

# BY THE SKIN OF OUR MACHINES: PSYCHOANALYSIS BEYOND THE HUMAN

A Dialogue Between Patricia Clough and Jacob Johanssen



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## Editor's Introduction

Sigmund Freud held a certain delight for machines. His first model of the system Conscious/Unconscious (Cs/UnCs), in *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), ran on the energies of affect. Freud, in fact, called it a 'machine.' But the problem was it kept breaking down, so he switched gears by the time of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Two and a half decades later, Freud offered up one of his most well-known machines through the example of the "mystic writing pad" (1925). The writing pad's three layers operated through the cycling of traces: the traces of sense-impressions on the receptive surfaces of Perception-Consciousness (Pcpt.-Cs.) as a relatively flimsy middle layer; the UnCs as the dark resin of the bottom layer that retained impressions (as memory traces) while also "extending feelers" out toward the external world; the top protective sheet that, when lifted along with the middle layer, removed old traces so that new ones could then be deposited. It's just a simple kids' toy [you might know it as 'the magic slate'] but it offered a wonderful heuristic machine for grasping the fundamentals of the psychoanalytic apparatus.

Patricia Clough and Jacob Johanssen are likewise fascinated with and highly attentive to the ways that various technological operations in our digital age must necessarily transform the contemporary workings of psychoanalysis. Patricia's career-long commitment to "originary technicity"—the notion that techné and being occupy the same ontological plane, that there is no rift between the technological and the epistemological, no gap between matter and the psyche, no splitting of extension from thought—indicates how the intertwining of the machinic and the psychoanalytic has always been the case. Now ninety-five years on from Freud's mystic writing pad, computational data-capturings, other-than-human micro-sensibilities, and out-of-body/mind sites for memory storage have certainly stretched—if not often unfastened—any and all skin-topographies of psyche and soma traces and layerings.

In this intellectually generous and lively dialogue, Patricia and Jacob present freshly formed methodological challenges to the more typical interpretive practices of psychoanalysis. They also articulate the crucial role of affect in how we come to grips with the continually shifting relationships of bodies, interiorities/exteriorities, digital media/tions and all of those other present day machines that are, as Patricia reminds, "changing the function of the skin."

—Greg Seigworth, co-editor-in-chief

## Dialogue

**JACOB:** To begin with, I would like to say that we seem to have similar interests in relation to digital media, affect, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and how one can think about the embodied, entangled—and at times messy—relationships we have with various media and how those, in turn, are shaped by and give rise to social processes and injustices. I am very inspired by your ideas and I first encountered your work when I read *Autoaffection* (2000); I was drawn to your treatment of television. I found it particularly insightful how you drew on a range of thinkers while advancing, I think, an argument that was still loyal to psychoanalysis, and Freud in particular, in order to think about the (un)conscious qualities of television as a technology. Perhaps we could begin this conversation by talking about your interest in psychoanalysis (and its critiques and developments by thinkers such as Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and others) and television as a technology. How did you develop those interests and why did you specifically turn to television in your book?

**PATRICIA:** Actually, I first wrote about television much earlier than the publication of *Autoaffection* (2000); I wrote at a time when much cultural criticism was deeply influenced by film theory. Feminist film theory especially had elaborated a critical blend of Marxism and psychoanalysis in an Althusserian Lacanianism that offered a critical perspective that held sway up and through Judith Butler's early work in queer theory. But it was in the same year that Butler published *Gender Trouble* (1992) that I published *The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism* (1992). It daringly proposed that narrative, then thought to be the basis of all knowledge, was nonetheless transformed with each development of a 'new' media technology. This transformation, as I saw it, was the result of an effort to contain the excesses of each new technology on behalf of governance and economy, thus limiting the potential of each technology by shaping the subject of that technology through narrative adjustment/containment of those excesses. I then suggested that empirical sociology depended on the narrative realism of ethnography that, seemingly without its awareness, had changed with each new media technology, affecting the unconscious of sociological representation. Moving from the realism of the novel to cinematic realism, the emotional realism of television, and the commercial realism of the digital, as these were represented by well-known sociological ethnographers, I elaborated a critique of realist representation in sociology and in culture generally. And although at the time I was interested in psychoanalysis, Derrida's read of it, as well as Foucault's, Gayatri Spivak's, Hortense Spillers', Judith Butler's and Donna Haraway's would pull me away from using psychoanalysis as an empirical method for audience study. Rather, it seemed to me that psychoanalysis offered support for constructing a certain criticism of empiricism, drawing out empiricism's relationship to positivism, narrativity, and realist representation.

So by *Autoaffection*, my stakes in television were a matter of addressing the question of subjectivity. In terms of the teletechnological and the changed conditions of realist representation it offered, transforming too the relationship of economy, governance, the private and public spheres, and pleasure and pain (beyond desire of the cinematic regime). I have always thought of my work with media more as a matter of speculation—of epistemology and ontology—for a critical study of methods of representation, and more specifically, of the qualitative aspects of quantitative measure.

