

# Ethical Reflection on the “Subject of Desire” under the Short Video Platform

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**Abstract:** Short videos have become the most typical form of commodity consumption. When people watch short videos, they always mistakenly think they are the “master of enjoyment”, but in fact they are only passively consumed under the arrangement of algorithmic recommendation. The algorithm captures the “subject of desire” precisely, and the “chain of energy” of desire extends continuously. The subject’s “surplus desire”, or infinitely multiplying desire, is being exploited by a new way of capital accumulation. This brings about a new, universal crisis of the subject. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the real ethical dilemma faced by the subject and the reasons for its formation, and to find an effective value direction to help the subject escape from the dilemma.

**Keywords:** Desire subject; Short video; Lacan; Desire theory

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## 1. The formation of the “subject of desire”

Jacques Lacan followed Spinoza’s definition of “desire as the essence of man itself”, and to some extent regarded the problem of the subject and the problem of desire as the same problem. Since Plato, “desire” has been a classical and controversial issue in the history of Western philosophy. Before Lacan, no one had analyzed “desire” in detail from the spiritual aspect of the subject in conjunction with structuralism. Žižek, on the other hand, applies Lacan’s theory of desire to postmodern politics, economy, culture and other fields, demonstrating the high degree of adaptation of desire theory to postmodern social problems. Therefore, the study and analysis of the current short video phenomenon in China can also be considered in the context of the above-mentioned desire theory, based on the following two main reasons:

Lacan’s theory of desire emphasizes the distinction between desire, demand, and need. A demand is an expression of a need, e.g., when an infant cries out of hunger, crying is a demand, while eating is a need. In addition to expressing a biological instinctive need that can be satisfied at the level of the real world, the infant’s cry also expresses a need in the symbolic dimension, that is, the unconditional love of the Other. The need for love continues to exist as a residue after the needs of the real dimension have been satisfied, and desire is constituted by this residue. Lacan expresses this process of desire generation in a mathematical formula as “desire = demand - need”. Because there is always a residual desire between the demand and the need, desire is constantly formed “at the margin where the demand becomes separated from the need”, and thus the satisfaction of desire is always a failure. But it is precisely the unceasing, perpetual scarcity of desire that allows the subject, whose essence is desire, to exist.

At the same time, Lacan also draws on Kojève’s theory of desire, giving it a metaphorical and metonymic character. According to Kojève, “desire is directed either to another desire or to an object which, from a biological point of view, is completely useless”. Lacan argues that metaphor and metonymy are both due to the finite nature of linguistic symbols, and that unlike the needs of the conscious level that can be represented, desire as an unconscious level has something left over when it expresses itself, and therefore, desire itself has no energy to refer to. For example, when we ask for love, we often point to symbols such as roses, diamond rings, candlelight dinners, etc. But when the roses, diamond rings, candlelight dinners are satisfied, the desire for love not only does not stop, but is linked to other energies. Thus, desire is an endless transmutation, an ever-growing chain of energy fingers.

## 2. The reshaping of subject’s desire mechanism in short videos

Short video absorbs the mechanism of human desire into its own commercial form for reshaping, which is mainly reflected in the

following two points: firstly, the short video goods pushed by the algorithm infinitely, or the physical goods advertised by the platform occupy the energy chain of desire. The business model of the short video platform is a kind of paradigm shift to the traditional business model based on material goods. In this new paradigm, the platform does not directly provide physical goods, but realizes the value-added of capital by acquiring the data generated by the subject's browsing and interaction behaviors on the platform. Therefore, the short video platform will use algorithmic recommendations to diligently push different content of short videos to different individuals precisely, so as to capture the desire of the subject. But the one-time "capture" is not the ultimate benefit of the new business model, short video platform also seeks to obtain the "capture" continue to deep. Because the subject's desire is an eternal metaphorical movement, after a short video, the subject's desire is temporarily satisfied, but then automatically linked to the next video, or linked to the video content-oriented material goods.

Secondly, short videos accelerate the reproduction of the subject's desire. Short videos that are generally less than five minutes do not even touch the subject's sense of vigilance, that is, short videos confuse the subject's built-in utilitarian device, as if the time cost is negligible, and the effect of pleasure can be obtained easily and happily. The low threshold content and short video length of short videos make the subject's viewing effortless, so the subject can get good and timely feedback. In the subject's involuntary continuous swiping governed by the pleasure principle, the production efficiency of its desire is much higher than that of daily life.

Therefore, when the subject is immersed in the endless browsing of short videos, the desire mechanism of the subject and the commercial mechanism of short videos are tangled together like two strands of rope, and the subject's desire is rewoven. The result is that the subject's desires become more and more dependent on short videos, and the hedonistic behavior of swiping short videos will appear repeatedly in the subject's survival activities. Moreover, the subject's pleasure threshold is not constant, and the desire to re-grow after a short period of satisfaction often wants to obtain more pleasure effects, so the content of short videos directed by desire will become more and more novel and exciting.

