief in the efficiency of the Symbolic order, though not without the presence of conflict, antagonism, and contradiction—a point I make through numerous references to the form social media takes in the context of the material class struggle (particularly in chapter 3). In fact, this is a point I make against assemblage theories of media and technology, such as the Deleuze and Guattari-inspired version articulated by Maurizio Lazzarato. I believe that their conception of "machinic enslavement" corresponds with a mechanistic and expressive causality that leaves no room for the agency of the alienated, desiring subject. Given my discussion of the class struggle at the heart of the social, it is very difficult for me to agree with Khader that my conception of social media corresponds to the so-called "singularity." Quite the opposite, in fact, since—as I have put it—"the assemblage theory of enslavement lose[s] sight of the negative core of subjection, which is the site at which to locate the negation of capital, not merely as substance but also as subject" (Flisfeder 2021, 112). Clint Burnham (2022), however, in his response to the book, acknowledges this and draws out my argument that the form taken by ideology and subjectivity, both on social media and in postmodern capitalism generally, is that of perversion in the Lacanian sense. This is best encapsulated by the formula of disavowal that I have already described—the fact that the subject disavows the non-existence of the big Other, and in fact aims to will it back into existence as a condition of enjoyment through the form of desire. This point can be explained further through a brief discussion of what I think is a minor, although somewhat significant point at the beginning of Khader's response.

Khader (2022) notes that my book does not address the debate or discussion surrounding Jeff Orlowski's documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020). The film is certainly related to the arguments I make in *Algorithmic Desire*. However, the

omission here is simply a matter of publication schedules that I'm sure Khader understands quite well. *Algorithmic Desire* was completed and submitted in July 2019; it was already in production at the time that *The Social Dilemma* was released on Netflix in September 2020. However, having now seen the film, a few aspects do, I believe, warrant a response. First and foremost is the irony that the film was released and distributed by Netflix, a company that relies heavily on algorithmic desire as it gathers users' data to curate content. *The Social Dilemma* documents the ways that social media platforms like Facebook, through techniques of data management and surveillance, collect information about users to better manipulate those users' beliefs and activities. The documentary relies heavily on Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) writing about surveillance capitalism.

Without delving too deeply into the claims of this text, my central problem with the idea of surveillance capitalism is its apparent ignoring of the fact that never has a form of capitalism not relied on surveillance. Surveillance has always been a mechanism incorporated into capitalist forms of production and also of the market and of distribution, circulation, and consumption. Capitalist production has always relied on surveillance by the employer and by managers, who make sure that workers are performing and optimizing their labor in the production process; Fordist mechanization and Taylorist scientific management have historically aided the advancement of these inherent forms of productive surveillance. As well, forms of market research have always been a part of consumerism; capitalism has relied upon information gathered about consumers—about their wants, needs, and desires—for more than a century. Surveillance, then, is nothing new in capitalism. What's different is the pace, accuracy, and automation of these platforms' surveillance mechanisms, which enhance the system's grasp upon the people. But the point I would make here is that, not surveillance, but *capitalism* is the problem (Khader, too, highlights this point). Surveillance as such is not necessarily a problem (a point that Foucauldian paranoia about power often substitutes for the historical-materialist attention to freedom and universality), but what remains problematic is the way that capitalism uses surveillance to better exploit and manipulate the people. We should try to recognize that surveillance can and should be used *by the people* to hold government and elites to account. *We* require the use and operationalization of surveillance as a necessary democratic and emancipatory tool. Thus, as with the blanket critique of social media technology as inherently problematic, and as I argue in *Algorithmic Desire*, the problem is not with the technology itself but with what interests are being served in its particular uses.