While television's emotional realism pointed me to affect, the affect it sent me to was at first more Derridean than it was Deleuzian. In the later 1990's, after publishing *Ends* and when writing about what was then a new genre—autoethnography, I took up the two legendary readings of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: the

one by Jacques Lacan in “The Mirror Stage” and the other by Jacques Derrida in *Post Card*. If Lacan's rereading would deliver terms such as projection, screening, paranoia, narcissism, voyeurism, and the imaginary for their further development in a cultural criticism of film, Derrida's rereading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1987) would submit psychoanalysis to an autobiographic criticism--initiating a cultural criticism of autotelecommunication. Reminding readers that the boy, whom Freud describes, is Freud's grandson and that the boy's mother is Sophie, Freud's daughter, who died suddenly while Freud was writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida suggests that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is autobiographical. But of course the autobiographical structure of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is barely acknowledged in the text; Sophie's death is only announced in a footnote. As Derrida sees it, Freud's writing is informed by a repressed unconscious concern with loss and therefore with his ‘legacy’—not only a familial legacy but also the legacy of the psychoanalytic movement. After all, Freud began writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* not only as a counter to Carl Jung's attack on Freud's thinking but also to eliminate the internal tension in his own thought that arose with his own treatment of narcissism (Derrida 1987, 366–368). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida would conclude, not only is an autobiographic writing, it also is an “autobiography of writing” that shows how often writing is a disavowed narcissistic defense against the author's loss of self, that is, the defense against the rupture in a fully known self that is disavowed through narrative suture. All writing is “autotelecommunication”—that is, a communication seemingly from a distance, as the prefix *tele* suggests, but where the distance is only the disavowed distance of the subject from itself (303, 326–337). While psychoanalysis is itself a deconstruction of any authorial dream of recording and transmitting all about oneself, knowing all about oneself, which is what television dreams it can do, in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, psychoanalysis also is shown to turn on this dream, turning it into a narcissistic defense of the author. It struck me that, even before television, all writing is autotelecommunication; television only more fully elaborates or more clearly surfaces the autotelecommunication that is disavowed in modern representation. Thus the intimate link between television and the early discourse on postmodernism.

I concluded that, while the unconscious of modern representation is the unconscious of the oedipal narrative, the *Ur* narrative in film and literary criticism of that time, there is an unconscious more general than the oedipal narrative, an unconscious of television which is buried in the dream of telling-all, showing-all, giving-all to the other--the dream of full and endless self-knowing and self-ex-

posure. In television, the disavowal of the unconscious is in the refusal to feel the distance of the subject from itself by erasing the distance with emotions or feelings endlessly offered to the other. It is the refusal to recognize that all emotions are first and foremost "autoaffections." And this is how *Autoaffection* would come to be a book about "unconscious thought in the age of teletechnology" but where autoaffection, itself, was seen as the unconscious' spacing and timing of the technological unconscious, or what I would elaborate in that book as the unconscious of "an originary technicity."

In retrospect I see that in each chapter of *Autoaffection*, there is a move from Derridean deconstruction to a Deleuzian ontology of virtuality as presented especially in his *Cinema II*, which was more about electronic media as Richard Dienst so brilliantly had argued. Along with that move from Derrida to Deleuze, *Autoaffection* was again a reconsideration of realism and representation drawing then on the growing field of science studies and studies of the body that would lead me further into affect and digital media and computational technology. In other words, I was done with looking at television because teletechnology now meant what I had described already in *Autoaffection* as:

the realization of technoscience, technoculture and technonature, that is, the full interface of computer technology and television, promising globalized networks of information and communication, when layers of electronic images, texts and sounds flow in real time, so that the speeds of the territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization of social spaces, as well as the adjustment to the vulnerabilities of exposure to media event-ness, are beyond any user's mere decision to turn 'it' on or off. Teletechnology is both a register and an actualization of postpersonal thought and nonhuman agencies (2000, 3).

A bit of awkward writing but it was the late 90's.

I might add what you might find interesting, Jacob; that is, I stopped looking at television even before this, when television was first broadcasting what would be called reality TV shows. The first appearance of reality TV turned me away from broadcast television or its content. These shows seemed to me, at least at the time, the near realization of the dream of television: a staged disclosing of the really real time of the self, an effort to absorb any distance in representing, such that the emotion endlessly stirred in emotional realism became nothing so much as an ongoing circulation of affect. Strangely enough, I had already read Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect," which was first published in 1995; I didn't quite know what to do with it then, but it would have a long-term influence.

**JACOB:** In *Autoaffection*, you suggested via Derrida that teletechnology was already anticipated by the conception of the Freudian unconscious, or in other words, that teletechnology bears traces of the unconscious and vice versa. You elaborated on this through the discussion of the mystic writing pad and Freud's understanding of memory. Freud, we could say, thought of the psyche as a medium and as being technological. Technology also has similar psychological qualities. He illustrated this with the example of the mystic writing pad. As I understand it, the writing pad is covered by a thin cellophane layer that protects the surface it covers. By pressing upon the surface with a pen, one can write on it. It is the pen that leaves traces on the layer that can then be felt on the surface of the pad. The psyche has the same capacity to store and retrieve data which is stored in different ways in the unconscious and consciousness. It is the system of consciousness that receives but does not store data or perceptions while the unconscious stores excitations that are retained as memory traces. The system of consciousness excites what Freud called the "memory system" (Freud 1981c) and the memory trace is discharged and becomes conscious to the subject. The memory trace that has crossed the protective shield is produced from unconscious perception and is thus rendered conscious or remembered. I think this conceptualisation is very interesting and lends itself to media, as you emphasise in your book. I also touch on this in my book in relation to Freud's ideas on affect. How would you relate your treatment of the Freudian unconscious in *Autoaffection* to contemporary technologies and particularly our ways of consuming television or television content?

