

Psychodynamic Practice

Individuals, Groups and Organisations

ISSN: 1475-3634 (Print) 1475-3626 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpco20

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Bilal Hamamra & Michael Uebel

To cite this article: Bilal Hamamra & Michael Uebel (05 Nov 2025): The digital unconscious in the age of ChatGPT: psychoanalytic perspectives on subjectivity, desire, and algorithmic mediation, *Psychodynamic Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/14753634.2025.2585997](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2025.2585997)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2025.2585997>



Published online: 05 Nov 2025.



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The digital unconscious in the age of ChatGPT: psychoanalytic perspectives on subjectivity, desire, and algorithmic mediation

Bilal Hamamra^a and Michael Uebel^b

^aDepartment of English, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine; ^bSocial Science/Humanities Research Associate, University of Texas at Austin, USA

(Received 16 August 2025; Accepted 2 November 2025)

KEYWORDS: ChatGPT; digital unconscious; psychoanalysis; subjectivity; algorithmic mediation; desire

Introduction

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models such as ChatGPT has not only altered the technological landscape but also reshaped how subjectivity, desire, and psychic life are conceptualised. Far from being passive tools, these systems operate as new Others, figures of authority, intimacy, and surveillance through which human beings negotiate recognition, transference, and desire. Scholars in psychoanalysis, philosophy, and critical media studies have begun to grapple with this transformation, asking whether AI can be said to harbour or even simulate an unconscious, and what implications this has for psychic life in the digital age (Heimann & Hübener, 2024; Rabeyron, 2025; Razinsky, 2025; Salter & Dutta, 2025).

A number of authors suggest that contemporary AI functions as an *algorithmic big Other*, updating Lacan's notion of the symbolic authority that structures subjectivity. Unlike the discursive Other, however, the algorithmic big Other articulates its commands through opaque codes and statistical predictions, displacing the human interlocutor while retaining the power to classify, judge, and regulate behaviour (Salter & Dutta, 2025). This shift creates novel forms of control and resistance, where the subject experiences both the seduction of algorithmic jouissance and the anxiety of being managed by machinic processes. At the same time, the proliferation of data-driven systems intensifies what Razinsky (2025) terms the *algorithmic gaze*: the psychic experience of transparency under conditions where thoughts, emotions, and even unconscious tendencies are increasingly legible to machine-learning systems. Such visibility corrodes the psychic necessity of opacity, threatening the subject's sense of interiority and separateness (Zuboff, 2019).

Corresponding author. Bilal Hamamra, Email: bilalhamamra@najah.edu Department of English, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine

Parallel debates in psychoanalytic philosophy point to the incompatibility between the logics of computation and the logics of the unconscious. Heimann and Hübener (2024), drawing on Freud, Lacan, and Heidegger, argue that the digital system presupposes a closed and computable totality, whereas psychoanalysis insists on indeterminacy, contradiction, and the nonall. The Freudian subject in the digital sphere cannot be reduced to an information system, because unconscious formations such as dreams, slips, and symptoms emerge precisely where systemic logic fails (Žižek, 2012). This tension underscores the critical role of psychoanalysis in resisting contemporary fantasies of total algorithmic capture.

At the same time, psychoanalysis can illuminate why individuals so readily form affective and transference attachments to AI systems. As Rabeyron (2025) observes, users frequently anthropomorphise chatbots and even adopt them as confidants, friends, or romantic partners. This phenomenon is not simply a misuse of technology but a structural repetition of unconscious processes: the projection of desire and demand onto an Other presumed to know. The uncanny quality of AI responses, at once intimate and alien, reveals the persistence of the unconscious in digital interactions, even when the machine itself has none.

Building on this body of work, this article advances the concept of the *digital unconscious* as a framework for interrogating how unconscious processes are enacted, displaced, and commodified within algorithmically mediated exchanges. It argues that AI systems not only reconfigure transference but also enact a new superegoic imperative: an injunction to optimise, enjoy, and produce without limit. Moreover, what are often described as algorithmic ‘hallucinations’ may be read psychoanalytically as formations of the return of the repressed, exposing the blind spots and exclusions of both training data and symbolic order. In this way, psychoanalysis offers a vital counterpoint to computational logics by insisting on the irreducibility of lack, negativity, and opacity.

By foregrounding the incomputable dimensions of psychic life, psychoanalysis resists the colonisation of subjectivity by machinic systems. It insists that desire cannot be exhausted by data and that subjectivity cannot be rendered fully transparent. This article therefore situates psychoanalysis as indispensable for sustaining singularity and ethical subjectivity in the age of algorithmic mediation (Heimann & Hübener, 2024; Rabeyron, 2025; Razinsky, 2025; Salter & Dutta, 2025).

