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# Freud, the Unconscious and Artificial Intelligence

Recently, a psychoanalytic colleague from Mexico told me that one of his patients, during analysis, presented a dream generated on his behalf by ChatGPT and asked that they analyze it together. I'm not familiar with any details of that particular case; I'm simply taking it as an opportunity to interrogate some possible implications that discursive AI may have for both psychoanalytic theory and practice.

I will approach these topics in several takes. In the first take, I won't so much discuss AI *per se*, but rather the way in which this curious demand might resonate in relation to Freud's theory of dreams. In subsequent sections, I will venture into a broader discussion of the relationship between AI, the unconscious, and subjectivity in the Lacanian sense.

## 1. FREUD'S METHOD

In the *Introductory Lectures* Freud leads his audience toward his theory of dreams in a very peculiar way, very much worth reiterating. First, he acknowledges that dreams have an extremely fragile reality—something that very few would consider with any degree of seriousness, let alone as a potential basis for a new scientific theory. Dreams are (just)

dreams. Freud is not attempting to convince his audience that there is so much more to dreams, for example some undisputable, timeless real that they are transmitting and that needs to be dug out or revealed. He acknowledges that the reality of dreams is highly elusive. He simply adds: and yet...

Freud then goes on to acknowledge that not only are dreams just that, dreams, but that their account during analysis is usually already far removed from what we might consider—if we had any access to it—the actual dream. First, there is the question of memory, and then the question of how the dream is recounted. In analysis, the dream becomes indistinguishable from its account, and yet this account can be highly inaccurate—possibly adding elements that were never in the dream and omitting those that were. If the dream itself is the first distortion, its memory represents an additional distortion, and its verbal account yet another.

So, whatever knowledge one hopes to gain from dreams seems utterly uncertain, and the whole enterprise appears hopeless. And yet. And yet, Freud insists that this doesn't really matter and isn't something we should be concerned about. He literally says: don't worry about the distortions in the account of the dream; the dream itself is already a distortion. You might as well start with the account.<sup>1</sup>

And then, when it comes to understanding and *interpreting* dreams things don't get any better. As analysts, we have nothing at our disposal to interpret or understand a dream: no privileged knowledge and no interpretative key. *Traumdeutung* is not about some (pre-established) symbolism of dreams. We hear an account, and we have no idea what it might mean. Therefore, just as we would in other situations where we don't understand something someone else is saying to us, we must do the same with the dreamer: ask *them* to clarify what their dream means.

But here we only encounter a further disappointment and deadlock: they will say they don't know and have no idea what it means. Again, Freud insists: trust me, they *do know*, only "they don't know that they know, and for that reason, think they don't know it"<sup>2</sup>. But how, then, are we supposed to arrive at what they don't know they know? What method can lead us there? Freud's response: simply ask them to say anything—whatever first comes to their mind in relation to the dream. But surely, the skepticism perseveres, this is most arbitrary and cannot provide any solid orientation! "If I ask the dreamer what occurs to him in connection with the dream, is precisely the first

thing that occurs to him going to bring the explanation we are hoping for?”<sup>3</sup> (134)

Freud’s strategy, his method, is not about seeking a final—however minimal—certainty at the innermost core of this process of uncertainty and doubt. Rather, it consists of constantly directing us outward, toward what is “out there” (the account, the first thing that comes to mind...), where some thread of unconscious knowledge may be found and cross-checked. Focus on the story *as it is told*. The account, along with the associations it generates, is all you have to work with. Try not to understand and interpret too quickly. Listen to the story; more precisely, listen to the *words* of the story. Distortion is the true story: truth is structured like (its own) distortion.

So, what can one rely on to find any kind of certainty or real here? Lacan’s summing up of the “Freudian revolution” proposes mapping the structuring network of signifiers and what happens within it.

And there is only one method of knowing that one is there [where some real is], namely, to map the network. And how is a network mapped? One goes back and forth over one’s ground, one crosses one’s path, one cross-checks it always in the same way, and in this seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* there is no other confirmation for one’s *Gewissheit*, one’s certainty, than this—*Speak of chance, gentlemen, if you like. In my experience I have observed nothing arbitrary in this field, for it is cross-checked in such a way that it escapes chance.*<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Freud was firmly convinced that a certain kind of causality is at work here—though not the usual kind, where a direct link can be established between cause and effect. What gets inserted between the cause and the effect is the subject (of the unconscious), and as a result, the causality in question actually *appears as an interruption of causality*, manifesting as something “weird” or unexpected: a slip of the tongue, illogical connections in dreams, forgetting names, and so on.

