

# Prosthetic Godhood and Lacan's Alethosphere: The Psychoanalytic Significance of the Interplay of Randomness and Structure in Generative Art

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## **Abstract**

Psychoanalysis, particularly as articulated by figures like Freud and Lacan, highlights the inherent division within the human subject—a schism between the conscious and unconscious mind. It could be said that this suggests that such an internal division becomes amplified in the context of generative art, where technology and algorithms are

used to generate artistic expressions that meant to emerge from the depths of the unconscious. Here, we encounter the tension between the conscious artist and the generative process itself, which may yield unexpected, even uncontrollable results.

This paper, therefore, seeks to address this division within the modern subject and its relationship to technology, wherein the division within the living body is revealed through the presence of prosthetic elements, which mirrors the division brought about by the incorporation of language as a signifier. I argue that the amplification of this internal schism does not necessarily lead to a more fractured subject. Instead, generative art, bolstered by advancements in AI and machine learning, offers a unique opportunity for individuals to externalize and explore their minds in novel ways.

By examining contemporary works such as Hal Foster's *Prosthetic Gods*, which stands as a pivotal exploration of the convergence between modernist art and psychoanalytic theory and Isabel Millar's *Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence*, this paper elucidates the profound implications of Freud's vision of modern

subjectivity as Prothesengott (Prosthetic God) and address the questions concerning this technological imbrication of the human mind and body through the Lacanian framework. Although for Freud, Man does not become a real God, rather, the potential to transcend one's limitations ascribes us to God-like qualities by seeking to generate new forms of life that go beyond merely reproducing nature — a transgression of the natural. Millar emphasizes that Freud observes that this is evidenced by the fact that these additional organs remain distinct from the organism and can never assimilate into it. One continually falls short of realizing the fantasy he envisions, opting instead to use his supplementary artificial organs to endlessly revolve around the objects of the drive.

This evolving relationship that the drive has with its technological objects, resounds in Lacan's conception of "lathouse" which allows extimate objects to convert interiority (unconscious) into exteriority (conscious) and exteriority into interiority. The thesis of this paper seeks to employ this underutilized concept to understand the nature of human subjectivity and its bodily and structural relationship to generative art. Therefore, this paper emphasizes what really happens when we enter into this relationship with the lathouse, whereby this artificial object has effects in the "real of jouissance", where these Lathouses create a network, namely the Alethosphere. My goal is to argue that generative art as a technological development, can be seen as an extension to the development of the drive. Conclusively, I make the for generative art's potential to externalize the human creative drive by emphasizing

the interplay between randomness and structure, and how it offers a means to surpass our inherent limitations by presenting an avenue for self-expression that transcends traditional modes of art.

## 1. Introduction

In psychoanalysis, the exploration of the unconscious and its inherent drives is integral to understanding the construction of the "self." Sigmund Freud's seminal work introduced the notion of the human self, revealing an inherent split (Spaltung) within the subject, notably between the ego and the id [1]. This division delineates the intricate negotiations between internal and external realities, as the ego grapples with the complexities of mediating these conflicting forces.

Jacques Lacan further expounded on this internal division in his influential works [2-3], positing it as a fundamental characteristic of subjectivity itself. This division, originating in the processes of individuation during infancy and the subsequent entry into the symbolic order of language, is epitomized by the concept of the barred subject (\$). This symbolic representation signifies the subject's entry into the symbolic order, marked by a lack due to castration and the loss of original unity, resulting in a perpetually divided subject. Lacanian psychoanalysis, recognizing that lack constitutes subjectivity, strives to elucidate this absent component through the subject's engagement with the symbolic.

This paper endeavours to explore the contemporary manifestation of this internal division within the modern subject, particularly in its interplay with technology. The division within the living

body becomes evident through the presence of prosthetic elements, echoing the division induced by the incorporation of language as a signifier. Both phenomena contribute to a disruption of unity and the introduction of lack or absence. Prosthetic elements, functioning as external additions, symbolize a form of supplementation or compensation for bodily deficiencies.

Similarly, language operates within a system of differences, signifying meanings and continually underscoring the absence of a fixed, unambiguous signified [4]. In this context, prosthetic elements and language act as mediators, unveiling the underlying division within the subject. They facilitate a perpetual negotiation between unity and fragmentation, presence and absence, within the individual's experiential domain.

