

## Lacan and the Algorithm

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**Abstract:** Exploring the development of algorithms in Lacanian theory, specifically the "R schema" in the 1950s, I argue that psychoanalysis, read through contemporary debates about the "algorithmic cult" of Netflix and other avatars of popular culture, can be said to reveal the inhuman, machinic essence of subjectivity. The etiology of algorithms, mathemes, and other formulae and diagrams in Lacan's *oeuvre* has been under-studied, in part because for some readers they are not as attractive as his more *bravura* flourishes of word play as exegetical excess, and in part because they derive largely from the 'hard' structuralist moment of his work in the 1950s, largely eclipsed in Lacan studies by interests in the 'Late Lacan' period of the Sinthome, the knots, *jouissance* and the semblant. Here I extend (and refine) arguments I began in *Does the Internet Have An Unconscious*, determining that algorithms in Lacanian theory help us understand the split subjectivity of internet discourse.

**Clint BURHAM****Lacan and the algorithm**

Jacques Lacan thought algorithms would save psychoanalysis. In the 1950s and 1960s, he began to formalize the structures of subjectivity, starting first with the most basic formula – which he called an algorithm – derived from linguistics:  $\frac{s}{s}$  (*Écrits* 418). Along with other “elementary cells,” such as the algorithm for fantasy, or  $\$ \langle \rangle a$  (*Écrits* 487n14), and the graphs of desire (*Écrits* 681-692), he would derive intricate formulas, schemas, and what he called mathemes that lay out the registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real; or the structure of the subject’s relation to the *objet petit a*; or combinatorial renderings of the “four discourses”; or how the sexes (did not) relate to each other. In this essay I propose to take seriously the prompt, asking not only “what does the algorithm want?,” but also how is “to want” (or to desire) an algorithm: how much is our subjectivity, understood in a psychoanalytic way, a matter of machinic structures? I propose to do so by way of three considerations of Lacanian algorithms, using as a case study the “R schema” first proposed in Lacan’s 1957 essay “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” (445-488). First, by showing the development of the “R schema” algorithm via two more “elementary cells” – the triangles of the imaginary and symbolic and the “L schema.” This is to argue for a history of the algorithm. Second, to call on that algorithm to do its work of explaining the contemporary relation of the subject to the internet. In particular, the R schema explains not only what Lacan called “erotic aggression” is constitutive of that relation but also how internet censorship functions as the Name-of-the-Father. Third is to argue not only that we have always been algorithmic (that is to say, machinic), but that to fully comprehend such a provocation we connect the structuralist moment of 1950s Lacan’s to the later forays into *Jouissance* and enjoyment, ground that has already been laid for us by Žižek but also by in a footnote appended by Lacan to the 1966 appearance of the “On a Question Prior” essay in *Écrits*.

**An elementary history of the algorithm**

There is an important argument that has been made by Lacanian critics on the importance of tracing the history, or development, of Lacan’s diagrams, graphs, mathemes, and algorithms (these terms are used interchangeably in Lacan’s writings). This argument is comprised of three parts. First, that the role such formulae play in Lacan’s work is to encapsulate his theory in a manner significantly different from that of language: such graphic representations are seen, by Lacan, as somehow evading the polysemic or connotative slide.<sup>1</sup> But are the algorithms and mathemes so slippery, or can they be read as more metaphorical than scientific or mathematical? This debate is both internal to psychoanalysis (with such figures as Octavio Mannoni and Jacques-Alain Miller weighing in – see Macey 169-176) and external (viz., the infamous Sokal hoax of the 1990s – see Aoki 222-224). For Lacan himself, two arguments, made in his essay on the subversion of the subject, are germane. First, speaking of the matheme  $S(\mathcal{A})$ , he concurs that “at the risk of incurring a certain amount of opprobrium, I have indicated how far I have gone in distorting mathematical algorithms in my own use of them” (*Écrits* 696) – that is, he is dealing with signifiers of lack, but also with *jouissance*. Earlier in the same essay, he avers that while algorithms are “designed to allow for a hundred and one different readings, a multiplicity that is acceptable as long as what is said about it remains grounded in its algebra” (*Écrits* 691), he also stresses that they are nonetheless not a metalanguage, not a system of signification that explains his concepts.

