



## The Other-Than-Human and the “User Unconscious”

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### ABSTRACT

Expanding on psychoanalysts’ treatment of online interaction between analyst and analysand, I take up digital media and computational technologies in terms of their more general transformation of the liberal configuration of state, economy, and civil society. From this perspective, I indicate the subjectivity that is being constructed and the indeterminate potentiality (or temporality) of its unconscious, what I call the user unconscious.

As recently as 2007, the distinguished psychoanalyst Sheldon Bach discussed the symptoms of adult patients who had suffered early childhood trauma in terms of the “psychic death of a digital consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> Contrasting digital states of consciousness to analog ones, Bach focused on temporality. Whereas digital temporality, as he saw it, is “thin” without affording the capacity to experience past or future or to suture present moments into a continuity, analog temporality is “thick” where the past and the future blend together in experiencing present moments as narrative (Bach, 2016, pp. 41–53). In the years since 2007, as digital media and computational technologies have become an infrastructure of sociality, governance, and economy, Stephen Hartman, in a set of articles, would offer a depathologizing take on the digital and its affect on the body, desire, and reality as well as on the practice of psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Hartman, again addressing what he sees as the short shrift given the digital by psychoanalysts in their comparing online interactions with in-person ones, also set his focus on temporality distinguishing the analog and the digital along lines surprisingly resonant with Bach’s.<sup>3</sup>

Although Hartman’s contrast of digital and analog produces a positive yield in his formulation of “cyberobjects,” his characterization of digital and analog temporalities, like Bach’s and those often found in everyday discourse as well, may keep our thoughts about digital media too narrowly focused on human interaction (in-person vs. online) without taking up the more general implications for governance, economy, and sociality of digital media and computational technologies or what is called the “datafication of everyday life.” Before returning to the contrast of in-person versus online interaction, I first want to touch on current theoretical and philosophical analyses of those digital media and computational technologies that have made possible the expansion and multiplication of the operations and functions of social media, the internet, and technologies of surveillance and control. I want to point to the way these media and technologies are employing other-than-human actants enabling the datafication of governance, economy, and sociality and thereby, undermining the neoclassical or liberal arrangement of the separation of state, economy, and civil society institutions of the public and private spheres, such as the family, school, religion, media, and education including psycho/therapy. In doing so, I hope to invite psychoanalysts to rethink what has been assumed to be the social (structural) context of unconscious processes (often expressed as racial, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual identities) and to invite further consideration of what I am calling the

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<sup>1</sup>Bach (2016). This essay was first delivered at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute in 2007.

<sup>2</sup>See Hartman (2011a, b, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Hartman (2017).

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“user unconscious” in order to recognize the inseparability of human and other-than human actants in relation to the social and the psyche.

### Digital media and other-than-human actants

What recently has been discussed as a ontological turn to the nonhuman or other-than- human in philosophy and critical theory also has been registered in media studies as a shift from focusing on media centered on and attuned to human experience to focusing on the other-than-human or nonhuman actants operating in digital media and computational technologies, all part of what sociologist and design theorist, Benjamin Bratton, has referred to as “planetary computing.”<sup>4</sup> While implicating humans, planetary computing more often than not is done by other-than-human actants operating in codes, protocols, interfaces, platforms, programs, and algorithms as part of the analytic capacities involved in data mining internet use, mobile tracking devices, biometric and environmental passive microsensors that continuously offer massive amounts of data that have enabled the datafication of governance, economy, and sociality. As Bratton sees it, planetary computing is enabling the development of “a global mega-structure,” what he calls “the Stack,” a vertical arrangement of layers of computing such as the cloud, massive addressing systems, the internet and more as well as encompassing the physical structures that enable the mega-structure to operate. The political, economic, and social power of this mega-structure, Bratton has proposed, is challenging the geopolitics of the nation-state as planetary computing functions beyond the nation even as it takes over some of the functions of the state and its work of governing a national economy for a national population.

Along with challenges to the nation-state that have necessitated and enabled overbordering its borders while debordering them for the circulation of capital and labor, the challenge posed by digital media and computational technologies to civil society institutions raises questions about the individual subject faced with other-than-human actants in everyday life—questions about self-possession, identity, embodiment, privacy, and agency, including bodily based perception and consciousness. These questions are entangled with planetary computing and the ubiquity of other-than-human actants. Take the (ro)bots that send to our Facebook accounts advertising based on data that we give without our awareness and that operate algorithmically without much human input. Or Siri and Alexa that are able, in ways we are not, to engage in machine-to-machine conversations, accessing various data sets at various layers of computing in almost no time, too fast for human consciousness or bodily based perception.