As I try to develop in *Algorithmic Desire*, the problem is not so much with social media technology; rather, our analysis of social media platforms teaches us about the exploitative dimensions of neoliberalism and capitalism generally. Khader acknowledges this point. However, while several current texts examine social media's political economy and its surveillance mechanisms (as I note in the book, Foucauldian and Deleuzian paradigms are *doxa* in this field), one of

Algorithmic Desire's objectives is to show how social media reflects the ideological structure of twenty-first-century capitalism and to examine the kinds of reflexivity and consciousness that social media proscribes.

By stressing problems with particular social media platforms, like Facebook (when, of course, Netflix operates similarly), and with these platforms' technological capacities for surveillance and content curation, *The Social Dilemma* is limited by its avoidance of the aggregate situation of twenty-first-century capitalism. *Algorithmic Desire* is an attempt to show that our analysis and critique of social media cannot end at grasping the technology or the platforms; we must go further in generating a critique of the structure of neoliberalism, specifically, and capitalism, generally. This is partly what I mean in the book's conclusion, which argues—against a version of Left accelerationism—that we must not accelerate the technology but the metaphor—the *concept*—of social media. Rather than abandoning the idea of "social media"—with an emphasis on *social*—we must make use of the this very *concept* as a tool for producing an *immanent* critique of the various failures and betrayals of the social in the way it has been operationalized by capital—that is, by the way capital expropriates from the social. The way capitalism does this on social media is grasped in my conception of algorithmic desire, and here I must take up Kornbluh's reading.

3.

I have two main disagreements with Kornbluh (2022). The first relates to the aforementioned conception of the demise of symbolic efficiency; the second concerns her understanding of my notion of algorithmic desire. It appears that, for Kornbluh, algorithmic desire refers to the presumed desire of the algorithm—what does the algorithm want? What does it want from us? What do we want with it? The problem here, for me, is that by "algorithmic desire" I am definitely *not* describing the desire of the algorithm but rather the way that social media algorithms have learned to automate and curate the representation of the big Other; algorithmic desire, in other words, is not the desire of the algorithm but is our own, which is also the presumed desire of the big Other—networks of other users. As Kornbluh explains, for Lacan, desire is always the desire of the Other. I do not disagree. Yet, for me, the Other implied by users' desire on social media is not the algorithm but the social network of friends and followers. As I say quite directly, the network "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). The social media big Other is not the algorithm but the production of the social, the community of others, with whom we are engaged: that is, what Alice E. Marwick (2013) refers to as social surveillance, as opposed to the kinds of corporate surveillance alluded to in the idea of surveillance capitalism. These are not separate, as again I describe in my rereading of Hall's encoding/

decoding model (Flisfeder 2021, 136). What I describe, however, is how platforms' analytics learn the algorithm of *our* desire.

Social surveillance refers to the field of social media friends and followers we try to impress with our posts. So-called "virtue signaling"—although the activity I have in mind is not simply limited to this—provides a useful example. Virtue signaling is the act of posting content that makes users appear virtuous from the perspective of their social media friends and followers lists. It matters little if users truly believe in the ideas or content they are posting (making it all the more cynical). What matters is to satisfy the interests and desires of other users. So much of social media use, as I claim in chapter 5 of *Algorithmic Desire* when describing the form of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, is premised on the project of managing one's online digital reputation. Users curate content, aimed at an audience of other users, to produce and develop their reputation. This activity does not necessarily need to be engaged in directly or actively; however, the conditions of the neoliberalized economy make our social interactions with others all the more utilitarian and instrumental, and this altered practice, I claim, inherently translates onto social media platforms. Even the character of the troll works in this way 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.