**PATRICIA:** What I found most interesting about Derrida's take on the mystic writing pad, Freud's last metaphor for the capacity of the unconscious to receive everything perception registers but does not retain, was his noting Freud's dismay that a hand was needed to lift the top layer in order to erase what is written, A hand was needed to make the apparatus/metaphor work. I took Derrida to be pointing to Freud's privileging of nature or being over technicity. Derrida would propose an originary technicity to counteract an originary being while placing a Derridean X through both. Neither was to be originary; or better, origin was to be indeterminate. The hand that dismayed Freud indicated that there always is a framing, a technical frame, even a technical frame that enables the privileging of nature over technicity.

In *Autoaffection*, the indeterminacy of origins would become for me the potentiality or virtuality of a Deleuzian ontology—not a matter of disavowed knowledge but rather the ontology beyond the framing of the opposition of nature and technicity, human and other-than-human, matter and life and more. It was the matter of a new materialism, a new empiricism (before the recent new materialisms and the new empiricism), a Deleuzian new materialism and empiricism in such works as those of Manuel DeLanda, Elizabeth Grosz, and Rosi Bradotti, that led to the *Affective Turn* in which the social was taken up in its ontological transformation in relationship to digital media and computational technologies, human life and the affective capacity of matter, biopolitics and global financial capitalism.

Affect has been taken up since then in studies of digital media, computational technologies, and social media either as a human matter—connectivity of human and machine that is taken often to be disembodied. Or it is taken up in terms of other-than-human agencies with an expectancy of changing the way we have understood the body as an informationally closed organism. Or it is part of a recognition of the degrees of potentiality for self-ordering in the technosphere beyond human agency, suggesting a human and other than human embodiment. For me there is much to think about around the body—our understanding of it, its relationship to those body/organism-based inequalities or violences. However, without being settled on the ontology of the body, human and other-than-human, and with affect no longer only situated in the organism but also in matter or the environment at large, the question about memory is provocative and difficult. For Freud, memory is a function of the body-as-organism, the psyche-soma, the traces laid down in the nervous system. It is an artifact of the temporality stipulated in the move from oedipal to pre-oedipal, always a recovering of the past that is retained in bodily affect and is yet to be symbolized.

But digital media and computational technologies are spawning a different thought of memory, linked to datafication and the search—the ‘forensic’ search of the cloud or the ‘personable’ search of the internet and social media. To discuss these searches there is a need to rethink conceptions of private and public, the state and economy that are assumed in Freud’s notions of memory and the body, the body and energy. But, more important, the temporality of memory in terms of big data is not that of a movement from the present back to the past, forward to the future. It is something more like the present to the future again and again, a realization of the temporal multiplicity of the present rather than the loss of the past—a change as well in the function of narrative, representation and realism, reintroducing an ontological realism of other than human agencies.

In the name of what I have called “the user unconscious,” I have been trying to figure out an unconscious that is both of human and other-than-human agencies involving not only objects that are lost as in psychoanalysis but also objects that are alluring, alluring us to the search. The search has unsettled the notion of internal objects about which contemporary psychoanalysis has become the primary theory; it has unsettled the inside and the outside of the body-as-organism and therefore for the human body, it is changing the function of the skin.

Before I say more, let me turn to you, Jacob, and ask two questions. I was very impressed with your book, *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture*. Your work engages a rich set of psychoanalytic thinkers, among them Didier Anzieu whose insights I have also found to be useful in working through the user unconscious in terms of a world skin. His usefulness to you is best shown, I believe, in a move in your research from reality television to Twitter and Instagram regarding affect and the body-as-organism. In this light, can you say more about your use of skin ego in relationship to affect and to what you describe, following Freud, as inhibition in the move from television to the digital?

**JACOB:** Thank you, Patricia. Before turning to Anzieu, I need to say a few words about Freud, because to me, and how I draw on their ideas in the book, Freud and Anzieu are very much connected. I have always had an interest in Freudian psychoanalysis and Freud’s work on affect was particularly fascinating to me. The French psychoanalyst André Green wrote a fantastic book on Freud and affect (Green 1999) and there is also book on psychoanalytic theories of affect by the psychoanalyst Ruth Stein (1999). Both helped me to make sense of and work with Freud’s ideas around affect which are, as is the case with some of Freud’s concepts, often loosely defined and were revised throughout his life. While affect studies are of course a wide and diverse field, it seems to me that they partly came about in a critical move away from psychoanalysis and the focus on an individual subject with a body as a contained entity (amongst other things such as a critique of a focus on language and discourse that came with poststructuralist thinkers).