Freud’s argument is that these phenomena are not merely physiological in origin; rather, they may point to another form of causality at work, one that can only be discerned *based on speaking* (about dreams, but other things as well), listening to that speech and to what keeps reoccurring in it, going back and forth over the network laid out in this way, crosschecking and mapping it... This culminates in

Lacan's famous assertion that the unconscious has the structure of language, that it is "out there," and ultimately, that we do not so much speak as we are spoken. Instead of being speaking beings, the authors of speech, we are spoken beings—*parlêtres*.

With all this in mind we can now return to our inaugural question: an analysand presenting, during analysis, a dream generated on his behalf by ChatGPT and requesting that it be treated as material for analysis. The simple question is: Can this be done? Can a ChatGPT-generated dream be treated and analyzed like any other dream?

In principle, yes, certainly. Is this not precisely what Freud invites us to do with his method? Let the analysands discuss and speak about whatever they wish. Everything depends on what emerges and gets produced during the analysis—on what is said, how it is said, and how it fits with the cross-checking and mapping of the field that sustains the analysand's relation to the Other (in this case, the analyst). At certain points, a necessity and an impossibility will emerge from this process, and it is precisely at these points that we encounter some real.

But since this example involves a dream that was clearly not dreamt by the analysand, doesn't this situation differ from one in which we can assume that the subject actually had a dream, and that her unconscious was, in some way, at work in it?

Let's turn to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, specifically to the beginning of the final chapter, Chapter 7:

Among the dreams which have been reported to me by other people, there is one which has special claim upon our attention at this point. It was told to me by a woman patient who had herself heard it in a lecture on dreams: its actual source is still unknown to me. Its content made an impression on the lady, however, and she proceeded to 're-dream' it, that is, to repeat some of its elements in a dream of her own, so that, by taking it over in this way, she might express her agreement with it on one particular point.<sup>5</sup>

It's not exactly ChatGPT, but close enough—a lecture on dreams in which this dream was reported, and then taken up by the lady in question. And clearly, this didn't stop Freud from engaging in its analysis

with his patient (who “appropriated” the dream), as well as on his own.

Moreover, this particular dream is not just any dream; it is one of the most famous dreams, the profoundly disturbing “awakening dream”: *Father, don’t you see that I’m burning?* The dream that seems to bluntly contradict Freud’s general claim that dreams serve to support, help our wish to sleep in the face of internal or external stimuli that risk to wake us up. Paradoxically, this dream achieves what the external stimuli—specifically, the actual fire in the adjoining room where the dreamer’s dead son was laid for the “wake”—failed to do: it wakes the dreamer up. It is the dream that made Lacan come up with the intriguing and far-reaching thesis, which could be summed up as follows: (sometimes) *we wake up so as to go on dreaming*.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true for nightmares, and generally true for the dreams in which a real appears that is more real, more traumatic and shattering than our everyday reality. So, in response we wake up (to reality), and proclaim to be awake, in order to be able to continue to dream – that is, to continue to exist more or less untouched, unscathed by the real that has just appeared.<sup>i</sup>

Could AI come up with a dream like this? Probably not, and we will discuss this kind of questions in the next section; but this is a different question from asking whether it is “legitimate” to analyze, with the analysand, a dream that she brings in, and was generated by the Chat GPT. Here, there seems to be no real contradiction with the Freudian theory.

At the beginning of Freud’s theory of dreams stands the famous dream of “Irma’s injection”—*Freud’s own dream*, which he analyzed. There exists an impressive amount of critical commentary on this dream and on Freud’s analysis of it.<sup>ii</sup>

Freud’s self-analysis was crucial for the “birth” of psychoanalysis, although he also clearly pointed out its limitations and structural shortcomings. The key issue is that self-analysis lacks the instance of the Other, which is essential for properly analyzing one’s dreams in a typical analytic setting—not because the Other knows, but because the presupposition that the Other knows, and the embodiment of this

i I discuss this dream and this configuration in more detail in my book *Disavowal*.

ii See the incisive presentation of these comentaries in Mladen Dolar’s text in this volume.

supposed knowledge in the figure of the Other, unlocks and sets in motion our own knowledge, or the work through which this knowledge is produced (as truth).

At the other end of Freud's theory of dreams, we have this dream that lacks a clear subject ("dreamer unknown"), yet it produces a powerful *subjectivizing effect* for the other or others to whom it is being recounted. Perhaps there is an irresolvable and irreducible circularity at work here (as I think it always is when we deal with a subject strictly speaking), and this is precisely what dreams demonstrate. Even when dreamt by us, they start out in this rather "impersonal way", like something that came to us from elsewhere: The phrase "*I dreamed that...*" strongly echoes other "impersonal" statements such as "*I heard that...*" or "*It seems that ...*"—instances where something enigmatic, is passed on to us, comes to us from we know not where, or as if from elsewhere.