But as media scholar Mark B. N. Hansen has suggested, digital media and computational technologies not only operate with other-than-human actants but also these actants enable digital media and computational technologies to access, register, and disseminate data of the environment, including data about our own implication in it.<sup>5</sup> Digital media and computational technologies feed forward this data to human consciousness and bodily based perception giving indications of the liveliness, intensities, or agencies of the world, what Hansen describes as “a self-sensing world,” a “worldly sensibility,” that is the sensory confound out of which human consciousness and bodily based perception arise (Hansen, 2013, p. 24). The ubiquity of the sensing and tracking devices supported by digital media and computational technologies is making us aware that human consciousness and bodily based perception are not fundamentals but rather accomplishments; data at every level of the global mega-structure reveals “the coexistence of multiple experiential presents—multiple, partially overlapping presents from the different time frames and scales” of other-than-human actants, thereby reembedding consciousness and bodily based perception in a far richer context of constituents, a planetary context (p. 45).

For Hansen (2013), this suggests a “new paradigm of (human) co-functioning with technics (in which) machines are necessary to register and interpret the sensory data constituting experience” (pp. 50–52) while allowing us to tap into the real potentiality of the world that precedes consciousness and perception. However, as the real potential of the world—the overlapping presents from different

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<sup>4</sup>Bratton (2015).

<sup>5</sup>Hansen (2013).

timescales—only can be accessed, registered, and disseminated through the methods and speeds of the digital, the digital is initiating a profound questioning about temporality. If, for example, the digital is producing anxiety about the loss of narrative, as Bach's (2016) remarks suggest, it is because the digital makes it more apparent that the function of narrative has been to provide a connection between past, present, and future that is necessitated by a human incapacity to register the actual passing of time in the present at the very many scales of being that now digital media and computational technologies can do. From the subatomic to the physical to the biological, to human consciousness and the cosmological, digital media and computational technologies access and register an indeterminacy, a gap of time or a passing of time involved in responding to innervation at each of these scales of being potentiality. This capture/uncovering of indeterminacy taken as a liveliness, intensity, or agency at each scale of being profoundly blurs the opposition of the living and the nonliving, the organic and the nonorganic, the human and the nonhuman. This blurring is at the heart of the recent ontological turn and the turn to the nonhuman in philosophy, critical theory, and media studies.

But for Hansen the indeterminacy at every scale of being is not a virtuality but rather a matter of the real potentiality of the world, the world's causal efficacy. Drawing on the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, while readjusting Whitehead's philosophy to the capacities of digital media and computational technologies,<sup>6</sup> Hansen argues that real potentiality is in "the contrast among already existing actualities ... the real potentiality of the settled world at each moment of its becoming"—becoming different with each new actuality or what Whitehead refers to as "data" (Hansen, 2013, p. 204). As each datum is an "intensity," as Whitehead would have it, it can be actualized and objectified while remaining a potentiality able to inform the genesis of another new actuality. Or as Hansen explains, "prehension" and "conrescence" as Whitehead used the terms, refers to processes by which each actuality in its becoming grasps the potentiality of the settled world as a matter of intensity or vibration, while contributing to the settled world or what Whitehead referred to as the "vibratory continuum" that is nothing else than the potentiality of the settled world (Hansen, 2013, pp. 225-228). It follows for Whitehead, as Hansen notes, that the real potentiality of the settled world urges a change in our understanding of causality, where probabilities are to be considered "expressions of real forces, of actual propensities rather than empty statistical likelihoods" (Hansen, 2013, p. 121). Causality, rather than a matter of the "acts of discrete agents," is a matter of tendencies drawing on the becoming continuity of worldly sensibility.

As these tendencies are in the present as indeterminate probabilities, Whitehead speaks of "the causal force of the present," or as Hansen explains it, "every actuality includes in its present feeling, *its* potential to impact future actualities *but also* ... that it feels the potentiality for the future in its present and indeed as part of what constitutes the causal force of the present" (Hansen, 2013, p. 210). It is the causal force of the present, its potentialities, that are accessed, registered, and disseminated by digital media and computational technologies without, however, reduction to a simple matter of prediction. There is always an excess of data, of a worldly sensibility, which thwarts prediction and thereby meets the anxiety about the loss of narrative by offering a worldly sensibility, the many temporalities affecting us, indexing a liveliness or agency other than our own. In accessing, registering, and disseminating a worldly sensibility, digital media and computational technologies go beyond human incapacity and disconnect temporality from narrative in instigating a nonphenomenological account of temporality along with a phenomenological one.

