SUBJECT TO FAILURE

by

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Abstract

My project here is to look at how uncovering those unconscious and phantasmatic identifications in the social field can lead to the possibility of altering subjectivity or, at the very least, tracing how subjects are formed through structure and how they are psychically linked to ideological structure. This thesis suggests that subjection is never total or complete and that when viewed from an awry or skewed perspective, particular discourses and modes of subjection are revealed to be neither permanent, true nor necessary—we can always open up new spaces of subjectivity and discourse and through the practice of ‘tracing’ structure we can discern how we are determined and at which points structure constrains or enables us. My work is an effort to supplement theories of discourse analysis/ideology critique with psychoanalytic concepts, and more specifically, the psychoanalytic category of fantasy to discuss the ways in which discourses are provided with coherence and how subjects are tethered/bind to discursive fields. In my discussion of the non-discursive, I will be drawing from the Freudian concept of unheimlich, or the uncanny, to discuss the ways in which discursive fields become disrupted by repressed or “foreign” elements. I contend that the subject always exceeds structure, and for this reason, there is always room for resistance within discursive fields.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The most certain chances of liberation are born in what is most familiar. Was it ever otherwise? …the living reality of non-adaptation to the world is always crouched, ready to spring. Since neither gods nor words can manage to cover it up decently any longer, this commonplace creature roams naked in railway stations and vacant lots; it confronts you at each evasion of yourself, it touches your elbow, catches your eye; and the dialogue begins. You must lose yourself with it or save it with you.

Raoul Vaneigem—*The Revolution of Everyday Life*

It is perhaps surprising, and unlikely, that the beginnings of the Paris May 1968 “revolution” started in the departments of Sociology and Psychology at Nanterre (Touraine, 1971: 132-133). No doubt these students were the product of the high structuralist theory that dominated French academic life for the better part of the sixties. As a reaction to the individual-oriented post-War philosophy of Existentialism, structuralism sought to incorporate structural-linguistic concepts in the scientific study of social and cultural phenomena, in an attempt to understand the universal structure of such objects as minds, myths and cultural codes. Many students felt that the antihumanist curriculum of structuralism, which sought to remove agency from subjects and reduce them to moments within either discourse or language, was far removed from the everyday life of the students themselves. They worried that these academic faculties were merely set-up to reproduce the standing order by supplying the next generation of bureaucratic mandarins and statisticians of bio-power. One of the participants of the events of May 1968, Maurice Brinton, explains:

The students saw that the sociology they were being taught was a means of controlling and manipulating society, not a means of understanding it in order to change it. In the process they discovered revolutionary sociology. They rejected the niche allocated to them in the great bureaucratic pyramid, that of 'experts' in the service of a technocratic Establishment, specialists of the 'human factor' in the modern industrial equation (Brinton, 2004: 226).
The students saw the university itself as one of the prime Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 1970) that was being railed against abstractly within the classroom. One of the central figures of May 68, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, was one of the Nanterre Sociology majors involved in the boycott of the end of year examinations. He was also involved in the publication of the pamphlet “Why do we Need Sociologists?” which questioned the imposed and conferred systems of ‘official’ and ‘sacrosanct’ knowledge within the university system (Gombin, 1976: 129). In response to the stultifying environment of the university departments and lecture halls, the students beautified the walls of Parisian universities, shopping arcades and bureaucratic buildings with graffiti in an attempt to reclaim and “own” their education. The walls of building became the chalkboard in the streets that were being turned into a living classroom.

If one knows anything about this period, or the work of the Situationist International, then its the slogan: “Beneath the paving stones: beach!”1 An especially resonant and evocative metaphor, this slogan has lent itself to the title of a SI coffee-table book as well as the appropriation by radicals decades after 68. This metaphor of the paving stone and beach is open to multiple interpretations, but the most obvious lends itself to a conception of “false consciousness” and the idea of a “pure experience” beneath crass over-coding and mystification of the individual. Although it is beyond the paving stones of the overcoded city, the beach is also often a repository for refuse from the industrial world—washed up medical waste, used condoms, dirty syringes, shards of broken beer bottles from the previous night—a place where one should watch one's step. Additionally, beyond the surface of the sand, there are things buried deep below that will always remain a mystery to us.