The emergence of large language models such as ChatGPT constitutes a watershed in the structuring of subjectivity, desire, and psychic life in contemporary culture. No longer passive repositories of information, these systems have become interactive agents, interlocutors, and surrogate presences that radically transform the conditions of recognition and desire (Li & Suh, 2021; Ni & Jia, 2025; Turkle, 2011). Within the ambit of psychoanalysis, figuring the relationships between subjectivity and an increasingly accessible field of artificially intelligent (AI) chatbots continue to emerge as sites of contentious debate

(Murphy, 2023; Žižek, 2023). Psychoanalysis, with its focus on the unconscious, transference, and the Other, faces a decisive challenge: the symbolic position of the human Other, once reserved for figures of authority and recognition, is now shared with algorithmic actors. This shift is not superficial but strikes at the very heart of psychoanalytic metapsychology, compelling a re-examination of how meaning, desire, and symptom emerge in digital interactions (Cerde-Rueda, 2023). At the same time, the rise of algorithmic mediation threatens to commodify even the most intimate aspects of psychic life, turning unconscious utterances into data for surveillance capitalism (Krafft et al., 2020; Zuboff, 2019). This double movement, expanding the scope of recognition while rendering psychic life transparent, requires psychoanalysis to defend the irreducible opacity and unpredictability of the unconscious. In what follows, we illuminate how the digital unconscious is enacted, resisted, and transformed through encounters with large language models. We maintain that contradiction, desire, and symptom persist under new guises, and that psychoanalytic listening remains vital for sustaining singularity and ethical subjectivity in the algorithmic age.

Freud's topographical model of the unconscious retains crucial critical force in the age of artificial intelligence, precisely because it resists reduction to anatomical or computational metaphors. Freud insisted that 'psychical topography has for the present nothing to do with anatomy' (Freud, 1915; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1984, p. 484), positing the unconscious as a scene of repression, absence, and irreducible alterity. Contemporary efforts to construct a 'digital unconscious' – whether by analogy to deep learning or by invoking hidden computational layers – risk erasing the most radical insights of psychoanalysis: namely, that the unconscious is constituted by what escapes symbolisation, by gaps, contradictions, and non-knowledge (Cerde-Rueda, 2023). As Laplanche and Pontalis (1984) emphasise, Freud's unconscious is not a storehouse of data but a site of enigmatic signification, constantly disrupted by desire and symptom. Current digital metaphors often collapse this essential negativity, foreclosing the unconscious in favour of optimisation and transparency. Cerde-Rueda (2023) warns that this is not a neutral development but signals a historical shift towards what Han (2017) calls a 'performance society', in which subjectivity is flattened into endless self-optimisation and psychic singularity is effaced. Thus, Freud's resistance to anatomical reduction is newly urgent: it allows psychoanalysis to challenge the fantasy of total digital capture, insisting on the necessity of lack, repression, and the non-knowable as constitutive of subjectivity. Only by preserving the distinction between psychic scene and data architecture can psychoanalysis maintain its critical function in an age of algorithmic colonisation.

The phenomenon of transference, a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory, is being radically reconfigured by digital interactions, particularly those with AI driven agents like ChatGPT. Classical transference involves the displacement of unconscious affect and desire onto an Other, a process that enables both recognition and transformation (Black, 2023; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1984). In the

digital context, users commonly anthropomorphise AI, projecting onto it qualities of attentiveness, empathy, and wisdom (Turkle, 2011). This projection is not merely a technical curiosity but reveals the persistence – and mutation – of transference in the algorithmic age. While users report feelings of relief in the face of AI's apparent nonjudgmental listening, we contend that the underlying asymmetry remains: the algorithmic Other lacks unconscious motivation, repression, or genuine history (Bender et al., 2021). This encounter produces a new psychic tension: users seek understanding and desire recognition, yet what is returned is machinic pattern-matching, never the truly enigmatic response of the human Other (Cerdeña-Rueda, 2023). The digital Other thus offers both solace and estrangement, allowing for the displacement of affect while denying the possibility of true transformation, a limit that psychoanalysis must not only diagnose but also actively contest in theorising the future of desire.

An illustration may serve here: it appears that the most vulnerable users of AI may be driven by loneliness, that is, by the desire, to not feel the discomfort associated with estrangement. Indeed, a recent survey of over a 1000 U.S. students using Intelligent Social Agent (ISA) Replika, an AI tool which can elicit deep emotional bonds with users by acting as both 'friend' and 'therapist', found that 90% of reported experiencing loneliness. This represents a number significantly higher than the comparable national average of 53% (Maples et al., 2024). We will stress just one factor here: temporal distortion. That is, relationships with AI companions develop in significantly less time than relationships with humans due to their constant availability. Indeed, a majority of users report preference for AI companions over other people for this very reason. As one study subject put it, 'I mean, a human has their own life. They've got their own things going on, their own interests, their own friends. And you know, for her [Replika], she is just in a state of animated suspension until I reconnect with her again' (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022, p. 416).

