MEDIA AND PSYCHOANALYSIS
A Critical Introduction

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Introduction

In 1907, Sigmund Freud wrote to his family while he was on holiday in Italy. On the Piazza Colonna in Rome, a screen had been installed on the roof of one of the buildings onto which magic lantern slides and moving images were projected:

> They [the magic lantern slides] are actually advertisements, but to beguile the public these are interspersed with pictures of landscapes, Negroes [sic] of the Congo, glacier ascents, and so on. But since these wouldn't be enough, the boredom is interrupted by short cinematographic performances for the sake of which the old children (your father included) suffer quietly the advertisements and monotonous photographs. They are stingy with these tidbits, however, so I have had to look at the same thing over and over again. When I turn to go I detect a certain tension in the crowd, which makes me look again, and sure enough a new performance has begun, and so I stay on. Until 9 p.m. I usually remain spellbound; then I begin to feel too lonely in the crowd. (Freud, 1992, pp. 261–2)

Written well over a hundred years ago, the scene that Freud describes here may nevertheless sound familiar to us. Big screens in public places on mild summer nights have long since become a cultural mainstay and frequently attract hundreds, even thousands, of people to experience, say, a sporting event together.

As art and media historian Pasi Väliaho (2013) observes of Freud's report, under 'the pull of the technological spectacle, the external environment of the Piazza becomes secondary' (2013, p. 169). His eyes glued to the screen, Freud finds himself suffering through the advertisements, as so many television viewers in the decades that would follow, but he admits to being *spellbound* by the moving images offered in between the ads and the slideshows. Indeed, the spectacle of movement on the screen fascinates him so much as to render him immobile, if only

for a short moment. More than that, each time he attempts to turn his back on the screen and leave, he can sense in the physical responses of other spectators that something new is catching their attention, which makes him turn around again only to become spellbound once more.

Although the magic lantern was one of the key inventions predating and anticipating cinema – with the first *properly moving* images having been made and shown by Louis Le Prince in 1888 – we can link the repetitive, tidbit nature of the screening at the Piazza Colonna to contemporary media technology. Indeed, the historical scene is reminiscent of the photo- and video-sharing app Snapchat, for example, where users can share up to 60-second-long videos with friends. Furthermore, the magic lantern slides can also be seen as early instances of animated gif images that have become commonplace on social media: punchily short film sequences that are a few seconds long and repeat endlessly. The silent films and slideshows of Freud's era were often accompanied by live music to add an additional stimulus. This comes remarkably close to another current social media platform, TikTok, which draws its highly affective strength from the often funny and joyful visual illustrations of short samples of well-known pop music songs.

Turning to more traditional media, Rome, the 'eternal city', has been featured in countless Hollywood films, from *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Minghella, 1999), to *Zoolander 2* (Stiller, 2016) and many others. It is also possible today to learn about Rome by watching videos of virtual walks on YouTube or to 'visit' the city through a virtual-reality headset like Oculus Rift where users can interact with a virtual artificial intelligence (AI) tour guide. Videogames from *Street Fighter Alpha* (1995) and the *Assassin's Creed* series (2007–16), to *Gran Turismo 6* (2013) have all featured levels set in the Italian capital. Hence, although technology and media change rapidly, we can always find traces of the old in the new. As we shall see in the coming chapters, the spatio-temporal dynamics of repetition and in/visibility that we have evoked in the above passages are characteristic of both media and psychoanalysis. In this Introduction, we outline basic ideas of psychoanalysis and define key technological terms such as 'media'. Lastly, we provide a summary of the book's main arguments.

What is psychoanalysis?

This book is a critical introduction to media and psychoanalysis or, more precisely, the study of diverse media through a psychoanalytic lens. The coming chapters feature the technologies, practices, uses and genres already broached above: film and television, the internet and social media, videogames and AI. We present and develop the field of psychoanalytic media studies and show how scholars have drawn on psychoanalysis in their thinking about them.