This paper posits that the amplification of this internal schism in the case of generative art, could indicate a more fractured subject, ensnaring its subjectivity in yet another domain of extensionality. However, it argues that while language and prosthetic elements introduce division through different means and operate in distinct realms—language in the symbolic, and prosthetics in the tangible, corporeal domain—prosthetics such as Artificial Intelligence do not induce the same division as the signifier. The paper therefore contends that AI has the potential to reconcile the pleasure principle and the reality principle within Lacan's underused concept of the "alethosphere," wherein individuals can externalize their minds in innovative ways.

Hence, this project seeks to interrogate the intricate interweaving of technology with the human mind and

body within a Freudian-Lacanian framework. More precisely, it formulates two essential inquiries that probe into the nexus of human subjectivity and technological advancements, particularly focusing on Generative Art:

1. In what manner does Freud's concept of prosthetic godhood find relevance in the context of generative art?

2. How does generative art function as an extension of the drive circuit, especially considering the inherent randomness and structural aspects within its composition and its relationship to the alethosphere?

In pursuit of addressing these inquiries, a comprehensive exploration will be undertaken, delving into contemporary works such as Hal Foster's "Prosthetic Gods" [5] and Isabel Millar's "Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence." [6]. Foster's work stands as a significant exploration at the crossroads of modernist art and psychoanalytic theory, offering invaluable insights. Meanwhile, Millar's contribution specifically dissects the ramifications of Freud's conceptualization of modern subjectivity as Prothesengott (Prosthetic God). This investigation aims to illuminate the profound implications of Freud's vision and engage with inquiries regarding the intricate entwining of the human mind and body with technology within the contours of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The exploration of these contemporary works serves not only to enrich our comprehension of the intersection between art and psychoanalysis but also to underscore the persistent struggle individuals face in realizing the fantasies associated with adopting supplementary artificial organs. Rather than attaining fulfillment,

individuals often discover themselves caught in an unending orbit around objects of desire. This paper thus examines enduring relationship between the human drive and its technological artifacts, as it resonates with Lacan's concept of the "lathouse," wherein extimate objects facilitate the transformation of interiority (unconscious) into exteriority (conscious) and vice versa. Fundamentally this concept allows us to locate the drive within the alethosphere of technology and situate it beyond the object cause of desire (object a).

## 2. Freud's Prosthetic Godhood

Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. [7]

The exploration of Freud's concept of prosthetic godhood serves as a critical entry point into an analysis of contemporary perspectives on technology, embodiment, and human desire. Freud's skeptical perspective on the extension of the body into utopias, manifested in the idea of a prosthetic god, challenges the notion that contemporary individuals find fulfillment in this god-like character [7]. This skepticism is rooted in the recognition that the desire for a technologically driven transcendence mirrors an unattainable future, coupled with a nostalgic yearning for an equally unachievable infantile past, as articulated by Andjelkovic [8].

Deriving inspiration from the classical representations of gods and goddesses in Ancient Greek statues, crafted to propagate an idealized bodily

form, Lacan [9] and Sloterdijk [10] emphasize a connection between cultural ideals and representations that can function as mirrors [11]. In this vein, Lacanian psychoanalysis discerns an intertwined evolution between technical artifacts and human desire, positing that technologies, far from satisfying pre-existing biological needs, increasingly generate new desires [11]. Consequently, technology assumes the role of a conduit for the imperative to attain this cultural ideal, correlating with the ego-ideal of the symbolic order.

Within this cultural milieu, the concept of "playing God" undergoes a nuanced reinterpretation, shedding some of its negative connotations. The idea of human transformation assumes a central role in various cultural sources, notably in the thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's foresight concerning the emergence of the "masters of the earth" resonates in contemporary discussions surrounding posthuman and transhumanist trends, where the posthuman replaces the traditional deity.

In the aftermath of the "discontents" arising from the technological entanglement of the human mind, I envision a technological future where generative art does not merely serve as a prosthetic extension endowing us with god-like technology. Instead, it should refrain from supplanting but rather supplementing the human body, thereby relinquishing the outdated notion of a human as a mere worker whose expertise allows the use of prosthetic elements [12]. The true peril of technology lies not in its inherent nature but in how our actions implicate us, not nature. This apprehension and fear of technology correlate with the Lacanian lamella—a "fear of the asexual

reproduction of Life, the fear of a life that is indestructible, constantly expanding, reproducing itself through self-division" [12].

