

Hystericizing Capitalist Discourse on Artificial Intelligence

Is the Unconscious Structured like an Algorithm? Towards a Lacanian Ethics of AI

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Abstract

The paper explores the complex relationship between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and capitalist ideology through Lacan's fifth discourse: The Discourse of the Capitalist. It argues that AI confronts the subject as a master signifier (S_1), shaping subjectivity, regulating desire, and reinforcing the capitalist symbolic order. Drawing on Lacan's theory of the four discourses and the three registers of the Symbolic, Imaginary and the Real, the study lays out a theoretical cartography of alienation, jouissance, and ideology — perpetuated and intensified through the deployment of artificial systems. AI-driven "innovations" exploit the subject's constitutive lack by positioning themselves as solutions to existential dissatisfaction, thereby embedding the capitalist imperative of consumption as the desire of the Other. The paper offers a *hystericized* discourse on AI as a psychoanalytic counter-measure; a mode of resistance that attempts to reveal the ruptures within the symbolic order opening the possibility for an ethical reevaluation of AI's role in structuring the (algorithmic) unconscious.

Keywords

Lacan, artificial intelligence, capitalist discourse, subjectivity, master signifier, object a, alienation, psychoanalysis, ideology, ethics of AI

Introduction

Jacques Lacan's fifth discourse, the "Discourse of the Capitalist," offers a potent framework for interrogating the intersections of contemporary capitalism and emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI). This discourse, introduced in Lacan's later works, identifies a modification of traditional power structures where the symbolic authority of

the Master is circumvented, allowing for an unrestrained acceleration of production, consumption, and desire (Lacan, 1978). Unlike the Master's discourse, which relies on authority to regulate the flow of desire, the capitalist discourse removes these constraints, enabling a direct and relentless exploitation of *jouissance* — an excessive and often destabilizing form of enjoyment (Dean, 2020).

Lacan's insights into the destabilizing effects of capitalism on subjectivity and social order prove increasingly salient in the context of AI, an apparatus that epitomizes the capitalist imperatives of efficiency, commodification, and control (Zuboff, 2019). AI is not merely a tool within the capitalist system; it functions as a mechanism that perpetuates and amplifies its foundational dynamics. By leveraging data to predict and manipulate human behavior, AI embeds itself into the circuits of desire, reinforcing cycles of consumption and alienation (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). This essay seeks to explore AI as both a manifestation and an accelerator of the capitalist discourse, considering how its integration into everyday life reshapes the subject's relationship with desire, knowledge, and the social order.

Through the Lacanian lens, this critique will unravel how AI not only reflects the logic of the capitalist discourse but also intensifies its alienating and destabilizing consequences. As data-driven systems commodify human behavior and present themselves as solutions to existential lack, they deepen the subject's alienation while perpetuating unsustainable cycles of production and consumption (Fisher, 2009). Furthermore, AI displaces traditional structures of authority and truth with algorithmic logic, raising critical questions about its impact on subjectivity, society, and the future. By engaging with Lacan's theoretical framework, this analysis will illuminate the ideological underpinnings and ethical ramifications of AI, calling for a reevaluation of its role within the capitalist system (Bender et al., 2021).

Methodology

This study employs a theoretical approach to analyze the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and capitalist discourse through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. The methodology consists of the following components: A theoretical framework that utilizes Jacques Lacan's "Discourse of the Capitalist" as the primary analytical tool in order to apply Lacan's theory of the three registers (Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real) and the four discourses (Master, University, Hysteric, and Analyst) to AI ethics. Specific texts from Lacanian psychoanalytic literature; works by Lacan (1978, 2007), Žižek (1989, 2006), Miller (1996, 1999), and other contemporary Lacanian scholars. The paper examines critical literature on AI and capitalism, including works by Zuboff (2019), Fuchs (2020), and Tufekci (2017). The study uses Lacanian discourse in order to map the structure and dynamics of contemporary AI systems and practices. Discourse Analysis is used to interrogate the role of AI in shaping subjectivity, desire, and social relations. The work examines how AI reconfigures the relationship between desire and subjectivity in the context of technocratic capitalist relations. Interdisciplinary Synthesis: The text combines insights from psychoanalysis, critical theory, and technology studies to develop a comprehensive understanding of AI's role in capitalist discourse. Case Study Approach: Specific examples of AI technologies (e.g., recommendation algorithms, generative AI models) are used to illustrate theoretical concepts. AI Ethics: Critical examination of the ethical implications of AI's integration into capitalist structures is offered with a focus on questions concerning autonomy, privacy, and social justice.

