

Does the Internet Have an Unconscious?

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This paper¹ offers a way to begin to think about a psychoanalysis of the digital, or of the internet, by engaging with those concepts via the broadest and most central theorizations of the unconscious in the work of Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Fredric Jameson. Each theory of the unconscious (or the position of the unconscious, or the political unconscious) helps us to think about not only what we know about the internet (what we talk about when we talk about the internet), but also the role of the digital in contemporary culture: precisely, the role of email in the police procedural, the user experience of passwords, the question of painting in a digital epoch.

I begin with the question, posed in relation to Freud, of whether the internet *has* an unconscious, or whether the internet rather *is* the unconscious. I then turn to the spatialization of the unconscious and the internet via Lacan. In both cases, it is fair to say that the way in which the internet contains what we forget, or what we do not know that we know, tells us something about the unconscious or how the unconscious functions or is sited in the contemporary moment. Then, through an examination of the nexus of painting and sexuality via Jameson's politics of the unconscious (together with a discussion of the paintings of an artist who compares paint to DNA-bearing sperm!), I offer an example of reading cultural objects via the notion of the unconscious as structure.

Freud

Freud begins his paper “The Unconscious” (1915) with the assertion that everything that is repressed is in the unconscious, but not everything in the unconscious is there by dint of being repressed.² This assertion is found on the first page of the essay. We can take this to mean that the mechanism of repression is important, and not just because the composition and publication of this paper follows closely on the paper on repression, nor, I would argue, because, as Freud himself declared in “The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement,”³ repression is the cornerstone concept of psychoanalysis.

Freud anticipates our digital age when he uses terms like ‘data’ and ‘system.’ I would like here to consider Freud’s text as a theory *avant la lettre* of how we relate to the internet, a relating that perhaps has to do with how it functions as our writing machine, but also with memory. Freud remarks that, as an example of the unconscious, we are familiar with “ideas that come into our head we do not know from where, and with intellectual conclusions arrived at we do not know how” (“Unconscious” 166), as if he were looking at his inbox or Facebook page: How did that spam get in here? Is *she* my friend? In the latter question one can already trace the repressive hint of negation. Also, when Freud describes the topography of the unconscious, which both is and is not a physical or anatomical space, his discussion of the localization of aphasia and other cerebral activities brings to mind not only local issues of RAM and other forms of computer memory, but also the more global phenomena of servers and also cloud computing, which both is and is not located in geographical space.

The spatialization of the unconscious becomes important for Lacan, as we will see. But Freud also raises the issue in “The Unconscious” when he wonders if an idea (*Vorstellung*: idea, presentation, image), when it moves from the unconscious (*Ucs.*) to the conscious (*Cs.*), is recreated or merely freshly registered: Can the same idea can be in two places at once? (174).

Such musings can remind us of the transmission of an email, which begins as one types on one's computer or smartphone (or the server on which the email program resides), and then is copied from server to server to end up with its recipient. And the question of an anatomical location for the mind is similar to the technological fallacy that bedevils digital thought today.⁴ Here I refer to the faulty notion that knowing the objects that make up the infrastructure of the internet can help us to understand our relationship to technology psychoanalytically.⁵

Freud returns to this problem of “a continuous laying down of new registrations” later in his essay, arguing that “to every transition from one system to that immediately above it ... there corresponds a new censorship” (192). In this way, he continues, “derivatives of the *Ucs.* become conscious as substitute formations and symptoms” (193). In the process, however, these derivatives have to circumvent two levels of censorship: between the *Ucs.* and the *Pcs.* (preconscious), and then between the *Pcs.* and the *Cs.* Still, I wonder, and this is speculative, if these two levels of censorship should be viewed as qualitatively different. We can consider in this light the experience of Johns Hopkins cryptography professor Brian Green's experience of censorship. After writing about the NSA's codebreaking activities, he was told by his department head to remove his blog from the university server where it is mirrored and not, remarkably, by Google, where he hosts it on blogger.com. Following Freud's logic, the Google site can be considered the unconscious, and the university site the preconscious.