Algorithmic desire, as I also describe in chapter 4 of the book, thus concerns the way that social media algorithms learn to curate our particular view of the social media big Other—the particular community of other users whom we see and engage with on the platform. Social media algorithms learn to read our desire by constantly keeping it at a distance from us. Algorithms learn to keep us libidinally engaged by forever maintaining our *dis*satisfaction. We only ever desire insofar as our desire remains unsatiated. Through this very libidinal investment, the matrix of social media platforms continuously recruits us as it extracts surplus value: from our labor, that is; not necessarily in the form of the prosumer commodity—as it's been described by Christian Fuchs (2014)—but especially in the way that the general form of social production in twenty-first-century capitalism operationalizes our "entrepreneurial" investments into our own human capital, in which acts of consumption are conceived as productive acts of investing in the Self. These practices are not voluntary but are conditioned by the austerity-driven structure of precarious life under neoliberalism. But, if we know this—if we know that this is how things operate—then why do we continue to disavow this knowledge? Kornbluh (2022), in concert with Dean, claims that we are indeed in a condition of the demise of symbolic efficiency. My view is that this apparent demise is *only* apparent; that the big Other, as Khader (2022) notes, in fact remains *non*transparent; and that in our constant misrecognition of the location of the big Other is where its operation persists.

Žižek, Dean, Jameson, and others claim that our present is defined by the demise of symbolic efficiency—or, as Jameson (1984) puts it, by the "breakdown of the signifying chain"—partly because the Symbolic appears to be fissured by conflict, antagonism, and struggle. Today, as I've already noted, our world is plagued by the problems of fake news, the disintegration of trust in symbolic institutions, and the emergence of the posttruth era. Again, two points are worth noting here. First is the fact—and this is the point I try to articulate regarding my conception of a new structuralism—that the Symbolic order is never a complete whole: it is non-all, organized or structured around an inherent lack, gap, or void. Second, not unlike the operation of commodity fetishism, our belief in the big Other and in the efficiency of the Symbolic order is demonstrated not by what we directly know or believe but by the ways in which we are effectively acting and participating in the material operations of capitalist society.

Kornbluh (2022) notes that there has been a disintegration of trust in symbolic institutions. Yet I would argue that, despite an apparent distrust in symbolic institutions, many of us nevertheless continue participating in them, and even the very basic matrix of commodity fetishism demonstrates where and how this remains universal, even if not everyone participates in the same sets of specific institutions—such as corporate social media platforms. After all, we all seem to know about the existence of platform capitalism; nevertheless, many of us who know continue to participate in this very matrix. The materiality of social media in this way correlates with the form of commodity fetishism. The fact that antagonism persists, that different users are interpellated differently, does not mean that we all know the big Other does not exist or that the demise of symbolic efficiency has happened; rather, it demonstrates that the Symbolic order is not-all and that the lack of the social is a material articulation of the class struggle as Real. It is by way of a common reference to the materiality of the platform, despite the presence of antagonism, that the platform's abstractions, not unlike commodity fetishism, are shown to have a hold upon us, in one way or another.

Commodity fetishism and the universality of the commodity form under capitalism provide the elementary or underlying premise upon which all other operations in capitalist production, circulation, and consumption operate. While we may point to money as a material object—whether as paper bills, bank notes, coins, or even digital currency—and while we may avow the fact that this is merely a material object, a piece of paper, or bits of information on a digital ledger, still, in our actions, in our practices, whenever we exchange the money commodity for goods or services, we demonstrate our belief in objective form. We may of course make this exchange while knowing full well that money has no intrinsic value, but our acts of monetary exchange show that money's value is contained in the *social relationship* that it represents. Money only ever works if those with whom we are engaged in acts of exchange accept the value embodied in the money commodity—that is, it only ever works if we share the same basic premise that the value of the commodity is guaranteed by the virtual agency of

the big Other, who we must assume believes in the value of the money commodity on our behalf. Similarly, when on social media, the material infrastructure of the internet, algorithms as fixed capital (as I describe in chapter 3 of my book), and the general capitalist political economy interpellate us to participate through the lure of desire and the reproduction of the lack that is constitutive of subjectivity.