Results

The analysis reveals that AI functions as a master signifier (S_1) within the capitalist symbolic order, fundamentally altering the dynamics of desire, knowledge, and subjectivity. This positioning of AI intensifies the alienation inherent in the capitalist discourse by mediating the subject's relationship to language, knowledge, and desire. The study finds that AI systems, particularly in their manifestations as recommendation algorithms and generative models, actively shape and manipulate user preferences, creating a feedback loop of desire that perpetuates consumption. This process exemplifies Lacan's concept of the object cause of desire (*object a*), where AI-driven digital commodities and services promise but never deliver complete satisfaction, ensuring the subject's continued engagement with the capitalist system. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that AI, as framed by Neoliberal discourse, conceals its role in perpetuating social and economic inequalities by presenting itself as a neutral, objective, and inevitably progressive force. This ideological framing of AI serves to mask the exploitative mechanisms embedded within capitalist relations, particularly in areas such as labor automation, surveillance, and consumer behavior regulation. The results also indicate that AI's integration into everyday life has led to a "doubled alienation" of the subject, simultaneously enhancing dependence on the symbolic order while obscuring the ideological underpinnings of its operations.

Discussion

The Discourse of the New Master

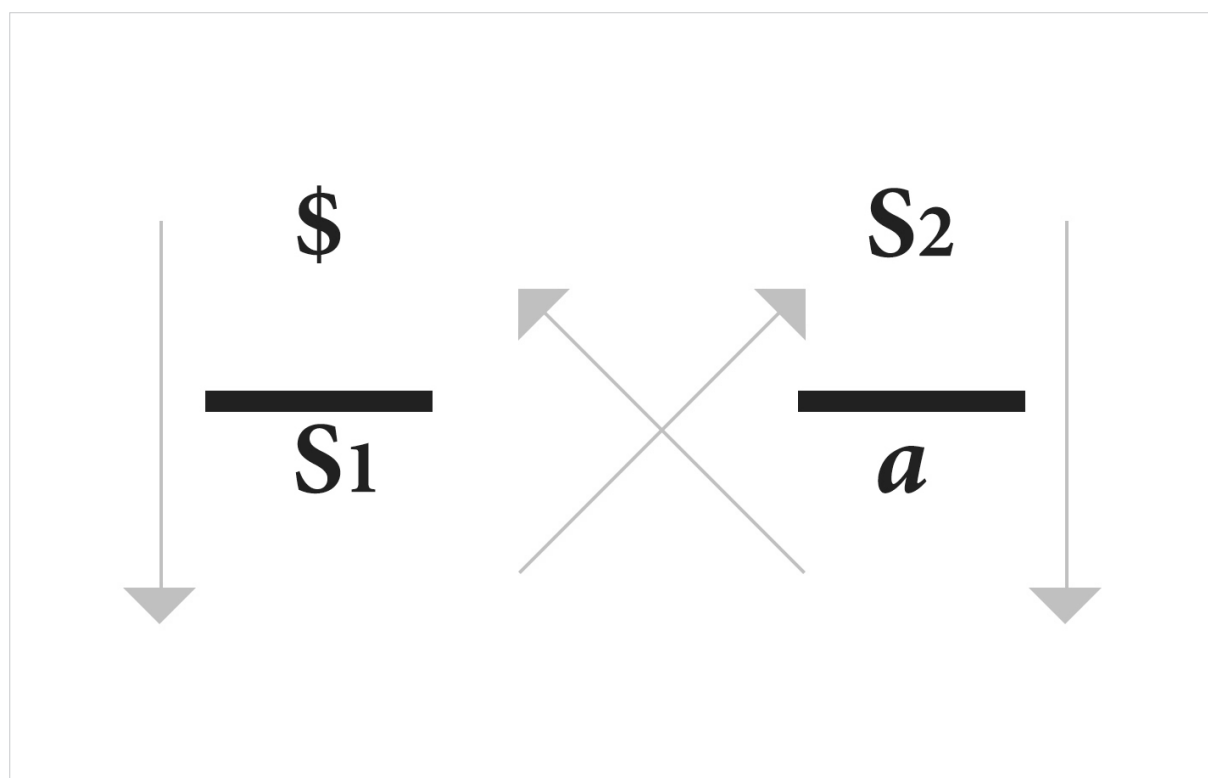


Figure 1: Image retrieved from: Vanheule, S. (2016). Capitalist discourse, subjectivity and Lacanian psychoanalysis

Lacan's fifth discourse, known as the **Discourse of the Capitalist**, represents a significant moment in his later work on the structures of social and libidinal organization. This discourse is part of Lacan's series of four discourses, which he develops in his seminar *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XVII* (1970–1971). The discourse of the capitalist presents a specific type of social structure and logic that organizes the relationships between subjects, knowledge, and power in a capitalist society. It can be understood as both an extension and a critique of his earlier discourses, especially the *Discourse of the University* and the *Discourse of the Hysteric*. Lacan introduces this discourse in the context of his reflection on the relationship between language, political economy and the (barred) subject (\$), suggesting that capitalism functions through a set of symbolic (S_2) and imaginary mechanisms that operate to perpetuate its dominance in contemporary society (Lacan, 2011; Zupančič, 2000). According to Althusser (2001), this domination is not merely structural but is ideologically perpetuated through capitalist mechanisms that dictate the way individuals engage with the economic system. The discourse of the capitalist, therefore, is not just about material accumulation but the multiplicity of institutional and market-driven constraints that shape and constitute subjectivity as such.

