

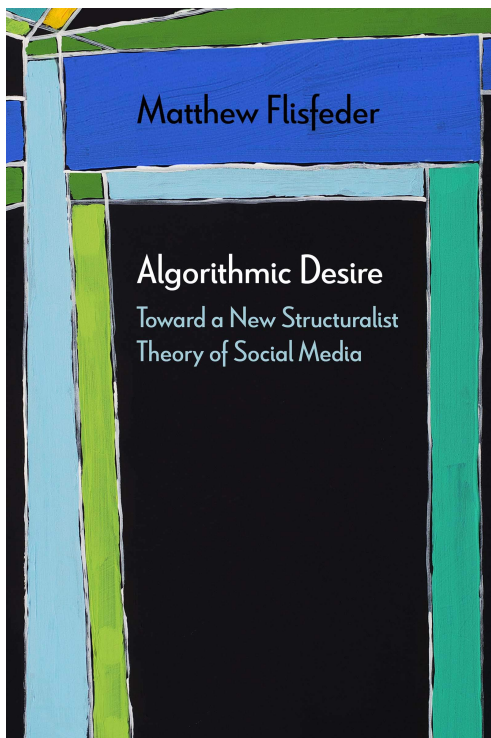


## Book Review

Flisfeder, Matthew. 2021. *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*. Northwestern University Press.

### Lukas Mozdeika

*OsloMet - Oslo Metropolitan University*



Matthew Flisfeder's recent contribution to literature on social media within psychoanalysis and critical theory is less a variation on the well-versed theme than an ingeniously crafted statement, deserving the praise and attention both by those within and outside of the field. Tying together Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxist and critical media theory illustrated by close readings of contemporary sci-fi film, Flisfeder lays ground for a New Structuralist interpretation of social media befitting twenty-first-century capitalism.

The appeal and novelty of his approach lies in the treatment of social media as the metaphor for a *dominant form of consciousness* or predominant ideology in the purportedly post-ideological age, thus

offering us a critical point of reference and a shorthand for envisaging a more authentic alternative. This helps avoid an emergent division between overtly pessimistic accounts of social media, such as those offered by Richard Seymour (2019) and Jaron Lanier (2018), and criticisms focused on specific technological, governmental, or economical aspects that remain too narrow to counter techno-optimism – the legitimizing discursive force of neoliberalism. Rather than scapegoating social media for the socioeconomic ills or preserving it as the only locus of emancipation, the gist of Flisfeder's analysis points to the limits of sociality inherent in neoliberal capitalism itself, and, as such, irreducible to the

technological architecture of digital platforms or platform economy alone, as critics of surveillance capitalism would have it. Put differently, social media remains the *hegemonic signifier* of the latest iteration of the neoliberal ideology as well as the key site of its reproduction, steering flows of information to keep its subjects tethered to the central stage of libidinal economy.

Structured in six chapters, *Algorithmic Desire* opens with a plea laying bare the guiding claim of the book: ‘social media does not make us antisocial; capitalism does!’ (3). This is followed by a brief historical detour into popular culture leading to a condensed theoretical outline rehearsing the argumentative thread of the book. Let the newcomers to the field not be deterred! The initial spadework pays off and leads to a delightful read of the following sections, wherein the pieces fall into place with cohesion and nuance.

The shift from the optimistic ethos that has accompanied the Arab spring to the disillusionment with social media amidst the post-truth turn and to the rise of right-wing populism culminating in Trump’s election serves as a point of departure for the first chapter. Flisfeder reads this shift against the dissolution of the subject marking the abandonment of structuralism in the post-structuralist, and by the same token postmodern, turn. What has gone amiss in the postmodernist attempts to do away with metanarratives is the recognition of how our very attempt at transgression conceals its own affirmative force giving way to the creation of new *normative orders* (Flisfeder 2021, 174). Hence to grasp the dismay of the emancipatory promises of the internet, we must attend to the structural – and profoundly ideological – role occupied by social media ordering the seemingly unstructured, free space of the early internet. The arrival of social media as a new hegemonic signifier is evinced in the rhetoric and discourse that gradually turned it into a stand-in for the internet and sociality as such, e.g., designating Arab spring as social media revolutions. This reveals the contours of the hegemonic ideology of post-crisis capitalism, argues Flisfeder, historicizing the emergence of social media in relation to the 2008 financial burst. Not to undermine the severity of problems at stake, the oft lamented malaise of the post-truth era – misinformation – is largely misplaced, as it is not so much the scarcity of truthful information or decay of epistemic standards, but the abundance of information, or *infoglut*, lacking in narrative or signifying structure that provokes cynical disavowal of truth among the disenchanting masses.