### **From the public and the private to the personal and the networked**

I have taken an all-too-fast turn through philosophy, critical theory, and media studies to move the question of temporality away from the concern expressed by Bach (2016) over the loss of narrative

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<sup>6</sup>The increasing reference to Whitehead rather than Heidegger in studies of digital media has to do with the understanding, contra the Heideggerian perspective on technology, that in fact it does matter which technology is being studied. Steven Shaviro (2009) has wondered what critical thought might have been if Whitehead instead of Heidegger dominated studies of science and technology. He concluded, "Heidegger flees the challenges of the present in horror. Whitehead urges us to work with these challenges, to negotiate them" (p. x).

not only because narrative continues to function but also it does so in the face of a rethinking of temporality beyond the limits of narrative, pointing to an expanded present rich in data, ours and that of a lively world. I have also turned to philosophy, critical theory, and media studies in order to return to the matter of online versus in-person interaction and the discussion of temporality that Hartman offers. Although Hartman's efforts for some time have been to move past a mere opposition of online and in-person interaction, especially in relation to the erotics of both, in his recent elaboration of introjected cyberobjects he does provisionally distinguish between analog and digital objects to get at "the temporal idiosyncrasies of each medium," (Hartman, 2017) the way each mediates experience (here human experience). The contrast is worth reviewing in light of the larger rethinking of temporality to which I have been pointing.

For Hartman, analog objects "illuminate the present moment through the past via narrative," while digital objects are "a current edit of a felt presence." That is, the introjected cyberobject is in the "present, not built up, insofar as it is deployed to organize a sensation or sense impression" (still only human but one wonders).<sup>7</sup> "As a reorganization, Hartman continues, "it has no duty to defer to previous organizations of sensation or affect" (Hartman, 2017, p. 167). Most important, with the digital a narrative sequencing is not compelled. In this sense the digital all but stands in opposition to assumptions underlying psychoanalysis generally, where "change occurs across iterations in the arc of a repeated narrative" or where introjected objects are accessed when "psychic bits are held well enough in the balance to coalesce into narrative" (p. 164). Although the process of narrative goes on in the present, what goes on in the present also is seen to index the past, real or fantasized. But, according to Hartman, the digital functions differently; it functions in the present in a way that "brokers only this moment and, in so doing affords the next" (p. 166).

Although the characteristics of the digital object that Hartman presents resonate with the larger discussion of temporality and the causal force of the present that I have been rehearsing, for Hartman the digital object's characteristics rest on his understanding of the digital as having a "nonindexical relationship to a source" (Hartman, 2017, p. 165). Although unintended, Hartman brings back the worry that the digital displaces reality to which narrative is seen to be the primary if not only medium, enabling an historical movement toward truth. However, from the nonhuman perspective of philosophy, critical theory, and media studies, digital media do in fact index; they simply index at scales that are nonphenomenological prior to consciousness and bodily based perception and, only after the fact, feed forward data to consciousness and perception, a matter of the intensities of overlapping presents, agencies at all scales of being, including the human scale. The digital is brokering this moment for the next in a thick present releasing its causal force, its real tendencies toward the future. The past is not erased by the digital; it is more that the past is seen to be a matter of different presents assembled in any moment, closer to what the unconscious has been thought to be—ever in the now.

### **The user-unconscious and originary multiplicity**

It would seem then that the issues about temporality raised by the digital cannot be fully grasped in the comparison of in-person versus online interactions, limited as this comparison is to the human. What seems possible if not necessary is to rethink the human in terms of digital media and computational technologies impacting the relationship of governance, economy, and sociality. As I already suggested, digital media and computational technologies are troubling the borders of the nation-state and its work of governing a national economy for a national population. Not only does capital circulate at digital speeds being both local and global at the same time but so too are populations endlessly moving across borders to mobilize capacities, survive, or evade near death. Related and perhaps more to the point for psychoanalysts is the way the private and public spheres are being reshaped enabling the individual to be opened up not only to other-than-human actants

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<sup>7</sup>Hartman (2017), pp. 163, 167.

but to the preindividual sensibilities of its own embodiment. Media scholar Wendy Chun has argued digital networks “mediate between two vastly different scales that have hitherto remained separate—the local and the global, the molecular and the molar ... pierc[ing] through the ‘mass’ or community to capture individual and preindividual relations”<sup>8</sup>

In profoundly changing what has been the liberal arrangement separating state and economy, the private and public spheres, digital media are also transforming the individual’s psychology and sociality. Not only has digital media affected the operation of desire as Hartman has explored as a matter of endlessly seeking an object rather than (re)finding one, “allowing one to prioritize possibility and presence over limit and loss” (Hartman, 2017, p. 167) but in reshaping the private and public spheres, digital networks also may have made it necessary to rethink the unconscious in terms of the datafication of everyday life or the reformulation of subjectivity in recognition of the embedding of consciousness and bodily based perception in the nonphenomenological temporality that supersedes them. What of this subjectivity? What of its unconscious?

