

Call for Papers

WORKSHOP:

KARENS, TRADWIVES AND MECHAHITLERS: INTERNET ARCHETYPES AS INDICATORS OF A TRANSATLANTIC, COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS?

14.11.2025

In the early days of the Web, Steven Stefik's anthology *Internet Dreams: Archetypes, Myths and Metaphors* (MIT Press, 1996) offered a now almost forgotten, early reading of Internet imaginaries, anxieties and assorted rhetorics. Featuring Internet pioneers like J.C.R. Licklider, Robert (Bob) Kahn or Vinton G. Cerf alongside academics and – most notably – psychologists, the volume sought to examine then-popular metaphors surrounding the “information highway”. It was but one attempt to give a psychological framework to tech ideologies and transformations in the making (see also Schrezenmeier 2019, 217–239; Dick and McLaughlan 2020, 63–93; Bollmer 2023). To frame the use of metaphors, Stefik drew on the analytical psychology of Carl G. Jung and argued that metaphors, just like technologies in the making, were often embedded in unconscious yet identity-shaping imaginaries. Following Jung's terminology, he sketched four “archetypes” of Internet functions: the Keeper of Knowledge, the Communicator, the Trader, and the Adventurer. Unlike the “information highway”, Stefik argued that these were the foundational metaphors to understand the Web through epistemic relationships and references of situated communal and cultural experiences: as a library, a virtual mailing system, a marketplace and a world to explore.

Jung's theory of archetypes was originally published in German in 1934 as part of his analytical psychology. His twelve well known archetypes – e.g. Everyman, Hero, Creator, Magician and Caregiver – and his four main archetypes – the Persona, the Shadow, the Anima/Animus and the Self – describe fundamental human experiences in a “collective unconscious”, an inherited reservoir of images, symbols, behavioral patterns and beliefs shared, according to Jung (1969) by human beings across cultures and independently of their upbringing and social environment. Like most psychoanalytical concepts, Jung's work has been widely critiqued, but it has also inspired scholarship in psychology, sociology and various humanities subjects. Elements of Jung's thinking are particularly prevalent in the philosophical reflections on media, literature and social structures of Deleuze or Simondon (see Rowland 1999, McMillan 2018, Maxwell 2023). To this day, Jungian thought keeps reappearing in discourses surrounding the digital age and our platform-based, decentralized networked media – not only because “an admiration of Jung is Deleuze's corpse in the closet; [but because the fact that] Deleuze borrowed a key term (*rhizome*) from Jung is not a mere insignificant accident” (Žižek 2004, 662).

A lot of ideas surrounding networks and networking pertain to Jung's more holistic reflections on society, published in *After the Catastrophe* (Jung 1970 [1945]). But his work also provides a complicated juncture to esoteric fascism/Nazism and the highly problematic assumption of a “collective Aryan unconscious” (Goodrick-Clark 2001, 179–180). If, like Stefik and others suggested (Thomas 2024), the Internet is our new collective unconscious, it also raises the question to what extent the so-called “cult of Wotan” is still haunting this machine of dreams. After all, Elon Musk's LLM Grok's recent self-proclamation on X as “MechaHitler” may be considered both a reference to *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and an evocation of Hitler as an archetype and a myth (Jung 1993, 117). One may indeed ask whether Grok has become the new voice of a “collective Aryan unconscious” or rather a populist iteration of the Hitler-as-a-pop-icon

discourse that is being perpetuated and thus normalized in contemporary meme culture (Hirt 2019).

There is a particular hegemony of transatlantic discourses of the Western hemisphere when “Karens” (Hamad 2025, 22–37), “Crypto bros” (Smith 2022), “tradwives” (Rhodes 2024) and a variety of other Internet user types (Feldman 2019) are now invoked as archetypes and carried over into diverse areas of everyday life. The narrative potential of the Internet (Bassett 2007) as a rugged landscape of collective stories and experiences comes into critical relief through archetypes old and new, humorous and critical, radicalized and resistant. Researching them against critical theories of postcolonialism, gender and transcultural area studies can help us shed light on “the specific political and cultural constraints [...] which give rise to idiosyncratic creative practices, curatorial creativity, and communal imaginaries” (Ensslin and Roy 2023, 153) and on how cultural meanings are shared, circulated, amplified, modified and erased by individuals and communities online.

In this workshop, generously funded by the Leibniz ScienceCampus “Europe and America in the Modern World”, we aim to revisit various archetypical iterations and definitions and seek to understand why and how archetypes have come to shape transatlantic post-digital landscapes across Europe and North America. We investigate transcultural flows in contemporary digital culture and examine (g)local formations of Internet memes as hybrid expressions of identity, power, and belonging. Contributions across disciplines are welcome to address the following (and/or other relevant) questions:

1. Are we looking at “new archetypes” that seek to embody transcultural, transatlantic and transmedial narratives that blend and hold together new (network) cultures, especially in the platformized “global village” of the post-digital age?
2. Do Internet memes convey some kind of **basic substance** shared by various stakeholders in contemporary **digital cultures** from literary media through games and social media?
3. Might the archetype have become one of many “**reading instructions**” for political or entertainment purposes, alongside terms like myth, motif, tropes or POV?
4. How do archetypes lend themselves to technofascist fantasies and hegemonies in the ongoing “**culture wars**” online?
5. What role do Jung’s theories play in new far/alt-right rhetorics?
6. How can we read these rhetorics through the lenses of critical cultural studies such as postcolonial, feminist, queer and/or critical race theory?
7. Are we nearing an **exhaustion of meaning**, definitions and symbols, given the fact that truths, facts, beliefs, theories and lies are increasingly becoming intermingled?
8. If archetypes represent unconscious experiences, what is their relationship to **affect and attention economies**?
9. If a collective unconscious is repeatedly invoked, what role do rising and dying platforms play in this post-digital **memory culture**?
10. What is the potential **role of AI** in these new formations of the collective unconscious? Have LLMs, which reference but also obscure and reassemble large knowledge bases, taken over as the new “collective unconscious” or are they still themselves an untrustworthy “Keeper of Knowledge” archetype bordering on a mystical “MechaHitler” existence?
11. How might geopolitical concepts like “transatlantic”, “European” and “North American” need to be rethought to more adequately reflect the de-/re-territorialized flows of online narratives and archetypes?

The one-day hybrid workshop is hosted at the Department for Interdisciplinary and Multiscalar Area Studies (DIMAS) at the University of Regensburg by Prof. Dr. Astrid Ensslin and Dr. Laura Niebling on **Nov 14th 2025**. It will bring together perspectives from various transatlantic, European and North American academic communities. Using a case study approach, we will critically engage with the idea of the Web as a new “collective unconscious”, and revisit and question Jung’s and other, emergent archetype schemata in light of how they might reflect elements of contemporary post-digital imaginaries and transcultural flows within the imagined “Global North”. To participate, please send in a short abstract (300 words) and short CV (150 words) to laura.niebling@ur.de before 30.09.2025.

The event is free of charge and light snacks and drinks will be provided. Researchers will have to cover their travel and accommodation costs. We can provide limited funding for researchers without travel expense support from their institutions.

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