We should also consider the way in which the diagrams will often appear in the Seminars in many different forms – indeed, dozens, if not hundreds, of diagrams appear over thousands of pages/hours of the twenty-plus seminars, while comparatively few<sup>2</sup> have achieved canonical status. Schema L first appears in Seminar II and III; in Seminar IV, we see triangles of the family drama also repeated in Seminar V (they are the “elementary cells” of our R schema), where the graphs of desire are worked out for the first time ... and so on through the years and decades of the seminars, with optical machines of various complexities, first four and then five discourses, and the formula of sexualization and triangle of *jouissance* appearing in *Encore*, as well as the proliferation of Borromean knots and strings in the 1970s. Some of these algorithms are better-known because they appear in the *Écrits* of 1966 (including the

<sup>1</sup> David Macey: “Lacan saw his ‘matheme’ as something that would ensure the integral transmission of his teachings ... proof against the ‘noise’ or interference inherent in any process of communication.” See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matheme>

<sup>2</sup> The best-known algorithms include the four graphs of desire, the R and L schema (the first with a more elaborate version, the second with a simplified version), the five discourses, the formula of sexualization, and the triangle of enjoyment. There are also various more concise mathemes, including the signifier and fantasy.

graphs of the desire and the three schemas – L, R, and the impossibly baroque I; but also the more straightforward formulas for metaphor and metonymy) or because of how they were picked up by Žižek in particular (including the discourses and sexualization); others have been left to gather dust.

Finally, there is the methodological question of tracing the etiology of sample algorithms. In his landmark *Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek made a strong case that the final graph of desire can only be understood not only by tracing its development through the three previous graphs, but also that the third algorithm, the famous *Che vuoi?* diagram, offers a more radical understanding of desire and the subject than the final, which pretends to offer a closure. More recently, Dan Collins, similarly examining the graph of desire, and its etiology in *Seminar V*, has put forth the proposition that

“the graphs are more than just pedagogical tools. They are the way Lacan thinks. Lacan doesn’t just work out arguments in prose and then condense them into graphs. He often works out arguments graphically and then struggles to describe them discursively. The graphs, in other words, are Lacan’s laboratory. His graphs are where he carries out his thought experiments, and they provide an opportunity to observe Lacan’s thought in motion” (154-55).

This argument concurs with my observation above regarding the proliferation of the algorithms in the seminars proper; they are as much a feature of his logorrhea as his puns and witticisms. Closer to our own algorithm, Philip Dravers has patiently traced the origins of the R schema in Lacan’s seminar on Edger Allen Poe, triangles of the mother, child, and imaginary phallus, on the one hand, and of the mother, child, and father, on the other. These triangles, Dravers asserts, become first the “L schema” and then our own algorithm, the R schema.

I want to further trace that development as a way of making the argument that the psychoanalytic theory of the subject – developed via Freud’s discovery of the unconscious and Lacan’s philosophy of desire – is expressly one in which to be human is to be an algorithm. As noted above, the origins of Lacan’s theory of the algorithm can be found in his work of the 1950s, including his seminars on Edger Allen Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (in *Seminar II*), his seminar on psychosis and its reportage in the *Écrits*, and in *Seminar IV* and *V*. First, as argued by Dravers, Lacan’s discussion of Poe’s story works out the Oedipal triangle twice: first as the child in relation to the mother and the imaginary phallus, or  $\phi$ . That is, the child identifies with what it sees the mother as desiring (or lacking): this is imaginary identification.

