What lurks beneath: The erotic charge of the Laplanchean unconscious and the digital object

Abstract: (40-100 words)

This paper takes a feminist approach to rethinking the significance of user-device interaction, attachments and dependency. It suggests that Jean Laplanche's resignificantion of 'seduction', the function of the 'enigmatic message', and reconfiguration of sexuality as a 'charge and tension', are particularly useful for theorising the relationship that smartphones, as digital objects, have to unconscious sexuality and psychic life. The paper suggests that the draw of user-device interactions is connected to the rhythms of unconscious sexuality and that this opens up the space for thinking beyond subject-object dichotomies and ultimately offers hope for a shift in the cultural imaginary.

Keywords:

Jean Laplanche; smartphones; unconscious sexuality; psychic object; seduction;

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'My tactic has always been to take an apparently classic theme in Freudian psychoanalysis, and to call it into question, challenge it and problematize it ... if we call things into question in this radical and violent way, a new thematic, a new order, and new concepts, or a new ordering of concepts, necessarily emerge'

Jean Laplanche *New Foundations in Psychoanalysis*

Introduction

In this paper, I take a heuristic approach to exploring the intersection of psychoanalysis, sexualities and networked media, by mobilising the work of Jean Laplanche in order to think through the ways in which unconscious sexuality may be a dynamic at play in our everyday interactions, attachments and reliance on smartphones. Within psychoanalytic understandings of subject formation, sexuality has long been a crucial, central and prominent feature of this process. In this paper, I return to some of the formative psychoanalytic insights around the function of unconscious sexuality in relation to the constitution of subjectivity, in order to open up the space to think through how we might understand the ways in which our (already formed) subjectivities take shape within and through a networked, digital context. Laplanche's approach calls into question, challenges and problematises some of the entrenched frameworks within psychoanalysis, such as the primacy given to the phallic signifier (Laplanche, 1992; 2007) and the desexualisation of the mother (Laplanche 1989; 1997). I use his invaluable revisions as a starting point to rethink the ways we might understand the phone-as-object in

relation to the psychic objects of our inner world, and the role that unconscious sexuality plays in this relationship. Laplanche (1992) astutely observed that it was Freud's rigid adherence to a particular phallic logic that often led to a contradiction within his theories. It is only when some of the dichotomous assumptions within psychoanalysis begin to be relinquished, that we can actively deploy psychoanalytic ideas beyond a strictly 'analogue' frame. As such, this paper seeks to dance within that in-between space of analogue and digital, pursuing ideas and connections which do not necessarily seek any definitive end point or conclusion. It is not my intention to definitively articulate what constitutes a 'digital subjectivity', instead, I am interested in demystifying the elements which come together in order to constitute 'subjectivity' in a psychoanalytic sense, and also to expose some of the necessary components which constitute a specifically digital object. If we peel back these layers, what happens when we look beneath the surface of both the 'digital' and 'subjectivity'? Can we use both the overlap and distinction of these two arenas to begin to play about with what might be considered a specifically *digital* subjectivity – something which at this time is still in process, yet to be definitively defined?

Fleshy Digital Bodies

The digital contemporary in which we now live is processual, continuously evolving and changing in impact, the results of which are yet to fully unravel and be revealed, nor perhaps will they ever be. We live in a continuous state of flux, incorporating digital developments into our everyday lives, as we become digital-subjects-in-process. Whilst our digital subjectivity may be something in process, our needs for sustenance and our very existence continues to be that of fleshy, embodied, earthly creatures. We certainly do not begin life as 'digital subjects', even those considered digital natives (Jacobs 2015) become subjects through psychic and developmental processes which are very much embodied and rooted in

the flesh, as well as through relationships with and proximity to other human beings. Perceptual and sensory experiences pave the way for the infant human to become a subject in its own right, and infantile sexuality is a crucial propellant in this journey. The aim of this paper is to mobilise these insights in relation to understanding the (inter)relation of sexuality and the networked digital context, specifically in relation to our everyday use of smart phones.

