

The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence by Isabel Millar. (The Palgrave Lacan Series). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. ISBN-10: 3030679802. ISBN-13: 9783030679804.

The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence is a timely contribution to the critical reflection on artificial intelligence (AI) at a time when a proliferating array of digital technologies are becoming integral and indeed infrastructural to the social bond and the operation of the world at large. While there has been an abundant growth of philosophical works recently emerging in response to the way digital objects and machine algorithms are poised to bring about profound social, categorical and existential transformations that will have deep ramifications in our lives, there are as yet few works which seek to deal in a sustained manner with the topic of enjoyment, and the position it occupies in our current computerized conjuncture of techno-scientific reason, a neglect which may strike one as surprising, given its quite explicit status in popular discourses on technology.

Millar's book is certainly not the first in the Lacanian field to try and grapple with the complex problem of technological apparatuses and, by extension, their relations to science and capitalism, but it is distinguished by being one of the first to deal with enjoyment as a problematic of AI and to construe the latter as a whole through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly with its concepts of sex, drive, and the speaking body. An avowedly speculative and experimental work, its central claim is that contemporary AI's attempts at creating embodied forms of artificial life in the guise of synthetic brains, emotive sensors, digital nervous systems, prosthetic companions, and the like – what the philosopher Yuk Hui aptly calls the 'becoming organic of digital machines' (2019: 16) in our present technological epoch – are provoking an urgent engagement with the psychoanalytic subject, implicating as they do the complexities of *jouissance*, sex, and fantasy.

Like Hui's insistence that this forms a new condition of philosophizing today, we might hear Millar's insistence to be that a new condition of psychoanalyzing is at hand, one which may itself play an integral part in the philosophy erecting itself on these new material foundations. But it is not philosophy, so much as anti-philosophy, that interests Millar, notably the latter's insistence on the irrevocable distinction between thinking and being that she uses to examine the attempt to separate thought from the body in current AI research and development. Apropos of enjoyment, this distinction is what she finds crucial to the elucidation of the matter of sex which she argues lies at the heart of AI, antecedent to any question of its status as a 'thinking thing' (p.7) routinely fought over between computer scientists and philosophers of mind.

The matter of sex in AI is normally construed as little more than a question of human sexual practices that AI will come to facilitate and enhance, but Millar submits this 'apparently superficial anthropomorphization of our fantasies of AI' (p.6) dissimulates what is at root the ontological problem of sex psychoanalysis has long taken as its privileged object – one that involves Lacan's conception of the real as impossible, a void structuring a formal economy of inside and outside that marks all subjects as speaking beings. 'This fantasy of AI sex,' as she writes, 'obscures the fact that sex is *only ever* a fantasy covering up for a hole in reality itself. [...] It is an absence which... brings with it a deafening silence which is impossible to ignore. The "sex" of Artificial Intelligence resides everywhere, it is what brings it into being' (p.6).

Amongst its various manifestations, the figure of AI Millar thus selects as her prime object is the sex robot, or Sexbot, which she submits to an original treatment in her book using a Lacanian

point of view. Situated at the crossing point between AI and psychoanalysis, the Sexbot for Millar is a being which underscores the way in which the body and the drives are centrally at stake in the current context of *technē*. It occupies, in her words, ‘a conceptual space between the human and technology, between knowledge and enjoyment, and between sex and death,’ (p.118) and thus embodies not just the fantasies of AI sex, but also the *Unbehagen* driving them, making it the technological object *par excellence* for a psychoanalysis of artificial intelligence.

Millar divides her book into two parts, the first of which she devotes to the theoretical elaboration of the Sexbot via three interconnected lines of inquiry: the concept of intelligence, the artificial object, and the ‘abyssal’ (p.9) nature of sex. She begins in chapter two, ‘The Stupidity of Intelligence,’ by considering recent philosophical engagements with the challenges posed by AI – in particular, that of Pasquinelli (2015), Parisi (2015) and Malabou (2019) – and tries to show how they paradoxically foreclose upon the figure of the psychoanalytic subject they bring to light. This shows up, she claims, as a formal figure of absence that appears, unmistakably, at the point where they touch upon the limits of knowledge, which she attributes to the workings of the impossibility of the real (stupidity), or the hole in the symbolic, as theorized by Lacan.

Probing, thus, from an anti-philosophical perspective, the way philosophical discourses on AI are in themselves forms of enjoyment stemming from the attempt at truth through knowledge, she goes on to consider our new ‘bodily and structural relationship’ (p. 7) to technological objects in her subsequent chapter, ‘The Artificial Object.’ Here, Millar deploys a little-used pair of concepts, the *lathouse* and the *alethosphere*, coined by Lacan in *Seminar XVII*, to elaborate how technological apparatuses in the contemporary are insinuating themselves into the social bond and reconfiguring real, symbolic, and imaginary dimensions of experience by their prosthetic intimacy to our bodies.