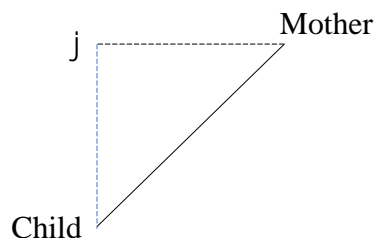


Fig. 1: Imaginary triangle<sup>3</sup>

Next, Dravers tells us, the child also must come to enter the classic Oedipal triangle, with the Lacanian tweak that the father is more properly the Name of the father, which puns on the No of the father (*Nom du père, non de père*). This is a structural position, and so denotes whatever it is that interferes – to the child’s relief – in the mother-child dyad, be it the biological father, another lover or figure, any other occupation of the mother’s, be it a job, other chores, or distractions.

<sup>3</sup> All figures are author’s own.

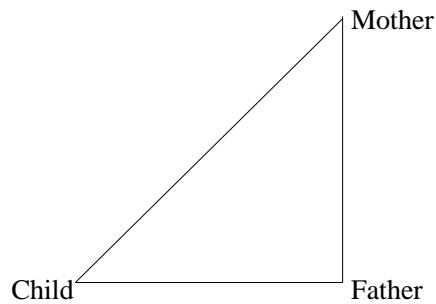
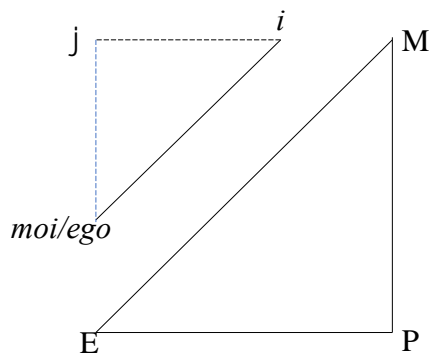


Fig. 2: Oedipal triangle

But here we must be careful. While the first appearance of Lacan's R schema was in the 1959 issue of *La Psychanalyse* (Vanheule), triangles similar to what Dravers extrapolates from the Poe seminar actually first appear in the February 1958 sessions of *Seminar V*, continuing to the session of March 5, 1958. Without a more archival approach – looking at Lacan's notes for the "Question Prior" essay and his notes for the seminars – it is well-nigh impossible to determine which came first (even if Lacan says, as he does in *Écrits* 485, that he wrote the essay in December 1957-January 1958, this is not to say it was not revised over the coming months). What can be most likely asserted is that the diagram in *Écrits* and its versions in *Seminar V* developed simultaneously.

The graphic or visual etiology of the R schema notwithstanding (and it is not inconsequential that one of the sessions of *Seminar V* is called "From the Image to the Signifier"), the context for the closest appearance of the R schema in *Seminar V*, in the March 5, 1958 session called "Desire and Jouissance," is Lacan's discussion first of Jean Delay's biography of André Gide<sup>4</sup> and then of Jean Genet's play *Le Balcon*. Gide's youth is explicitly connected to our algorithm:

Fig. 3: triangles from *Seminar V*

Lacan argues that the Gide's perversion is not so much his affection for young boys (which would be the *i* or images of his own youth) but instead his Ego-ideal (E) as the (incestuously) desired child of his aunt. This reading can then be aligned with Lacan's comments on the Genet play, in which a police chief pesters the madame of a brothel to determine if any customers have chosen to dress up as himself. The Lacanian take on Genet's comedy is that, as he argues in "Presentation on Psychological Causality," that "if

<sup>4</sup> About to appear in the April, 1958 issue of *Critique* and included as "The Youth of Gide, or the Letter and Desire" in *Écrits* (623-644).

a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less mad" (*Écrits* 139) – demonstrated by Genet's police chief who can only be reassured in his symbolic authority if others inhabit it. Like the young Gide, Genet's police chief's perversion is not to identify with the *i* or image of others (that is, to inhabit the *ego* or *moi*) but instead to be desired by the other qua Mother – to be in the place of the I or Ego-ideal. In some ways Genet's conceit is merely theatrical – a commentary on the illusions of the stage; however, rife with references to "images," the script ties that together with imitation: "As long as I have not been impersonated," the Chief of Police consoles himself, adding that "I'll know by a sudden weakness of my muscles that my image is escaping from me to go and haunt men's minds" (Genet 82).