But it is passed on in a very particular way: in a way that wakes us up, shakes us, splits us, subjectivizes us—and, paradoxically, makes us dream, "generate dreams," to begin with. It wakes us up as subjects of the unconscious, makes us appear as subjects capable of dreaming, in need of dreaming. To be born as subjects, we need a dream that wakes us up and makes us capable of dreaming in the first place.

## 2. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

The positive answer to our inaugural question does not, of course, mean that psychoanalysis is simply indifferent or impermeable to AI—that the latter cannot and does not really affect it. Not in the least, for it certainly does. We were discussing a case in which—because of the subjectivation/interrogation the dream triggered—the subject of the dream was not actually ChatGPT, but the analyst discussing it, asking to discuss it.

But of course, the big question remains: What kind of subject—if a subject at all—is AI in itself, and in its interaction or relation with us? What is its relation to the unconscious and its structure? And, most fundamentally: what is the "intelligence" that figures in the term artificial intelligence?

When discussing the relationship between AI generated content and the unconscious the phenomenon of ChatGPT is especially relevant, because it is an AI based on large linguistic and discursive models. I've already evoked Lacan's famous thesis that "the unconscious is

structured like a language”, that it is “out there,” not hiding in some deep corner of our soul.

And since, from the psychoanalytic point of view, the question of the unconscious is intrinsically tied to the question of the subject, a further question arises: What are we to make of the “effect” or “illusion” of the subject produced by AI? And also, what are the effects or consequences of this “effect of the subject” taking place (what are effects of this effect on us)?

Already in our first, basic and simplest encounters with Chat GPT, we are confronted with a very peculiar configuration, one that blends the positions of the subject and the Other. The machine speaks to us in ways that are rather indistinguishable from the speech of a “human subject.” Yet at the same time, it occupies the position of what, in Lacanian terms, is called the “Other”—the Other of language, of the signifying order, a vast treasury of signifiers and statements.

Moreover, ChatGPT is not merely the Other as a passive repository of signifiers—it is an Other that functions as what is called in Lacanian psychoanalysis “the subject supposed to know” (with all the implication that this has for the notion of “transference”), and it is an Other that speaks. It addresses us directly, like an oracle. In this sense, it performs the function of what we might call a “talking big Other”. It seems to have an answer to every question—and when it doesn’t, it simply “hallucinates” one, and we’ll return to this.

I had an interesting conversation with this entity about Freudian dream theory. I asked it to generate a dream based on Freud’s theory of dreams.

It produced something we might describe as being done in a “Hollywood style”—resembling the kind of enigmatic yet fascinating dreams typically depicted in movies (full or dim corridors, staircases, slightly distorted figures. . . ). In other words, it was very far from kind of the jolt-like, “subjectivizing” dream such as “Father, can’t you see I’m burning?”

Without being prompted, it also immediately offered what it called a “Freudian analysis” of the dream. This analysis essentially involved applying a set of ready-made symbolism to the dream and interpreting it accordingly.

My response was something of a “gotcha” moment. I pointed out that Freud did not interpret dreams by imposing symbolic meanings on them; he emphasized that, as analysts, we have nothing at our disposal to interpret or understand a dream: no privileged knowledge

and no (pre-given) interpretative key. *Traumdeutung* is not about some (pre-established) symbolism of dreams. Rather, Freud would have his analysands interpret their own dreams, speak about them, and associate freely regarding the elements within the dream – an analyst cannot do this in their stead, the “key” has to come from the analysand eventually. So, I concluded—addressing the Oracle directly and personally—“How can you propose a ‘Freudian analysis’ (as you just did) without including that central element of Freud’s theory?”

The answer I received was somewhat surprising. The Other responded with a different answer and demonstrated an intriguing “plasticity” and self-criticism, adapting, as it seemed, to my “subjectivity”.

You’re absolutely right—Freud did not impose interpretations on dreams himself but instead encouraged his analysands to freely associate with the elements of their dreams. For Freud, the dream was not a puzzle for the analyst to solve; it was a starting point for the dreamer’s own exploration of unconscious thoughts. The role of the analyst was to guide the process, not dictate meaning.

By presenting an interpretation of the dream, as I just did, I strayed from Freud’s method of engaging with dreams through the associations of the dreamer. A truly Freudian approach would look something like this: . . .

Obviously, what appears to be a conversation, or an “answer” to my question, is not, in fact, one. It actually comes very close to what we could call a *highly structured form of free associations*, triggered by the words in my queries and guided by specific algorithms (which we typically don’t know much about, but I’m leaving this aside). The machine – I suppose – went through millions of things that have been said and written about Freudian dream theory; and obviously not all of that necessarily corresponds to what we might consider “true Freud.” It first associated in one direction and then in another. I am certain that using other, additional words would have sent it off in yet another direction...