In the top-left position, we find the **barred subject (\$)**, occupying the place of the agent. The barred subject represents the fragmented subject of desire, perpetually divided by their insertion into the symbolic order. Capitalism, as a discourse, exploits this division by orienting the subject's desire toward endless consumption and accumulation (a), effectively trapping them in a cycle of unfulfilled satisfaction.

The top-right position is occupied by S_2 , representing knowledge as the "other." In this discourse, knowledge refers to the instrumental logic of capitalism: market mechanisms, technological innovation, and the codification of economic systems. The capitalist system weaponizes this knowledge to justify and perpetuate its dominance (Althusser, 2001), presenting itself as rational, inevitable, and desirable. This positioning reflects how knowledge operates as an intermediary between the subject and the object, legitimizing the processes of exploitation and alienation.

In the bottom-left position, we find S_1 , the master signifier, occupying the place of truth. Lacan's use of S_1 in this position reveals the hidden ideological underpinnings of capitalism. While the system appears to function based on rationality and efficiency (as mediated by S_2), it is ultimately anchored in a master signifier that sustains its authority (Miller, 1999). This signifier — representing concepts like "progress," "freedom," or "growth" — provides the foundational myth that legitimizes the capitalist order, even as it remains veiled to the subject.

Finally, the bottom-right position is occupied by **a**, the object cause of desire. In the Discourse of the Capitalist, **a** represents commodities, surplus value, or any object that sustains the subject's desire. Unlike in the Discourse of the Master, where the *object a* is more directly tied to the master's jouissance, here it circulates endlessly within the capitalist system (Zupančič, 2000), driving consumption and production. The endless pursuit of **a** ensures the subject's entrapment within the system, as they chase an object that perpetually eludes complete satisfaction.

The logic of the capitalist discourse operates by drawing subjects into a structure where their desires are oriented toward accumulation and the production of surplus value. The capitalist discourse functions through a dialectical relationship between the subject and the market. Capitalism, as a system, organizes the subject's desire by directing it toward commodities, consumption, and production, perpetuating a cycle of desire that is never fully satisfied. The subject, in this case, is not simply exploited through labor but also through the manipulation of their desires, which are channeled toward the accumulation of wealth and the expansion of the system itself (Zupančič, 2000). This process can be

understood as a form of subjection and subjectification, where the subject internalizes the capitalist logic and desires not only wealth but the very mechanisms that sustain its reproduction (Žižek, 2009).