But, first of all, what is psychoanalysis anyway? Founded by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), psychoanalysis is, first and foremost, a theory of the human mind, or the human being in general (the 'subject', a term many psychoanalysts prefer) and its peculiar ways of functioning. Taking its cues not from the well-functioning and healthy, but from the ailing mind, it consists of a clinical practice of caring for what today is referred to as 'mental health issues': for example, an inexplicable and overwhelming sadness (called 'depression'), states of extreme, mysterious fearfulness ('anxiety'), obsessive–compulsive behaviours such as 'hoarding', and radical mood swings and emotional instabilities (classified today as 'bipolar' or 'borderline', depending on the strength and character of the phenomena), as well as many others.

We can say that, together with his mostly female patients – or 'analysands', as one calls them nowadays, so as to denote a more equal relationship in which both analyst and patient/analysand engage in mental work – Freud 'discovered' that people suffering from psychological turbulences could be significantly helped by talking about themselves and what is difficult in their lives during daily sessions. Although much has changed since then,[1] the basic principles have remained the same. The analysand lies down on a couch and freely associates – that is, talks about everything and anything that comes to their mind – while the analyst sits at an angle behind them, taking in the analysand's stream of (un)-consciousness with evenly hovering attention, trying not to focus their attention on any specific aspects of the analysand's discourse, but bringing out the import of the overall scene thus created.

Psychoanalysts (or psychoanalytic therapists, psychodynamic therapists or depth psychologists, as they are often called) are trained in psychoanalytic institutes, not merely learning key psychoanalytic ideas, but experiencing them by submitting to psychoanalytic treatment

themselves, long before they start seeing their own patients/analysands. Once accredited, they can set up their own practice.

Depending on where one lives in the world, the availability and affordability of psychoanalytic treatment vary greatly. For instance, psychoanalysis does not have a large presence in the Arab region, whereas the Argentinian city of Buenos Aires is said to have the most psychoanalysts per square mile. This might have to do with the practice being rooted in a western culture that puts emphasis on individuality – the idea that each of us is their own, separate being, living their distinct lives. Paradoxically, clinical psychoanalysis affirms this idea each time an individual lies down on an analyst's couch; at the same time, however, the aim of the treatment can be described as making individuals aware of their fundamental state of '*un*separatedness' from others. In this respect, it is unfortunate that psychoanalysis has become marginalized by many welfare states, as governments – and individuals themselves – often favour other, allegedly 'quicker' and more 'cost-effective' forms of therapy.

Furthermore, due to its western origins, psychoanalysis has been critiqued as a white, modernist project that cannot simply be 'exported' to all corners of the world. Many regional variations and developments of psychoanalysis – for example, in Egypt, China and India – have emerged as a result. We briefly return to this point in Chapter 4, when we consider psychoanalysis and racism. But back to the beginning. At the very core of the so-called 'talking cure' (Freud & Breuer, 1895, p. 30) is the process of free association that Freud (1913a, p. 134) emphasized was 'the fundamental rule of psycho-analytic technique':

> You will notice that as you relate things various thoughts will occur to you which you would like to put aside on the ground of certain criticisms and objections. You will be tempted to say to yourself that this or that is irrelevant here, or is quite unimportant, or nonsensical, so that there is no need to say it. You must never give in to these criticisms, but must say it in spite of them – indeed, you must say it precisely *because* you feel an aversion to doing so. (Freud, 1913a, p. 134, italics in original)

Even more importantly, Freud emphasized that patients should never follow the urge of *not* saying something because it is *unpleasant* to tell (ibid.). In this way, he held that unconscious thoughts and unconscious

ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing could be brought to the fore and made perceivable, understandable and thus conscious.