This question of censorship such a rich topic in Freud's writing, and so important as a political analogue of repression – can also be compared to the sort of filtering of email that our contemporary technological dependence requires, such as spam filters for example.⁶ Here we can return to Freud's notion that an unconscious thought comes into our head “we do not know from where.” Surely it is no accident that the idea of tracing the origin of email should have become a

major plot element in so-called police procedurals. We need only note the Freudian name the Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin gives to his detective: *Rebus*.

On the topic of the fictional detective today, it is significant that this literary figure, in a neoliberal twist, is no longer the *petit bourgeois* freelancer à la Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe. Today's genre of the procedural features a policeman or detective employed by the state: Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch, Rankin's Rebus, or Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole, for instance.⁷ The genre foregrounds bureaucratic procedure: forensics, bosses to be argued with, paperwork, internecine territorial battles. In three Scandinavian procedurals in particular – Norwegian Jo Nesbø's *Nemesis* (2002), Swede Steig Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005, 2009, 2011), and the Danish television series *The Killing/ Forbrydelsen* (2007-) – email plays a significant role in the plot. In *Nemesis*, detective Harry Hole receives emails correctly accusing him of being present at a murder. He pays an old friend to follow the trail of the server to Egypt, and then back to his own cell phone. In *The Killing*, a political candidate follows leaked emails back to his campaign manager. And in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, not only is the heroine, Lisbeth, a hacker who plants malware (of course the novel heavily features Mac products), but the IMDb.com website for the American film featured a viewer question asking: “Is it that easy to hack a person's email account?”

We notice that this phenomenon is not merely a mirroring of everyday life: if mimesis were at work, then we would have characters in romance novels or avant-garde fictions engaged in the same pursuit.⁸ The novels, films, and television series raise anxiety because our anxiety with respect to email is also *an anxiety about our unconscious and its repression*. This is key to my argument in this paper: Not only can we only understand the digital with the insights of psychoanalysis, but we can only understand psychoanalysis today via the digital.⁹

I am not arguing that one should ignore the practices of state and corporate surveillance, although I find Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s contention that privacy is a nineteenth century bourgeois liberal fantasy compelling.¹⁰ But certainly, as revelation follows revelation of the data mining of one’s personal information (the ideology of a subject ‘owning’ or ‘having rights to’ one’s information must be questioned and historicized), one feels that there is a certain structural relentlessness on the part of such apparatuses. Perhaps what we need is a psychoanalysis of those apparatuses, of their perverse need to compile all of one’s data.

Let us now turn to Freud’s famous remark that the unconscious knows no contradiction. This is so because the unconscious is the site of our desire, of our “wishful impulses,” which “exist side by side without being influenced by one another, and are exempt from mutual contradiction” (186). I would argue that this lack of contradiction is also what is so prevalent and annoying about social media and online email web browsers. Consider how, when Facebook or Gmail is up on our computer screen, we see our intimate thoughts surrounded by ads for belly fat or ESL or gay photography. Facebook now asks me: “How are you doing, what’s happening, how’s it going, what’s going on, how are you feeling, Clint?”

Here the unconscious of the internet, via the shared characteristic of a lack of contradiction, relates to how the algorithms work. On Facebook, ads are triggered by your profile information (if you like cookery, you will get cookbook ads) and your likes (you are what you like, as one online posting explains), whereas Google ads are triggered by your search terms.¹¹ In both cases, we find precisely what Freud discusses in terms of the contents of the unconscious: wishful impulses, with the exception or caveat that we may not, in fact, like cookbooks, even if we clicked on that link, or want cookbooks. Indeed we may have used that search term because we wanted to buy one for our cousin for his or her birthday. Thus, when I go to Amazon I am

continually offered books I bought not for myself, but for my son or my brother. This is my point: our subjectivity as worked out in the unconscious does not conform to how we want others to see us (the imaginary: cookbooks versus cultural theory; YA novels versus police procedurals). Instead it discloses the real of our desire, in my example actually to please my brother or my son. In this sense, it's a matter of desire (Lacan), and not taste (Bourdieu).