In part, I believe that the differences between myself and my interlocutors concerns the way in which media, cultural, and film studies in the English-speaking world has incorporated an earlier reading of Lacan and Althusser. Even though both Khader and Kornbluh are expert scholars in neo-Lacanian theory (with bodies of work I admire), I believe that on these points they still draw from and rely upon interpretations of Lacan and Althusser that have not yet fully accounted for the influence of Žižek and the Slovenian school—particularly with the inversions of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. In the next part of this response, I intend to speak to the ways that my reading develops the insights of Žižek and Dolar as I have in turn developed them in my own writing, particularly for theorizing media interpellations.

4.

Although I do not express this perspective directly in *Algorithmic Desire*, it is my contention that media and communication studies—and critical and cultural theory more generally, at least in the English-speaking world—have not yet completely absorbed the extent to which the Slovenian school of psychoanalysis (specifically the work of Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, and Alenka Zupančič) has intervened into, critiqued, and further developed the Althusserian theories of ideology and subjectivity. This was a topic that I tried to address in *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (Flisfeder 2012), which paid particular attention to the conceptions of spectatorship and subjectivity developed by the British screen theorists (e.g., Laura Mulvey, Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe, and Peter Wollen),[2] who were some of the first to introduce Lacan and Althusser alike into the fields of media and cultural studies. Cultural studies' initial foray into questions of media and ideology—particularly in the work of Stuart Hall (2011, 2012)—began as a response to screen theorists' conceptions of cinematic interpellation, and we can see in the cultural studies project efforts to develop the agency of the spectator against the screen theorists, whose work developed a perspective of the spectator as a passive receptacle of the ideology of the cinematic text. Noting that the subject position of the audience bears an influence upon the reception of the text, early work in cultural studies emphasized differences in media decoding dependent upon the real-world position of the subject-spectator, relative to their position within the social relations of production and the

2. I believe this error also occurs in the writing of Christian Metz, particularly with his notion of cinema as an "imaginary signifier."

kinds of experiences and knowledge to which they have access—what Hall referred to as "frameworks of knowledge." bell hooks (2009), for instance, reworking Hall's conception of the "oppositional gaze," notably challenged white feminist theories of the male gaze, noting that black female spectatorship departs significantly from that of white spectatorship.

Althusser had already made his way into the political discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, with many of his texts being translated in the pages of *New Left Review* and his work being engaged in debate with English socialists—most notably, Edward Thompson (1978), who in his prohumanist response to Althusser erroneously framed him as a Stalinist apologist. Althusser's response to John Lewis, the British Marxist philosopher, is also a noteworthy step in his political writings, wherein he emphasized his antihumanist and antihistoricist theses of a process without a subject or goal; that the masses make history; and that the class struggle is the *motor* of history. While such political encounters first brought attention to Althusser in the English-speaking world (see Anderson 1980)—with Hall (2016) particularly keen to this influence, making Althusser, along with Gramsci, one of the two Marxist pillars of cultural studies—it was Althusser's (2001) essay on ideology and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) that has marked his most profound influence upon the fields of media and cultural studies.

Three dimensions of Althusser's ISAs essay are most commonly taken up in media and cultural studies: (1) the conception of ideological (as opposed to repressive) state apparatuses, which was almost naturally aligned with media studies insofar as the cinema and the media more generally can easily be regarded as a state ideological apparatus (see Baudry 1986); (2) the thesis that ideology *represents* an *imaginary* relation of the subject to its *real* conditions of existence, with the level of the Imaginary—along with Lacan's claim in his "mirror stage" essay that the Imaginary coincides with the image or the *imago* of the subject—having a lasting, if fallaciously theorized, influence on media studies, as I will argue here; and last, (3) the thesis that ideology *interpellates* individuals as subjects. Two of the strongest theoretical influences in my own work—Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson—have shown where aspects of these Althusserian theorizations of ideology and subjectivity, drawing upon Lacan, have been mistaken. Žižek (as well as Dolar) has shown that the Althusserian theories of ideology and subjectivity differ from Lacan insofar as the subject is for Althusser a *product* of ideology, whereas for Lacan the subject emerges where ideology fails. This is why my book on Žižek and film theory argues the need to reverse Althusser's formula: it's not that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects but that the subject is interpellated as a kind of symbolic mandate, or as an individual (Flisfeder 2012, 133). Likewise, in his writing on postmodernism, Jameson (1984) has shown that the Althusserian thesis of ideology as a dimension of the *Imaginary's* relationship to the *Real* misses the third dimension of Lacan's triad: Imaginary, Real, and *Symbolic*.