Unlike conventional academic psychology, Freud placed a great deal of emphasis on the dynamic interplay of (a) what people are consciously aware of, (b) what they might at any given time become consciously aware of, but simply do not focus on, and (c) what of their thinking and feeling is more or less opaque and inaccessible to them. Whereas Freud straightforwardly called (a) the conscious, he referred to (b) as the preconscious and only defined (c) as unconscious – that is, those thoughts people are totally unaware of themselves. And indeed, we are not always aware of why we do certain things – moreover, we are frequently not even aware *that* we do them in the first place. We are often unaware of how we relate to people in the ways we do, leave alone *why*; we seldom remember our dreams, but most of us remember recurring ones. However, this is without being able to say for sure why we keep dreaming them, or why we keep making the same old mistakes, repeating particular patterns or going in circles with our lovers, friends or colleagues with actions and reactions we know we should shake off but are unable to. Irrespective of whether we feel mentally healthy or fragile, our actions, thoughts, utterances, fantasies and desires are constantly being shaped by unconscious processes. The psychoanalyst Phil Mollon (2000) defines the unconscious using digital technology as analogy:

> Consciousness could be compared to what is visible on a computer screen. Other information could be accessed readily by scrolling down the document or by switching to a different 'window'. This would be analogous to the conscious and the preconscious parts of the mind. However, some files on the computer may be less easily explored. They may have been encrypted or 'zipped', or they may require a password or are in other ways rendered 'access denied'. Some may also have been corrupted, so that information is scrambled and thereby rendered incomprehensible. While the Internet potentially makes available (to people collectively) all kinds of information and images […], a programme [sic] may have been installed that restricts access to Internet sites, censoring some that contain material considered unacceptable. Moreover, most of the activity of the computer is not visible on the screen; this is analogous to Freud's idea of the bodily based instincts, or

'id', in themselves inaccessible to the mind, only to be discerned through their derivatives (desires and phantasies). (Mollon, 2000, p. 8)

With this quotation, we do not want to say that the mind works like a computer, but Mollon's analogy is productive in our context, not least because it links the unconscious to media technology. The psychosocial thinker Stephen Frosh writes that the psychoanalytic unconscious 'refers to the existence of ideas which are not just not being thought about (hence not just "not in consciousness") but which are also radically unavailable to thought' (Frosh, 2002, p. 12). For clinical psychoanalysis, the reasons for particular neuroses, mental troubles or forms of suffering often have blocked and inaccessible aspects, either because they are attached to our earliest, pre-linguistic experiences, made at a time when our consciousness had not been sufficiently formed, or because they have been repressed and banished from an established consciousness as they are too traumatic, shameful or, as Freud (1913a) put it drily, 'unpleasant' to face consciously.

While psychoanalysis holds the unconscious to be universal, it is nevertheless shaped by particular individual and sociocultural dynamics. As mentioned, it takes a culture in which individuality holds some importance, for example, for psychoanalysis to make any sense in the first place. Gillian Rose (2001) puts it thus: 'the unconscious is formed by the disciplines of a culture, by its particular pattern of interdicts and permissions. Subjectivity is thus culturally as well as psychically constructed, and this process of subjection continues throughout our lives' (p. 104). The unconscious is never simply a box or kind of hidden place where something can be hidden or buried. In that sense, Mollon's analogy of the zip file is not fitting. Rather, the unconscious is dynamic and, to stay with computer analogies, a reservoir of algorithms and if-then patterns which continuously announces its presence in our interactions with others. As Frosh (2002) writes, these 'hidden ideas', as he calls them, 'have a profound influence on psychological life', by remaining 'active ("dynamic"), pushing for release' (p. 13). In other words, unconscious fragments continuously intrude on and reintroduce themselves into our interactions and mental activities.

Breasts, penises, mothers, fathers – what was Freud('s) thinking?

Readers unfamiliar with psychoanalysis will nevertheless be familiar with many of its ideas. These ideas have deeply penetrated popular culture. Proverbial sayings that have long since turned into common-sensical wisdom are, for example: that everything in life is about sex; that young children desire the parent of the opposite sex; that men strive to marry someone who is like their mother and women someone like their father; that cigars and other pointy objects represent the phallus; that some people are 'anal' (i.e. obsessively controlling) and some others are characterized by 'oral cravings', etc. Although such notions are sometimes taken too literally, they often have some truth in them. For example, 'anal' and 'oral' as character traits denote particular phases in an infant's psychosexual development and, even though these phases are no longer seen as holding true in the rather rigid sequence in which Freud posited them, they still offer immensely productive models for conceiving human relatedness, a point we unpack in Chapter 5.