It would be easy to suggest that the endless possibilities for sexual stimuli, which networked digital technology seems to afford us, is the start and end point of how we might think about sexuality in a digital context. Certainly, the vastness of sexual potentials, fetishes, non-normative practices and 'perversions' (in the psychoanalytic sense) has never seemed so great, and so close to us, now we have access to these hand-held networked devices. In many popular discourses, sexuality and the digital are causally positioned, and this standpoint relies upon the significance of the visual in our capacity to understand sexuality, whether one is sexually engaging in what can be seen on screen or using this visual stimulation to then hook up with another human being. In the public sphere, sexuality and networked technology tend to come together in debates around the perceived changes in the accessibility and content of pornography (e.g. its causal link to child sexual abuse and sexual violence more generally); the potentiality for sex-specific networks to be established, accessed and spill over into the 'real world' (e.g. paedophile rings, swingers parties, casualised sex via hook up apps such as grindr and tindr); or the change in the marketisation of sex via the digital (e.g. cam girls, online escort agencies, live streaming events). But legalities, morals and ethics aside, how helpful is this focus on the visual dimensions of sexuality and digital engagement? Does this prioritisation of the visual - as in the literality of what can be seen on screen – foreclose, or at least circumvent, the potential to think about the ways in which unconscious sexuality works in the everyday?

Beneath the Surface

It has already been astutely pointed out, by thinkers such as Luce Irigaray (1985), that the primacy given to the visual, is another mechanism which both informs and is informed by a notion of phallic primacy. What might we be missing if we overlook the possibility of an alternative, more subtle approach to thinking about sexuality in the context of networked mobile devices? What is at work, out of sight, beneath the surface, not only in terms of the unconscious of the user, but also in terms of the digital object itself as a 'thing' with some kind of functional interiority? What is at stake here is the ways in which a focus on *content*, can shut down the potential for thinking about *form*. In other words, by focusing on what can be seen outside of ourselves (albeit it may stimulate sensations inside ourselves), we risk overlooking that which cannot be seen, such as the internal drives which lead us to pick up the phone in the first place. The purpose of this paper is to try and unpick the significance of these internal processes in relation to understanding our libidinal investment in the digital object; or, in other words, to explore the ways in which we are 'seduced' by the smart phone as an object which beckons us, and what relation this may have to the process of 'seduction' which brought our subjectivity into being in the first place (Laplanche 1989).

Jean Laplanche was one of the few psychoanalytic thinkers who insisted on acknowledging the erotic dimension of the nursing breast, stating 'any attention paid to the fact that the breast is firstly sexual for the mother, that it forms part of her sexual life as an erogenous zone—such an idea, such attention, are practically never found' (1997, p.660). With some notable exceptions (such as Helene Deutsch), the role that the erotic *charge* plays in mother-child intimate relations has not been given much thought outside of psychoanalytic feminism, and a specifically *maternal* sexuality remains a blind spot within psychoanalytic discourse. In the Laplanchean schema, it is precisely through being in the presence of the mother's unconscious sexuality, in the context of intimate maternal body relations, that the infant's rudimentary subjectivity comes into being (Pollock, 2009). As such, subjectivity emerges in

relation to an ‘otherness’, an otherness which cannot be known, colonised or mastered and yet is erotically charged. If we consider this in relation to the ‘erotic’ depiction of women, such as in pornography, the crucial difference is the possibility for this eroticism to be colonised. The gaze acts in a colonising fashion, subsuming the object it sees into meaning of its own making. The active, seeing eye gives meaning, consumes, and claims the woman’s eroticism all for itself. But this is not the case in the erotically charged process of breastfeeding, whereby the breast resists subsumption into absolute meaning, and maintains an enigmatic quality of ‘otherness’ through its incommunicable dimensions. Laplanche locates this otherness, as the undecipherable sexuality, eroticism and erogenous nature of the mother’s breast:

> the breast is not only an object, it is a message presented to the child ... there is not only an explicit message, but also an implicit message, and the child cannot but understand that there is something hidden in it. He doesn’t understand it exactly, has no idea of what the fantasies of the mother are (about sexual pleasure in the breast and so on), but it is impossible in this relationship that something is not perceived of that “normal parapraxis”; what is perceived is that this gesture has something of another meaning, another meaning which is even unknown to the mother herself (Laplanche 1992, p. 22).

