"And Another Thing: I'm Not Mad" — Cyberspace & the Sinthome
Jake Cowan | Paper Presented at LACKiv (2023)

Writing as a medium was haunted by specters long before Marx. Contrary to any naïve presumption that Communism's opening salvo merely reflects a general 19th-Century Gothic morbidity, critical media theorists like Friedrich Kittler contend the reverse, that the hauntological metaphor evokes the eerie rather than the other way around. Otherwise said, it is the tome which precedes the tomb and it is the epitaph which produces the dead. According to Kittler, one cannot articulate the vicissitudes or analyze the meaning of a discourse without also attending to "the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data" (DN 369). That is to say, if methodologies of study such as rhetoric and psychoanalysis seek to understand *how* discourse structures social relations and psychical characteristics, then we must foreground literally *how* a discourse connects subject to subject, signifier to signifier, thinking through the channels we think through, those medial affordances and material limitations that enable discourse in the first place. If, as Wittgenstein forwards, *«die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt»* (TLP 5.6), and if a medium means the limits of language—how far and fast it can travel, the fidelity with which it is stored, who has a right to access it, and so on—then technology are not means of communication alone but weigh upon the meaning of every communication, their individual contours lending themselves over to the ethical, political, metaphysical, and rhetorical tropes that constitute a discourse.

From this vantage, the romance with the occult that typifies Discourse Network 1800 emanates from the technical, social, rhetorical, psychical—that is to say, discursive—dominance of the Word as Written. Around the dawn of the 19th Century, the basic character of written characters changed: In order to both populate and prop up the newly established bureaucratic nation-state as a form of politico-economic organization, men of letters devised novel pedagogical techniques for teaching letters in an effort to reproduce themselves—"Men of words secure their territory by such self-referentiality," to quote Kittler (157), an autodeixis at the core of conventional humanism—thereby facilitating the historical passage from the discourse of the Master to a discourse of the University through an attempted universal phoneticization of European literacy. The Discourse Network of 1800, says Kittler, initiates "a metaphysics of silent reading, whose prerequisite was the alphabetization of central Europe," and whose effect was "[a] voice, as pure as it is transcendental, [that] rises from between the lines" and echoes between the ears (DN 65), an internal hallucinatory speech derived from the page and misrecognized as the self. "Not content or message but the medium itself made the Spirit," says Kittler (DN 178). Yet the unsplit subject conjured up by writing—neither of which, medium nor message, after the apotheosis of alphabetization within the Discourse Network of 1800, is long for this world—remains a phantasm just the same as the other spirits of the time, albeit anything but eternal or ephemeral, grounded instead temporally and materially to a particular technological configuration that would soon compose itself into decomposition as writing erases itself from the scene by the end of the century.

"A medium is a medium," Kittler holds (DN 229), and in the Discourse Network of 1800, this means that a medium-qua-means functions in line with a medium-qua-mystic, summoning spirits and interpolating subjects at one and the same time; however, by the *fin de siècle*, the written word (with its attendant *Zeitgeist*) had given up the ghost and given way to a new definition of media that recognized a medium-qua-medium, a technological and material apparatus for recording, storing, and distributing information that is no longer reducible to a translucent tool of the (poetic) imagination—the medium is dead; long live the medium! "Coherence, identification, universality—all the honorary titles conferred upon the book by universal alphabetization" a century prior and key terms for psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and the like fall by the wayside as the prestige of the tome is entombed in the eyes of the masses (DN 245), the written word's historical relevance and reputation replaced "around 1900 [by] a new paradigm of knowledge" founded on the superhuman production, storage, and distribution capabilities of the gramophone, cinematograph, and typewriter (DN 237). Following "Lacan's methodological distinction between [the] symbolic, real, and imaginary...which constitute all information systems," Kittler argues that the psychical monopoly of writing and the subjective unity it supposed were obliterated circa 1900 by these technological innovations, where now, "[t]he real of speaking took place in the gramophone" and "the imaginary produced in speaking or writing belonged to film" (DN 246), leaving only "the rituals of the symbolic" to the modernist games played by serious and increasingly unpopular literature and poetry (DN 247). With this fragmentation of discourse along three distinct and competing channels, one could say that the Atomic Era had landed already a half-century before Fat Man or Little Boy. Kittler thus offers an obituary: "Man" with a majuscule M "simply died around 1900" (DN 258), joining Woman in the realms of the nonexistent, taking with him, in a cultural murder-suicide, the consistency, commonality, and efficiency of social discourse.