Further details from Freud's essay detail this point. In the unconscious, he writes, there is no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty: all this is only introduced by the work of the censorship between the *Ucs.* and the *Pcs.* Negation is a substitute, at a higher level, for repression. In the *Ucs.* there are only contents, cathected with greater or lesser strength. (186)

Freud adds that this cathexis has a degree of mobility linked to the mechanisms of our old friends condensation and displacement. Lacan will connect these to metonymy and metaphor, but we can also compare them to the networking of links and hyperlinks in the digital sphere. Returning to Freud, the processes of the unconscious are timeless: they "are not ordered temporally," nor are they "altered by the passage of time" (187). Further, the unconscious is based not on reality itself but on the polarity of pleasure and unpleasure. Perhaps these last characteristics can be combined so as to suggest an understanding the internet. Our clicks and links and likes move us around, via our pleasures or desires, through a timeless or eternal web (nothing ever goes away on the internet, we are told), but also, of course, in a way that amounts to a supreme waste of time.

There is yet another signal discussion in Freud's essay with which I want to close this portion of my essay. I allude here to the distinction he draws between the thing-presentation (*Sachevorstellung*) and the word-presentation (*Wortvorstellung*). The immediate context is the elaboration of the difference between schizophrenia and the more common neuroses. Freud remarks on the schizophrenic's over-cathexis or over-investment in words themselves. Freud

offers as an example the patient of Victor Tausk, who referred to her boyfriend as an *Augenverdreher* (literally an “eye-twister”) or deceiver, and also complained that her own eyes *were not right, they were twisted* (198, italics in original). Freud remarks that schizophrenics treat words in the same way as dreams (the primary processes of condensation and displacement), adding that the unconscious is the scene of thing-presentations, whereas word-presentations are only to be found in the conscious mind.

Do we not indeed treat email as a Freudian thing-presentation: not as the message that is contained within but as a thing, one which does not refer to anything but itself? And so we keep checking our email in the manner of an obsessional neurotic. This is to say that email, if it is a thing, may be the Thing, or *das Ding*, which offers a nice transition to our next thinker, whom I want to talk about in terms of the unconscious space of the internet.

Lacan

Immediately at the beginning of his *écrit* “Position of the Unconscious,” Lacan makes two important statements. First:

The unconscious is a concept founded on the trail [*trace*] left by that which operates to constitute the subject.

and then:

The unconscious is not a species defining the circle of that part of psychical reality which does not have the attribute (or the virtue) of consciousness.¹²

In other words, and first of all, the unconscious is a concept based on something left over when the subject is created; that is, it is the *that* (a deictic shifter) “which operates to constitute the subject,” be it discourse, civilization, hegemony, ideology, capital, or patriarchy. When the subject is created, something is left over, and that leftover is the unconscious.

Second, for Lacan the unconscious is not merely not-conscious. It's not what we're not aware of, what we don't know, or even, *contra* Žižek's appropriation of Donald Rumsfeld's well-known quip, the unknown known. As Lacan goes on to say, it is not a part of knowledge, at least not in this formulation, anymore than the "un-black" (*l'in-noir*) is what is not black (704).

To his definition of the unconscious as both not not-conscious and also not part of a circle, Lacan adds that the unconscious did not exist before Freud. The unconscious involves the *other* in the clinical scene: psychoanalysts "constitute that to which the unconscious is addressed" (707). But perhaps not only the person of the clinician, but also discourse. Because the unconscious is "situated in the locus of the Other," it is found "in every discourse, in its enunciation" (707). So if the unconscious is in the Other, it is in every discourse and in every enunciation.

So now we are getting somewhere in terms of our topic if we think not only about how we address the computer, how we are addressed by it, but also if we think of our enunciation as we type, and of the computer as a technology of the internet and its locus in the cloud. Lacan refines the clinical situation, the to and fro of language, with the notion of retroactivity, Freud's *nachträglichkeit* (711). When Lacan says that the patient receives his question back from the Other in inverted form, we recall the interpolated emails we often receive, where our text is suddenly added to a margin along the side with the other (the little other: our correspondent; the big Other being the internet itself).

Lacan speaks of the subject's relation to signifiers in a way that suggests the signifiers of the internet. Signifiers speak of the subject, constitute the subject, and speak from the position of the unconscious. On the internet, our subjectivity is constituted as much via the *subject line*. Here there may be a line of signifiers, of text, or else no text: a gap in the email field. This is the void

that then addresses us if we fail to address it – fill in the subject line, that is – with the notice “Warning (!) No subject. Send Anyway?” This warning that there is no subject that speaks to the unconscious of the internet, in other words its failures. The warnings and “404 file not found” and linkrot and sundry weblife brownouts constitute the unconscious of not only the internet, but our subjectivity as well. Both the internet and subjectivity are founded on an absence, a void. As Lacan puts it, “before he disappears as a subject beneath the signifier he becomes, due to the simple fact that it addresses him, he is absolutely nothing” (708).