This is a radical and important proposition within psychoanalytic theory as it is not reliant on the disavowal of the mother (Irigaray, 1985; Jacobs, 2007; Stone, 2012). Thus not only does Laplanche’s approach enable the functionality of the breast (as nutritional source) to be less influential in understandings of pleasure and excitation, thus sexuality, but also his formulation suggests that the emergence of the infant’s sexuality is in response to being in the presence of ‘otherness’, that is in the presence of the mother’s sexuality through the erotically charged breast. The maternal and sexual are still held as entirely mutually exclusive categories in the cultural imaginary (Giles, 2018; Young, 1990; Tugwell, 2019) and to think of the breast as concurrently sexual and maternal literally causes meaning to collapse (Grosz, 1989). Laplanche’s insistence of the erogenous nature of the breast and the resultant erotic charge in breastfeeding, is one way of bridging this seemingly impossible dichotomy. For Laplanche, it

is precisely *because* the mother is a desiring social *subject* that the child's rudimentary sexuality and subjectivity can come into being (1989; 1997). This is a radical turning point which, I feel, is really worth holding on to when trying to unpick the dynamics at play in the interactions between user (as subject) and smart phone (as object). Might it be that the boundaries between subject and object are not quite so clearly demarcated? If so, what are the implications for thinking about our relationship to digital 'objects', if there is not necessarily a fixity to our assumed position as 'masterful subject'?

A Charge and Tension

A fruitful starting place to begin to try and think through some of these questions is Laplanche's return to Freud's pre-genital conception of eroticism, where 'the entire body is initially a potential erotogenic zone' (1999, p.169). Through his revision, Laplanche was able to challenge some of the rigidity of a genitally-fixated understanding of sexuality, and ultimately suggest that sexuality is in fact not about seeking discharge and release but instead is a pleasure of charge and tension (Laplanche, 2007). The pleasure is not eclipsed by or collapsed into an end point, but instead is located in maintaining a rising tension, which ultimately furthers excitation, 'an attraction that feeds itself, then tends toward an ever greater charge' (Laplanche 2006, p.5). Freud's psychosexual framework (1905), which positioned a genitally-fixated understanding of sexuality as synonymous with mature or developed sexuality, relies upon a configuration of 'discharge and release' – thereby positioning (male) ejaculation as the epitome of the sexual moment – which in turn upholds an Oedipal framework, in which the security of phallic primacy is ensured. Laplanche's reconfiguration of sexuality unsettles the phallocentric logic underpinning conceptions of sexuality and even biology itself (Stein, 2007), opening up an alternative space for understanding internal sexual processes.

It is precisely within the context of mother-child intimate bodily relations that the 'charge and tension', of which Laplanche writes, initially emerges. The mother – and her breast – come to be understood in psychoanalysis solely from the perspective of the child, as either object or part-object. She exists in the discourse as *function* and not as subject. As Bion (1959 pp.311-2) writes, 'the part-object-relationship is not with the anatomical structures only but with function, not with anatomy but with physiology, not with the breast but with feeding, poisoning, living, hating'. Even at the point of becoming a whole object (Klein 1935), the mother exists as a result of her objectal relation to the child, and whilst she may be afforded more complexity, she is still known chiefly through her maternal function. Irigaray (1993, p.11) observes that the maternal function not only underlies the social order but also the order of desire. However, it is restricted to a dimension of need, thus 'once individual and collective needs have been met there is often nothing left of maternal female potency to satisfy desire' (1993c, p.11). As explained by Stein (2007), Laplanche's notion of the pleasure in charge and tension can be understood as, 'the non-functional, self-stimulating, *virtual simulation* of a "functional" body activity [that] comes to carry its own unique pleasure' (p.190 italics mine).