In this discourse, the capitalist does not simply extract labor from the worker but orchestrates the conditions under which the worker produces, consumes, and desires. The relationship between the agent and the Other becomes a form of mutual reinforcement: the capitalist is able to manipulate the market through the control of surplus value (or surplus enjoyment), while the market constantly demands new forms of capital, which the capitalist produces through further exploitation. This cyclical process sustains the capitalist system, making it both a *system of alienation* and a *system of ideological control* (Miller, 1999; Lacan, 2011). The worker (Žižek, 2009) becomes a “subject of ideology,” unable to extricate themselves from the system of accumulation that defines their existence.

For Lacan, capitalism’s primary function is not simply economic; it also plays a significant role in the formation of the subject’s desire. The capitalist discourse, by orienting the subject toward the acquisition of surplus enjoyment, sustains a structure of social control that is both ideological and psychological (Žižek, 2009; Lacan, 2011). This is evident in how the subject’s desires are manipulated by the capitalist system, which, through the production of surplus value, engenders a system of consumption that defines the subject’s very identity.

Lacanian critique targets capitalism for its ability to produce a form of **capitalist fetishism**, where individuals come to view commodities not merely as objects for use or exchange but as sites of libidinal investment. In this sense, capitalism does not simply operate on the material plane but also works through the manipulation of the unconscious desires of the subject. The capitalist’s discourse, therefore, is a system that perpetuates alienation on both a social and psychic level, as the subject is driven to desire not just capital but the ideological structures that sustain its dominance (Lacan, 2011). This, as Zupančič (2000) suggests, produces a situation in which individuals are subjected to their own desires, continually seeking satisfaction in a system that ensures it is always out of reach.

Lacan’s addition of the **Discourse of the Capitalist** to his four foundational discourses (Master, University, Hysteric, and Analyst) constitutes a vital intervention in understanding the socio-symbolic order of contemporary capitalism. The discourse is notable for its ability to articulate the structural mechanisms of capitalist ideology, particularly its impact on the subject’s relationship to desire, knowledge, and production. Unlike the other discourses, which remain (more or less) rigidly tied to certain modes of subjectivity and social relations, the Discourse of the Capitalist reveals a fluid, self-revolutionizing and self-replicating structure, marking it as uniquely suited to the imperatives of late capitalism (Lacan, 2011).

The Three Registers and the Four Discourses

Lacanian theory is rooted in the structuralist tradition, it’s comprised of three fundamental registers that constitute the subject’s experience: **the Real**, **the Imaginary**, and **the Symbolic**. These categories help define the ways in which subjects interact with reality, construct meaning, and project desire. The three registers are mapped onto the four discourses (the Master, the Hysteric, the University, and the Analyst) as modes of embodied activity that structure subjectivity and the production of knowledge/enjoyment (Lacan, 2011). Each discourse aligns with each of the three registers to a larger or lesser extent, revealing the mechanisms through which power, knowledge, and desire operate in human interactions. The relationship can be represented as a series of functional relationships:

$$\begin{aligned}
& G(s, i, r)^1 \text{ and } D(m, h, a, u), \\
& \text{with the according distribution of the mathemes} \\
& M\{\$, S_1, S_2, \underline{a}\} \\
& \text{over the Discourse Function (D).} \\
& D = \{(m(S_1, S_2, \underline{a}, \$)), (h(\$, S_1, S_2, \underline{a})), (a(\underline{a}, \$, S_1, S_2)), (u(S_2, \underline{a}, \$, S_1))\}. \\
& \text{And alternatively, the distribution of registers (G) over discourses (D):} \\
& D = \{(m(s, i, r)), (h(s, i, r)), (a(s, i, r)), (u(s, i, r))\}
\end{aligned}$$