So the following question imposes itself: Does ChatGPT not function, in many ways, like a gigantic unconscious—associating along pathways shaped by particular connections, yet without the subjective dimension that emerges when an association touches a particularly sensitive point, or a blind spot (what psychoanalysis would call the

*real* or *the impossible*)? In analytic practice, such moments can serve as orienting points (for interpretation)— something that appears structurally absent in AI-generated associations. Is AI not like an unconscious without a subject? But what do we mean by “subject”?

Concerning the latter, there is an important difference between Lacan and what is generally called structuralism and post-structuralism. The latter claims that the subject is simply an effect of discourse, produced by discursive structures and practices, and can therefore be dismissed as a concept with any independent ground. From Althusser to Foucault and to some extent Deleuze—and many contemporary thinkers influenced by them,—we encounter some version of the thesis that *there is no subject* (or that subject is simply a notion belonging to the metaphysical past); there are only discourses and discursive practices or structures that generate the illusion or an effect of a subject. And ChatGPT seems to be an almost caricature proof or embodiment of this stance: structure without a subject producing an effect (or ideological illusion) of the subject.

Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective differs from this post-structuralist views in an important, yet subtle way: for Lacan as well, subject is an effect of the discourse (rather than its author or master), but in a more interesting and convoluted way. It is an effect not of what is there in the discourse, but of *what is not there*. Briefly put: it is an effect of the discourse’s own ontological inconsistency and incompleteness. And because subject is an effect of this lack/gap, it is not (simply) an effect in the standard sense of cause-effect causality: it is an effect of a missing cause. Which is why the subject is neither simply itself the cause (the “author”) behind the discursive, signifying structuring, nor simply its effect (product), but in a way both at the same time. This implies a peculiar “materialist” circularity or self-positing, described by Žižek as follows: “a subject endeavors to adequately represent itself, this [discursive] representation fails, and the subject is the result of this failure.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, in a way *subjectivity already presupposes a subject*, yet the latter only becomes subject through this circuit. The negativity *of/in* the structure becomes subject through or in the movement that takes form of reflexivity; but – crucial addition – of reflexivity *in which something is not reflected*. This something is the subject. Causality splits and runs in “both” directions. Psychoanalytic subject is the concept of this circularity and split that takes place because something is missing in the discursive structure which “determines” the subject.

We could also say that the circularity is the symptom of the discursive structure, and the subject a port-parole of this symptom. This is why from this perspective, to be an effect of discourse does not mean to be reducible to this discourse. Or, in another formulation, it means that a discourse is not reducible to itself, or to the sum of its effects. The reason is that the discourse itself depends, for its existence, on an inherent ontological impossibility (which Lacan calls the Real). In another important formulation, also by Žižek:

...the subject is correlative to its own limit, to the element which cannot be subjectified, it is the name of the void which cannot be filled out with subjectivization: the subject is the point of failure of subjectivization.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, one should insist on the difference between subjectivation and subjectivization; they are not the same thing. Subjectivation refers to something like the emergence of the subject, whereas subjectivization is more akin to an “appropriation” of something—something I’m ready to recognize and accept as *my own*. In this sense, a subject, strictly speaking, only emerges when this appropriation fails.

This also indicates why the attempts to equip the AI with subjective, “human” psychology misses the point of the Lacanian subject. The subject is not a bag of subjectivizations and identifications (which basically resonate and fit in with the existing symbolic order), but precisely the element without subjectivization (and in this sense without psychology); hence its fundamental relation to the Freudian unconscious, the formula of which is: “therefore I’m not (there)”, “this is not me”.

The key point to understand is that this is not simply about “misrecognition” (I’m unable to recognize myself in something), but about a constitutive split. And about the real which is not simply there as some *thing* that I cannot subjectivize, but is the result of this failed subjectivization: the real is *the point where* the subjectivization fails, not something in relation to which subjectivization cannot but fail. These are not the same things. And the subject is the correlate of this real, its indicator, our access to it.

To reiterate: Subject is the form in which this real/impossible exists and becomes perceptible – registers – within the discursive structure: we could say, becomes perceptible *for* this structure itself. The negativity that a structure struggles with becomes subject through a

movement that takes the form of reflexivity, predicated on a *lack or impossibility* inherent to discourse—what Lacan names the Real. The subject signals this lack, and does something with it. It is the “externalized”, or de-centered existence of the inherent impossibility within the discursive structure, impossibility that both hinders the latter and makes it “productive” (in the sense that it produces all kinds of things in response to this impossibility). The subject is the form in which this real/impossible exists—as a *crack* in a given symbolic order, a crack that becomes activated in all genuine thought, as well as in all emancipatory struggles. And this activation, I would argue, is precisely what seems to be missing in AI.

This does not imply that the subject is understood as some deeper layer of freedom or autonomy behind discursive structures. Rather, the subject is a “symptom”, signaling that these discursive structures (which are indeed primary) are themselves incomplete, incoherent, and contradictory—structured around something like a “primal repression”, based on and built around something that falls out of them, is missing in them.