In her work on the impact of digital media, especially on the public and the private spheres, Chun (2016) describes the subject of digital media as a YOU, the assemblage of an “I” and a profile or cloud of data traces that have more value than the I not only to economy and governance but increasingly to the sociality of users as well—as we add up numbers of friends or likes and dislikes for everything we upload or peruse the data that tells us how we slept, how many steps we have taken in a day, the levels of our blood sugar by the hour—and more. The subject actually is a subject- or user-position into which anyone or anything human or other-than-human can enter and does enter, mostly temporarily, operating in relation to programs and platforms at any one or any number of the layers of planetary computing. As various layers of computing bind polities to themselves, let us say a school, a city, a police force, an ethnic population, these polities address every actant as users, making being a user what counts. The user, human and other-than-human, coheres in relation to interfaces at various layers of the megastructure of planetary data. In light of the challenges posed by this megastructure, especially the challenges to civil society institutions, to privacy, self-possession, embodiment, and identity, Chun argues that what is most notable about the YOUS is that they are subject- or user-positions offered by networks where the separation of the private and the public spheres negotiated and maintained by civil society institutions has been displaced by the separation of “the personal and the networked.”

However, as the separation of the personal and the networked is more imagined than actual, YOUS’ privacy actually has become entangled with publicity, where YOUS are prone, if not invited, to be caught in public acting privately. In doing so, YOUS, Chun (2016) proposes, become shameable, hateable, or lovable subjects of digital networks. We only have to think of Trump on Twitter. But examples abound on social media where an epistemology of the closet has become an epistemology of outing, even self-outing that blames and shames the closeted victim and increasingly, the outed/self-outing victim as well, making them either hated or loved or both. Chun gives the example of Amanda Todd, the 15-year-old who had flashed for an admirer online and then was online blackmailed—that is, the exposing photo was sent to a porn site and then to classmates and more (pp. 135–165). After becoming depressed, having panic attacks, and using drugs and alcohol, Todd committed suicide. But long before doing so, she took to YouTube and using handwritten note cards as her means of communicating, Todd gave witness to her self-abuse caused by the blackmailer’s abuse. Although she became a loved victim-hero for some, others blamed and hated her for having become a victim in the first place, for not knowing better how online communication actually works. Todd became a scapegoat for the way online communication is constituted by its leakages.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Chun (2016), pp. 2–3.

<sup>9</sup>Chun’s (2016) discussion of leakages as constituent rather than an exception to the operation of social media opens to a larger discussion of hacking and breaching that have become ordinary activities of everyday life even at the highest levels of governance.

For Chun (2016), then, examples like Todd's suggest that the user is invited to and punished for unwittingly transgressing the separation of the personal and the networked or more pointedly for embracing the seeming privacy of digital media while denying the network of which every one is a part through their cloud of digital traces, their profiles. Chun argues that this habit of embracing the seeming privacy of online communication while denying the fact that it isn't private is "the productive nonconscious of social media," where nonconscious refers to the information that is given off or leaked without the user's consciousness or in the user's disavowal of the personal-network entanglement (p. 7). It is this nonconscious that I want to treat instead as the user unconscious in order to reformulate the unconscious in relation to the datafication of everyday life and the other-than-human agencies of digital media and computational technologies.

To do this, I turn to Harold Searles's proposal that the nonhuman stratum of early self-experience remains throughout life.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on Searles, Sue Grand even has proposed that there is a nonhuman stratum to early self-experience that is an ongoing resource of attachment. As Grand puts it, "If the psyche comes into being in relation to human others, so it comes into being in relation to the nonhuman world. Perhaps we all have a nascent thing-self."<sup>11</sup> For Grand (2003), the "thing-self," often linked to traumatic experience, can also be a resource for positive, cosmological, even ecstatic experience (p. 337). Even when she does treat traumatic experience, particularly in relation to sexual abuse, Grand, although proposing that abuse undoes "the psychic skin," nonetheless refuses to equate the skinned body with sanity. Instead she points to the contingency of the body's being there or not in relation to the "I" and goes on to speculate that "perhaps the 'I' feeling can contract and expand to include or exclude the body and thus is not simply derived from bodily states. Perhaps we have something like a nonhuman mental ego, contracted in relation to nonhuman 'culture,' and generative of both anxiety *and* 'centeredness'" (p. 337).