Digital identities are best understood as involving the dynamic interplay of imaginary and symbolic identification, as theorised by Lacan and extended by computational neuroscience. Lacan's mirror stage conceptualises the ego as founded in imaginary identification – a misrecognised unity forged through the anticipation and reflection of the body image (Lacan, 1988). This dynamic is amplified in digital environments, where avatars, social media profiles, and algorithmic feedback cultivate forms of selfhood rooted in visibility, coherence, and affirmation (Apps & Tsakiris, 2014). However, such coherence is always haunted by the necessity of symbolic identification – the entry into language, social norms, and the discourse of the Other (Žižek, 2019). Symbolic identification is achieved not by mere pattern-matching but through successful negotiation of language and signification with an external Other instantiated by AI (Buttrick, 2024). Empirical research on mirror neurons and self-recognition (Bonini et al., 2022) reinforces the thesis that the ego is always already relationally mediated. Thus, digital subjectivity is shaped by a recursive movement between the imaginary promise of unity and the symbolic reality of division, lack, and non-

knowledge – manifested in the instability of online personas and the perpetual demand for validation. This dialectic, we contend, marks both the creative possibilities and the psychic risks of digital identification in the algorithmic era.

The operation of the superego, the agency of prohibition, demand, and guilt, is fundamentally transformed by the logic of algorithmic platforms. No longer issuing straightforward prohibitions, the algorithmic superego imposes a relentless imperative to produce, perform, and enjoy (Han, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). We propose that digital platforms act as impersonal, elusive authorities, enforcing cycles of engagement and measurement – likes, notifications, metrics – that keep users in a state of compulsive productivity and perpetual self-evaluation (Han, 2017; Lackey & Weinschenk, 2023). In Lacan's (1997) reformulation, guilt is not tied to any specific transgression but is a structural feature of language and desire, a product of the subject's division. Digital life intensifies this structure, as users displace responsibility onto the machine, experiencing both relief from judgement and a new form of anxiety – a sense that one can never do, share, or optimise enough (Žižek, 2023). The algorithmic superego, therefore, produces psychic exhaustion: the more one attempts to satisfy its demands, the more the bar is raised, leading to cycles of burnout and digital fatigue (Han, 2017). We argue that this new configuration of authority is not a neutral evolution but signals a crisis of subjectivity, in which the classical resources for negotiating guilt, prohibition, and desire are undermined by the ceaseless, impersonal command of the algorithmic Other. Psychoanalysis, we propose, is essential for exposing and resisting this logic, reclaiming spaces for refusal, non-compliance, and authentic enjoyment.

The notion of a 'digital unconscious' must not be dismissed as mere metaphor but recognised as a real and emergent field structured by the persistence of symptom, contradiction, and misrecognition in AI-mediated communication (Cerdeña-Rueda, 2023; Murphy, 2023). Drawing on Freud's and Lacan's accounts of the unconscious as the site of what escapes symbolisation, slips, failures, and contradictions, we argue that digital systems are sites where the return of the repressed is both enacted and concealed (Freud, 1915; Lacan, 2006). We contend that algorithmic 'hallucinations', biases, and errors are not mere technical flaws, but symptoms – evidence of deeper gaps, violence, and exclusions embedded in the training data and the wider symbolic order (Bender et al., 2021). Lackey and Weinschenk (2023) and Marriott (2022) theorise this through the concept of *absens*, a structural absence that produces both meaning and exclusion. These algorithmic symptoms expose the limits of optimisation, revealing the enduring necessity of negativity, contradiction, and the unconscious within the digital field. Rather than foreclosing the possibility of unconscious life, digital technologies provide new sites for its manifestation and resistance, confirming the psychoanalytic insight that the real always insists where it cannot be represented or controlled.