However, and I am sure we will return to this in our conversation, to begin with, I want to hold on to a psychoanalytic theory of the human subject as an individual who is situated in particular relationalities and psychosocial dynamics. I believe that psychoanalysis is the best and most complex theory of human subjectivity we have. In that sense, my use of affect theory goes perhaps slightly against



some thinkers within affect studies who have emphasized the transindividual dimensions of affect, but I would nonetheless argue that there is some common ground between the two. Generally speaking, affect refers to processes that involve the body, or bodies (human and non-human), and where there is a certain excessiveness involved that is perhaps situated at the intersection of consciousness and non-cognition. Even the 'classic' starting point for many affect theorists, of affecting and being affected (Spinoza) or Massumi's work (1995) which you also mentioned is useful here. All of those ideas, we can also find in Freud.

For Freud, affect is a subjective, bodily experience that is at first felt rather than consciously known or understood. It is a kind of momentary bodily dispossession. The experience is, but does not necessarily have to be, subsequently reflected on and rendered discursive by the subject. This is also very relevant for the consulting room when it comes to phenomena such as acting out or particular symptoms. I find Freud's early work on affect particularly interesting (Freud 1981a, b, c); we could also refer to this as the 'discharge model'. An affective experience can occur in relation to a particular stimulus (e.g. a sequence on television) and it can also be unconsciously activated by a memory that somehow relates to that particular sequence for example. For Freud, an affective experience is either pleasurable or unpleasurable in how it is felt by the subject. Those experiences are fleeting, momentarily. They are discharged, as Freud called it, and leave the body. This conceptualisation of affect is in my view very apt for media use, such as watching television or using social media, because of the fast-paced affectivity that is, as you have also argued in your earlier response, so inherent in media content. It allows us to think about how we are being affected by media on a bodily level. However, Freud's idea of affect is still rooted in the individual subject. I want to think of affect as more relational than Freud did, and his sometimes cryptic discussions also lack a sensual, or phenomenological, element of affective experiences.

It was Nicola Diamond's (2013) book on psychoanalytic understandings of the relational body that introduced me to Didier Anzieu. Anzieu, draws on a number of psychoanalysts (Bion, Winnicott, and Bick) but, I think, he is deeply influenced by Freud. His notion of the skin ego is partly based on Freud's idea of the protective shield which Freud developed in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud 1981a) and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1987). Taken together with Freud's theorisation of the ego as a surface entity, the protective shield is an envelope that enwraps the psyche and, as Anzieu stresses, is also the skin on someone's body. It is virtual and material. The skin ego comes into being as the baby is in deep, affective contact with individuals around her (and those are of course often the

mother and father or other primary caregivers). The baby's skin ego is an envelope that is made up of sensual experiences (touching) and also a secure boundary that protects. The baby arrives at a sense of self through and with others. The baby is touched, held, rocked, etc. and thereby the skin ego is formed and the baby of course responds to those affective messages of being touched, talked to, etc. by touching and gesturing herself. Those affective experiences allow for an ego to emerge. The baby not only feels held and protected, but also has the fantasy of sharing a common skin with the mother (which is eventually separated into two egos). Anzieu writes in this context: "to be an Ego is to feel one has the capacity to send out signals that are received by others" (1989, 62). This beautiful quote struck me, because of how similar it sounds to how digital media operate. Signals, or code, are sent out and received by others and this often occurs in a cocoon-like manner. We are deeply intertwined with media, devices and so on.

I discuss this in more detail in my book, but we can also think of the skin ego as being characterized by different experiences that are discharged by the baby and are often of course highly pleasurable and also unpleasurable. The skin ego, I think, allows us to re-introduce the social and the sensual-affective into Freud's affect model. The first ways of communicating and relating to others, what you call an "originary technicity," are thus affective and they do not involve vision, as Lacan would argue, but touch and the body as a whole. I also find the virtual and sensual-material qualities of the skin ego very valuable for thinking about affect and the body in relation to digital media. Perhaps media have such an important status in our lives because they relate to a primitive affective state of relational processes around the sending and receiving of signals. I'll answer your question on inhibition as part of my response to your next question below.

**PATRICIA:** In your work, you make use of psychoanalysis in interviewing viewers and users. Can you say more about how this approach works; what kinds of realism and empiricism do you think you are employing?

**JACOB:** In response to my first question, Patricia, you said about psychoanalysis and empiricism: "[r]ather it seemed to me that psychoanalysis offered support for constructing a certain criticism of empiricism drawing out empiricism's relationship to positivism, narrativity, and realist representation." I completely agree with this and I think psychoanalysis is a useful project for critiquing a focus on rationality, positivism, and empiricism within other disciplines. My own discipline of media and communication studies can be particularly enriched by psychoanal-

ysis, because the human subject is either taken for granted and undertheorised, or regarded as a completely rational and reflexive individual. I think the legacy of feminist film theory and other work on media, which are more exploratory and philosophical we could say, is really fundamental for psychoanalytic research into contemporary technology. I was trained in empirical research and I wish to combine the two. Empirical media research, often unconsciously (I like what you write about sociology's unconscious in *The User Unconscious* in that respect), very often operates with an assumption that human beings are able to fully know the reasons for watching a certain show on television for example, and that they are able to speak about this in interviews for instance.