Adjusting Grand's speculation to include a recognition of the liveliness of the other-than-human or thing, I propose that digital media and computational technologies may well be eliciting the human user's thing-self, giving shape to what I am calling the user unconscious in order to point to the activity of the unconscious in relation to the collapse into the YOU, of the I and the cloud of digital traces including the data of a worldly sensibility. These, no matter how disavowed, are becoming an intimate part of the I, evoking a thing-self. Returning to Hartman, it might be argued that the introjected object of digital media maintains a relation to the thing-self, which, I add, opens the unconscious both to the liveliness of other-than-human actants and to the reformulation of embodiment in the YOU. That is to say, the YOU refers to that part of the I that is not humanly embodied, not so much a digital disembodiment but an other-than-human embodiment. The I is not simply humanly embodied and, as such, is not one with the organism. As digital media scholars like Hansen have argued, "Embodiment cannot be contained within the organic skin."<sup>12</sup>

Although I am sure that the notion of a thing-self might raise discomfort and this is understandable, it also speaks to the way we are nervously treading a fine line between properly recognizing other-than-human actants on the one hand and on the other facing destructive inhuman-ness both of which, I argue, implicate digital media and computational technologies. In that they can be destructive to and instructive about our place in the world, digital media are bringing forth another "genre of humanity," to borrow a phrase from Silvia Wynter.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the thing-self is meant to address both the way we are human and not and the potentiality given in the transformation of governance, economy, and sociality.

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<sup>10</sup>Searles (1960).

<sup>11</sup>Grand (2003).

<sup>12</sup>Focusing on the later works of Merleau-Ponty, Hansen (2013) argues that a worldly sensibility or a self-sensing world prior to human consciousness was recognized in the later works of Merleau-Ponty and points to what he described as "the flesh of the world" or what Hansen refers to as "a worldskin." Given the operation of digital media in bringing us a worldly sensibility, Hansen argues that embodiment can no longer be contained in the organism.

<sup>13</sup>Wynter (2007).

## Rethinking the social structural

Although Chun would treat the YOUs not as a “we” but as a plurality that still addresses individuals as individuals or preindividualities, she nonetheless proposes that the YOU expressed in cases like those of Amanda Todd do present the potentiality of a YOU’s desire for community. This potential, Chun has proposed, is in the reminder that the YOU offers: that the individual is a “singular/plural,” to use the terms Chun has borrowed from Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>14</sup> As subjects are constituted as singular through a plurality of others, including, as I have been arguing, other-than-human others, the community that might be realized among YOUs is what Chun has described as an “originary multiplicity,” which is “not represented by society but rather through writing.”<sup>15</sup> Again drawing on Nancy and slanting writing toward the temporalities of digital media, Chun proposes that writing is not so much about meaning but a communication seeking nothing but “an originary multiplicity,” an “inoperative” we.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than an aspect of a developmental theory, “originary multiplicity” is an ontological specification of the being of the human subject as a singular/plural. It implies an “originary technicity” in being that has been actualized in both our data traces and the data fed-forward to consciousness and perception as their constituents, proposing that there is an indeterminacy at all scales of being that opens each of them to technological actualization. Somewhere between Hartman’s focus on, if not celebration of, online interaction and Chun’s focus on the profoundly shaming aspects of it, there is, I argue, a growing recognition of the datafication of sociality, economy, and governance and the indeterminacy thereby actualized that asks us to become more engaged with the transformation from social structure to network infrastructure. Not only are desire and temporality to be rethought but also along with them the other-than human actants, agencies, intensities, or liveliness that raise questions of identity, embodiment, privacy, and agency such that race, sexuality, gender, and ability once thought to be the mark of the social structural must be rethought in terms of digital media and computational technologies and the network infrastructure they inform.

## Notes on contributor

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<sup>14</sup>Nancy (2000).

<sup>15</sup>Chun (2016), p. 163.

<sup>16</sup>Chun (2016) is referring to Jean Luc Nancy (1991). Originary multiplicity needs further discussion as it is an ontological stipulation that is understood to precede intersubjectivity, that very central concept in psychoanalysis.

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