Not unlike my film theory book, the context of the Althusserian problematic of the ISAs frames my examination of social media in *Algorithmic Desire*. The book continues to expand upon and develop from the influence of the Slovenian school, particularly through its differences with the Althusserian approach to ideology and subjectivity. This is the position from which I attempt to articulate what I am calling a new structuralism. Admittedly, this label is an experiment, of sorts. My conception of a new structuralism departs from that older structuralism influenced especially by Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose writing is known to have had an influence on both Althusser and Lacan. However, a key difference between the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and the new structuralism I seek to develop pertains to the theory of the subject. Lévi-Strauss (1966), writing against Sartre, famously states in his book *The Savage Mind* that the objective of the human sciences is not to constitute but to dissolve the subject. The relation here to Althusser is pertinent.

For Althusser, the subject is, in this sense, a category of ideology that, as he explains, develops as the product of bourgeois philosophy and legal discourse. A Maoist influence can also be read into Althusser's idea here since, for Mao, the subject is to be opposed to the objective understanding of history. It is also by way of the category of the subject that, according to Althusser, the germ of humanism invades the Marxist discourse. For Lacan, however, the subject—and this is partly the argument developed by Žižek and Dolar—represents the *gap* within the structure. The subject signifies the representational *impossibility* of the structure itself to totalize. I thus conceive the difference as follows: for both Lévi-Strauss and Althusser, structure appears to produce a constitutive whole, whereas, as developed in the work of the Slovenian school, structure is for Lacan always marked by a position of incompleteness or the not-all. This mark of incompleteness—signaled by the presence of antagonism, contradiction, and struggle—for me distinguishes the new structuralism, developed by the Slovenian school, from the old.

As I develop it in the introduction to *Algorithmic Desire*, this conception of a new structuralism can be rendered, as Bruno Bosteels (2006) identifies, in the movement from Laclau and Mouffe, as early influences on Žižek, to the latter's own theorization of the dimension of enjoyment and the role this dimension plays in ideological formations. As Bosteels notes—and this is a point Žižek draws out early in his work, too—the significance of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory is the role they assign to antagonism in the social edifice. As Žižek (1989) develops this point, Laclau and Mouffe's notion of antagonism (which for Žižek is better grasped as the material class struggle) demonstrates the very fact of the inability to constitute society as a self-enclosed whole, as rendered in their Thatcher-like thesis that society is not a valid object of discourse. Žižek then goes further, arguing that not only is society never whole or complete—that is, it is always marked by antagonism and class struggle—but also the subject itself coincides with this very gap in the social edifice; or, in Lacanian terms, the subject overlaps with the gap in the Symbolic order.

The Symbolic order itself is never complete, and the position of the subject is the marker of this incompleteness, of the very fact that the Symbolic order is always organized around the failure of its own signifying representations. The subject, put simply, coincides with the gap in the structure and the Symbolic order. However, Žižek does not end here, and this next point is significant for thinking the difference between ideological and emancipatory logic. According to Žižek, this gap in the Symbolic order is nevertheless filled in by the subject in its relationship to its enjoyment. The way that the subject relates to its enjoyment, marked by the gap in the structure, in the Symbolic order, ties in significantly to the manner with which we come to understand the difference between *ideology* and radical, emancipatory *ethics*; this pertains, in Lacanian terms, to the difference between the subject of desire and the subject of drive. It's on this point that in *Algorithmic Desire* I contend with Jodi Dean's influential conception of communicative capitalism, particularly regarding her interpretation of Žižek's (1999) notion of the demise of symbolic efficiency.