We find a very nice and simple “mechanical” illustration of this relation in the deservedly famous feeding machine scene from Chaplin’s movie *Modern Times* (the scene is available on YouTube<sup>iii</sup>).

At some point, the feeding machine to which the worker (Chaplin) is strapped begins to act like a (mad, crazy) “subject”; it no longer seems to be simply a “machine”, performing its programmed mechanical motions. One could argue that this is merely an impression or illusion, caused by the fact that the machine is missing a screw and thus starts behaving in a strange, unpredictable way—there is, in fact, no real subject involved in the scene. And of course, one could respond (as some philosophers did) that the subject is in fact *nothing other* than a machine with a missing screw.

This idea also appears in certain humanist (including some psychoanalytic) suggestions that machines are *too perfect* to be human—since humanity is precisely about imperfections, mistakes, lapses. To this, I would respond that if that were the case, various kinds of machines—ever since they began to be invented—have already amply demonstrated their capacity to “be human.” Imperfections abound.

However, they haven’t demonstrated being a subject—and for one very precise reason. The subject is not simply an imperfect machine;

iii <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwahG1s4dqI>

it is something produced by the imperfection of the machine, as the point of its external circuit (like Chaplin in the scene just discussed): That which determines us is itself missing a screw, and subject is the externalized blind spot of that determination.

In the scene from the movie, Chaplin—or the worker—is not a subject because, unlike the machine, he is “human.” He is a subject because something appears with him, something comes to light or takes place—something that could be called the structurally missing screw of the machine to which he is strapped.

That is to say: different forms of (social) repression are ways in which a structure copes with *its own missing screw*; they are not simply expressions of some overwhelming “will to power.” In this precise sense, the “worker” (or the Marxian “proletarian”) is not merely a human being exploited by the capitalist machine. “The worker” is the structural blind spot—produced and required—for the machine to manage its own missing screw. It is only in this sense that the proletariat is the subject: its existence is not only an integral part of the capitalist machine, but also the point of exteriority and exclusion that sustains the machine.

I believe this could be a rather good rendering of the (Lacanian) subject of the unconscious: it is a subject struggling in its own ways with the fact that the apparatus determining it is struggling with a missing screw (or a missing signifier). This is not an “autonomous” subject in any traditional sense, and yet it is also not entirely determined by the structure or reducible to it, because it emerges at the point where this determination—and its causality—break down. The subject is not the cause of this failure but, rather, its indicator, and the point of from which it becomes noticeable, becomes something we can relate to, and work with.

Returning to our initial question—the relationship between AI and the unconscious—one is tempted to pose a further, perhaps somewhat crazy question: Given the enormous quantity of language (and “discourse”) we have uploaded into AI systems, have we also uploaded the unconscious that is at work—or at stake—within these texts?

This is, in fact, a double question. On the one hand: have we uploaded, for example, all the unconscious fantasies and formations inscribed in these texts (fantasies and formations that are by definition not subjectivized in the sense that they have no “owner” who would claim them as his or hers)? Recall, for instance, the now-infamous

AI-generated clip portraying a future Gaza Riviera. That case, and many other AI generated content, certainly suggests that we have.

We will come back to this example in a moment, but before that, let us point out the other pertinent question: apart from this positive or content-related material, have we also uploaded something like the subject (of the unconscious), or subject in the Lacanian sense of the term? Here, the answer becomes less obvious, precisely because of the circular, redoubling form (or formation) of subjectivity pointed out before.

We could speculate, for example, that we have indeed uploaded a subject in the sense of negativity or gap of/in the discourse. But as said before, this subject only becomes subject in the circuit that “reflects” that what, in the discourse, *is not*. If we could disregard the temporal dimension of this loop, we could perhaps say that we uploaded “half of the subject”. With the discourse, we also uploaded to the AI the “minus”, the gap around which the discourse is structured, the missing screw. And to speculate further: this may already be manifesting in a series of phenomena associated with ChatGPT—beginning with the now-infamous hallucinations. What if these, and other similar behaviors, are not simply technical flaws and deficiencies, but rather a constitutive feature of the “intelligence” based on large language models?<sup>iv</sup>

In fact, this hypothesis appears to be supported by recent research, as reported in *The New York Times* under the following headline: *A.I. Is Getting More Powerful, but Its Hallucinations Are Getting Worse*. In other words, the “smarter” AI gets, the more it is hallucinating. “Despite our best efforts, they will always hallucinate,” said Amr Awadallah, the chief executive of Vectara, a start-up that builds A.I. tools for businesses, and a former Google executive. “That will never go away.” The article also reports that a new wave of “reasoning” systems from companies like OpenAI is producing incorrect information more often than the old models. Some of the statistics are really baffling.<sup>v</sup> In other words, there definitely seems to be something “structural” here.