Laplanche's formulation enables 'functionality' to be uncoupled from pleasure at the breast, and this can be useful in exploring our relation to these 'functional' digital devices. How much time is spent aimlessly scrolling through Facebook or Twitter, not because there is an aim or agenda, but precisely because of the allure (or seduction) of the scroll itself. If we consider the never ending turning wheel as we wait for a page to load, the unpredictable buffering whilst waiting for a strong enough connection, the ways in which one can get lost down a 'wiki-hole', or any other pursuit of endless, infinite connections and possibilities; all of these libidinally invested activities are not seeking discharge and release but instead are propelled by the pleasure of charge and tension. Our reliance upon networked mobile devices and our seamless adaptation to living with these devices, is perhaps because of the ease with

which this interaction mimics the rhythmic pleasure of unconscious sexuality. Indeed, could there be a link between the digital object and the mother-breast object of psychoanalysis? Taking this proposition as our entry point into understanding how seamlessly we have adapted to being digitally networked (via our hand-held devices), and the dependency we ultimately now have on this way of being, what might the notion of a 'virtual simulation of a "functional" body activity', tell us about the libidinal relationship between human and digital object?

Remembering Primary Narcissism, Denying Dependency

Much has already been written on human engagement with mobile devices and the way in which they can be seen to function as transitional objects (Balick 2013; Mowlabocus 2016; Macrury & Yates 2016), as virtual spaces in which we can be 'held', until we are ready to come out the other side. The transitional object acts as a substitute for the mother's absence (Winnicott 1953). Thus, to follow this argument, it could be suggested that the digital object functions - psychically at least - as a mother-breast-substitute. However, I would suggest that these positions are not so clearly demarcated in helping us make sense of our interactions with networked digital devices. What I think is more relevant is to consider the ways in which the device is able to 'hold' us in the safety of an omnipotent fantasy, without us necessarily ever transitioning to something, someone or somewhere else. The phone therefore facilitates the possibility for us to reactivate some of the unconscious rhythms attached to that early experience of primary narcissism, prior to autoeroticism, when there was no differentiation between ourselves and others. In other words, by mirroring some of the unconscious dynamics at work in the experience of omnipotent fantasy in primary narcissism, the phone props up our defences against our own 'outsiderness', our own opacity to ourselves.

Closely related to omnipotent fantasy is the fantasy of mastery and, according to Luce Irigaray (1985), these can both be seen to be regularly at work in the male imaginary, and thus

have in many cultural practices, representations and institutions become customary, if not imperative. Perhaps the ease with which we have fallen into reliance and dependence on our mobile digital devices, is because their purpose and usage has largely been governed by what we can understand as fantasies at the level of the (male) cultural imaginary. Our relations with our smartphones allow us to relax into a fantasy of mastery: all facts, knowledges, 'truths', experiences are available to us via an internet search engine; we are privy to a whole host of details about those we know (and those we don't) because of what is 'shared' on social media networks, giving a sense of scopophilia and voyeurism; we need never worry about forgetting anything as all of our photos, videos (aka memories), phone numbers, passwords, internet search history (and more) are all stored in this wonderfully compact archive that is our smartphone. Together with the networked smartphone we can relax into the fantasy of omnipotence, mastery and autonomy. Furthermore, in this entanglement of user-device fusion, there is a complete blurring of the position which we occupy, going somewhere beyond an either / or logic and enabling existence in a liminal state. This is not just omnipotence, but parthenogenetic omnipotence *par excellence*!

Feminist scholars have long suggested that 'masculinity' is based on a denial of dependency (Irigaray 1985). If we consider the implications of this in the context of user-device interactions and intimacy, it is clear how we disavow this dependence. Much like the ways in which the fantasy of mother-child fusion continues to occupy a place in the cultural imaginary (Baraitser 2009), it is perhaps for the same reasons (around omnipotent fantasy) that our dependence on our smartphones is so acute. Anyone who gets a new phone will know how difficult it is to get used to a new interface, for example when switching from Apple to Android, but once familiarity is established, a reassuring sense of symbiosis is able to take shape and dependency can begin once more. We are only confronted with our dependency when our networks crash, batteries run out, or the phone 'dies' in some other way which is ultimately

beyond our control. In those moments, we do not mourn for the loss of the device, but instead are angry and hateful, much like Klein's schizoid child who is frustrated and furious that the breast is not there when it is needed (1952). If we think back to the infant of Freudian psychoanalysis, coping with the absence of the mother is a key aspect of development. Freud's (1920) 'fort da' game helps the child gain a (false) sense of omnipotence over the mother's presence / absence. And yet with our mobile devices, even with all the best protection, we cannot be totally assured that this phone-mother will never abandon us. The phone-as-mother may die, or give up, at any point. The 'otherness' within the phone – the satellite technology, the algorithms, the frequencies – is beyond both our control and understanding, and that of the phone itself. Thus, the phone presents itself with a constant threat to omnipotent fantasy in its very workings (or malfunction), and to a certain extent we can understand this as an 'otherness' that resists colonisation.