One final step must be taken in assembling the R schema from Lacan's triangles: bringing them together via the shaded gap that denotes the Real. Now, Lacanophiles (or "La'stans") know very well that in the writings of the 1950s he had not yet developed the full concept of the Real as that which is inaccessible to language, outside the symbolic. Nor are we yet at the properly topological concept of the Möbius strip that, in a famous footnote to "A Question Prior," Lacan argues that shaded zone of the Real can be twisted (*Écrits* 486-87n14). But the Real still functions as a gap or bar in the subject, and, discussing the L schema, Lacan warns us against any holistic or totalizing conception of the ego qua subject:

S is the letter S, but it's also the subject, the analytic subject, that is to say not the subject in its totality. People spend their time plaguing us about taking it in its totality. Why should it be a whole? We haven't the faintest idea. Have you ever encountered whole beings? Perhaps it's an ideal. I've never seen any. I'm not whole; Neither are you. If we were whole, we would each be in our corners, whole, we wouldn't be here, together, trying to get ourselves into shape, as they say. It is the subject, not in its totality, but in its opening up. As usual, he doesn't know what he's saying. If he knew what he was saying, he wouldn't be there. He is there, down on the right. (*Seminar II*, 243).

The Lacanian subject, that is, is not a totality or a whole – is not a harmonious personality (nor is such harmony the goal of psychoanalysis), but rather it inhabits "the corners" of the various schemas. This is to lead to an understanding of how the R schema accounts for our interactions with the internet – which is to say, that such an algorithmic conception of the subject demonstrates that our consciousness is always-already machinic. The algorithm is, in Lacan's hands, an analytic tool for understanding the unconscious, the role of language, and our relationship with the other.

### Lacan avec the Internet

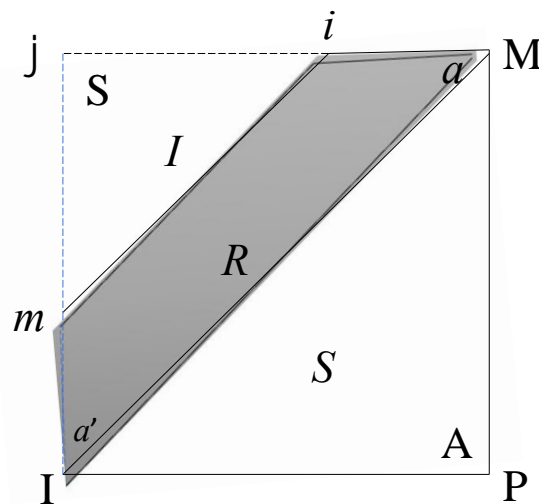


Fig 4: Completed R schema

What does the R schema teach us about our relationship with the internet? Or, what does the internet have to tell us about Lacanian theory, as codified in the R schema, in that algorithm. There appears to be a certain mirroring tautology at work here: we are using an algorithm (or what I perversely call an

algorithm, one of Lacan's diagrams) to analyze the system of algorithms (recommendation machines) that is the contemporary internet as we encounter it through Google, or social media, or cloud computing. I want to make a metaleptic turn here. The Lacanian question *Che vuoi?* or "what do you desire?" applies to any journal prompt or CFP. First of all, who is the "author" of the prompt – Matthew Flisfeder, the editor of the special issue of *CLCWeb*, or the institutional authority of the journal itself? I would argue that the "guest editor" acts as a "cut-out" (spy jargon for an intermediary) for the journal qua big Other. But also, a prompt in turn becomes a sort of algorithm, generating responses from scholars as surely as does the Amazon recommendation or the Facebook ranking algorithm that prioritizes emotional responses (Merrill and Oremus). But those emotional responses, or what Lacan calls "the relationships of erotic aggression" (*Écrits* 462), are to remain in the imaginary, in that upper left triangle where we remain enthralled to the imaginary phallus, or  $\phi$ . This reading is confirmed by the recent trove of documents released by the Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen. The "dislike" button, for example, had a five-time weight compared to "like" when used for ranking posts: meaning that divisive shares or comments on social media ranked higher and spread more virulently.