Hal Foster's work, "Prosthetic Gods," skillfully employs psychoanalytic theory to delve into the trauma experienced by European artists. Prostheses, including the act of art-making, empower individuals as subjects to engage with the world, safeguard themselves from external threats, and compensate for the imagined castration. However, Foster also critiques mainstream modernism for presupposing an intact ego capable of expressiveness, vision, or transgression [5]. He underscores the potential of art to offer redemptive meaning that neither undoes loss nor fixates on trauma:

No wonder, then, that Guber wanted to escape this paranoid fascination with enigmatic signifiers, this melancholic cult of traumatic loss; so did many other artists and critics (hence, again, the recent turn to Beauty and Spirituality). But between riddling and redeeming, between an aesthetic of missing parts and a dream of wish-fulfillment, there are other paths; and Guber intimates one third way: neither a fixation on trauma nor a faith that magically undoes loss, but the fabrication of scenes for a working-over of trauma and loss—a working-over, not a working-through in the sense of having done, a narrative closure, a redemptive meaning. [ 5]

To guard against succumbing to the potential horrors of technology on our psychic apparatus, I argue that genuine self-expression through generative art is a tangible possibility. This can be achieved by structuring, utilizing, and fostering prosthetic gadgets (or lathouses) in the alethosphere in a manner that does not pose a threat to the

human subject and its composition, yielding outcomes with a humanistic orientation. Andjelkovic [8] contends that the relationship with technology can serve as a backdoor to the sacred:

Technology is the expression of an unconscious fantasy – and thus a 'back door' to the sacred – in the same way that notions of gods and spirits pointed to an abrogated ideal of omnipotence desired by the human subject, cast-off and projected onto objects, figures, and forces found without, in the external world. [8]

In "Lacan and Religion," Dunlap posits that a teleological direction in response to the alethosphere is crucial, emphasizing the significance of the drive that locates the essence of what already exists, rather than engaging in the arbitrary creation of desires and meaning [13].

We might expect Lacan to turn, at this point, to the realm of the real, to perhaps present us with a matheme – a little package of purely formalized and meaningless truth – to emphasize the impossibility of navigating ourselves out of this impasse from within the symbolic. It is therefore curious that Lacan would instead turn to the category of meaning (sens) and religion as the properly human response to life in the alethosphere. In his other works meaning is almost always associated with the imaginary and accompanied by a warning ... It would perhaps be best to connect this strange (for Lacan, at least) use of meaning to his understanding of Aristotle's fourth cause – that of teleology, or, for our purposes, the "direction" that is another meaning of sens – which modern science has had to jettison in order to pursue the purely mathematical, and therefore meaningless, truths that function as its gold standard. When Lacan tells us that, "what is at stake when what we are dealing with is the divine dimension and generally that of the spirit, turns entirely

around the following: what do we suppose to be already there before we discover it" (1967–8: 15/11/67)...this for Lacan functions not as a symptom – a problem to be overcome – but as *sinthome*, both sickness and cure; for it is woven into the very fabric of the alienating *alethosphere* while yet providing the best hope that the rising tide of modernity has only served to sharpen what is "true" about religion: that it gives meaning to life, but not a meaning that is tacked on to arbitrarily turn a tragedy into a comedy, but one that was there all along, a *telos* reigning from "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4)." [13]

## 2.1 The Transvaluation of the Death-Drive: A New Future

Foster [5] delves into Marinetti's anticipation of the Freudian hypothesis, influenced by Lamarck, which posits that each organism evolves a protective shield (*Reizschutz*) against stimuli. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, asserted that this protective shield "is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli" [14]. Marinetti suggests that this extruded shield has evolved into a technological organ, functioning as an auxiliary organ that has become integrated into humanity. Consequently, Foster illustrates how Marinetti envisions a transformative dialectic where the traditional distinction between shield and shock collapses, and technology serves both as a protective shield and a stimulus for shock [5]. Foster further elaborates on a transvaluation of the death drive in Marinetti's perspective.

As we have seen, Marinetti was fascinated by the breaching of the body ego. Again, for Freud the response to this breaching is a binding of the body ego, a binding that develops through

repetition; but this repetition cannot be easily controlled: it might conduce to a becoming-inorganic not only of the protective shield but of the entire being—at least to the degree that it is gripped by the death drive. In his double move to reify the body and to vitalize things, "to substitute for human psychology, now exhausted, the lyric obsession with matter" (M 87), Marinetti seems to intimate this same process. More radically, he seems to embrace it, to transvalue the death drive as the very principle of self-preservation, indeed of self-exaltation ... On the one hand, this is to accept a kind of death; on the other, it is to stake a new future for "life" in a technology (in or beyond mere death). [5]

In Foster's chapter on the Return of the Real, there is a pronounced emphasis on the notion that art within this context seems to desire the gaze to illuminate, the object to assert its presence, and the real to manifest itself in the splendid horror of its pulsating desire. Essentially, the artwork aims to evoke a sublime condition, either by directly embodying it or by eliciting a response that resonates with the intense and pulsatile essence of the real [5].