On Seduction

Laplanche's notion of 'a general theory of primal seduction' (1989) refers to the phenomenon of the child emerging in the already sexualised world of the adult, and the ways in which the child attempts to makes sense (or not) of these 'enigmatic' inscriptions (Fletcher and Ray 2014). The adult-child relationship is essentially an unequal relationship, and for Laplanche, this is understood as the adult having an already formed unconscious and access to meaning, whereas the child does not. As such, the emergence of the child's subjectivity in this vein has the potential for being the beginning of a subject-subject relation, as the child begins to ask 'What does the breast want from me, apart from wanting to suckle me, and, come to that why does it want to suckle me?' (Laplanche 1989, p.126) thus not reducing the breast (and mother) to object. The child attempts to decode the 'messages' that are transmitted to it, repressing and making unconscious those elements that cannot be understood. Laplanche

(1992, p.26) suggests that it is "the mother [who] is the main source of messages in our civilisation", and it is "culture [which] comes to [the child's] aid" (Stein, 2007, p.186) in decoding these 'messages'. Following a Laplanchean trajectory, we accept that the subject is formed by being in relation to 'otherness', an otherness imbued with libidinal elements which cannot be known in their entirety. Attempts are made to decipher or decode what is meant by this 'otherness', and that which cannot be known is repressed and becomes unconscious. Similarly, there is a lot we do not understand about the ways in which our mobile digital technology works. Laplanche makes it clear in his writings that the breast in *one example* of the 'message', there may very well come a time when children are no longer breastfed and this will no longer be a site of transmission (Laplanche 1999, p.128). Thus, whilst this paper is a playful account of understanding libidinal relationships with digital objects, these tentative suggestions may take on more significance as the digital object continues to wield a greater presence and influence in our development and 'being in the world'. As we see in the user-device interaction, one will continue to become a subject by being in proximity to an enigmatic 'otherness'. It would be overly reductive to say that this process is always at work in any phone (although any phone is always potentially open to this calling), it needs to be the phone we have made our own, the one which has become a cathected object.

The notion of a 'seduction' is useful in exploring why we are seemingly so willing to surrender our own personal data, with very little reflection on what the implications of this might be. Seduction in the context of Laplanchean psychoanalysis describes the unequal relationship between adult and child, and the child's curious attempts to make sense of what some of the implicit codes within this interaction might in fact mean – 'what does the breast want from me?' Certainly, within the context of our relationships with networked digital objects, there is an unequal power relationship. The device cannot 'know' what it means to *be* a fleshy, sentient human, but also those aspects that we do not necessarily know about ourselves

may also stay occluded and exempt from colonisation. However, the computational ability of the device will always be far much more superior than our human capacities. The data gleaned from us, reduced to code and algorithm, arguably becomes the 'true' digital subject or at the very least, its simulacrum, and the spatiotemporal contexts in which it survives and thrives we may never know. Is this digital version of ourselves, this commodification of ourselves, the 'otherness' of which Laplanche wrote in the context of subject formation? I would suggest that the 'enigma', or what is unknown, is both our own unconscious – which of course remains opaque to us – and also the algorithmic, computational workings behind smartphone technology. It is both of these aspects which form part of what we might understand as the interiority of the phone, which includes an algorithmic version of ourselves. The notion that the unconscious is unknowable is a position which has usefully been applied in relation to ethics, "my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others ... an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves" (Butler, 2005, p.41). Yet in the context of our interactions and relations with our mobile devices, there is not an equitable arrangement of recognition. One could say that it is, in fact, the rhythms and traces of our own unconscious sexuality, given back to us as an otherness that is being transmitted. We are seduced by the return to our own infantile sexuality, facilitated and mediated through hand-held technology.