The imaginary dimensions of the digital subject (S) work in the following ways. First, at the top of the diagram, the subject identifies with the *i* or "ideal images derived from the Other" (Vanheule 186): that is, both our social media images qua pictures, selfies, and the like (which nonetheless possess a utopian grain of communistic networking), and the more abstract image one has of oneself in a psychological fantasy (occasioned or "triggered" when a friend says "I love your pictures on Instagram" or "did you read my email?").<sup>5</sup> But the subject also identifies with *a* or little others (again, "did you read my email"), deriving pleasure and self-worth from an "imagined community" of all of one's "friends" or "followers." The hard Lacanian lesson here is that such social links are no more spurious than the collectivities of political groups or activism, as the history of such groups invariably demonstrates. Finally, identification with the internet qua mother can best be demonstrated with a recent (but pre-Covid) advertising campaign by the Canadian food delivery app Skip the Dishes.



Fig 5: Skip the dishes Oedipal advert

Consider a billboard ad for Skip the Dishes a few years ago: "That hot pic meant for Dan went to Dad." At first glance, this seems to rest on a simple mistake – what Freud called a parapraxis or we now call Freudian slip – typing D-A-D instead of D-A-N. Or maybe not. A psychoanalytic interpretation would point out, first of all, that perhaps that was not a mistake, that we actually INTENDED to send a hot pic to Dad. Or, to take it to the next level, following the maxim that every girl falls in love with someone who reminds them of their father, perhaps your boyfriend's name is *Dan* because it is so similar to *Dad*.

<sup>5</sup> Please see my discussion of selfies in *Does the Internet have an Unconscious?*



Fig 6: Skip the Dishes parapraxis advert

Or consider this other ad for Skip the Dishes, a more innocuous mistake, perhaps. But surely the point of these ads is that the mistakes and failing we have in our digital communication are a reason to order in some food. Again, this can be read psychoanalytically: we seek the comfort of food because of the alienation of the internet (and, more recently, Covid). It is no coincidence that we talk about one's "newsfeed" on Facebook, one's "twitter feed," or that a photo that gets a lot of likes on Instagram is called a "thirst trap." The internet is the mother that feeds us.

This is also to enter into the bottom left corner of the R schema, where the sense of being a *moi* or *ego* depends as well on mirror images (*a'*) and the idealized signifiers or Ego-ideal (I). As in the mirror-stage essay, the imagined competency of the internet image props up one's ego, as does one's identification with idealized signifiers (I am a professor, a lawyer, an activist, a tenant – consider that vaunted sacred text of the email signature, in which, according to one's predilections, one includes a quote from James Baldwin or the Buddha, a land acknowledgment, or a list of one's academic publications).

But this imaginary dimension of the internet is only half of the story (of the R schema), and it is when we turn to the right-hand side or corner that things get interesting. For all of our imaginary fantasizing that we are desired by the internet, there is that nasty question of the Father, the name or no of the father as discussed above. As noted above, the R schema explains not only the "erotic aggression" (Lacan 462) that is constitutive of that relation (see "doomscrolling" or "aggressive liking" qua contemporary digital praxis) but also how internet censorship, be it "bad" (Chinese) or "good" (Facebook controls) functions as the Name-of-the-Father. Here three findings from recent questions of internet surveillance and censorship are helpful: first, that QAnon attempts to evade Facebook controls are similar to Chinese dissidents' workarounds (Frenkel and Hsu; Ai); second, that much of the anti-algorithm news coverage itself is algorithmically determined clickbait; third, that many (if not all) discussions of so-called "fake news" are not only ideologically biased towards mainstream capitalist media (*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, BBC, etc.) but also evince a naive, pre-postmodern belief in truth and narratives (Giansiracusa 182-83).<sup>6</sup>