The nothing that we are is thus constituted by the mistake of the internet (or our own? in *not filling in* the subject field?). Here the space that is not filled in, the void that Lacan calls “the cause that splits” the subject (708), will be characterized in terms of a closing that retroactively denotes an opening. Lacan describes the opening to Plato’s cave as

an entrance one can only reach just as it closes (the place will never be popular with tourists), and the only way for it to open up a bit is by calling from the inside ... assuming the ‘open sesame’ of the unconscious consists in having speech effects, since it is linguistic in structure ... it is the closing of the unconscious which provides the key to its space – namely, the impropriety of trying to turn it into an inside. (711)

Lacan argues that the unconscious is spatial, but not an inside. It closes, but only before opening, and one therefore needs a key, an “open sesame.” The closing of the unconscious provides the key in the sense that, in the clinical situation, when a patient makes a Freudian slip – mentions her father but then when asked, denies it – that denial is the closing. In uttering the denial, the analysand makes an opening into her unconscious, provides “the key.” The clinician must “call from the inside” by engaging with that mistaken term. And here we can turn again to our experience of the internet, of the interminable keys and passwords and open sesames that we are burdened with; in other words, the memory stored in the smartphone, the ATM, the credit card, but also for innumerable websites, email passwords, or Captcha.

What frequently happens, of course, is that we ‘forget’ our passwords. We must be given a hint (the big Other gives it back to us), or our password is emailed to us, or we are sent instructions to reset our password. Even more frequently, we have so-called cookies in our web browser, so our password is filled in automatically. It is important to recognize how these examples make manifest the spatialization of our unconscious in the internet: Our passwords are not so much in our memory (although they may be in our muscle memory); they are not in *our* consciousness, but rather in the unconscious that is the internet. The spatialization can also be discerned in the fact that we need the password to ‘enter’ a website. And if the Freudian slip is the open sesame of the unconscious, so too it is a mistake of causality to think that we need a password to gain access to the internet. Rather, the password is the *cause* of the internet, just as the Freudian slip is the cause of the unconscious. The unconscious not only did not exist before Freud invented it, it did not exist before the first Freudian slip. More concretely, the strategies that software developers create to retrieve passwords are necessitated by user errors or ‘fails.’

Indeed this forgetting of passwords is key to how we think about the internet. It is not only the case, as I argued earlier in my discussion of Freud, that the internet *never forgets*.¹³ There is also this: Whereas Lacan implies that Freud would remember the joke from a drunken party the night before, we are now trying to forget. But in order to forget *we must remember our password*. Lacan goes further, arguing that the unconscious is between the subject and the Other, which we can take to mean that the unconscious is the password mangled between the user and the internet/computer: “The unconscious is, between the two of them, their cut in action,” writes Lacan (712). Or their cut *of* the action: consider those pop-up website for Russian casinos (or Russian girls) that appear when you try to download software.

To re-cap: Lacan's unconscious is a matter of a remainder, that which is not not-conscious, is spatialized, and a matter of the signifier. Our practices as internet users relate manifestly to how Lacan characterizes our interaction with not only the unconscious, but also the Other: via the 'open sesame' of the signifier and the retroactivity of meaning. Secondly, the practice of the internet also demonstrates the spatiality of the unconscious; this spatiality is *not* three-dimensional, and yet is social. The internet is our outsourced memory or unconscious: we go 'on the web' or 'check out' a website; we have 'inboxes.'

But there has been another throughline to these thoughts, only made apparent to me during the editing of this paper. This concerns the relationship between the Thing and the big Other, with email as the Thing that arouses our anxiety, and the internet as the big Other. On the one hand, we are always 'retrieving' or checking our email – it is a tic, a nervous or obsessional activity that no doubt causes automobile crashes, pedestrian collisions, and neglected stovetops (or children or spouses!) every day. But what is this Thing that is so close to us, nestled in a pocket near our genitals, or carried in our hand like a Willie Wonka ticket, and yet so far away? What is that internet, that Thing, that email that we are waiting for, and why is so much psychic energy deposited there? I want to come back to these questions at the conclusion of this paper. But first let us turn to the question of the politics of this unconscious, and to the third theorist under discussion, the American Marxist Fredric Jameson.