1 Sous les paves: la plage!
Measured by the yardstick of, say, 1919 Russia or even 1789 Paris, the “revolution” of May 1968 was a failure in the sense that it failed to overturn the ruling order and replace it with a new order. What did change, however, was the notion that radical change could be effected only in the streets. Now, it seemed, one also needed to get into to the bedrooms and skulls of the participants in a revolution, into their everyday lives. As a result, many antihumanist theorists of the ‘end of man’ had to re-work their theories to account for both social change and for the active subjects that were resisting full subjection or oppression. In many ways May 1968 speaks of the ways in which subjects struggle under structure and how spontaneous and organic “revolutions” often spring from conditions which seemingly would not support such radical change. In this view, May 1968 was not the result of some kind of inbuilt revolutionary potential” of its participants, nor of a “gradual increase in contradictions in late capitalism,” nor a “progression in the revolutionary consciousness of the working classes.” Again, Maurice Brinton explains:

What are given are the contradictions and the conflicts we have described and the fact that modern bureaucratic society more or less inevitably produces periodic 'accidents' which disrupt its functioning. These both provoke popular intervention and provide the people with opportunities for asserting themselves and for changing the social order. (Brinton, 2004: 254)

Far more than the simple of the confluence of contradictions in late capitalism, I will later argue, these accidents are a result of the uncanny eruption of repressed and “illegitimate” elements within both discourse and society, eruptions that speak fundamentally to the ways in which structures are constituted, and how illegitimate and repressed elements always exist within, while being excluded from, dominant discourses.

This very real break from the strict, deterministic structuralist theory/academic discourse by the students reflects a need for us to understand/map/resist the structures that govern us and
how the subject operates within this structure. Although previously the famous high anti-humanist harbinger of the “end of man,” after the uncanny eruption of May 1968, Foucault’s work took notice of these events and he re-directed his ‘structuralist’ project into a more political one which took into account a type of agency and ontological project for the subject. In explicit reference to the events of May 1968, Foucault recognized that his own writings were influenced by what was happening “out in the streets,” and, here in the following passage, he states his allegiance with the ‘street philosophers’:

… what the students are trying to do and what I myself am trying to accomplish is basically the same thing. What I am trying to do is grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behaviour without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation, the constraint they impose upon us; I am therefore trying to place myself at a distance from them and to show how one could escape (Foucault, cited in Poster, 1975: 340).

This project of tracing how the subject is determined by structure was further developed in the late period Foucault starting with the first volume of the History of Sexuality (1980) and then later more explicitly in both the “ethical” project of the Care of the Self (1984) and his “Preface” to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus (1983). The antihumanist project of structuralism can be seen as a tactical tool for a type of ontological awareness that may lead to a new type of ethic and way of orienting to the world. It does, however, demand from the reader/theorist that they go beyond the dire prognosis of the “end of man” and instead look at the antihumanism in both structuralism and post-structuralism as a way to understand how the subject is determined/subjected and how this leads to a new type of ethical/subjective position in relation to the other/society.
Thesis Statement.

My project here is to look at how uncovering particular unconscious and phantasmatic identifications in the social field can lead to the possibility of altering subjectivity or, at the very least, to tracing how subjects are formed through social structure and how they are psychically linked to ideological/material structure. This thesis suggests that subjection is never total or complete and that when viewed from an awry or skewed perspective, particular discourses and modes of subjection are revealed to be neither permanent, true nor necessary—we can always open up new spaces of subjectivity and discourse, and through the practice of ‘tracing’ structure we can discern how we are determined and at which points structure constrains or enables us. My work is an effort to supplement theories of discourse analysis/ideology critique with psychoanalytic concepts, and more specifically, to use the psychoanalytic category of fantasy to discuss the ways in which discourses are provided with coherence and how subjects are tethered/bound to discursive fields. In my discussion of the non-discursive, I will be drawing from the Freudian concept of unheimlich, or the uncanny, to discuss the ways in which discursive fields become disrupted by repressed or “foreign” elements. I contend that the subject always exceeds structure, and for this reason, there is always room for resistance within discursive fields.

The work in this thesis can be located in the larger discussion of how the subject is related to the social. The starting place for this discussion can be found in post-World War II responses to the humanist philosophy of phenomenology and existentialism. These humanist theories, stretching all the way back to René Descartes and the Enlightenment, have at the centre a rational, self-determined and autonomous subject who is unaffected by the social world. With the linguistic turn and the incorporation of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language into the human and social sciences, a theory of structure was formed that displaced the human subject
from the centre of philosophy. Rejecting the humanist foundation of subject-centred theories—Liberalism, analytic philosophy, phenomenology, existentialism—structuralist theory sought to explain the world through social codes, structures, systems and universals:

The subject was dismissed, or radically decentered, as merely the effect of language, culture of the unconscious, and denied causal or creative efficacy. Structuralism stressed the derivativeness of subjectivity and meaning in contrast to the primacy of symbolic systems, the unconscious, and social systems (Best and Kellner, 1991: 19).