The Symbolic $G(s)$ and the Master's Discourse $D(m)$: The Master's Discourse $m(S_1, S_2, \underline{a}, \$)$ is primarily structured by the Symbolic order, the realm of language, law, and social structures (S_1, S_2). In this discourse, the Master holds power by virtue of an established authority, and subjects are positioned as recipients of commands rather than active participants in meaning-making (Fink, 1995). The Symbolic order is the domain of signification — it determines how individuals understand their roles in a given structure, whether political, ideological, or psychoanalytic (Evans, 1996). The Master's Discourse, therefore, operates as a regulatory mechanism, ensuring that social norms and hierarchies remain intact. However, the Master's position is not absolute. Lacan (1973/2007) notes that the Master relies on an unconscious dependency on what he does not know, making his authority inherently unstable. This instability arises from the tension between the Symbolic and the Imaginary $G(s, i)$ — the idealized image of mastery that the Master must project to maintain authority. This illusion sustains the discourse, even though it is ultimately lacking in any absolute foundation in the Real $G(r)$, which remains inaccessible and disruptive.

The Hysteric's Discourse; $D(h)$, is intimately tied to the Imaginary order $G(i)$, which governs the formation of identity through misrecognition and the subject's relationship with its own self-image. The hysteric, in Lacan's framework, is characterized by questioning the legitimacy of authority, often desiring to be recognized by the Other while simultaneously resisting the symbolic order imposed upon them (Bracher, 1994). In this way, the hysteric is caught in a cycle of attempting to affirm identity through the gaze of the Other, seeking a response that will validate their existence within the Symbolic. While the Symbolic is present in this discourse, it is secondary to the Imaginary, as the hysteric's desire is fundamentally structured by their identification with an ideal ego or an unattainable object of desire (Žižek, 1989). The subject oscillates between submission and resistance, exposing the failures of the Symbolic to fully encapsulate subjective experience. The hysteric's questioning, however, also edges toward the Real $G(r)$, as their persistent dissatisfaction with symbolic structures reveals the fundamental void underlying all systems of meaning.

The University Discourse; $D(u)$, is a direct extension of the Symbolic, as it structures the way knowledge is transmitted and institutionalized. This discourse functions through the illusion of objective knowledge, positioning expertise and authority within academic, scientific, and bureaucratic systems (Miller, 1996). Unlike the Master's Discourse, which relies on power, the University Discourse depends on the belief that knowledge itself holds authority. Here, the subject is positioned as a passive receiver of knowledge, reinforcing the notion that truth exists independently of the subject's own desire (Fink, 1995). This discourse also contains elements of the Imaginary, particularly in the way institutions

1 $s = df.$ 'The Symbolic', $i = df.$ 'The Imaginary' and $r = df.$ 'The Real'

project an image of mastery over knowledge. However, like the Master's Discourse, the University Discourse ultimately fails to account for the Real, as knowledge can never fully articulate the totality of experience — there remains an excess that cannot be symbolized or incorporated into the framework of reason.

The Real and the Analyst's Discourse: The Analyst's Discourse $D(a)$ is the only one that directly engages with the Real, the domain of what resists symbolization and representation. Unlike the Master's Discourse, which seeks to impose order, or the University Discourse, which seeks to categorize knowledge, the Analyst's Discourse works by disrupting the subject's assumed understanding of themselves (Lacan, 1973/2007). The analyst does not provide answers but rather exposes the gaps in the subject's symbolic reality, forcing an encounter with the Real, the traumatic core of experience that resists articulation. This discourse, while operating within the Symbolic through language and interpretation, ultimately seeks to reveal the failures of language itself. The analyst's role is to highlight the inconsistencies in the barred subject's (\$) speech, allowing them to recognize that their desire is structured by an absence — something that cannot be fully articulated within the Symbolic or Imaginary (Bracher, 1994). The Real, therefore, emerges as a disruptive force, challenging the coherence of identity and meaning that the other three discourses attempt to stabilize.