Drawing on Žižek, Dean (2002, 2010) claims that ideology today is constituted much less as the interpellative mechanism of desire. Rather, according to Dean, communicative capitalism operates through circulations of drive. Both desire and drive relate to the enjoyment of the subject. From the perspective of desire, the subject is caught in its pursuit of a lost object—some *thing* that the subject believes will bring full satisfaction in the final attainment of enjoyment, or jouissance. However, the subject begins to see that every positive object never completely satisfies its desire. No positive object is ever *it*. Of course, the ruse not to be missed here is the fact that a "lost object" can only ever exist *as lost*. Its positive existence is known only in its negativity, in the fact that it exists as lost and therefore can *never* be a found object. Drive, on the other hand, comes in by the paradoxical position from which the subject continues to enjoy—or rather is condemned to enjoy—despite never being able to attain the lost object. The enjoyment the subject receives in drive is produced in the constant failure to attain the object. Drive represents a completely irrational enjoyment of failure. However, we should consider the fact that what drive enjoys is not necessarily failure as such; rather, what drive enjoys is a constant return to the subject's foundational act of choosing the self-limit from which its subjectivity was produced in the first place—that is, the choice of a representational signifier. In other words, what drive enjoys is the foundational act of the decision that formed the subject of the signifier in the first place.

What the subject of desire then represses (in the mode of neurosis, or later disavows in the mode of perversion) is its own foundational act of choice, of becoming subject. The subject constantly displaces the limit to enjoyment onto the Other: we perceive that it's because the object is prohibited by the Other that it remains inaccessible. However, the emergence of subjectivity in fact coincides with the subject's own primordial act of choosing its own limit, which is at the

same time the production of its own subjectivity and the moment of formation of the lost object. In the act of choosing—that is, of affirming a choice—the subject at the same time negates all the various other possible choices that were previously available to it, and in this way it emerges as a *desiring* subject. Nevertheless, the subject still receives enjoyment from failing to attain the lost object because this is ultimately a repetition of its primordial choice in the foundational moment of its own emergence as subject.[3]

Separating desire and drive is thus the form of the fantasy that in the Lacanian register is something akin to the narrative that the subject produces to find out which object it believes it desires, which is always the desire of the Other. Fantasy and desire act as a lure that nevertheless enables the subject to garner enjoyment in its constant pursuit and failure to attain the lost object. In acts of repression or disavowal, for the subject to continue to save itself as a subject of desire—for it to continue following the path of desire—it ultimately displaces the impossibility of the object onto some obstacle that prevents its attainment. In my view, the subject in this way clings to the form of the Symbolic order and to the big Other, which protects, in one way or another, the subject's capacity to garner enjoyment from the failed pursuit of the lost object. So long as it perceives the failure of the object as contingent—barred or prohibited by the Other—rather than as necessary, the subject is able to follow along the path of desire without it turning into drive. For desire to pass into drive, the subject would already have had to *traverse the fantasy* that tethers it to the form of the Symbolic order.

Again, it is worth being reminded that, for Lacan, desire is always the desire of the Other. As I interpret this point, the subject's desire—the desire that it pursues, mediated by the form of the fantasy—is the desire for the desire of the Other— that is, the subject desires the recognition or acknowledgement of the Other even while it is constantly engaged in battling the Other as the assumed prohibitory agency. To sum up my point here, the difference, for me, between an ideological subject and one who is prepared to engage in some radical act of emancipation relates directly to the relationship between desire and drive. I agree with Žižek (1991) that the ethical subject is the subject of drive: the subject who has traversed the fantasy and has learned that oneself is the agent responsible for erecting one's own limits, one's own barriers to enjoyment. This subject learns to acknowledge that enjoyment is in the fantasy itself and not in that which lies beyond. The ideological subject is thus, for me, the subject of desire, one who has not yet traversed the fantasy and who still clings to the form of the Symbolic order and the big Other. This is my key point of contention with Dean, as well as with the arguments made by Kornbluh and Khader. It is on this point that I theorize the form of the big Other, of the Symbolic order, in *Algorithmic Desire*.