Methodologically, I draw on how the technique of free association has been adapted by the psychosocial scholars Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2012) for social research. I conducted interviews with viewers and users and encouraged them to freely associate without too many interventions on my part. In this way, narratives are potentially less governed by consciousness and there may be aspects that are made conscious in interviews. In the different projects that I discuss in *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture*, I wanted to understand how individuals were biographically invested in the media that they use, or in other words what the relationship was between their biographies and digital media. There were moments in many interviews when individuals would suddenly remember an experience, something from the past, or when they would speak more freely about their self-representation on social media for example. Such moments were aided by free association.

I think what you say about the nature of television, Patricia, is really insightful. How interesting that you turned away from television when reality TV became popular. It was reality television that got me interested in affect studies. As some scholars have argued, reality television is so much about a kind of excessive display of affectivity and bodies. I wanted to understand in a more complex manner how audiences responded to such content and how it affected them. Freud and Anzieu are particularly useful for thinking about such questions I feel, because affect is situated at the intersection of, or is in tension with, the discursive and non-discursive. For Freud, once an affect is discharged, the individual might be able to reflect on it or articulate what that experience was like.

This was also evident in my interviews, particularly with those viewers of the reality show *Embarrassing Bodies*. They tried to articulate an affective experience they had had when watching the programme, e.g. in relation to a very graphic surgery sequence, but they could not fully do so. They explained that they had

to look away from the television screen sometimes, or that they did not know why they had such affective experiences. Those were attempts to turn particular affective experiences into language. At the same time, many interviewees spoke of the programme in very pleasurable terms and that they liked the doctors in particular because they were always able to help. The interviewees had also spoken to me about their bodies and particular bodily experiences (related to trauma and illness for example). I concluded that they used the show to work through some of their own affective-bodily states and that the show functioned similarly to a skin ego for them. They were enwrapped in a containing environment which is periodically broken through affective experiences which relate to their biographies. This working through, however, happened unconsciously. None of the interviewees spoke of it in such terms and they did not make a connection between their own past experiences and the show. So it was this non-connection which they spoke about that led me to conclude that there was an unconscious connection which was facilitated by the television programme.

Regarding your previous question, Patricia, I use Freud's notion of inhibition to analyze some of those individuals' narratives about using social media. I can now comment a little more on it. Social media facilitate very important and healthy forms of communication in today's world, but at the same time there is an obsession with the idea of sharing. Sharing everything about ourselves. This is closely connected to affect and the need for us to show how we are affected by others and are in turn affecting them. We are told to be relational on social media and other digital platforms. We may draw a connection to Anzieu's skin ego here, because the subject is formed and develops an ego through sharing. The baby has the illusion that she shares a common skin with the m/other. Anzieu notes in this context that the baby has the illusion, "that the person on the other side of that wrapping will respond immediately, and in exact complementarity, to its signals; this is the reassuring illusion of an omniscient narcissistic double always at its beck and call" (Anzieu 2016, 48). There is a striking similarity here to how our modes of communication operate today. An accelerated relationality where we are expected to share and immediately respond. However, there are aspects of ourselves which we are unable to share online. The *Embarrassing Bodies* viewers also spoke about their use of social media and they did not share anything about the show online (or offline in many cases for that matter). I argue that they were inhibited because of how strongly they were affected by the show. So in a way, there were conscious as well as affective and unconscious constraints which shaped the way they used social media.

Coming back to the question of empiricism once again, I think it is important to emphasize that I am not psychoanalyzing research participants. I have to be very careful regarding the interpretations that I make about their affective and (un)conscious investments in digital media. This was one of the criticisms of early cultural studies scholars against screen theory / feminist film theory: that they had invented a subject who would do things for them as it were (unconsciously identify with the protagonists, etc.). I think those criticisms were perhaps too generalizing and dismissive, but they nonetheless open up a problem for empirical work that draws on psychoanalysis. In that sense, for interview-based research, all analyses are based on the data and particular discursive moments which may point to contradictions, complexities and so on which, in turn, relate to specific psychoanalytic concepts.

For my next question, I will turn to your recent collection of essays *The User Unconscious* (Clough 2018). I really like the term “the user unconscious,” and I share your idea that digital technologies are altering and shaping the unconscious itself and have themselves unconscious qualities. I quote from your recent commentary on Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* on the *Public Seminar* website:

The user unconscious, I therefore have suggested, is a matter of affect, in psychoanalytic terms, the force of seeking lost (infantile) objects, operating, however, in a networked environment of objects that along side those lost are those that are not lost but rather are lively and not containable brought by datafication out of reach of human consciousness and bodily-based perception, that is, an environment of the endless availability of the search that in itself supersedes finding an object. This endless searchability supported by datafication is another way of posing the liveliness of objects or their other-than-human liveliness that suggests an embodiment of the I and the unconscious that is human and other than human, yet to be fully engaged as a matter of subjectivity and sociality.