What is key for Millar in the concept of the *lathouse* is that it enables us to conceive of this intimacy as bearing directly on the drives. The term *lathouse* – a neologism which consists in *ousia* (Greek for essence) and *ventouse* (as in the suckers of an octopus, a suction cap, or a cupping glass), and thus also connotes *vent* (‘wind’, as in that of the voice) – was, as Millar explains, originally invented by Lacan to describe the manner in which his voice was being captured with tape recorders at his lectures, and then circulated as a disembodied object to be listened to (*j-ouir*) and enjoyed (*jouir*) (p.52), in what he correspondingly called the *alethosphere*, the name, drawn from *alētheia* (‘truth’), he gave to the formalized spheres of scientific and social discourse within which *lathouses* circulate. According to Millar, presaging our own time, Lacan can be seen thus to be fundamentally concerned with ‘the possibility of siphoning off bodily enjoyment via some form of apparatus’ that would, therefore, contain in itself something of the drives (p.52).

Crucially it was Lacan’s own suggestion that this conceptual pair be understood as analogues of one another, and Millar thus develops the thesis of *lathouses* as drive objects that trace out a circuit into which the bodies they are parasitic on are plugged. Using the allegorical example of Sara in the episode *Arkangel* of Charlie Brooker’s Netflix Series, *Black Mirror* (E4:S2) – a dystopian tale of a mother who gets her daughter’s (Sara’s) brain implanted with a chip that allows her to simulate her vision and control her sensory perceptions – Millar discusses the way technological objects qua *lathouses* subsist in and with bodies as objects that ‘siphon off’ and ‘administer’ (p.64) *jouissance* on the proximal level, while at the same time objectify and codify it in the *alethosphere* as units of manipulable data – in short, as ‘extimate object[s] that convert interiority into exteriority and vice versa’ (p.64).

The crucial dimension of this conception of the technological object, however, for Millar, is that of the drive body it implies, a subjective apparatus which indexes what psychoanalysis takes as its privileged object: the split subject, which she elaborates, drawing on Tomšič's (2012) reading of Freud's *Prothesengott*, as a form of relation to the signifier in that, like the symbolic castration attendant to the entrance of the speaking being into language, technological prostheses radically expose the split of the subject between its biological and drive bodies.

Millar underscores that this is none other than what is called 'sex' in psychoanalysis: an artifice propped up on the biological body exactly like a prosthetic organ. This conception of sex as 'the first of all technics,' (p. 63) she claims, is what Freud had posited from the very beginning, and is precisely the dimension of the theory of prostheses that has been elided in Stiegler's philosophy of technics which has drawn a similar link between drives and technological objects. Yet, it is this sexual notion of technics – one she finds supported in Baudrillard's notion of the 'gizmo' in *The System of Objects* (2005), where he posits a parallel between technological action and sexual action – that she takes to be critical to our technological present, increasingly populated as it is with *lathouses* circulating like so many drive objects of the body around the void named by sex.

It is through this perspective of the 'sexual non-rapport,' therefore, that Millar attempts to formulate the theory of the Sexbot in chapter four, 'The Sexual Abyss.' Her central concern here is directed to what she points out has been ironically left out of the picture with respect to the Sexbot, amidst the voicing of the ethical quandaries surrounding its use: the nature of sex per se as a problem of an ontological abyss and a radical lack of meaning which she insists can be seen as motivating the moral, ethical, and biopolitical discourses on the Sexbot in the first place.

Using Zupančič's (2017) notion of sex as an 'inhuman operator' in being, Millar discusses the Sexbot as something that arises out of the negativity of sex as a positivized object circulating in the topology of the drives, and thus embodies the ontological void inasmuch as it paradoxically covers over it in the form of fantasy – a structural logic the name of the leading Sexbot company appears uncannily to suggest itself: Abyss Creations (p.114-116).

For Millar, therefore, it is not simply the fantasy of sex embodied by the Sexbot, but the fact that the Sexbot personifies a sex that is only ever a fantasy, given the impossibility of the real lying at its origin, which needs to be exposed. Through a reading of Lacan's logic of sexualization and concept of feminine as 'not-all' together with the clinic of ordinary psychosis that centralizes the notion of the speaking body as detachable and re-appropriable, she goes on thus to spell out the way the Sexbot as an inhuman non-living intelligence enables sexual fantasy through the very enigma of sexual difference it poses, and thereby raises the question of a 'non-discursive' or 'autistic' *jouissance* (p.107), *a la* J.A. Miller (2019), which bypasses the field of the Other and forms a closed loop of object satisfaction imagined as untethered to any negativity attendant to language and the dialectic of desire which she analyzes the Sexbot as constituting and saliently embodying.