But my aim here is not simply to argue that Lacanian theory helps us understand the internet, nor even that we are always-already algorithmic, but, more crucially, what current concepts of the internet and algorithms mean for Lacanian theory. Here I want first to remind us of three keywords from both Lacan and discussions of the internet: divisive, virulent, plague. "People spend their time plaguing us about taking [the subject] in its totality," Lacan says in the quotation from *Seminar II* above. That is, the psychoanalyst is himself inundated with fake news. Then, notions that the "erotic aggression" online is "divisive" suggests a concept of the social body as harmonious (this fantasy subverts much of contemporary U.S. political discourse, from red versus blue states to bipartisanship). And that which is "virulent" almost too neatly combines the discourses of internet mania with present day Covid anxieties. Thus asking, as this journal's prompt does, "what does the algorithm want" and suggesting different approaches to platforms generates such content as this essay's discussion of the Skip the Dishes platform.

<sup>6</sup> For the clickbait assertion, please see my article "Hegel without Lacan: on Todd McGowan's *Emancipation after Hegel*."



Consider the ubiquitous generator of algorithms: the search.<sup>7</sup> In an article published on the cusp of Covid (February 2021), a *Guardian* journalist warned readers that Facebook auto-fill mechanisms would complete a search beginning "vacci" with "vaccine re-education discussion forum," "vaccine truth movement," or "vaccine resistance movement" (Wong; see also Giansiracusa). The feature has since been debugged, but the content (vaccine science or vaccine resistance) is immaterial; it is the act of searching that matters. Here two arguments from psychoanalysis are germane. First, as Stijn Vanheule argues, "Lacan... defines the symbolic phallus as a negativity: it is the signifier people search for in a Sisyphus-like way, but never find. This doesn't mean that their search is fruitless. As people search for what it is that determines desire, identification with signifiers or traits detected in the Other takes place; signifiers that are seen as indications of that which causes desire. These symbolic identifications mark subjectivity" (186). This "identification with signifiers or traits detected in the Other" indicates that Lacan is already a matter of the autofill or autocomplete mechanism. That is, Lacan fills or completes our subjectivity, even in his theory of the split subject. In the subfield of Lacanian neuropsychanalysis, John Dall'Aglio, drawing on Jaak Panskepp's theory of the seven affective systems, asserts that "SEEKING closely resembles the Freudian libidinal drive... an *objectless*, volitional system that carries its own subjective quality of *excitatory* pleasure (as opposed to a reduction of tension" (Dall'Aglio 29; see also Hook). This is to argue, in turn, that animals' (and humans') circuitry and neurotransmitters, as Dall'Aglio confirms, are themselves a motor function with their own Facebook/Google search parameters. Doomscrolling is baked into our DNA.

A salutary effect of Lacan's algorithms is that they function as much as visual clues to his thinking as they do some inhuman calculation machine (although they are that as well). In the R schema, the swath of shaded quadrangle denoting the Real also has the appearance, from afar, of what in heraldry is called the bend sinister, sometimes also denoting bastardy ("Bend [heraldry]"). The heraldic connotations qua *shield* works both in terms of the earlier L schema's blockage (or filtering) of the symbolic relation with the big Other by the imaginary (in the object relations seminar, Lacan uses the covid-like metaphor of "filter") and more general Freudian-Lacanian concepts of the screen memory; what must be avoided, however, is the properly Jungian symbol hunting that would find either in heraldry or the R schema some cryptonyms. In an early session of his seminar on object relations, Lacan refers to the analyst-analysand relation as akin to the Amish custom of "bundling," when a young couple would wrap themselves in sheets or lay a board between them in bed, to prevent (no doubt not always successfully) fornication. Here lies another way to conceive of the R schema: the Real qua attempt to block the analysand qua ego mirroring of itself on the "healthy" ego of the analyst. This reading also returns us to the etiology of the R schema discussed above, in the triangles derived from the seminar on Poe.