## 3. The Generative Drive and the Alethosphere

It is in this context where the lathouse takes on significance as a different form of object. Based on this reading if object a is on the side of the metonymy of desire, then the lathouse is on the side of the drive and the body. [6]

Isabel Millar, in her work "The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence," contends that a conceptual shift from Lacan's 'object a' to the 'lathouse' is essential for grasping the often-overlooked concept of enjoyment. This

'lathouse' represents a contemporary form of the object, situated within the real as a synthetic creation resulting from technoscientific advancements such as Artificial Intelligence. According to Lacan [15], understanding the implications of entering into a relationship with the lathouse is crucial. He emphasizes that the lathouse occupies the position of the 'real,' and its effects within this realm are significant and impossible to fully encapsulate [15]

Millar [6] elucidates that Lacan introduced these neologisms to speculate on the growing importance and implications of these technological devices on forms of enjoyment and the broader sphere of 'formalized truth' to which they belong [15]. Lacan's central point is not merely that these objects cause desire but that they encapsulate elements of the drive, serving as impossible objects attempting to capture the jouissance of the body. These objects, therefore, seek to record the truth of our enjoyment within the Other, known as the alethosphere. Millar believes that because technoscience effects the real, it warrants us to consider them to be more than just "consumer pests" [6]

Millar's [6] discussion also looks at Veronique Voruz's [16] exploration of these non-natural objects of technoscience, emphasizing their production in the alethosphere. Vrouz distinguishes lathouses as objects of the real of science, in contrast to the more traditional guises of *object a*. Freud's concept of prosthetic godhood, driven by an inherent lack, involves the use of auxiliary organs to orbit around the objects of the drive. Millar [6] also delves into Stiegler's *What Makes Life Worth Living?* [17], which is an exploration of

the changing relationship between the drive and technological objects, with the lathouse serving as an external non-natural object that administers jouissance. In this context, the lathouse takes on significance as a different kind of object, where 'object a' aligns with the metaphor and metonymy of desire, while the lathouse aligns with the drive and body [6]

Therefore, there is a shift whereby lathouse as an extimate object, converts interiority to exteriority and allows for the circulation of drive around the "ab-sex-sence of jouissance" [6]. Therefore, Miller's project serves as an interrogation of the relationship between knowledge and enjoyment, as she quotes "The philosophical question of truth is thereby supplanted by the psychoanalytic question of enjoyment, where metaphysical knowledge becomes sexual knowledge." [6].

Nonetheless, the disruptions ushered in by contemporary scientific endeavors, driven by the pursuit of knowledge but increasingly severed from meaningful contexts, result in an environment saturated with nothing beyond an assemblage of gadgets [13]. Lacan formulated the concept of the alethosphere as a myth, portraying truth as estranged from our grasp. He articulates this idea by stating, "if you have a little microphone here, you are plugged into the alethosphere" [15] underscoring that each gadget (termed 'lathouses') effectively connects individuals to this ultra-modern mythical space. Copjec says

In Lacan's new ultra-modern myth, there is no heavenly sphere, naturally; it has been demolished. All that remains of the world beyond the subject is the 'alethosphere', which is a kind of high-tech heaven, a laicized or 'disenchanted'

space filled none the less with every technoscientific marvel imaginable: space probes and orbiters, telecommunications and telebanking systems, and so on. **The subject is now a 'terminal' subject**, plugged into various circuitries, suited with wearable computers and fitted with artificial, remotely monitored and controlled organs, implants. In this alethosphere (alethosphere because this space and everything in it is built on the demonstrable truths, rigorous and mathematical, of modern science) the prosthetically enhanced, plugged-in subject does not need to flee reality in order to indulge his pleasure principle, for he is now able to remould reality in accordance with it. In other words, in the ultra-modern, advanced capitalist world, the pleasure principle and the reality principle are no longer in competition, but have merged to form a kind of corporation. [18, 13].

#### **4. Implications for Generative Art and Conclusive Remarks**

As I conclude this exploration into the psychoanalytic implications of technoscientific progress, particularly within the realm of generative art, a fundamental question surfaces: What role does randomness and structure play in reshaping the mythical expanse of the alethosphere?

Our investigation leaves us pondering the prospect of new desires emerging within the alethosphere, potentially giving rise to increased self-alienation and loss. Amid these uncertainties, however, we discern a potential potency within lathouses, influencing the authentic drive of the real and transcending the boundaries of the pleasure principle to construct meaning. Žižek, positioning gadgets beyond the realm of pleasure, introduces an element of Kierkegaardian anxiety rather than a

mere enhancement of pleasures and abilities [12]. This prompts reflection on whether technological control over prosthesis might extend to controlling the core of our self-experience, a concern articulated by Žižek [12].