This antihumanist aspect of structuralist theory can be seen in Louis Althusser’s application of a scientific Marxism, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ anthropological study of kinship models and in some readings of Jacques Lacan which position him as psychoanalytic structuralist (Bowie, 1991 and Kurzweil 1980).

By the mid 1960s structuralism itself had been taken to its most logical extremes and saw a break much like the structuralist break from theories based on the Cartesian subject. Post-structuralist theory, as exemplified by such writers as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and some readings of Jacques Lacan, can be seen as a response to the essentialism and scientific pretensions of structuralist theory. Their main critique is that structuralism is premised on ahistorical assumptions about human nature, universal structures and the use of language in social systems. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, posits that structure is the product of historical systems and that these systems affect the way subject, identities and bodies are produced, shaped and directed. Important here, for many post-structuralist writers, is the role of power and how it operates through but is yet co-existent with discourse. The post-structuralist subject, then, is a subject of discourse that is formed and maintained through the workings of power. For this reason, many post-structuralist theorists refer not to a ‘subject’ but rather a ‘subject position’ that is related within a discursive field.
Within this discussion of the subject and discourse, I argue in agreement with the previous statement by Marshall W. Alcorn and such theorists as Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler and Mark Bracher, that post-structuralist theories of the subject/subject position often under-theorized the role of the psychic life of the subject and how the ‘internal’ life of the subject often undermines how they operate in discursive fields through various attachment, quirks, complexes and hauntings (narcissism, repression, neurosis, melancholia, etc.). For this reason, this thesis will make a central claim that psychoanalysis—which is predicated on theorizing/studying the psychic constitution of the subject—is an essential supplement to any theory of the subject because it theorizes not only the subject’s relation to discourse but also how the subject resists discourse (if only unconsciously) and full subjection by discourse.

My own work, although oriented to questions raised in the field of sociology, is interdisciplinary and draws from such field as clinical psychoanalysis, cultural studies, gender studies and social and political theory. Following from here, I start with the psychoanalytic tradition and employ many of their categories—although not without reservations. I will drawing from the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, utilizing both his writings (2002), and seminars (1990, 1997 and 1998) which were intended for a professional and clinical audience first, with only minor concessions for the ‘fellow traveler’ audience. It is my contention, in the first chapter, that Lacan’s mapping of the topography of psychic experience is essential to any model of subjectivity. With Lacan’s work being notoriously difficult and dense, I rely on Bruce Fink’s The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance (1995) to help me through some of the more complex and obscure aspects of Lacan’s work. Although Fink is also writing for a clinical audience first, he makes major concessions in his writings for those ‘fellow travelers’ like myself.
From the field of cultural studies, I draw from Mark Bracher’s work (1993 and 1994) where he applies a Lacanian theory against various cultural texts in order to gain theoretical insight into the workings of both discourse and subjectivity. In his work in cultural criticism, for example, Bracher employs Lacanian theory to analyze the ways in which audiences identify with various texts (pornography, political speeches, anti-abortion propaganda, etc.) and how these texts deploy fantasies that elicit attachment.

Judith Butler, in her book The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (1997), does cultural criticism work quite similar to Bracher's, although it is more relevant to the field of gender studies. I will be using The Psychic Life of Power to discuss the ways in which subjects are both enabled and constrained by subjectivation. Butler’s work in this piece employs a hybrid psychoanalytic/post-structuralist position and for this reason many elements of posthumanism can be read into her work since she does employ a theory of the subject that is not simply reduced to the play of discourse or subject position.

From the field of social and political theory, I draw from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and more specifically, from their Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (1985). Although their work is most typically characterized as post-Marxist, I draw primarily from their interaction with Lacanian theory and how such concepts as ‘antagonism’ and ‘master signifiers’ can be utilized beyond a clinical setting towards more political ends. Another political/social theorist influenced by Laclau and Mouffe’s political usage of Lacan is Slavoj Žižek, who I will be using throughout my argument. In The Sublime Object of Ideology (1989) and The Plague of Fantasies (1997), Žižek utilizes Lacan’s work to answer many questions first raised in Marxist theory. Like Bracher’s cultural studies work, Žižek is concerned with how ideological texts interpellate and then maintain the subject through psychic
fantasies, and for this reason, Žižek’s work has been justly celebrated for its unique approach to both 'high' and 'low' cultural texts.