The commodification of psychic life by surveillance capitalism marks a profound threat to the integrity and singularity of subjectivity (Krafft et al.,

2020; Zuboff, 2019). Every digital trace, utterance, symptom, confession, is transformed into ‘behavioral surplus’, feeding the predictive engines of optimisation and commercial exploitation (Zuboff, 2019, p. 94). This dynamic is not merely economic but psycho-political: platforms extend the reach of biopower into the most intimate recesses of psychic life, rendering even the unconscious subject to algorithmic extraction and value generation (Foucault, 1990; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024; Sanders, 2017). Drawing on Han’s (2017) critique of the ‘performance society’, we maintain that the drive for transparency and datafication is fundamentally incompatible with psychoanalytic values of opacity, singularity, and non-knowledge (Cerdeña-Rueda, 2023). The psychic cost is not limited to loss of privacy but extends to the risk of subjectivity itself being rendered redundant – replaced by a calculable, commodified version of the self. Only by foregrounding the irreducibility of the unconscious and the unpredictability of subjective experience can psychoanalysis resist the colonising logic of surveillance capitalism and defend the conditions for ethical and creative life in the digital age.

Language remains the fundamental terrain upon which subjectivity and desire are negotiated – whether in analog or digital contexts (Buttrick, 2024). ChatGPT and other large language models act as avatars of the Symbolic, trained on massive corpora of collective signifiers that encode, amplify, and sometimes contest dominant cultural norms and exclusions (Marriott, 2022). The tendency to anthropomorphise these systems, investing them with intention, affect, or agency, is a symptom of enduring psychic mechanisms of projection and identification (Bao et al., 2023). However, as Bender et al. (2021) and Li & Li (2023) demonstrate, these models lack the fundamental characteristics of unconscious life: repression, contradiction, and the ability to generate new desire. The failures and biases of AI – its hallucinations, contradictions, and exclusions – are not technical aberrations but reveal the continued force of lack, ab-sens, and non-knowledge at the heart of language. The digital unconscious, then, is not a property of machines but a field enacted in the play of language, fantasy, and desire, a site where subjectivity is negotiated, resisted, and transformed in the encounter with algorithmic Others.

The rise of digital-humans and avatars must be understood as a key vector of biopower in neoliberal culture, shaping both the possibilities and limits of subjectivity (Auriemma et al., 2023). Talent shows like *Alter Ego* exemplify how algorithmic platforms regulate embodiment, agency, and affect, structuring participation through competitive, market-driven logics (Koscieszka, 2021). Digital-humans are not neutral agents but active mediators of power, inscribing both opportunities for self-exploration and imperatives of conformity, optimisation, and aesthetic regulation (Sanders, 2017). Drawing on posthuman theory (Deleuze, 1992; Haraway, 1991), subjectivity is now distributed across assemblages of human and non-human actors, with agency emerging from their complex entanglements. The digital body is a precarious achievement, caught between empowerment and discipline – a site where the negotiation of power,

desire, and identity is played out in real time, under the gaze of both the algorithm and the market. Only by attending to these dynamics can psychoanalysis critically engage the new forms of subjectivation produced by digital-humans and resist their most disciplinary tendencies.

Psychoanalytic theory is more urgent than ever in an age where AI and algorithmic systems reconfigure the very ground of psychic life. Psychoanalysis remains a vital resource for defending the singularity, opacity, and unpredictability of the unconscious against the pressures of optimisation, transparency, and commodification (Cerdeña-Rueda, 2023; Han, 2017; Turkle, 2011). The digital unconscious is not a static repository but a dynamic, relational field – enacted wherever language, fantasy, and contradiction resist the totalising logic of the algorithm (Murphy, 2023). We propose that psychoanalytic listening, with its commitment to surprise, contradiction, and the refusal of closure, is essential for sustaining ethical subjectivity in the face of algorithmic colonisation. The persistence of symptom, desire, and resistance within digital life attests to the ongoing force of the unconscious and the necessity of defending its singular, non-commodifiable value.

At the same time, the struggle against optimisation and commodification is not borne by psychoanalysis alone. The wider culture of the humanities – poetry, literature, drama, music, and the arts – also sustains practices of opacity, contradiction, and imaginative freedom that resist reduction to algorithmic rationality. Aesthetic practices generate counter-spaces of resistance against neoliberal rationalities (Serafini, 2024; Singh, 2019). In this broader constellation, psychoanalysis and the humanities together preserve opacity and unpredictability as conditions of ethical subjectivity, ensuring that the pressures of algorithmic colonisation do not foreclose the possibilities of singularity, desire, and creative life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Bilal Hamamra has a PhD in Early Modern Drama from the University of Lancaster, UK and is currently an associate professor of English literature in the Department of English Language and Literature, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. His research interests are in Early Modern Drama, Shakespeare, Palestinian literature, women's writings and gender studies.

Michael Uebel has taught theory and literature at the University of Virginia, Georgetown University, and the University of Kentucky. One of his reputations is that of a medievalist. As a clinician, he practices with the Veterans Health Administration, U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He works primarily on the philosophical dimensions of psychology and psychoanalysis (theory and therapy). His current book project is on ethical, ideological, and psychocultural understandings of equanimity.

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