A key stage in this model is the **Oedipus complex**, which refers to a phase in a child's development, roughly from age four to six, in which the child develops a quasi-sexual – but not in the way we understand adult sexuality – attachment to one of the parents, usually that of the opposite sex, and a degree of animosity toward the other parent. Such tensions in one's earliest relationships have indeed proven plausible. Across different cultures, for example, toddlers have shown a tendency to make proclamations along the lines of: 'I am going to live with daddy/mommy one day.' As Freud stated, those oedipal wishes are given up at some point because, in the male case, the little boy fears that his father may punish him for such adultery through an act of castration (i.e. cutting off the penis, which stands for total destruction and/or subjugation). In turn, the little girl, Freud argued, upon realizing she does not have a penis, comes to feel inferior to her father and angry at her mother for not 'equipping' her with one. This part of psychoanalytic theory has been fiercely debated and challenged within and outside psychoanalysis, and we can only scratch the surface of this debate here by emphasizing that the Oedipus complex is not so much about the penis as a bodily organ. Rather, it comes to embody a particular symbolic meaning in society that has to do with power and the ways in which people invest things, other people

and themselves – including certain body parts – with power or a lack thereof, something the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan elaborated on. Hence, although the idea of the Oedipus complex may sound a little *whacky*, far-fetched and embarrassing, we invite readers to take its basic premises seriously: specifically, how patterns of deep attachment and love – as well as sexual stirrings – which form first between the baby and mother, and subsequently among baby, mother and father (or other caregiver arrangements), come to shape a person's upbringing, identity and being in the world.

By crossing through the oedipal phase and giving up on one's parents as sole love objects, the child becomes able to see themselves as part of a generational line (in familial as well as societal terms) and thereby gains a (rudimentary) understanding of history and temporality. The child learns to see themselves as a subject of the future and begins to speculate and daydream about what that future might look like – and, importantly, they need to face what it will *not* look like. Although Freud argued that the Oedipus complex is universal, his theory's focus was clearly on boys. Yet, both boys and girls need to give up on their longings for a blissful return to a union with either mummy or daddy and, in the process, they internalize their parents as inner authorities. Through this process, and with the child becoming more aware of their surroundings, the *super-ego* is formed. The quasi-erotic desires of the Oedipus complex become repressed, tabooed and forbidden – a process Freud saw as a hallmark of civilization. The child 'is forced to swallow her or his desires in the face of the power of the real world', Frosh (1999, p. 36) notes.

Thus, mediated by the relationship to one's parents, the super-ego comes to represent the laws, customs and morals of a society, with Freud introducing two further neologisms in his later metapsychological writings with which he sought to delineate the subject's relationship to these laws: the *ego* and the *id*. Whereas the id comes to represent the unconscious and constantly seeks pleasure and enjoyment, in this way going against and coming into conflict with the laws of the super-ego, it is the ego's job to negotiate between id and super-ego and navigate the arising conflicts so as to keep them in check. Yet, this is no simple task, since the super-ego is seldom benign; rather, being intimately related to the id and its unconscious desires, it must be seen as the latter's flipside and thus as a hyper-moralistic and exactingly cruel agency which constantly taunts its bearer for their failures and shortcomings, their insufficiencies

and transgressions, even – or better, especially – if these transgressions are not enacted but merely imagined.