## Conclusion

In response to a recent controversy regarding comedian David Chappelle's transphobic comedy, Hannah Gadsby called Netflix "an amoral algorithm cult" (Cassidy). But what if such an ethics can be laid at the feet of the human subject? Lacan's use of algorithms, graphs, mathemes, knots, discourses, formulae, and diagrams throughout his *oeuvre* bespoke a certain desperation, it seems: even the vaunted analytic situation of analyst and analysand could not explain sufficiently how the subject desired. Lacan's algorithmic rigor from mathematics (even as it revealed it to be metaphorical) and insisted it was not a metalanguage. Like Lacan's turn to cybernetics in the 1950s (Liu), the algorithm as method ensured a split in his reception, with Jane Gallop famously declaring "I find Lacan's stories and poetry more sympathetic, more pleasurable, and easier than his graphs and later 'mathemes'" (Aoki 48). She preferred the literary Lacan to the diagrams. And yet the algorithm made different readings possible, if only because it itself came in so many forms, both the different genres (graph, matheme, discourse, etc.) and their plethora of appearances in the seminars and *écrits*. They insisted on being written (or drawn). Commenting on and participating in a politics of psychoanalysis, both the internecine battles of Millerians versus Solerians versus everyone else and the extimate, as it were, social politics of the IPA and other societies, algorithms functioned less to illustrate a preformed idea than to trigger its working out, whether in the Seminars (where, as in the discussion of Gide and Genet in *Seminar V*, an already completed R schema is then broken back down again) or the *Écrits*. The two "elementary cells" of the R schema, when combined, then help us to understand such Internet phenomena as Facebook censorship and click bait as thirst traps. In Genet's play, the Chief of Police is as forlorn as a social media user who lacks followers or friends: his images have not

<sup>7</sup> Any thoughts of mine regarding internet searches are embarrassingly indebted to my former Ph.D. student Alois Sieben, and his 2021 dissertation, *Search Results: The Subject of Google in 2010s Culture*.

escaped him. But the completed R schema also points us forward to the lure of the Real, that shaded band noted in the discussion of heraldry above. This is to connect the combinatorial, "hard structuralist" moment of this period in Lacan's work to the later excursions into *jouissance*, topologies, and the *Sinthome*, a connection attempted by twisting the "Real" trapezoid of the R schema into a mobius strip, for, Lacan tells us, "what the R schema lays flat is a cross-cap" (*Écrits* 486).

The reader of this essay, perhaps exhausted by its diagrams, literary references, and internet arcanæ, will be relieved to know I will not, at this late date, turn to non-Euclidean geometry as a way of offering a conclusion to the question of what algorithmic thinking derives from, and tells us about, Lacanian theory. Rather, I want to offer a more general proposition: first, that algorithmic *jouissance* as evinced in Lacan's work can offer an anti-humanist or posthuman theory of the subject (this much is orthodoxy), but, second, a harder lesson: that the internet today is manifestly a humanist project. That is to say the following. Everything we hate about the internet, from its fake news and liberal virtue signaling to distracted teens and rigged elections, is good. This is not to disagree with Gadsby: Netflix, indeed the internet in general, *is* an amoral algorithmic cult. And such amorality is a neoliberal form of diversity, so there can flourish both Chappelle's transphobia and Gadsby's woke comedy. It is this real of the split subject that the internet (and Lacan) makes available to us, via the algorithm.

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