Related to your notion of the user unconscious, I am interested in discussing what you and colleagues (Clough et al 2007) have called “affect-itself.” You seem to be specifying and defining something with that term which, at the same time, is difficult to define. Generally, affect studies operates with many conceptualisations of affect that, to some extent, all resist definition of what we actually mean by ‘affect’ in a way. In the article, you want to situate affect at all scales of matter. Affect-itself, then, is the process of how diverse modalities and phenomena are being subjected to measure. You give examples, such as:

pre-individual capacities ranging from preconscious human bodily capacities, to human genetic materials functioning outside the human body, to the capacities of computer programs to elaborate scales of complexity beyond the specifications of the program, to the capacities of bacteria to cross species now leading to a reconceptualization of evolution, as well as becoming a model of bioterrorism. (Clough et al, in Clough 2018, 3)

You then relate this to affective labor in order to rethink the body of the worker as something that is not a closed being to whom affect belongs. If I understand you correctly, you argue that there is an abstracting of the human body in certain forms of work that disregards the individual body as one who affects and is affected. You are conceptualising affect-itself as something that is about the “dissolution of the distinction between organic and nonorganic life” (ibid, 11). You then relate your discussion to fascinating insights from quantum physics, information theory, and new materialism. Finally, you also discuss the relationship between value, measure, and affect. Affect has become a means of measuring value, or re-valuing activities and processes that go far beyond issues around work and exploitation but concern populations’ (and individuals’) “capacities for living” (ibid, 20).

Taking all of the above into account, I was wondering if you could say a little about what led you to define affect in that way? And perhaps following on from that, I also have an interest in affective labor which articulates itself quite differently. In so far as I take issue with Hardt and Negri’s lack of definition of what they mean by affect, and I argue in my book that a subject-centred model of affect is helpful when it comes to thinking about the individual who, after all, is the one carrying out affective labor. A similar point has been made by Kylie Jarrett in her monograph *The Digital Housewife* (2016), specifically when it comes to digital labor and our ways of using commercial online platforms for example. I want to think of affective labor as subjective, bodily potentials that are of course interwoven with the social, but are nonetheless about individual bodies. What are your thoughts on all of this?

**PATRICIA:** It was in an attempt to theorize the changing image of the body that my students and I developed the concept of “affect-itself,” drawing on current mathematics and physics (as Marx had in his time and Freud too) to redefine the body. Taking up the ongoing discussion about what then was described as immaterial labor, we proposed that laborers’ bodies were no longer central to the production of surplus value but that bodily capacities or affective capacities were. These capacities were part of the accumulation of wealth displacing the human laborer’s embodiment of labor-power with the laboring of affective capacity at every scale of matter, an informing of energy at every scale of matter. Sometime after theorizing affect-itself, I would come to notice media studies scholars who were shifting their attention from the nonconscious affective relationship between human user and technology to the technology’s nonhuman cognition, itself. Hayles (2017) would explain that,

“part of the contemporary turn toward the nonhuman is the realization that an object need not be alive or conscious in order to function as a cognitive agent” (216). Of course humans still labor and you, Jacob, have made an argument for users of digital media to be laboring—free laboring as Tiziana Terranova (2000) noted long ago; that they emotionally or affectively labor in consuming digital media. I agree, and there still are laborers laboring all over the world. But the production of wealth that defines finance/data capital today is the larger arena in which all labor comes to value. Here taking up the derivative logic of the market is important (but I won’t be able to go into it now, except to say that Randy Martin proposes that the state is separating from the nation as the capitalist economy is global and nothing coheres, but this incoherence has found itself to be productive economically in capitalism). That the subjects’ use of digital media continues to contribute to datafication is relevant here, as it makes anything you have identified as affective labor to the finance/data market more central to the production of wealth.

Again, something more than the human body or the rational mind is involved here, or the human body and the mind have been opened to the other strata of matter-energy from which they arise and remain in touch (opened by datafication to a worldly sensibility as Mark B.N. Hansen (2015) would put it). That is why I recently have described the user unconscious in terms of a YOU, that composite of an I and its data traces as well as the data fed forward to it from others, including other-than-human others, and whose embodiment is human and other-than-human beyond the organism and the skin, with a cognition that is human and other-than-human. I want to suggest that there is a new diagram, as Foucault would put it. But I also want to be careful to note that it is actually a new more complicated mix of diagrams—for example, disciplinary, control, and beyond control (see below).

This is important to a critical take on datafication. With the recent turn to datafication, a certain violence is unleashed with the speculation on the capacities for life and death, or futurity, beyond the containment of the body and the mind—the economy of affect-itself. Certain populations, those already long violated in their very definition as less-than-human, abandoned, or at-risk, now not only continue to be subjected to these definitions, but in addition are subjected to the speculation of their capacities. While we all are dividuated and subjected to speculation of our capacities, some are more violently or at least differently exposed to and by the social technology of control operating across the whole field of experience in what no longer even can be imagined to be the liberal arrangement separating economy, state, civil society, the private and public spheres, as this arrangement is displaced by the circulation of a global network of financialized capitalism.