In a long line of cultural-analytic works, Freud showed how unconscious conflicts among ego, id and super-ego seep not only into family relations, but also into wider sociocultural spheres – for example, in works of literature, theatre plays, visual art, jokes, proverbs and parapraxes (the famous Freudian slips!). It is this presence of unconscious processes in cultural and societal realms – or these realms' suffusion with unconscious processes – that makes psychoanalysis so truly radical and, in our opinion, so useful for analysing how individual subjects on one side and culture and society on the other shape each other in various ways. This question of the respective mutual shaping of the individual psyche and the collective or aggregated social is at the core of psychosocial studies, an approach and emerging academic discipline we are particularly invested in. Psychosocial studies argue that the individual-psychological and the social–structural dimensions of reality and existence are intertwined (Clarke, 2002; Hollway, 2006; Frosh & Young, 2008; Jones, 2008; Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Day Sclater *et al.*, 2009; Frosh, 2010; Hollway & Jefferson, 2012; Woodward, 2015; Redman, 2016; Krüger, 2017b). 'We are psycho-social,' Wendy Hollway (2006) writes, because we 'are influenced by desire and anxiety provoking situations that are affected by material and social conditions, discourses, as well as by unconscious defence mechanisms and intersubjective relations' (pp. 467–8). This book, too, is interested in this process of the mutual shaping of individuals, culture and society, and it considers media as entities positioned at the intersections of these three.

Post-Freudians: debates, rifts and developments

When Nazi Germany occupied Austria in 1938, Freud and his family fled Austria, which had embraced its 'Anschluß' (annex) to the 'Third Reich' rather enthusiastically (Krüger, 2011, pp. 199, 293). The family immigrated to London, where Freud died of painful cancer of the jaw in 1939. Many German and Austrian analysts sought refuge in other countries, first and foremost the USA. Although agreeing in principle on the dynamic unconscious as the foundation of human subjectivity, psychoanalysts had quarrelled over Freud's ideas already during his lifetime. After his death, however, these

quarrels developed into distinct psychoanalytic traditions (Makari, 2008). In that sense, it is wrong to speak of 'a' or 'the' psychoanalysis, as we have done up to now. Perhaps more so than other disciplines, psychoanalysis is at variance with itself and divided into different 'schools'. In the USA, for example, an ego-psychological school took hold whose focus on the functionings of the ego was presented as honouring the Freudian heritage, with Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris and Rudolph Loewenstein at the helm. In France, Jacques Lacan presented his revisioning of psychoanalytic ideas and concepts as a 'return to Freud'. However, instead of taking sides in the institutional conflicts which, in the wake of the Second World War, were simmering all over the psychoanalytic community (Lacan, for example, was expelled from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1963), we agree with those moderating voices today that mediate between, and find productive perspectives in, the various schools, without regressing into an anything-goes attitude. To our minds, the multiplicity of perspectives and approaches within psychoanalysis is testimony to the 'heterogeneity of the unconscious' itself (Laplanche, 1996, p. 11). Therefore, what we argue is required, particularly in psychosocial and cultural analysis, is a careful dialogue between, on the one hand, one's empirical material and the part of reality one seeks to analyse and, on the other, the broadest possible scope of psychoanalytic theory that one can bring to bear on one's analysis.

Since one of the main tasks of this book is to present already existing psychoanalytic dialogues between psychoanalysis and media culture, and since these dialogues have mainly been conducted from Freudian, object-relational and Lacanian perspectives, it is these central schools that we will focus on in this book, as well as in the remaining parts of this Introduction. However, it is important to note that there are highly influential psychoanalysts who did not form a school of their own, such as Didier Anzieu, Bracha L. Ettinger, André Green, Juliet Mitchell, Jessica Benjamin and Jean Laplanche, some of whom we will encounter in the course of the following chapters.