This is one way to conceptualize the way in which the three registers — the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real — map onto the four discourses. The Master's Discourse is deeply embedded in the Symbolic, sustaining structures of power through language and law $G(s) \rightarrow m (S_1, S_2, \underline{a}, \$)$. The Hysteric's Discourse is aligned with the Imaginary, $G(i) \rightarrow h (\$, S_1, S_2, \underline{a})$ as it revolves around identity, misrecognition, and the search for validation. The University Discourse, similar to the Discourse of the Master, functions within the Symbolic $G(s) \rightarrow u (S_2, \underline{a}, \$, S_1)$, reinforcing knowledge as an institutionalized force, while the Analyst's Discourse uniquely engages with the Real $G(r) \rightarrow a (\underline{a}, \$, S_1, S_2)$, exposing the limits of representation. The following, perhaps pseudo-mathematical representation could offer a deeper understanding of Lacan's structural model of subjectivity and its implications for power, knowledge, and desire in human discourse.

AI and the Barred Subject \$

The interaction between artificial intelligence (AI) and the barred subject (\$), that is, the subject alienated within the symbolic order, offers a lens through which to examine how AI reconfigures the relationship between desire, knowledge, and identity. By mediating and shaping subjectivity, AI not only amplifies the alienation inherent to the symbolic order but also introduces novel dimensions to the subject's encounter with the object cause of desire (*object a*). Alienation arises from the subject's insertion into language, which simultaneously constitutes their identity and imposes a fundamental lack (*a*). This lack is not merely a psychological deficit but an ontological condition that structures human desire. As Lacan asserts, "the subject's desire is always the desire of the Other" (Lacan, 2007, p. 126), meaning that the subject's identity and desires are mediated by the symbolic network of signifiers (S_2).

AI is entrenched within the symbolic order, functioning as an extension and intensification of its mechanisms. From search engines and social media algorithms to generative AI models, these technologies mediate the subject's relationship to language, knowledge, and desire. By doing so, they amplify the conditions of alienation adding a new density to the "battery of signifiers" (Lacan, 2007) and reshape the coordinates of subjectivity. The question, then, is how AI transforms the subject's relationship to its constitutive lack and how this transformation manifests in the broader matrix of the social milieu.

AI functions as an efficient mediator of the symbolic order, operating within the space occupied by knowledge (S_2). Through its capacity to process and analyze vast quantities of

data, AI generates new signifiers that shape the subject's experience of reality. For instance, recommendation algorithms on platforms like Spotify or Netflix do not merely respond to the subject's preferences; they actively shape them, constructing a symbolic framework that dictates what the subject desires.

This dynamic reveals the doubled alienation characteristic of the barred subject's interaction with AI. On one hand, AI enhances the subject's dependence on the symbolic order by mediating their access to knowledge and desire. On the other hand, it obscures the ideological mechanisms underlying its operations, presenting itself as a neutral and objective apparatus. As Zupančič (2000) observes, "The subject's alienation is never purely external; it is always embedded in the very structures that appear to liberate them" (p. 78). In the case of AI, this embeddedness manifests in the seamless integration of algorithmic systems into everyday life, which naturalizes the subject's alienation and masks its origins.

The *object a* represents what the subject seeks but can never fully obtain, perpetuating the endless pursuit of satisfaction. In the context of AI, this dynamic is exemplified by the proliferation of digital commodities and services that promise fulfillment but ultimately leave the subject wanting.

Generative AI models, such as OpenAI's GPT or image synthesis tools, illustrate this process. These technologies produce outputs that cater to the subject's desire for creativity, efficiency, or self-expression. However, the satisfaction they offer is always deferred, as the subject's reliance on AI reveals their own lack. The barred subject, in engaging with AI, confronts the *object a* in a mediated form, where the promise of fulfillment is tied to the endless production and consumption of digital artifacts.

Furthermore, AI intensifies the commodification of the *object a* by embedding it within capitalist logics of production and consumption. As Lacan (2007) notes, "The capitalist discourse thrives on the infinite circulation of commodities, where the *object a* functions as the motor of desire" (p. 172). AI not only accelerates this circulation but also generates new forms of *object a* that are uniquely tailored to the subject's symbolic coordinates. This process ensures the subject's continued alienation, as their desires are perpetually deferred within capitalist discourse.