### **3. The ethical crisis of "desire subjects" under the short video platform**

#### **3.1 Crisis of freedom: The hidden exploitation of "desirism" by platform capital**

From the technical rationality of "everything is quantifiable", the leisure activities of the subject also become the data for the short video platform to make profit, which will lead to an invisible, yet elastic and destructive exploitation. A new pattern of exploitation is revealed in Platform Capitalism: "Simply put, we should treat data as a raw material that must be extracted, and the activities of users are the natural source of this raw material. Like oil, data is a substance that is extracted, refined and used in a variety of ways. The more data there is, the more uses there are." This means that the business logic of platforms, including short-form video, must treat all the data generated by user activity as productive material in the production run of the platform. This may mean that the short video platform obtains the user's "unpaid labor," a covert exploitation that blurs the line between leisure and labor, and the subject's time is extracted to the maximum extent by capital. "Platforms are often generated by an internal need to process data and become an effective way to monopolize, extract, analyze and use the growing volume of recorded data." Under the control of the mechanism of love for the subject, the short video platform succeeds in acquiring a large amount of data about the subject, who is frequently and meticulously quantified and becomes the object of algorithmic recording and analysis on the short video platform. The subject is wrapped into this operation process, and eventually inevitably becomes a tool for capital profit. In order to obtain more data, the short video platform will use flattering content to please the subject, and constantly stimulate the subject to generate desire, so that it can carry out digital survival activities in the platform for a long time, leaving behavioral data that can be analyzed and used by the algorithm. At the same time, the data after analysis enhances the control over the subject.

The subject's desire to rely on short videos inevitably leads to the weakening of the subject's ability to reason. In the 1960s, McLuhan already put forward the assertion that "the medium is the extension of the human body". All media are the extension of the human body, such as clothing is the extension of the skin, transportation is the extension of the feet, then, the algorithmic recommendation of short video can be understood as the extension of human judgment. If the subject numbly complies with the algorithmic recommendation and goes with the flow on the short video platform, the subject will retreat to a purely hedonistic space without thinking, and then the inherent rational judgment of human will be replaced by the medium of algorithmic recommendation to a certain extent. In *Entertainment to Death*, Neil Bozeman continues McLuhan's formulation by suggesting that "the medium is epistemology". According to Bozeman, "My point is simply that an important new medium will change the structure of discourse. The ways in which this change can be achieved include encouraging certain ways of using comprehension, favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and creating a form of telling the truth that gives a word some new content. Again, I want to make it clear

that I am not a relativist in this matter, and I believe that the epistemology created by television is not only inferior to the epistemology based on lead words, but also dangerous and absurd.”

Nowadays, the “danger and absurdity” of short video is no less than that of television, and the short and quick mode of communication of short video determines that it is difficult to produce works with depth of thought and breadth of knowledge, and the idea of using short video to improve the cultural cultivation of the subject is probably just a delusion. The profit-seeking short video platform is short-sighted in content production, and in order to maximize the “residual desire” of the subject, its content will be dangerous and absurd as the threshold of the subject’s desire increases. In short, due to the inferior epistemology of short videos, human rational cognitive ability will be seriously impaired on short video platforms.

### **3.2 The crisis of rationality: self-enslaving under the mechanism of reinventing desire**

When the exploitative essence of the short video platform is not revealed by the subject himself, the subject detains himself with the freedom of inconsistency given by the short video. Faced with the attentiveness of the short video platform, the subject in the unconscious state will have a direct feeling of “I am the master”, and the subject seems to have absolute freedom to choose to watch or not to watch this video, and to choose when to finish watching, as if the subject has rational control all the time. But in fact, subjects caught in short videos always unconsciously spend a lot of time “mindlessly swiping”. This is because when the self-consciousness is not present, the unconscious level of desire is running on top of the Möbius belt, in an infinite cycle of movement. If we fail to move from the unconscious to the level of self-consciousness, the screen-painting behavior will continue. As Marcuse said, the unfreedom under industrial civilization is “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable and democratic unfreedom”. Therefore, the master who enjoys short videos on the surface is actually enslaved by short videos, and this enslavement is caused by the lack of self-awareness of the subject, rather than being enslaved by the object “short video”, it is enslaved by the unreasonable operation of their own desire mechanism.

When the subject accepts the “rationality” of short videos, this consciousness will bring more drastic exploitation for the subject. The rationality of short video is the technical rationality without value scale, which quantifies all the activities generated by the subject in the short video platform into the technical rationality that can be calculated and analyzed into data. As the basis for the capital appreciation of the platform, the data will act in the complex business behavior. And in order to get more data, capital creates pleasant short video images to stimulate the subject’s desire to accelerate production. The above is the technical rationality of the short video platform, and today’s subjects seem to have internalized this rationality, so they regard short videos as a rare leisure activity, and accept short videos without thinking about the increasingly bottomless entertainment content.

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