If we think about a notion of seduction in the context of our interactions with networked digital devices, we might want to think that we are being seduced through a replication of the rhythms (of charge and tension) of our most primitive sexuality. Rhythms which form the bedrock of our evolved, mature, adult sexuality - however that might take shape or manifest itself - these rhythms are the very blueprint of sexuality. We are effectively seduced back into the unconscious, erotically-charged rhythms of infantile sexuality as produced through mother-child intimate bodily relations. Yet this 'other' that is necessary for the seduction, is not a

subject but a digital object which has the capacity, but not the autonomy, to mediate this charge. In the context of the use of smartphones and networked media, it is through the relational and mirroring processes of interaction and engagement with the material device itself, as well as with networked others, which facilitates the possibility for a digital subjectivity to emerge. In our everyday engagement with and use of a networked digital device we are constantly in proximity to an 'otherness', an otherness which is multi-layered and diffuse. This otherness includes the unconscious 'otherness' of the individuals we interact with via the phone's mediation; the computational languages that enable the phone to be 'open' to the user-as-other, either in its capacity as a device, or within that, the programming and functionality of each of the apps; and the data which is being collected and distributed in ways that far exceed our understandings or acknowledgement, or our digital footprint, as simulacrum of the self.

Digital Objects, Psychic Objects

I have presented some entry points, via Laplanche's ideas, in which to think about how we might make sense of some of the internal process at work in our allure of and dependency on smartphones. But what happens when this cathected object is no longer present, available or functioning? 'The object which has been lost is not the same as that which is to be rediscovered ... Human sexuality is narrated by Laplanche in terms of object loss, object-displacement, and object refinding, which is eternally a refinding of an object other than the original' (Stein 1998b, p.597). *If* there are certain connections between the ways in which the digital object functions psychically and the internal object of the mother-breast, then it makes sense that we experience such a sense of crisis when we find ourselves unexpectedly or unintentionally without our phone. When the security of the digital object's proximity is removed, the unacknowledged dependency we have on these devices acutely hits home in that moment. Legacy Russell's (2013) work on the 'glitch' is helpful in this regard, as she

eloquently observes the glitch is perhaps not so much an error but ‘a much-needed erratum’ in an already violent and stratified system. Thus, we can use the example of the interruption to what seemed like the seamless interaction, or fusion, of user and device, as an opportunity to make an intervention into the pre-existing, often dichotomous, frameworks on which much of traditional psychoanalytic thinking is based. For example, by insisting on bringing previously disavowed dependency back into view, we can begin to unsettle some of the unquestioned hierarchical relations inherent in subject-object dynamics which are at the heart of much psychoanalytic thinking. In Freudian, Kleinian and Lacanian psychoanalysis the breast is of particular interest (and significance) at the point of its loss or absence, for example in the context of weaning (see for example Klein, 1952, p.117; also see Evans 2005, p.117; and Nasio 1998, p.87). If we think of the absent breast / absent phone parallel, the digital object does indeed seem to function (psychically) in a similar way to the mother, which is perhaps not surprising when we think that the mother is the original data machine (van Cleaf, 2017). We come to rely upon this ‘phone-mother’ to remember everything we need to know, and more, to help us make sense of the world, to provide us with the answers, and hold onto precious memories. Whenever we reach out to her for reassurance, distraction, information, she responds to our needs. Furthermore, she tries to predict what it is we want or need, in the form of predictive text or internet search prompts. The presence of our ‘phone-mother’ is unconditional, unwavering, reliable. It is us that calls out to her, touching her, pushing her buttons, demanding an acknowledgement and response. We come to believe that our phones have the capacity for omnipotence, and with this comes a blurring of what belongs to us, and what belongs to the phone.

Through proximity to the functional capabilities of the device, we too can retreat into a fantasy of our own omnipotence. But it is not just the phone which can take up the position of mother-object, we too, as users, are able to take up this position. As ‘mothers’ in this fantasised

dyad, we touch, swipe and hold the device, responding to its flash of light or bleep of sound when a notification comes through. The 'phone-as-infant' lets out a call, to which we quickly respond, as 'ordinary devoted mothers' (Winnicott 1973). We ensure our 'phone-babies' do not get wet, do not get scratched or smashed, and do not fall. We protect them, look after them, keep them charged with (battery) life, keeping them close to us. They are often the last thing we look at before we sleep, and the first thing we gaze upon when we awake. Unlike in the human world, we are able (as already fully constituted subjects) to take up both positions of mother/child, subject/object, in our web of networked digital interactions. It is therefore difficult to directly map any single particular psychic position (i.e. that of mother or infant, subject or object) onto user and device, and instead what seems to take place in user-device interactions is a dance between two polarities, perhaps leading to a new position entirely, one which is currently beyond the scope existing psychoanalytic understandings, as it far exceeds any kind of binary logic.