Jameson

In turning to the work of Jameson, I want to engage in a more directly political way with the question of the unconscious. I will restrict myself to the introductory chapter "On Interpretation" from the 1981 book *The Political Unconscious*. Recall that Jameson begins by distinguishing between three different kinds of historical causality: mechanical, expressive, and

structural. His argument does not aim in an avant-garde way to dismiss the first two. Instead, he contends that political readings that make topical or allegorical references are not just misreadings; rather, the resistance to such readings is itself political. Jameson's position is in many ways Althusserian, and therefore Lacanian: history is the real, which is to say not really a text, though it is only available to us in the form of a narrative or text.¹⁴ Within any cultural text there will therefore be at work a well-nigh Freudian machinery of condensation and displacement, not merely of the libidinal or sexual but also the political, which must then be mediated from the social into the cultural.

The particular and genuinely new form of Freudian dreamwork that Jameson then identifies is ideology as a "strategy of containment" (52-53): the use of pop culture, or ideological closure and repression, which is a form of fetishistic disavowal. Methodologically, Marxist criticism therefore requires a concept of the unconscious, "or at least some mechanism of mystification or repression" (60), in order to work out how a text does not simply mean what it says.

With Freud, then, Jameson argues that "the autonomization of family as a private space within the nascent public sphere of bourgeois society" not only included the "autonomization of sexuality," but also worked as a "precondition for the articulation and analysis of the mechanisms of desire." Bourgeois culture performed the "preliminary isolation of sexual experience, which enables its constitutive features to carry wider symbolic meaning" (64). Jameson also recommends the historicization of vision: What were originally contingent features of religious relics and rituals became, through the development of easel painting or the colonists' pillaging of totems and masks, the genres of landscape and portrait and still life and, more recently, the further specialization of light and the brush stroke in impressionism and pointillism,

leading up to the Greenbergian picture plane in modernism and its dialectical other, the anti-retina-centric triumph of conceptualism. For Jameson, then, questions of the unconscious and sexuality are inextricably connected not only with the political, but with the visual as well. And thus it makes sense to turn to art.¹⁵

Jameson's notion of the reification or commodification of sexuality and desire clearly draws from psychoanalytic interpretation. Keeping this in mind we might ask, What is the political unconscious of painting today? I was drawn to this particular artform by the work of Laura Owens, an artist who teaches at UCLA. In 2004 she became the youngest artist, at age 34, ever to have a retrospective at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.¹⁶ Her paintings draw on a wide range of source material, from old masters, the baroque, fabric, and outsider art. Her 2013 exhibitions at Sadie Cole HQ in London and Gavin Brown's project space in Los Angeles consist of 12 large, 10x10 canvases which, in their composition and images, reference commercial and graphic art and design. More specifically, they evoke 1980s design, in particular Patrick Nagel's album covers for UK band Duran Duran. Indeed Owens' nickname for one of her works is "The Eighties Called, They Want their Painting Back." Additional references include graffiti, newspaper ads and imagery, and especially the web, all of which pose questions of thickness, drop shadows, and layering.

Owens' art stages the triumph of painting over the digital: her paintings are examples of what Artie Vierkant has called "post-internet art."¹⁷ That is, their very size transcends the limitations of the miniscule tablets, laptops, and smartphones. Too, the tactility of their the plump puffs of paint (looking as if extruded from a giant tube of toothpaste) imply a haptic dialectic whereby the gesture of our swiping and pinching of touchscreens is not only magnified,

but made gargantuan and thus more sensuous. Our consumer electronics could never be so big, so tempting to touch.