As such, populations differently marked by race, class, gender, sexuality, debility, and geopolitics play their part differently in what has now become the privileged capacity to disavow our always already being networked in the socially mediated use of data, which allows the use of digital media to feel personal and private or, at least, ascribable to the legality of private property. Following that, the calls for protections of privacy and ownership of data in the rights of individuals further displaces the violence unleashed in the undoing of the liberal arrangement, as privacy becomes more a matter of the personal and the networked in the state of global financialized capital. That is to say, the unleashed violence is being absorbed as every difference becomes the grist of the algorithms operating in digital media and datafication, albeit differently for different populations but where the body-as-organism is no longer the predominant site of difference and where thinking no longer is distinguished in terms of rationality or reason opposed to instrumentalism. But it is here too that the drive for being in touch with a larger milieu of others, among them other-than-human others, a sensibility of worldly entities or objects, still carries the recognition of a sociality yet to come, a capturing of the indeterminacy of the algorithm unto life. Here I have turned to Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of inoperative community, following Wendy Chun (2016) who rephrases it as "inoperative we," the larger context of the YOU. The 'we' is inoperative because it is impossibly operative in its arising and falling away, back into noise again and again only leaving traces. Yes, Jacob, you are right to be worried that instead of the potentiality of a sociality yet to come, we might find that there is an insistence on individualism, that each of us is an individual and seeks the comfort of a skin ego enwrapped by a highly functional platforms that we depend on for living. I think here is the tension between psychoanalysis and technology urging a rethinking of the subject, the body and the mind.

**JACOB:** Thanks, Patricia. I would like to talk about what the developments that are often subsumed under the term 'big data' mean for the status of the human subject. In your chapter "The Datalogical Turn" (Clough et al 2015), you write the following:

With the datalogical turn, therefore, not only is there a decentering of the human subject, but the definition of the bodily also broadens beyond the human body or the body as autopoietic organism, and as such, bodily practices themselves instantiate as data, which in turn produces a surplus of bodily practices.

So too, the difference of the inside and the outside the system is undone and a question is raised as to what environment is (Clough et al 2018, 105).



I think this is a very powerful and apt characterization of what is at stake when everything about us and around us is being turned into data or in some way being linked with digital data. I would agree with this characterization, but I would also argue that such a decentering of the human subject falls back on the human subject, that is the human subject who thinks of herself as being centered and rational, in positive as well as threatening ways. The two of us are probably more interested in the latter, given our investment in psychoanalysis, so I would argue, as I do in Chapter 6 of my book, that those practices around big data and data accumulation can result in fragmented, polarized senses of who we are and how we appear online, on digital devices, in relation to technology etc. We have so little control over and knowledge of what happens with our data, which are tracked and appropriated, that this can result in anxious, even paranoid, subjects. Where it feels like we as subjects with some level of agency are being immobilized and made powerless in relation to our data. Those data can come back to haunt us or affect us in very profound ways. So this fragmentation of our subjectivities and how the inside and outside of the system are undone, as you say, is something I absolutely agree with, but the question then is: what does that do to us, our unconscious and affective ways of experiencing reality? What does it do to our experiencing and understanding of our bodies?

I am wondering what the implications are of the obsessive ability of datafication to bring together disparate data in order to produce new relations. If we have become metrics or are merely regarded as data points that can be manipulated, what sort of politics follows on from that? How can such practices be resisted, or if that is not possible: perhaps from a Deleuzian–Guattarian perspective, turned into forms of enjoyment that we might tolerate? I think Mark B. N. Hansen’s work is very interesting here, and you cite him in the conclusion of your text, as he argues that the subject “comes to learn that it lags behind its own efficacy” (2013, 14). The subject, then, is constantly “tracking tendencies, maintaining liquidity of capacity” (Clough et al 2018, 114). I discuss this similarly in my chapter where I think about the subject and big data as being oriented towards the future and as always in flux. Alison Hearn’s work (2017) is useful here. She has argued that mass datafication, targeting, and predictive analytics give rise to, what she calls, a “speculative subject” (2017, 73). A subject, whose data are not only constantly anticipated and in flux, but who becomes anticipatory and malleable herself. We come to regard ourselves as bearers of value that is possible of being optimized towards a future state. To a large degree, how that future is going to look is in the hands of automated data mining processes. Related to your earlier question about who the subject of big data is for me, I actually hadn’t realized before you

pointed it out that my chapter on big data is the only one in the book for which I did not interview users. I wanted to make that chapter more exploratory both in writing and conceptual terms. It seems less linear than my other chapters, just like datafication and related technologies are.

I think it is very important to point out, as you do in various texts, how the data-logical turn enables a new form of population racism and surveillance. On a more fundamental level, I think there is an underlying process of dis/individualization at work. We are being individualized through technology because datafication enables a bespoke, custom-made user experience for us whereby the platforms, devices, and services we use address us as *individuals*. This can be highly pleasurable. We are being told by Facebook for example, how valued and important we are. At the same time, our data are mined and used for various purposes. This is disindividualizing. Who we are as complex human beings does not matter in reality, as long as parts of us and our expressions online can be merged with other data to come to various conclusions about who we are. I relate this to the psychoanalytic notion of perversion in my book. Going back to Anzieu, we could also characterize such processes as being about the creation of a skin ego where we are assured and enwrapped by highly functional platforms which we have come to depend on. However, beneath the surface that very skin ego, or perhaps one layer of the skin envelope, is broken down and parts of us are extracted. This creates a strange experience where we own something and have control over it and do not own it and cannot control it at the same time. What is your view on this?