This fracturing in turn also annihilated the condition of possibility by which capital-Man might leave behind a ghost, and so the loss of universal alphabetization led to the curtain rising on Universal monsters as the new embodied horrors of the age. From Pazuzu and Pinhead to Carpenter's Shape and Carpenter's Thing to Bruce the Great White and HAL9000, in the discourse network of the 20th Century the ghost gives way to the undead corpse, where what had remained recognizably anthropoid is replaced by the incomprehensibly inhuman, impelled not by inner spiritual desire but by some insatiable mechanical drive experienced as if coming from the outside. "Language," says Kittler, "ceases to be a bastion of inwardness" (DN 243) and literature can no longer be a refuge for the soul. Hence, as the Soul/unity of the psyche became dispersed through new media channels, ghosts could no longer be found haunting the house of language, but instead took up residence in and as the machines that engineer late capitalist business with all its nightmarish alienation.

Since the advent of the Internet and the swift passage into Discourse Network 2000, the psychical disunion produced by that alienation has, of course, only worsened; and moreover, in a conceptual match cut, anxiety triggered by the alienation of the base economic infrastructure has morphed into superstructural anxieties about literal alien nations. On the one hand—the right, specifically—such disquiet gets articulated as a fear not of occult terrors but of terrorist cults, a jingoistic xenophobia concerned with weak borders and foreign belligerents that is at the root of the global resurgence of nationalist flag-waving; on the other hand—this time the left—the dread of alien nations manifests as a concern with multiverses, alternate timelines, and deep fakes. All along, this alone has been the fantasy driving cyberspace, which William Gibson aptly labeled "a consensual hallucination"—to unmoor the Imaginary and dissolve what few ties to the Real remain, foreclosing access to it, a disidentificaiton with the mirror-body in favor of a wholly virtual ego-avatar: Cyberspace "is not where bodies live," John Perry Barlow declared at the end of history, for "there is no matter here." This turn of the screw has left us screwed and screwy, yet the unconscious means hope, and even a psychotic, such as Lacan says of Joyce, is not utterly beyond the ends of analysis. With this in mind, I believe we must begin to conceptualize the Internet in terms of the Sinthome, which would have the potential to reknot and undo what has come undone.

A slippery and indeterminate thing, the Sinthome: One might best understand the idea as the classical Freudian symptom in an inverted form, like a glove turned inside-out and worn on the other hand (Moncayo 92), akin in a rhetorical sense to Kenneth Burke's anthropocentric binary of motion—which is instinctual, compulsive, matter in "sheer locomotion"—versus action—which signifies intentionality (Biesecker 26). According to this Burkean schism, to get tangled in your shoelaces and fall is motion, while to pratfall is action—first as tragedy, then as farce. Here, however, is where the comparison between Burke and Lacan breaks down, and hence becomes more useful: Whereas what separates action from motion is the intentionality behind a *conscious* willing, in another inversion, the Sinthome is marked by *unconscious* willing, the insistence of desire and jouissanc. With the Sinthome, one comes to "identify" with one's symptom, to transform what had previously disturbed the ideal composure of the subject into something now felt as necessary for survival, so enjoyable it makes life worth living. Look again to Joyce, who was able in practice to reconfigure his writing-mania not as an imposition arriving from the outside—that common trope of the artist as channel for a transcendent dictator—but as his own interior imposing itself on the outside world (Moncayo 74). Such a revaluation of unconscious values, I venture, parallels Burke's motion versus action dichotomy: On the one hand, there is the the symptom tripping up the subject, as painful and undesired as a bad fall; on the other hand, like an inverted glove, one has the Sinthome, which provides the split subject a figure of alterity and the possibility of pursuing variant pathways that may look like where one came from but lead eventually to a much different place—is this not what also is most disturbing about Discourse Network 2000, with its alien nation specters and multiverse border crises?

As we have witnessed online a general rise in psychotic discourse, such as the Qanon and Sovereign Citizen movements, with the last century's superhuman technologies dethroned by this century's post-human technologies, scholars invested in the potentials of psychoanalysis might supplement the usual style of paranoid reading with critical attempts to repair (or, better, retriad) the knot of the subject. Take, for a brief concluding example, those conspiracy theorists who believe—rightly or wrongly, who's to say?—that shapeshifting repitilian aliens have replaced civic leaders and clandestinely rule the world. Rather than attempting to shake these nuts out of their tree, ridding them of such a paranoid symptom, a clinic and a rhetoric of the Sinthome would make it so that "the subject can take responsibility for [their] symptom" (Moncayo 43)—perhaps, in this instance, by recasting the object of their concern to instead include the cold-blooded conspiracies of actually existing Capitalists; or how draconian culture industry behemoths like Disney maintain their market position by tapping into viewers' basal lizard brains—in the process transforming motion into action, symptom into Sinthome. In the end, if, as Kittler contended, the capacity for media to register discourse materially reflects and operationally reifies the Lacanian registers of the psyche, then any analysis that does not consider the impact of the Internet as our contemporary discursive Prime Mover will inevitably fall flat. In turn, by supplementing the usual mode of critical paranoia with a more reparative style of reading less in line with Romantic correspondence than with the unfixed discourse of the post, we might begin to transform the online sin-house into a true Sinthome.