In this attempt to formulate responses to life within the alethosphere, I turn to contemporary works, notably Isabel Millar's "Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence" and Hal Foster's "Prosthetic Gods." These sources guide this exploration as we grapple with the challenges inherent in the journey toward individuation. This psychoanalytic anthropology, rooted in acknowledging disparity, provides a foundational understanding for a philosophy of technology informed by psychoanalysis. It is important to understand how randomness and structure operate in the context of generative art. The collaboration between the conscious artist and AI reveals unforeseen potentials, specifically for the expression of categorical meaning (sens). While we anticipate challenges in the technological future, our inquiry envisions a scenario where technoscience authentically impacts jouissance. The conscious subject, navigating generative art, autonomously expresses its drive toward individuation, safeguarding subjective experiences within the alethosphere. Acknowledging technology as a reflection of unconscious fantasies unveils a potential backdoor to the sacred, fostering humanistic goals. Emphasizing the conscious utilization of tools, like lathouses, becomes crucial to prevent compromising individuality. Investigating how individuals approach technology in creating generative art is imperative.

In this exploration, I acknowledge that we might not have all the answers.



Nonetheless, we assert that technoscientific advances need not lead to a future of self-alienation. Generative art emerges as a medium for authentic creative expression, potentially immortalizing the creative drive. This parallels the Lacanian myth of the Lamella, attempting to replicate an indestructible digital lifeform, signifying a potential future of self-exaltation with technology. The recovery of an indestructible, eternal essence within the subject may remain an impossibility, but the exploration of the transvaluation of the Death-Drive hints at a future where life with technology becomes a form of self-exaltation.

Lastly, the comprehensive exploration of psychoanalytic implications within the realm of technoscientific advancements, particularly in generative art, unveils profound considerations for the future intersection of human psychology and technology. Several key implications emerge from this inquiry:

### 1. *Reconfiguring the Alethosphere:*

The examination of randomness and structure within the alethosphere prompts contemplation on how these factors reshape our understanding of truth in the technologically mediated world. The potential emergence of new desires and the transformative influence of lathouses on the real drive open avenues for reconfiguring the conceptual boundaries of the alethosphere.

### 2. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle:*

Žižek's positioning of technological elements beyond the pleasure principle underscores a paradigm shift. Rather than enhancing pleasures, these prosthetic components induce anxiety and fear, aligning with

Kierkegaardian notions of apprehension. This challenges conventional views on the role of technology in human experience, urging a reconsideration of its impact on our core selves.

### 3. *Technological Self-Expression and Individuation:*

The exploration emphasizes the potential of generative art as a means of technological self-expression. By navigating the intricate path toward individuation, individuals can confront challenges and concerns within the alethosphere. The paper envisions a future where the conscious engagement with generative art ensures the preservation of subjective experiences and facilitates autonomous individuation.

### 4. *Backdoor to the Sacred:*

Acknowledging technology as a reflection of unconscious fantasies opens a conceptual backdoor to the sacred. The interplay between psychoanalysis and technology provides a unique lens through which individuals can achieve self-realization and transcendence. This suggests that the conscious utilization of technological tools, such as lathouses, can potentially lead to humanistic goals.

### 5. *Immortality of the Creative Drive:*

The examination of the Lacanian myth of the Lamella and the replication attempts by the prosthetic god introduces the notion of the potential immortality of the creative drive. Generative art, as a form of self-exaltation, signifies a departure from the original loss, offering glimpses into an indestructible digital form of life.

### 6. *Challenges and Responsible Utilization:*

The inquiry acknowledges the challenges inherent in the future of humanity entwined with technology. It underscores the importance of responsible utilization of technological tools, particularly in the creation of generative art. Conscious efforts to avoid compromising individuality become imperative in navigating the evolving relationship between humanity and technology.

#### 7. *Transvaluation of the Death-Drive:*

The exploration of the Transvaluation of the Death-Drive suggests a future where life with technology becomes a unique form of self-exaltation. By redefining the relationship between technology and our unconscious desires, this perspective opens avenues for novel interpretations and understandings in the ongoing discourse on human-technology interaction.

In essence, this exploration fosters a nuanced understanding of the intricate interweaving of psychoanalytic principles with technological advancements. The implications outlined here propel future discussions and inquiries, urging a continued exploration of the evolving dynamics between the human psyche and the ever-progressing realm of technology.

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