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3. For more on this point, see my discussion of the branching symbol from the anthology TV series *Black Mirror*, in Flisfeder (2021, chap. 6).

5.

A few more comments are necessary to draw out further consequences from the argument regarding the so-called demise of symbolic efficiency. As I've already indicated, the thesis regarding this so-called demise is one that Žižek explains near the end of *The Ticklish Subject*. It's a thesis that Dean relies upon for her conception of communicative capitalism and to argue that ideology becomes a function of drive when it appears that no one believes any longer in the existence of the big Other. But it's worth reminding ourselves that, in the Lacanian paradigm, recognition of the nonexistence of the big Other overlaps with the moment of the psychoanalytic cure. This is one reason why I argue, against Dean, that the demise of symbolic efficiency is only *apparent* and that we must come to grasp the dominant form of subjectivity under conditions of postmodern twenty-first-century capitalism according to the logic of perversion and fetishism disavowal.[4] Here, I rely still on Žižek's (1989) thesis regarding the cynical form of ideology.

The thesis about the demise of symbolic efficiency should also be read, I claim, in terms of Fredric Jameson's conception of postmodernism, which he describes in Lacanian terms as informed by a "breakdown of the signifying chain." As I read Jameson, our postmodern dilemma is grounded in the fact that, on both the left and the right, every affirmative articulation of an explanatory narrative has been deconstructed to the point of appearing to lose its interpretive clout. For instance, Lyotard's postmodern "incredulity towards metanarratives" resonates with the notion that no unifying ideological formation exists to structure us into a shared sense of identity, community, culture, nationality, class, and so forth. What Jameson calls "cognitive mapping"—which he elsewhere claims is merely another way to grasp the form of class consciousness (Jameson 1998)—represents for him what in Lacanian terms we might regard as the force of the interpretive work and the work of narrative construction, or of tying together loose threads (i.e., narrative as a socially symbolic act), to have an effect in the Real.

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4. Žižek in fact tends to waver back and forth between supporting and critiquing the thesis regarding the demise of symbolic efficiency. For instance, in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek (2008, 34) writes, "It may seem that Lacan's *doxa* 'there is no big Other' has today lost its subversive edge and turned into a globally acknowledged commonplace—everybody seems to know that there is no 'big Other' in the sense of a substantial shared set of customs and values, that what Hegel called 'objective spirit' (the social substance of mores) is disintegrating into particular 'worlds' (or life styles) whose coordination is regulated by purely formal rules … However, the example of cyberspace clearly demonstrates how the big Other is present more than ever: social atomism can only function when it is regulated by some (apparently) neutral mechanism."

Even earlier, in *The Ticklish Subject*, he writes, "Today, more than ever, we, as individuals, are interpellated without even being aware of it: our identity is constituted for the big Other by a series of digitalized informational files … files we are mostly not even aware of, so that interpellation functions … without any gesture of recognition on the part of the subject concerned" (Žižek 1999, 259).