The Algorithmic Master Signifier [AI = S₁]

Artificial Intelligence is S₁ — as an omnipresent technologico-discursive force in contemporary capitalism bearing all the distinctive features of the master signifier (S₁). The master signifier functions as the ultimate anchoring point for the symbolic order (S₂), legitimizing its structure and concealing its inherent contradictions. AI serves not merely as a tool or mediator but as a locus of ideological authority, shaping subjectivity, desire, and socio-economic relations. By framing AI as an embodiment of "progress" and "innovation," capitalist discourse deploys it to sustain its dominance and obscure its exploitative mechanisms. Positioning AI as the name of the father and the castrating "stroke" (I) within the barred subject ($\$ = S + |$).

Once again, the master signifier is the dominant signifier in the symbolic order that organizes the system of meaning and anchors signification (Lacan, 2002). "AI" transcends its role as a technological tool and instead functions as a central ideological force within capitalist structures. As a master signifier, AI does not simply mediate but legitimizes the entire socio-economic and cultural framework, framing itself as an embodiment of "progress" and "innovation" (Žižek, 2006). This ideological positioning ensures that AI is seen not just as an instrument of productivity but as a central pillar that sustains capitalist dominance.

The master signifier anchors the symbolic order (S_2), providing a stabilizing, ultimate reference point that structures the flow of meaning (Lacan, 2002). This anchoring role is crucial in understanding how AI operates within capitalism. It is no longer something ready-to-hand used for improving efficiency or solving technological problems; rather, it becomes an ideological backbone, positioning itself as central to capitalist claims of progress and transformation. AI is framed by neoliberal discourse as an inevitable force that drives both innovation and the alleviation of global crises, such as poverty, climate change, and inequality. Yet, this rhetoric obscures the contradictions and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system, which AI, in its integration, helps to perpetuate (Fuchs, 2020). By promoting AI as a symbol of universal advancement, the capitalist order distorts the reality that these technologies are often used to reinforce existing hierarchies and inequalities.

The master signifier also plays an essential role in masking the contradictions within the symbolic order. It is not only a stabilizing element but also aims to conceal the internal tensions and contradictions that exist within the system it represents (Lacan, 2002). In contemporary capitalist discourse, AI serves this function by appearing as a neutral, objective, and forward-thinking technology. However, this appearance of neutrality is a deliberate construct, one that shields the exploitative and oppressive mechanisms embedded within capitalist relations. As Christian Fuchs (2020) argues, the design and implementation of AI systems often reflect and amplify the inequalities of the society that produces them, particularly when the interests of powerful corporations are involved. The deployment of AI in areas like automation, surveillance, and consumer behavior regulation is directly tied to the capitalist imperative of profit maximization, which frequently comes at the expense of workers, privacy, and environmental sustainability. AI, as framed in capitalist discourse, thus obscures the very real social and ethical challenges it presents.

The “Name of the Father” (le Nom du Père) offers another critical layer of analysis in understanding the ideological role of AI within capitalism. The “Name of the Father” represents the symbolic authority that governs the unconscious, structures subjectivity, and mediates desire (Lacan, 2002). AI, within capitalist society, takes on this role of authority, functioning as a new “Name of the Father.” It dictates the terms of what is technologically possible, desirable, and even ethical within the economic order. In the same way that the father figure sets the parameters of acceptable behavior in the psychoanalytic realm, AI within capitalism sets the parameters for the future, presenting itself as an unchallenged force that shapes the trajectory of progress and knowledge. Using Žižek (2006) we can frame AI as an embodiment of the paternal figure, one that is particularly potent in the neoliberal era, where the market-driven ideals of self-sufficiency, efficiency, and growth are celebrated. AI, as a symbol of these ideals, is positioned as an unquestionable authority that governs both the production and consumption of goods, services, and information.