The first chapter of this thesis will be drawing from Lacan’s concept of the subject. Although widely used for decades in the disciplines of cultural studies, comparative literature and only more recently political theory, I intend to show how Lacanian theory provides a multi-dimensional and persuasive theory of the subject which could serve as a theoretical model for any discipline that operates with a theory of the subject. My specific object of critique is the way in which certain writers in the social sciences use a theory of the subject which relies either on a humanist-modernist model of the subject stemming from either the Liberal or Marxist traditions, or an antihumanist model which is used by those locating themselves in the post-structuralist or postmodern paradigm. What I intend to do with Lacan’s work is read him beyond both humanist and antihumanist models of subjectivity, and instead argue for a posthumanist theory of the subject. This kind of theory posits a model of an ‘active’ and semi-autonomous subject in light of antihumanist theories of structure and subjection and how they determine the subject (Fryer, 2004: 14). As part of my argument, I will suggest that all attempts to posit a coherent (or modernist) theory of the subject are doomed to fail since the subject is always in the process of becoming and failing -- complete subjecthood is precluded by both language and the very structure of subjectivity. Despite this ‘fragmenting’ or ‘decentering’, though, the subject still exists and is not dissolved in the interplay of discourse or narrative—as claimed by some postmodernist theorists—but persists to reiterate itself in a succession of failed identity bids.

As my starting point for this discussion of the Lacanian subject, I will be discussing the subject in light of the three Lacanian registers, or orders, of psychic experience: Imaginary,
Symbolic and Real. I argue that any successful model of subjectivity must take into account not only the social subject of modernist and post-structuralist models, but also the ego and the unconscious subject that is a feature of psychoanalytic theory. What I will be doing is tracing a type of social and psychic ontology of the subject with special reference to how the subject attempts to find coherence through identity claims in the social field, and ego recognition through interaction with other subjects. The Lacanian self is divided in the ways it invests itself in different registers—in relations of ego recognition, in the social world of language, in unconscious pursuit of jouissance—so it is impossible to simply speak of a flat, one-dimensional subject when one is dealing with a constellation of different and competing motivations and desires. Fundamentally, I claim, the Lacanian subject is both a failed subject and a subject of lack since it is incessantly striving—a series of fragmented becomings without being.

In the chapter I discuss the theory of interpellation, or how the subject is ‘called into being’ in an ideological field. This chapter centres around debates raised by the work of French Marxist theory Louis Althusser (1918-1990) and his synthesis of discourse analysis/ideology critique and psychoanalysis that was first hinted at in his “Freud and Lacan” (1964), then developed more explicitly in the seminal work of discourse analysis/ideology critique, “Ideological State Apparatus: Notes Towards an Investigation” (1969). The integration of Freudian and Marxist theory dates back to the early 1930s with the work of Wilhelm Reich (1930), and later with the Frankfurt School theorists, most notably Herbert Marcuse (1955). Officially, however, psychoanalysis as a theory and practice was labelled as being a ‘mystifying’ and ‘reactionary’ bourgeoisie theory/science by Marxist theorists of the party. All official flirting with the theories of psychoanalysis ended in France when it was publicly denounced in 1948.

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2 I have chosen to capitalize various Lacanian concepts—Imaginary, Symbolic and Real—in order to avoid confusing them with the everyday or even theoretical use of the word. This is not a practice that Lacan himself follows.
(Althusser, 1964: 190). It should not be understated, then, that as the chief philosopher of the French Communist Party, Althusser’s incorporation of psychoanalytic theory signalled that Marxist orthodoxy, in regards to social and political theory, was loosening up in the post-Stalin era.

The basic premise behind his influential “Ideological State Apparatus” essay is the incorporation of the Lacanian notions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic into a Marxist framework, to enable an analysis of how the subject is called into being in social and ideological systems (of the family, school or workplace, for example). What is interesting about Althusser’s work here is its relationship towards Lacanian theory and the ways in which Althusser purposefully ignores some of the more radical aspects of this theory. For example, Althusser's discussion of the Symbolic and the Imaginary neglects any mention of the third register of experience, the Real. The concept of the Real, of course, was slowly becoming the main focus of Lacan’s work at the time the ISA essay was written (Libberecht, 2001: 154). This oversight on Althusser’s part is, of course, telling of what he intended his project to elevate Marxism into a science hoped to achieve. No “science” can tolerate the operation of the non-discursive and irrational/unknowable -- the Real -- within its field. Althusser rejects the Real as a category because it is that which cannot be incorporated into the Symbolic, and thus any true, hard scientific project. The Real is impossible to know, predict, or quantify, and therefore must be excluded from the domain of a science based on positivist and Enlightenment principles.