**PATRICIA:** Well Jacob, I find everything you say about your own work very compelling and very interesting; all of it is on behalf of the subjects you interview and who stand in for subjectivity in the age of digital media and datafication. However, noticing that there are no research subjects in your chapter on big data suggested to me that there needs be a fuller rethinking of subjectivity and datafication, a difficult but necessary task ahead of us. For me, this implies the larger issue of a change of *diagram* as I mention above and remembering how Deleuze (2005) reworked Foucault's treatment of it in terms of micro-relationships of power and affective forces, informing various aspects across the whole field of experience and which engages an already existing mechanism making it central to a new diagram, as it "crosses the technical threshold," becoming a social technology (Clough 2019).

For me, the rethinking of subjectivity in terms of datafication as it becomes, if not already has become, the social technology of control beyond control suggests a diagrammatic change from the liberal arrangement of separating state, economy, civil society, and the private and the public spheres, a change in the figures of the body and the mind as they have been conceived in disciplinary society. This liberal arrangement, as Marx pointed out in his *The German Ideology*, coincides with industrial capitalism arising in Europe and the bourgeoisie's ownership of the means of production of consciousness as well as material life, or the matter of consciousness arising out of material life. Although what is described here is the 'free market economy' as separate from state control, and the relative autonomy of civil society institutions, such as the family, the military, the school, etc., Marx and the critical, theoretical perspectives he has inspired recognize that this is more an ideological understanding, one promoted in fact by civil society institutions, which interpellate the subject to this ideological understanding that includes the fiction of the autonomous or sovereign individual subject of the Nation-State as well as the market. To speak of the diagram as informing this liberal arrangement is not to reduce the diagram to it but rather to mark the dynamism of the arrangement, opening it to change. What I have been arguing is that datafication is part of another diagram rather than a disciplinary one and calls forth a subjectivity that is not specific to the individual. Moreover, the individual subject cannot be the figure in our contemporary theoretical/critical discourses. Or as you put it: it is the subject of a strange experience where we own something (of ourselves) and have control over it and do not own it and cannot control it at the same time. A control beyond control is here involved.

This has involved me in a rethinking of the body and its capacities beyond its figuration as an organism. It also has led me to the work of Luciana Parisi who, along with others, is taking up the thinking done by algorithms, the machine learning supported by the indeterminacy of the incalculable immanent to the algorithm—what Parisi (2017) calls speculative thinking. A new image of thought is given that is “nonbiologically bound to any organism;” further it works by abduction rather than induction or deduction (177). It is speculative thinking that Parisi argues refuses the opposition between reason and sheer instrumentalism and prefers a pragmatism where massive amounts of data again and again offer another problem rather than a solution—a socially mediated use of data that works speculatively as the algorithm does. If you still are with me, I am suggesting that with datafication, we not only have a new image of thought, we have a new figure of the body, both requiring we rethink the subject and the unconscious.

Thank you Jacob. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have had our conversation and I am so sorry it's near its end. I leave you to have the last words.

**JACOB:** Thank you Patricia, I have immensely enjoyed having this conversation. It has been an honor. I think it is particularly valuable to see where our ideas converge and diverge while we are both committed to thinking about similar questions that concern the status of the human subject and technology today, and agree that those are of great importance. I think what you have said about the changing ontology of thought, the unconscious, the body, and the human subject—and I would also add things like meaning and interpretation—is very powerful. It is very enriching to such debates that you hold on to psychoanalytic ideas and productively combine them with other paradigms that can be very critical of psychoanalysis (like new materialism), and your discussion of the thing self in *The User Unconscious*, for example, is very interesting in this context. Regarding the conceptual and actual challenges to notions of (liberal) subjectivity which you have outlined so beautifully in your response, I would say that the subject, and Chun makes a similar point in her work (while focusing less on the body), is both individual, an organism, material, and relational, unbounded, leaky, beyond the body as organism, virtual. This presents us with some conceptual problems of how to hold on to such a view which may seem contradictory to some. Anzieu and how we have been discussing his ideas is useful here I think, because he shows how the subject is becoming individual through relationalities, or is moving towards individuation via the relational. I would add to this that an unconscious desire to return to this relational sphere of the skin ego persists throughout our lives.

You have raised important questions that are now very fresh in my mind, and will be for some time, about the changing nature of the unconscious, of bodies, and subjects due to computational technologies and the datalogical turn. Your concept of the user unconscious is very powerful here. I think this tension that you mention which is revealed because of technology should also be something of a wakeup call for psychoanalysis. Perhaps clinical psychoanalysis itself needs to take account of such technological shifts because they have such fundamental effects on the very understanding and being of the subject. So there is a need for a new psychoanalytic theory. If we accept the fact that technical systems, datafication, algorithms, artificial intelligence and so on will become increasingly more autonomous and 'intelligent', even capable of cognitive processes as Hayles

argues, we are pushed even further into expanding our understanding of the kind of questions we have discussed in this conversation. Hayles argues that we are already at a point where technology is capable of cognition. I think this is taking things a step too far and we are not at this point yet, but it certainly opens up a vision of the future where machines, algorithms, and other technologies will be able to think with us, for us, and against us –more quickly, more rationally, and more effectively than we ever could. This has implications for the unconscious and many other aspects, not least for how populations are subjected to forms of violence and surveillance. Returning to affect, the affective capacities and capabilities of media and devices in relation to subjects and how subjects in turn will affect them will surely increase even more in the future. Those themes will continue to occupy us.

Thank you again Patricia for this wonderful opportunity to engage with me in this dialogue.

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