The conclusion of Jameson's (1984) essay on postmodernism notes that Althusser's thesis—that ideology represents an imaginary relation of the subject to its real conditions of existence—combines the two levels of the Imaginary and the Real, ignoring the level of the Symbolic. I claim that drawing from Althusser—and from film and media theory, too—has caused us both to rely on the proposal that ideology represents a strictly *imaginary* relation of the subject to its real conditions of existence and likewise to ignore the dimensions of the Symbolic. There are thus two ways by which I want to return the Symbolic to its proper place through my own reading and interpretation of the form and structure of social media, which I've tried to develop implicitly in *Algorithmic Desire*. I claim that the symbolic order—the form of the big Other—is the necessary layer of ideology and therefore that the Imaginary is not found in representation directly but relates the subject at a subterranean level—at the level of fantasy—or through what Žižek calls the sublime object of ideology. The Imaginary relates to the dimension of fantasy, tying the subject to the surface level of ideological propositions. However, representation—what we see directly in language, in communication, on the screen—appears at the level of the Symbolic. Thus, the Symbolic pertains to two aspects of social media communications: on one hand is the social network itself—that is, our social network of friends, followers, and also presumed "lurkers," all of which are *represented* on social media platforms; and on the other hand is the form of the curation of our identities, of our "selves," on these platforms, in terms of how the signifier that is one's profile page comes to *represent* oneself for all of the other users in the network—that is, for the *big* Other. According to Lacan, the signifier is what represents the subject for all the other signifiers; the signifier is also that for which all the others represent the subject.

Moreover, a second dimension of the symbolic is worth highlighting, regarding Jameson's reading of the Althusserian formula through a Lacanian lens: the role the Symbolic plays at the level of interpretive, analytical discourse—that is, how the Symbolic impacts on the Real. At this level, I claim, the *metaphor* of social media as I describe it in the introduction to *Algorithmic Desire* is the marker of the Symbolic's entry into the Real and is also the very concept that we must hold onto and maintain as a tool for immanent criticism of the exploitative aspects of communicative capitalism.

The big Other only starts to dissolve once we recognize the fact that it is also alienated, inconsistent with itself. However, the concept of social media provides this for us in the dimensions of the immanent critique as it allows us to perceive the self-relating negativity of the concept: it shows its incapacity to produce the promised online digital public sphere. That which is negative in the concept is therefore also negative in the structure of the big Other, of the symbolic order. My goal, as I explain in the book, is not to produce a better social media but to use the concept of social media to grasp the material barriers to its own realization and thereby further understand the antagonisms and contradictions present within the structure of neoliberal capitalism. Even more difficult to explain is the fact that, by recognizing itself in the hail of an Other it knows does not to

exist, or in the performative gesture of maintaining appearances, the subject helps to (re)constitute the very big Other it disavows.

While Khader (2022) acknowledges my defense of perversion as the form of ideology, he quibbles that I do not offer any solution to this. I disagree. I claim that by sticking to the social media metaphor—to the concept of social media—we can continue to follow the Lacanian ethical injunction not to give way regarding our desire. This ethic, I claim, hystericizes the subject, especially if we understand hysteria as *failed interpellation* in the form of the hysterical question to the big Other: why am I what you are saying that I am? By following and maintaining the social media metaphor, we are made capable of more than merely articulating an immanent criticism of social media—of the antisocial aspects of antagonism, Twitter wars, trolling, fake news, posttruth, and the exploitative dimension of communicative capitalism. My analysis of social media is not meant merely to critique the form and structure of platforms and platform capitalism. To slightly amend one of Kornbluh's (2022, 408) comments, my goal is not merely a media-studies intervention into psychoanalytic theory but is also a media-studies intervention into emancipatory ethics and the critique of ideology. As well, through the prism of the new structuralism that I introduce, and through the analysis of algorithmic desire's effect on social media, I claim that we can grasp the form of the general ideology of twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism—a form, I argue, that is perverse.[5]

My point, in other words, is *not that another social media is possible* but that through the concept or the metaphor of social media we remain capable of seeing the constitutive dimensions of alienation and the lure of wholeness propelled by the algorithm of our desire. My claim is not that another social media is possible to imagine—not for a "community 2.0"—but that *social* media is only truly possible in the material conditions of universal emancipation.

Acknowledgments

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5. Samo Tomšič (2015, 151) likewise asserts that, while capitalism itself is not perversion, nevertheless "it demands perversion from its subjects."

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