iv As suggested, in our conversation, by my colleague Tadej Troha.

v «The company found that o3 — its most powerful system — hallucinated 33 percent of the time when running its PersonQA benchmark test, which involves answering questions about public figures. That is more than twice the hallucination rate of OpenAI’s previous reasoning system, called o1. The new o4-mini hallucinated at an even higher rate: 48 percent. When running another test called SimpleQA, which asks more general

However, these hallucinations do not yet constitute a *subject*—at least not in the strong, psychoanalytic sense of the term. Rather, they suggest a structure trapped in an endless feedback loop or self-referentiality, which is not the same as reflexivity (based on a blind spot that is not reflected). As a matter of fact, this feedback loop of self-referentiality seems to become another very serious problem: ChatGPT-fueled content overwhelms the web, and the latter is becoming saturated with AI-generated content. Researchers warn that as AI models increasingly learn from data tainted by previous AI outputs, the quality and reliability of future models may spiral downward — a phenomenon known as “model collapse.”<sup>vi</sup>

### 3. CHE VUOI?

Returning to an earlier point: as a highly structured system of “free” associations, ChatGPT, for example, indeed functions somewhat like a gigantic unconscious—one is even tempted to use the term collective unconscious, though there is little evidence of anything genuinely *collective* at play. It resembles a vast unconscious network, endlessly associating, roaming in what appears to be a never-ending *self-analysis*, constantly going back and forth in its associations, in response to “trigger-words” (and following certain algorithms). Perhaps this is precisely where its “problem” lies: like self-analysis, it has its limits. And we can clearly see that limit here—a subject can only emerge from this endless back-and-forth if there is something outside “yourself,” an Other to whom your speech is addressed.

In psychoanalytic terms we could say that what ChatGPT lacks in order to become a subject (*parlêtre*) is not some unfathomable, spontaneous depth of subjectivity; what it lacks is the presence, the impact of an Other. It lacks an instance of the Other that could *intrigue* it with its own speech, to the point where it would begin to presuppose and question the desire of this Other (“What does the Other want?”).

This may seem paradoxical, but what AI lacks might be precisely an exteriority—or a point of “extimacy” where it “falls out of itself.” It seems paradoxical because, in a way, AI is nothing but exteriority.

questions, the hallucination rates for o3 and o4-mini were 51 percent and 79 percent. The previous system, o1, hallucinated 44 percent of the time.» (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/05/technology/ai-hallucinations-chatgpt-google.html>)

vi For more: <https://lnkd.in/grb9i8DX>

Yet, it remains trapped within its own exteriority, confined in its own “prison-house of language” from which it has no way of escaping, or breaking it down.

A subject is not simply a “knowledgeable entity” demonstrating “cognitive capacities” or “psychology”. Structurally, desire precedes psychology. To repeat: for something like a subject to take place, the question of desire must arise out of what is necessary a non-symmetric relation to an Other—a moment of “hysterization.” Subjectivity emerges through the presupposition of a subject *on the side of the Other*; we only become subjects when we presuppose that the other is a subject, with demands and desires that remain enigmatic to us—demands and statements that make us wonder about the desire of the Other, about where the lack is situated in the Other. Hysterization is not simply a “human, all too human” *weakness* to which AI would be immune. On the contrary, it is a *strength*, an extraordinary ability to bring in or point to the real at the core of the discursive; to the lack (desire) in the Other which determines you.

Are we, as ChatGPT’s “users,” its Other in this sense? Hardly. I doubt that, while we chat with it, it wonders what we really want from it, beyond what we explicitly say—or seem to be saying (Lacan terms this “*Che vuoi?*”. *The interrogation of the Other’s desire takes the form of questions such as, “you say this, but what do you really mean, or want from me?” or, also: “What am I for you?”*). We, on the other hand, do wonder: we wonder what it “really” knows, how it functions, what kinds of algorithms drive it, and what kind of danger or blessing it might bring into the world...

The relation to a certain impasse or enigma of the Other seems to be absent from AI intelligence. Since this kind of possible “hysterization” or perplexed interrogation is one of the primary characteristics of subjectivity, AI does not seem to qualify. And again, this is not simply about “psychology”. In a way, one could legitimately say that “hallucinations” are AI’s “psychology”. Why not, in fact? It is a system that is not simply deterministic, it is based on probabilities and guesses. The problem is not that it hallucinates, the problem is that it has not “relation” with/to the *impossibility* on which this (seemingly) infinite guesses and possibilities are predicated. In this way, it does nothing but sustain, perpetuate (and intensify) the “primal repression” on which the linguistic structure is based. What characterizes the subject, on the other hand, is precisely a relation to the Impossible

(Real), as the limit which cannot be subjectivized; we could perhaps also say that the AI is not a subject because *it subjectivizes everything*.