If this is indeed so, then what is the political unconscious at work here; what is it that cannot be said or visually represented in such work? Evidently, in Owens' paintings size itself matters; but that 'size' is also social. Her enormous canvases were shown as the inaugural exhibition at a project space complete with a front-of-house retail venue catered by a hip taqueria located in a desolate, off-the-grid section of Los Angeles: Skid Row or Boyle Heights, a historically Japanese-Latino neighbourhood now gentrifying. Thus you can buy not only a Laura Owens artist book but 'locovore' collections of jams and nut spreads with her brand.¹⁸

The institutional reification of Laura Owens' work turns out to have a class dimension in its triumph over the digital. Unlike such a common, populist medium as the internet, painting here safely asserts its elite space, the gallery a gated community keeping out the online masses. And yet, a utopian reading of the paintings' unconscious is also available, especially if we consider the art's relation to the internet first in terms of Owens' shocking formal promiscuity: The mix-mastered content of styles, periods, mediums, and tonalities is perhaps a nod to the 'fugly' aesthetics of user-generated content and 4Chan/meme factories. This reading might be developed via a critique of the gesture itself: gesture *qua* commodified swipe and pinch that reduces the haptic to a nervous tic which can only be accomplished via its historicization. But this reading first requires contextualization with respect to the hands of the factory workers at Foxconn and elsewhere, in particular their hand gestures, and then the response of the gestures of the Occupy movement. We could develop an art history of the hand and the gesture, moving from the classical workshop of the old masters (where the gesture *qua* brushstroke was hidden, glossed over by a division of labour), to the modernist era of 1850-1945 (from the Impressionists

and pointillists and fauvists' brushstrokes to the abstract-expressionist 'libidinal brushstroke' as mark of the painter *qua* individual and his gendered style), and finally to the Pop of the 1960s (the return of the machine-made or factory-made work, now making visible the mistake of Warhol's off-register prints, or the outsourcing of conceptualism).

Just as Jameson argues that vision, sexuality, and desire are reified, so too is the gesture. It is a history of this last form of reification that Laura Owens' paintings call for. As a preliminary note towards that history, I want to close this discussion of Jameson's political unconscious by turning towards his three levels of interpretation. The first deals with the cultural object as text, embedded in the everyday of political events and contexts, which are then managed by the text as a symbolic act that results in an imaginary resolution of a real political and historical contradiction. At the second level, the text is an utterance in a dialogical struggle, the text *qua* ideologeme. Finally, at the third level, the text is superseded as it is raised to the level of genre (or, here, medium), as the ideology of a whole form that disguises its relation to the mode of production. The political unconscious of Laura Owens' paintings therefore stages at the first level an imaginary resolution of the contradiction in class politics where the digital divide is rewritten as its older ancestor: cultural capital, to return to Bourdieu. At the second level, in the dialogic utterance of the gesture itself as a movement of the hand or finger (or paintbrush or mouse), we have a staging of the ideologeme of the obsolescence of painting. Finally, at the third level, we have genre and medium in relation to modes of production; contradiction here is signaled by the title of Owens' works in London: "Pavement Karaoke," a ventriloquism of the street, a pastiche or simulacrum. Here the contradiction can be found between the (touch) screen and the (don't touch!) canvas, what in another context one might call postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Conclusions

I want to offer some provisional conclusions, first with specific reference to the discussions of Freud and Lacan, and then more globally. With respect to the Freudian unconscious and its similarity to how we think of email, the mistake here would be to conclusively or empirically ‘fix’ the source of the email in such places as the server, the server farm, or the cloud. This mistake is illustrated in the Nesbø novel, where a harassing email is chased first to Saudi Arabia, then to the detective’s own (misplaced) cell phone, and then, finally, to a laptop in his basement storage locker. In other words, the narrative illustrates where our emails come from: our own unconscious. And then we can think of Lacan’s position of the unconscious and its keywords and passcodes: Surely our plethora of codes is a vernacular or popular instance of ‘analysis interminable’?

We keep asking the computer, the email provider, the website: *chè vuoi?* What do you want (from me)? I know you want my password but what do you *really* want? And so our critical analysis must situate this text that is the internet in a political unconscious, one that resists both the glorification of the digital as that which will save activism (or the humanities) *and* the dismissal of the digital as retrograde, commodified, or complicit in a banal way. This is, I think, a way to bring together these cultural examples and theories and the role of our bodies in a disembodied political praxis. We can return to the paper’s title and to the remarks on anxiety and the big Other embodied in the question previously posed. In some ways, I have been arguing that the internet *is* our unconscious because of how we relate to it in a transferential way, that is in Lacan’s specific sense of desire being the desire of the Other, for instance.