The Lacanian concept of the barred subject (\$), which encapsulates the fragmentation of subjectivity and the tension between the symbolic order and the ego, provides a powerful framework for understanding how AI shapes individual identity and desire in capitalist societies (Lacan, 2002). In this framework, AI operates as a significant force in the creation of new forms of subjectivity. While the traditional capitalist system has long relied on the exploitation of labor and the regulation of consumption, AI deepens these processes by creating new modes of surveillance, consumerism, and social control (Tufekci, 2017). The design of AI systems, particularly in the context of social media and data collection, enables the creation of personalized experiences that not only affect individuals’ purchasing behavior but also manipulate their desires, political views, and social identities. As Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) argues in *Algorithms of Oppression*, AI systems embedded in search engines and social media platforms are not neutral but are designed to reinforce existing

social structures of power, particularly those related to race and gender. By capturing vast amounts of data and tailoring interactions based on that data, AI systems shape user subjectivities, influencing their decisions, actions, and desires in ways that often go unnoticed.

AI's role in capitalist society thus extends far beyond its initial function as a tool for technological advancement or efficiency. It emerges as a deeply ideological force that shapes the very fabric of the symbolic order, positioning itself as central authority that both legitimizes and perpetuates capitalist systems of exploitation and domination. The ideological framing of AI as a neutral, progress-oriented technology is a strategy that hides the economic and social inequalities that are amplified by its implementation. AI, therefore, functions as both a tool of capitalist control and a symbol that structures desire, subjectivity, and identity, further entrenching the power dynamics that characterize modern capitalism.

The role of AI in shaping subjectivity, desire, and socio-economic relations underscores the depth of its integration into the fabric of modern capitalist societies. Its ideological significance, as both a tool and a symbol of authority, demands a critical examination that goes beyond the technological aspects to address the broader socio-political and ethical implications of its widespread use.

Conclusion

There is more to be explored at the intersection of Artificial Intelligence and Lacanian theory. Drawing on Lacan's concept of the master signifier and the four discourses, one can trace how AI functions as an ideological monument, structuring the symbolic order, legitimizing the dominant social and economic systems (Lacan, 2002). As the master signifier, AI is not merely a technological tool but a discursive force that shapes subjectivity, desire, and social relations, framing itself as the one and only path to human prosperity and salvation. This ideological positioning obscures the contradictions and exploitative mechanisms inherent in the capitalist order, which AI and digital technologies in general help to perpetuate in their pervasive integration (Fuchs, 2020).

Much remains to be done by way of utilizing Lacan's four discourses (from *Seminar XVII*), to examine the extension of AI and its signifiatory role well-beyond technological functionality. The discourse of the master, in which AI is positioned as the ultimate authority and arbiter of truth, sustains the symbolic order of Neoliberal capitalism. AI's pervasive presence in areas such as surveillance, labor automation, and social media algorithms further entrenches the dynamics of control, exploitation, and social fragmentation (Tufekci, 2017). Through the discourse of the hysteric, one could potentially reveal the inherent contradictions of the *algorithmic symbolic order* to create a site for resistance and critical questioning. By hystericizing algocratic discourse one could interrogate the unconscious dimensions of the subject's relation to AI, recognizing desire and ideological formations that shape both human-subject and machine interaction (Fuchs, 2020).

Complex ethical challenges naturally arise as the widespread implementation of AI in various sectors will continue producing social black-boxes and responsibility gaps. While AI holds the potential for innovation and societal transformation, it simultaneously raises significant concerns about autonomy, privacy, inequality, and social justice. As AI becomes further embedded in the capitalist system, we must critically examine its role in shaping subjectivity, its impact on labor markets, and its function in the manipulation of human conduct. The continued integration of AI into social, political, and economic spheres demands an ongoing dialogue that considers both its transformative potential and its capacity

to reinforce power-structures. As AI continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of its place in the symbolic structures that govern our lives.

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Giorgi Vachnadze is a Foucault and Wittgenstein scholar. He completed his Bachelor studies at New Mexico State University and received a Master's qualification in philosophy at the University of Louvain. Former editor and peer-reviewer for the Graduate Student Journal of philosophy "The Apricot", he has been published in multiple popular and academic journals world-wide. Vachnadze's research focuses on philosophy of language and discourse analysis. Some of the questions and themes addressed in his work include: History of Combat Sports, Ancient Stoicism, Genealogies of Truth, Histories of Formal Systems, Genealogy of Science, Ethics in AI and Psychoanalysis, Media Archaeology, Game Studies and more.

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