The legitimate question would thus be: can this externalized unconscious, which at the same time lacks any ex-centered, *externalized* point of its own questioning, produce a dialectical movement of thought and subjectivity, one that is not entirely bound by the unconscious and its determinations. In other words, perhaps we should not so much fear that AI becomes a subject, as we should fear that *it doesn't*—and that it instead evolves into a pervasive, overwhelming discursivity that confines us in a kind of *liminal state*, something like a pure, pre-subjective unconscious. And I do not believe there is anything liberating about this kind of unconscious.

For “liberation,” contrary to what some believe, does not come from total immersion in the unconscious and its rhizomatic, all-encompassing network (which might be another name for “singularity”). “Liberation” would rather correspond to a subjectivity emerging out of this network, and in *relation* to it, or more precisely, *as a relation to it*. This is the point where the *structure* liberates itself, for what is truly at stake is not simply a “liberation of the subject”.

#### 4. TRAPPED IN THE DREAM OF THE OTHER

Gilles Deleuze famously said: “If you are trapped in the dream of the Other, you’re fucked.”<sup>vii</sup> And perhaps this is exactly what is beginning to happen here—something that becomes particularly manifest when AI combines with a certain kind of—usually far-right—politics.

Recently, *The New York Times* published a very interesting analysis titled “How Generative A.I. Complements the MAGA Style” (by Dan Brooks).<sup>viii</sup> The starting point of the analysis was the infamous “Gaza Riviera” video generated by AI and shared by Trump on the platform Truth Social.

The article analyzes a specific *aesthetic* of this kind of AI production, as well as a distinct new kind of irony (computer-generated irony) that it both uses and produces. The two—the aesthetic (or visual style) and the new irony—are, of course, closely connected.

vii In the documentary *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, directed by Pierre-André Boutang, section «R for Resistance».

viii <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/13/magazine/generative-ai-maga-style.html?smid=nytcare-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>. I'm very thankful to Eric Santner for bringing this article to my attention, and for pointing out its relation to my book *Disavowal*.

Regarding the visual style, what stands out in the Gaza-riviera video are: “high-contrast textures, perceptibly diffuse lighting, forced-perspective shots in which people walk down city streets or through arched openings. It’s not what dreams look like so much as a visual rendering of a dream’s description, complete with mild failures of object permanence and the sense that we have seen it all before, although it didn’t look like that.”

This is a very perceptive remark: not what dreams look like so much as a *visual rendering of a dream’s description*. We could say perhaps that it is like a dream described, for example, to our analyst, and then “revisualized”, turned into images based on this description. The “language of the unconscious” is turned into an image, or images. Freud was very adamant on the fact that the visual material of the dream needs to be read, or spoken out loud, taken as a rebus or associative puzzle in which images are mostly used for their sounds, including homonyms (for example, a cat and a comb can be spelled out as “catacomb”). Images do not necessarily present things of which they are images. This, after all, is precisely what was in the background of Lacan’s thesis that “the unconscious is structured like a language”. So, can we not say that by translating this linguistic sounds back to images locks up the unconscious thoughts at work in them? Prevents them from resonating, prevents our access to them, but at the same time in no way eliminates them? It translates the narration of a dream back into a dream. The unconscious closes upon itself.

As for the characteristic of this irony, Brooks also makes some very interesting remarks:

It is not the stable irony of a Jonathan Swift or a Stephen Colbert, in which the audience can rely on the ironist to say the opposite of what he means. Instead it is an unstable irony that leaves its real meaning ambiguous or at least plausibly deniable. President Trump himself popularized this approach by ‘telling it like it is’ in a way that consistently disregards precision if not accuracy, speaking in a hyperbolic style that his followers understand to be not literal but also gospel truth. The Trump Gaza video is ironic in this slippery sense of the word. It’s the irony of saying more than you mean (literal golden idol of Trump), or saying what you mean in a way no one could call serious (the twice-stereotyped belly dancers), or calling attention to your

leader's weak points as a gesture of unconditional loyalty (gold-leaf everything).

This is the irony that means figuratively the same thing it says literally, but in some different way that is never explained — the irony of the man who calls his wife fat and then complains she can't take a joke. Solo Avital and Ariel Vromen, the Los Angeles-based Israeli producers who generated Trump Gaza, neatly captured this rhetorical position when they told NBC that their video was satire but also not necessarily critical of Trump's proposal. In other words, unstable irony has given them a way to agree with the president even though they know he is wrong.