I do not think it is entirely helpful, or accurate, to suggest that the digital object is interchangeable with the psychic object of mother-breast. I feel that the significance of the digital object is much more nuanced than this. Furthermore, to make such a suggestion – and end with that suggestion – would be to reproduce some of the entrenched ideas I hope to disentangle myself from, specifically that, psychoanalytically, the mother can only be understood in relation to her status as object. A number of feminist thinkers working with psychoanalysis have contributed to re-thinking the possibility of signifying the mother as desiring social subject (Battersby, 1998; Benjamin 1998; 2013; Grosz, 1989; Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1985; Stone, 2012) and how we might reconfigure our understandings of sexuality and subjectivity in relation to this. Certainly, by positioning the mother as someone with a complex interiority, both in relation to having desire and also an unknowable unconscious, or in other words by insisting the 'mother' is reconceived as a subject, this affects the subject-

object dynamic on which much psychoanalytic thinking is based. The exploration offered in this paper also seeks to question the fixity of the subject-object dichotomy in user-device relations. Whilst I don't suggest that the phone is a 'subject' in how we might regularly understand this concept, I do maintain that it is critical that we hold on to the 'otherness' of the device, which automatically puts a question mark above its status as consistent, undisputed object.

It is not so much what the device represents as psychic object, but is in fact more interesting to think about what unconscious dynamics may be playing out in the context of user-device interaction: one of which may very well be informed by the psychic trace of being in the web of maternal bodily relations. It is well known that there are algorithms, codes, data collection and all kinds of computational activity going on behind the scenes in our everyday usage of mobile digital technology. There is an active disavowal of this knowledge, and we continue to share and freely offer up personal information. Just as the sexuality of the mother was disavowed, so is the commodification of our own personal data disavowed in our reliance and engagement with digital technology. Ultimately, the phone is a material device, one which does not come with an unconscious – although its computational workings remain opaque to most of us. However, once the phone is taken on, made our own, we begin to fill it with our own data – and oftentimes this data is erotically charged. What I mean by this is that the photos we take, the internet searches we embark on, the emails and text messages we send, the music we listen to, the movies we stream et cetera are often the end point of a libidinal charge. They are imbued with our wishes, fantasies and other such unconscious motivations. In fact, aside from its own algorithmic interior, the phone becomes filled with the residue or traces of our own unconscious as a result of our interactions with it.

To Conclude

Laplanche's ideas help explain how a 'seduction' is at work in our desire for a greater engagement with networked digital technology, and this seduction works by being able to create a space in which the rhythms of unconscious sexuality are both fuelled by and fuel the user-device interaction itself. In many ways, to become a digital subject is to become a subject all over again. Furthermore, this process need not necessarily be dependent on the notion of an 'other' as object, but instead be dependent on a more diffuse notion of 'otherness'. An otherness as difference, one which is not dichotomous, rooted in the logic of subject-object relations, which has a presence through being the 'not-I' (Irigaray 2019). Laplanche 'keeps insisting on the need for the other not to be reduced to the "subjectivity of the receptor," but rather to be maintained in his strangeness. One's inner strangeness is "held" by an outer strangeness, while that outer strangeness in turn is held by the enigmatic relation of the other to his own internal stranger' (Stein 2007, p.181) Perhaps by being in the presence of the 'otherness' of technology, this will enable the denial of dependency to begin to crumble, and therefore other fantasies intrinsic of the male imaginary might also begin to lose their grip, and the digital landscape may begin to afford us another possibility to reconfigure what it means to become a subject in relation to an otherness that cannot be known, colonised or subsumed. A utopian fantasy perhaps, but utopian thinking allows for alternatives to be heuristically gestured towards and, as I stated in the introduction, this paper was always intended to be a playful heuristic dance, and one which does not claim any mastery or definitiveness to boot.

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