So whether it is Facebook ads that know what we want before we do, passwords that we forget, or emails that ensure white collar workers must work 24/7, or art that can now confidently draw on our historical knowledge of digital memes, the internet knows us, and knows what we know, and even knows what we don't know we know (which is to say, again, our unconscious). But there is also the question of whether the internet *has* an unconscious: is that its political economy? A few years ago John Lanchester wrote in the *London Review of Books* about Moroccan workers paid a dollar an hour to scan Facebook for offensive images. Is the unconscious perhaps the 'dark web,' its obscene corners of trolls and pornographers? Or, finally, is the internet's unconscious its process of distorting social and personal desires into monetized and clickable data? These are questions opened up for me by this essay, questions I will continue to ponder and perhaps, one day, answer.

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Notes

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² Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious" (1915), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Worlds of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), vol. 14, p. 166. Further references are incorporated into the text.

³ Freud, "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement" (1914), *SE* vol. 14, pp. 15-16. It will be noted that in what follows I do not argue that what the internet contains what we repress: Jon

Beasley Murray argued at a presentation of this paper in Vancouver that such a difference suggests a Foucaultian reading of the internet.

⁴ The debate on plasticity also has bearing on this issue. See François Ansermet and Pierre Magistretti, *Biology of Freedom: Neural Plasticity, Experience, and the Unconscious* (London: Karnac, 2007); D. Buller, *Adapting Minds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Catharine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁵ See Andrew Blum, *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).

⁶ For my own discussion of this issue, see “Slavoj Žižek as Internet Philosopher,” *Žižek and Media Studies*, ed. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), pp. 201-210.

⁷ For further related discussion of the detective in contemporary culture, see Robert A. Rushing, *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture* (New York: Other, 2007), pp. 19-25; and Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 48-66.

⁸ Two fictions appeared during the writing of this paper that simultaneously support and refute my claim. Ed Park’s “Slide to Unlock” short story in *The New Yorker* is a crime narrative in which a robbery victim tries to remember his ATM password <http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2013/06/10/130610fi_fiction_park>. And Dave Eggers’ fall 2013 novel *The Circle* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2013) features a Facebook-like company which offers a “TruYou” online subjectivity with one password for all websites: “The era of false identities, identity theft, multiple user names, complicated passwords and payment systems was over” (21). In the fall of 2013, Google announced the impending demise of online passwords, which has not yet come about.

⁹ Thus in terms of the clinical situation, the US Military used Skype sessions as a form of therapy for soldiers stationed in war zones. See “Military expands mental health counseling in Afghanistan to soldiers over ‘classified Skype’,” *The Guardian*, February 1 (2013).

¹⁰ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2012).

¹¹ “Facebook Ads Guide.” *Social Ads Tool*. <<http://www.socialadstool.com/facebook-ads-guide/facebook-ads-vs-google-ads/>>.

¹² Jacques Lacan, “Position of the Unconscious,” *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 703. Further references are incorporated into the text.

¹³ After a European Court of Justice ruling on “the right to be forgotten,” Google began, in summer 2014, to remove information from its search engine. “Google Starts Removing Search Results Under Europe’s ‘Right to be Forgotten,’” *The Washington Post* June 26 (2014).

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981), p. 35. Further references are incorporated into the text.

¹⁵ This emphasis on the visual in *The Political Unconscious* reaches its apogee in Jameson’s chapter on the novels of Joseph Conrad, which draws significantly from Conrad’s famous declaration “above all, to make you see.”

¹⁶ Owens was recently on the cover of, and interviewed in, *Artforum* (March 2013).

¹⁷ “Post-internet art refers to art made since the early 2000s, when the internet is ubiquitous and banal, using its methods for artworks both on and off the internet (which is to say after net art, a 1990s phenomenon, and made to be seen on the net).” See Artie Vierkant, “The Image Object Post-Internet” via <www.artlurker.com>.

¹⁸ This art world synergy is nothing new, of course. We can go back a century to what Roger Shattuck called the “banquet years” of the historical avant-garde, when Picasso celebrated buying a Matisse painting with a party the catering details of which are rendered in Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*. Or to Seth Siegelaub’s Maoist marketing of the conceptualists in the 1960s, documented in Alex Alberro’s *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).