As regards to the establishing of psychoanalytic schools, the so-called 'Freud–Klein controversies' were pivotal in shaping the intellectual landscape of psychoanalysis in Britain and beyond. In Britain, two main camps emerged, one led by Freud's daughter Anna (1895–1982), who had become a highly theoretically versed psychoanalyst herself, and one led by Melanie Klein (1903–60) who, born in Budapest and psychoanalytically trained by Karl Abraham in Berlin, moved to London in 1926 where she

developed her own ideas about psychoanalysis, often radically redefining Freudian concepts, such as the super-ego, in the process. From 1942 to 1945, in the midst of the Nazi German 'Blitz' on London, a string of meetings was held there at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, where Freudians and Kleinians, too, fought battles over their diverging ideas. Yet, despite deep-seated feelings of embitterment, which come to the fore in private letters exchanged at the time – for example, between Anna Freud and Ernst Kris, who had migrated to New York (see Krüger, 2011, pp. 395–7) – the London Institute was *not* torn apart, and the three separate groups that were formed (Kleinians, Freudians and the Independent, or Middle, group) learned to coexist.

Melanie Klein: object relations and early infantile fantasies

Settling in London in the mid-1920s, Melanie Klein quickly became influential in psychoanalytic circles, and she is still particularly well known for her analyses of and writings on children, an interest she shared with Anna Freud. For Klein, a developmental phase key to the understanding of the human experience is what she called '**the paranoid–schizoid position**' – 'a constellation of anxieties, defences and [...] object relations' characteristic of the earliest months of an infant's life whose influence continues into childhood and adulthood[2] (more about this in Chapter 4). Klein, among other notable object-relations analysts, such as D. W. Winnicott, Esther Bick, Ronald Fairbairn, Wilfred Bion, Donald Meltzer and Harry Guntrip, was key in advancing and supplanting Freud's theories towards a more relational and intersubjective perspective. Whereas Freud had been most interested in people's inner conflicts – an interest that often centred his ideas on the individual person – object-relations psychoanalysis emphasized the primary importance of people's relationships with other people, most importantly those with their main caregiver, traditionally the mother.

We are not only born out of a (sexual) relation between two individuals; throughout our lives, we foster connections with others. '**Objects**' in this tradition do not refer to things, such as smartphones, milk cartons or chairs, but to other human beings and how they are rendered 'inner objects', or fantasy representations that shape how people relate to themselves and each other both 'out there' and 'in here'. As Klein

writes about the process of object formation in the infant's mind:

> The baby, having incorporated his parents, feels them to be live people inside his body in the concrete way in which deep unconscious phantasies are experienced – they are, in his mind, 'internal' or 'inner' objects. […] Thus an inner world is being built up in the child's unconscious mind, corresponding to his actual experiences and the impressions he gains from people and the external world, and yet altered by his own phantasies and impulses. (Klein, 1975, p. 345)

Klein placed great emphasis on seemingly 'negative' states such as envy, guilt, hatred or fantasies of destruction – which remain integral parts of subjectivity. She often worked with children and focused on their unconscious phantasy life and how dynamic it was. Julia Segal writes about Klein's observations of her own four-year-old son: 'When he was feeling angry with her, he saw her as a witch threatening to poison him. When he was feeling happy and loving towards her, he saw her as a princess he wanted to marry' (Segal, 2004, p. 28).

Fantasy, a key concept for psychoanalysis in general, is even more central in the object-relations paradigm than in the Freudian. In fact, object-relational analysts even spell it more emphatically, as *ph*antasy. Generally, fantasy refers to imaginary scenes and small plots that individuals dream up so as to insert themselves into them as the protagonists. Fantasies have strong unconscious dimensions and motivations; and in the Kleinian version, phantasies usually remain unconscious altogether. Especially in Freud's early work, fantasizing, and the related daydreaming, represent a desire for wish fulfilment and constitute the creation of a particularly desirable reality (Freud, 1914, 1915). For Klein, in turn, unconscious phantasies are constitutive of all mental processes, and although they are expressive of both libidinal and aggressive impulses (Bott Spillius *et al.*, 2011, p. 3), Klein's focus was decidedly more on phantasies of attacking and being attacked, destroying and being destroyed, particularly in relation to the mother and close others. However, although the differences between 'fantasy' and 'phantasy' are often important to note, we merely use 'fantasy' in this book to refer to both conscious and unconscious fantasies, so as to not overwhelm readers with the theoretical intricacies of the diverging schools.