Having thus conjured the figure of the Sexbot, Millar proceeds in the second part of her book to address these implications of the Sexbot: firstly, as an inhuman form of thinking, secondly, a form of enjoyment that is undead, and thirdly, an unborn yet sexed being; three dimensions of the future of embodied AI which she boldly attempts to explore through the medium of film, and which she contends fundamentally subverts Kant's three famous enlightenment questions: 'What Can I Know?', 'What Should I Do?' and 'What May I Hope For?', which correspond respectively to the Sexbot taken as 'exterior' (Knowledge), 'interior' (Act), and 'extimate' (Hope) (p.119).

Chapter five deals with the first Kantian question, and is devoted to a further elaboration of the anti-philosophical thesis of the sexual non-rapport *qua* the split between being and thinking, a schema through which Millar, following Copjec's (2015) reading of Lacan's graphs of sexuation in *Seminar XX* as the instantiation of Kant's antinomies of reason, posits metaphysical knowledge as sexual knowledge, and thus renders distinct the categories of knowledge and enjoyment which she also reveals to be at work in the original Turing Test itself. Analyzing the figure of Ava from the 2014 film *Ex-Machina* as an exterior instantiation of the Sexbot, she discusses how her status as the first real AI being poses itself as a 'transcendental object' in the position of the hysteric whose embodiment of the Other *jouissance* instantiates, for her male creators (the protagonists of the film), the ontological cleavage between knowledge and truth that pertains to the structural logic of castration.

Chapter six deals with the second Kantian question, and is largely devoted to reconceiving the Kantian moral law, following Lacan, as based not just in desire but also in *jouissance*, in the context of the development of artificially intelligent beings for sexual pleasure and the way their undead and ever reprogrammable suffering, precisely the kind sought after by Sadean libertines, may come to radically restructure our normative ethical frameworks – a complex of questions related to sex, law, and originary loss which she explores through the figure of Major Killian in the 2017 film *Ghost in the Shell* as an insignia of the 'interior' Sexbot *qua* subject of undead suffering.

Chapter seven broaches the third Kantian question and focuses on the question of futurity and immortality in light of the inventions AI is currently fashioning in the field of reproduction, such as artificial wombs and hence the possibility of ectogenesis and asexual reproduction, which are producing new conditions of filiation – the positions occupied by maternal and paternal functions in the psyche – implications she explores through the predicament of K.'s identity as the child of 'replicant' parents in the 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049* as the 'extimate' instantiation of the Sexbot, and also through that of the laboring capacity of female bodies positioned as commodifiable means of reproduction, both involved in what she considers a fundamental reconfiguration of the notion of the primal scene and by extension that of the subject of desire.

Finally, Millar concludes her study by considering Kant's fourth question – 'What is Man?' – which she repositions, following Badiou's (2017) reading of Lacan's formulas of *L'Étourdit* (2009), as a being lodged between 'matheme' and 'anxiety' in the real, explored through the figure of David in Steven Spielberg's 2001 film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, an AI child created as an experiment in love who becomes subject through his desire for his mother's desire for a 'real' human child into which he seeks to transform at all cost.

By thus conjoining the Lacanian psychoanalytic corpus with the question of the corpus of AI currently in development, which is no easy task, Millar has provided us felicitous means with which we can rethink and reinvent the Freudian psychic apparatus relative to the technological apparatuses of our time as they become systematic on a planetary scale. To be sure, owing to its speculative nature, much of what Millar presents in her book will demand further specification, such as on what the concept of sexuation might mean for the definition of the digital as such, or whether it is ultimately in accord with, or opposed to, a digital conception; but as it stands, it marks the beginning of an approach to AI that incorporates the logic of the (sexual) unconscious as its key element, and can help to inflect the current philosophical reflections on the urgent problem of psychic (dis)individuation, *a la* Simondon (2020), which has undoubtedly become indissociably bound up with the question of subjective position in the Lacanian field.

That said, the reader may find the form of discourse undertaken in the book to be somewhat challenging, appearing not infrequently circuitous and overwrought with theoretical constructions such as to obscure and detract from some of its otherwise incisive points – an unfortunate drawback (and not diminished, I should say, by the sometimes pious tone adopted towards Lacan), since it clearly offers crucial and important conceptual tools with which to delineate the new contours of the psychoanalytic subject it rightly and successfully shows AI to be implicating. The treatment of technological objects as bearing essentially on the prosthetic drive body, in particular, is one that will certainly come to have wide-ranging utility – situating, as it does, the question of the subject, as Lacan would have it, on the level of unconscious enunciation, and one that Millar furthermore connects to the real of feminine *jouissance* as a disavowed truth but also generative point of inventive multiplicity in AI, a theme that runs throughout the book – in the coming context, presently in rapid development, of the so-called internet of things.

Jeremy SOH
Berkeley, California

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