This diagnosis echoes writings of Slavoj Žižek as well as other advocates of the Hegelian-Lacanian school of thought such as Alenka Zupančič and Mladen Dolar, also Todd McGowan and Jodi Dean, all of whom inform Flisfeder’s analysis. In the second chapter Flisfeder queries Dean’s interpretation of neoliberal ideology as interpellating its subjects in relation to the logic of drive rather than desire (66). The demise of symbolic efficacy or the belief in the big Other as prohibiting agency that characterizes postmodernity poses a challenge

for the subject of desire in so far as desire in Lacan's framework is constitutive of lack – the unattainable object-cause of desire (*objet petit a*). It is precisely the lack as a constitutive condition for desire that is missing in the cyberspace, where immediacy of access, spatialization of time and numbing stimuli produce abundance eliminating any comprising limit that could suture the condition for desire. Rather than reading this as a case of drive which would admit the emancipatory traversal of fantasy by the subject, Flisfeder proposes that the prohibiting agency is *willed into existence* by postmodern subjects themselves (158), remaining in the grip of fantasy while cynically disavowing their belief in the big Other's nonexistence. And here lies the perverse underside to our compulsive social media practices – not to be equated with subversion, but with ideology. Social media remains, *pace* Dean, 'new frontier for desire' (83-84), 'bringing back lack and scarcity where, from the immanentist perspective, there would otherwise be formless abundance' (183).

Flisfeder qualifies this at first sight counterintuitive point in his discussion of algorithmic media. The power of the algorithm 'to constantly stage and then to displace desire' (108) reproduces the very limits constitutive of the desiring subject that keep it 'dis-satisfied' enough to stay in the loop chasing the *objet petit a*. Instead of lauded affordances of social media, one may think here of the limits they procure, as innocent as the character limit of tweets and as luring as the sense of perpetual deferral that keeps us clinging onto social media feed. Yet, Flisfeder is careful not to subsume the role of a subject to the process that assemblage theory thinkers – Maurizio Lazzarato inspired by Deleuze and Guattari in particular – have theorized as *enslavement by machine*, placing the human in the assemblage of non-human actors. 'Subjection before Enslavement', as the title of the third chapter suggests, is the main contention demarcating the fault line between Hegelian-Lacanian perspective and a posthumanist one. Flisfeder discusses the latter at length, scrutinizing its variations—Accelerationism, New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology—throughout the book and observing how '[t]he more we self-objectify, the more we are driven to theorize the agency of objects' (147). This is certainly a thought-provoking parallel revealing the ways Accelerationism, and posthumanist philosophies more generally, may end up lending legitimacy to the neoliberal impetus of enjoyment, mistaken for the acts of subversion.

In a nutshell, our incessant participation in social networks is not preceded by enslavement, which comes after, but is already caught within the logics of the marketplace and its legitimizing ideology. The figure of the desiring subject is incorporated into the technical infrastructure of social media platforms and prefigured by discourses which inform and guide the very design of an algorithm. Flisfeder probes the mystery, or the *black box* of an algorithm in chapter four, attending to the double role of curation performed by algorithmic media and users compelled to feed it data. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, revised

for the digital age, helps to stress the reproductive link of the communicative chain within this new media logic. The oppositional readings are incorporated and diffused through the mutual curation, whereby users' content serves the training ground for algorithms, in turn projected as individualized imagery for the desiring gaze.

Chapter five makes the transition to the audience side, locating the root causes for the compulsion to maintain our social media presence in the neoliberal imperative of self-entrepreneurship and rational choice ideology. The last chapter attests to the extent these modes of self-objectification have penetrated the daily fabric of sociality by locating their operative logic at play in dating apps. Flisfeder's discussion of love and romance does hint at the possibility of liberation, if only we get all the way through the path of desire, which he dissects in dialectic terms of negation and affirmation. This emancipatory twist elevates what may otherwise appear as slightly bewildering, if thorough and far-reaching analysis.

The most important takeaway, however, lies in the very metaphor of social media for the dominant form of ideology. While it may not be enough to convert sceptics of Hegelian-Lacanian thought, it certainly does a great job at illuminating widely shared and deep-seated intuitions about social media age through its central categories of enjoyment, drive and desire. This makes Flisfeder's New Structuralist account a crucial waymark in redeeming the locus of subjectivity that has gone missing from much of contemporary critical theory.

## References

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