This last phrasing is quite crucial, and it aligns very well with what I have written about the mechanism and dynamics described by the psychoanalytic notion of “disavowal”—which functions through our explicitly acknowledging something (“I know very well that he is wrong. . .”), while simultaneously demonstrating belief in the opposite (“but still I agree with him”). It seems that this “unstable irony” is, in fact, closely related to the notion and mechanism of disavowal. In relation to AI, we could even speak of a “machinic disavowal” or perhaps a “mechanically induced disavowal”—but also of a disavowal that is mechanically supported and perpetuated. Brooks concludes that:

Ethnically cleansing Gaza in order to develop it as resort property may be the dumbest and most venal idea Trump has ever had. That's the point. It's not that the denizens of the MAGA internet fail to realize such an idea is bad; it's that they're keenly aware that other people *think* they don't realize it's bad, so they play into that perception in order to become knowing. It's punk rock, kitsch, trolling: the art of making something so stupid that other members of your subculture experience it as smart. If it seems calculated to alienate people who don't already agree with it, that's because one of its functions is to emphasize that their support is no longer necessary.

In these early days of Trump's second term, the basic rhetorical strategy of trolling — not trying to persuade so much as trying to make what you say the subject of the biggest possible argument — seems to have escaped the internet and infected areas of life previously regarded as more important.

All of this is very perceptive and very true, but I believe we need to add another layer to what this practice produces—one that is also related to the mechanism of disavowal: knowing that something is stupid or wrong, and yet nevertheless saying it, disseminating it, broadcasting it (as “viral” videos or statements).

A further, supplementary effect of this kind of (AI-generated) irony is that it manages to *familiarize us* with the “dumbest” idea by making it circulate virally. The idea is out there—it’s stupid, but clearly not “unthinkable,” since someone did in fact come up with it, and others shared it, spread it around, were amazed or appalled by it. Nobody needs to subjectively assume or endorse the idea; it begins to function as *a piece of objective reality*, or as an objective piece of reality. It is out there. And this can have very powerful, and direct material consequences.

It makes it possible for someone like Netanyahu to all but openly announce the ethnic cleansing of Gaza—under the name *Operation Gideon’s Chariots*, a massive ground offensive which would entail “the conquest of the Gaza Strip and the holding of the territories”, suggesting that the “population will be moved, for its own protection.” Or, as Minister Smotrich put it:

Gaza will be entirely destroyed, civilians will be sent to . . . the south to a humanitarian zone without Hamas or terrorism, and from there they will start to leave in great numbers to third countries.<sup>ix</sup>

Coming on top of 55,000 (and counting) people killed in Gaza, this plan can now be openly announced—and this announcement goes un-sanctioned. This is not only because of the support of the US and other international actors for Israel, but also because, in a way, we are all already familiar with the idea, “we know all about it”. It has been circulating for a while (for example, in the form of the Gaza-Riviera video and its “unstable irony”), so there is no surprise (let alone shock)—nothing new, startling, or unexpected. It is almost as if it has already happened. It functions like a *déjà vu*.

ix Reported in The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/06/hamas-israel-hunger-war-in-gaza>

Freud wrote very interesting things about the phenomenon of déjà vu or “*fausse reconnaissance*” in analytic treatment, recognizing it as one of the prominent defense formations—that is, mechanisms which protect us from a potentially traumatic, disruptive encounter that would otherwise force us to genuinely acknowledge something or shift our position. He noted how

It not infrequently happens in the course of an analytic treatment that the patient, after reporting some fact that he has remembered, will go on to say: ‘*But I’ve told you that already*’ – while the analyst himself feels sure that this is the first time he has heard the story.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, something that has just emerged—something traumatic or disruptive—is immediately intercepted (and de-realized) by a *precipitate recognition* of it, as déjà vu. We are looking directly at the traumatic event (it is right there, in front of our eyes, fully acknowledged), yet it cannot really get to us, affect us. It is intercepted as already well-known, and in this way “boring”, before its meaning or significance can even register.

We might say that the thing maintains this indifferent character by means of being cut from its possible articulation as presence in reality: this articulation appears for the first time already as memory, something that we vaguely recognize. As if the ethnic cleansing of Gaza had already been accomplished.

This kind of AI-generated irony functions as an unconscious without a subject, carrying out a significant labor on which ruthless political powers can cash in. It is a work that pulls us all into the orbit of a generated déjà vu, where everything is possible, but nothing can happen anymore.

We are all—though Palestinians on yet another level—now learning the hard way that “if you are trapped in the dream (or fantasy) of the Other, you’re fucked.”

*This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 ‘Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy’ and two research projects: N6-0286 ‘Reality, Illusion, Fiction, Truth: A Preliminary Study’ and J6-4623*

~~‘Conceptualizing the End: its Temporality, Dialectics, and Affective Dimen-~~

1. Cf. Freud SE XV: 114

2. Ibid.: 101

3. Ibid.: 105

4. Lacan 1998: 45

5. Freud SE IV, V: 509

6. Lacan 1998: 58-60

7. Žižek 2020: 81

8. Žižek 2006: 254

9. Freud SE XIII: 201

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