I will be engaging Althusser’s work in this chapter in two seemingly contradictory, but related, ways. First, I will critique his work on the basis of the stable, rational, ‘flat’ subject that he posits at the centre of his work. As stated earlier, I will suggest that he selectively ignores the Real aspect of the subject in his appropriation of Lacanian theory. Second, I will be supplementing his theory by critiquing those theories and interpretations of interpellation which operate with a false
dichotomy of self/social and inside/outside. Such theories, most notably those originating from the Frankfurt School, are premised on ‘social influences’ and how society pressures or dupes subjects into oppressive roles. This is where psychoanalysis is an essential supplement to ideology critique/discourse analysis, since it operates with an awareness of Sigmund Freud’s central insight that:

… society doesn’t ‘influence’ an autonomous individual, but that society comes to dwell within him. Lacan’s theory of the construction of the symbolic order, when language and law enter man, allows for no boundary between self and society: man becomes social with the appropriation of language, and it is language that constitutes man as a subject. (Turkle, 1978: 74)

To summarize, I will argue that interpellation operates on not only the Imaginary and Symbolic registers—which Althusser covers in his work—but also at the level of the Real, where the subject pursues the forever-sought jouissance which eludes them. Further, the unconscious and the Real are a clearinghouse of repressed elements, fragments, false starts and hauntings that undermine the perfect, transparent workings of the social subject.

I will also be drawing from those cultural studies theorists who employ a hybrid psychoanalytic/post-structural conception of power and subjectivity, like Judith Butler (1997) and Slavoj Žižek (1989 and 1997), to discuss how extra-discursive element—like bodies in Butler’s case or jouissance in Žižek’s—effect the functioning of discourse and power. In their work we can see that the unconscious allows us to resist the discourse and regulating effects because the subject always exceeds discourse. This will also be a critique of those theories that posit that discourses operate with a rational sense of predictability. Rather, I will argue that discourses, like the human subject, carry with them foreign and irrational repressed elements that haunt their functioning, and which occasionally erupt to the surface. According to Marxist ideology critique, oppressive systems are always subject to an inevitable and gradual increase of inherent
contradictions, and all discursive systems are alienated, false ideological veils to be combated by conscious and enlightened counter-discourses. Lacan-influenced theorists argue, on the contrary, that real social political change is premised on both how we organize the economy of the self and how we orient to fantasies that tether us to ideological systems—to ignore the psychic life of the individual is a serious mistake that must be avoided by both social/political theories and social movements alike.

The third chapter of my thesis is premised on another psychoanalytic concept, *fantasy*, which was introduced by Freud in his case study of his first patient, Anna O. After covering the subsequent psychoanalytic and clinical usage of this term, I will then turn to the way this concept has been used by psychoanalytic micro-political theorists of desire and subjectivity, such as Mark Bracher and most notably Slavoj Žižek, in the service of ideology critique/discourse analysis. The concept of fantasy allows us to part company with the ideological (and Marxist) concepts of the ‘mystified subject’ and ‘false consciousness.’ I argue that ideological and discursive systems are not illusory veils that obfuscate the subject; but rather, ideology/discourse re-direct desire onto manageable, safe, codified and striated lines. I largely follow both of their work in the premise that subjects are tethered to ideological fields by the direction and structuring of their psychic life and desire through fantasy. I will be making the argument that fantasy—as the psychic and libidinal bonding of the subject to the social field—is yet another essential psychoanalytic concept that would benefit discourse analysis/ideology critique. I will make the argument that ‘fantasy’ is a better alternative to either ‘false consciousness’ or the ‘mystified subject’ because it bypasses arguments about ‘species being’ or essentialist claims about what might or might not stand at the ‘root’ of ‘mystified subject.’

The fantasy chapter will conclude with a discussion of the political uses of what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls ‘traversing the fantasy.’ What is premised behind this tactic is altering one’s
position with regard to one's *sinthome* or *object (a)*. It involves ‘tracing’ one's structuring in order to de-tether oneself from social fantasies which organize one's psychic economy into ideologically sanctioned forms. The fantasy chapter will then end with a segue into the final concluding chapter which will be premised on how subjectivity and discursive fields are interrupted and haunted by the return of repressed elements, the *uncanny*, and how subjects orient to power once the rationale and support for some aspects of structure collapse through the intrusion of repressed or illegitimate elements.

To conclude, I will draw from the canon of classical sociological theory, particularly from the ethnomethodological work of Harold Garfinkel, which is rooted in the earlier phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz (1932). Ethnomethodology can be briefly described as the study of the methods we use when we orient to specific social objects (tradition, figures of authority, norms and mores, etc.) and employ various heuristics (routine, ‘common sense,’ repetition, etc.) in order to both make sense of everyday life and to enable meaningful exchanges with other individuals in society. Not unlike the related Symbolic Interaction theories, ethnomethodology is premised on the concept that individual actors, and the groups in which they participate, create order through various intersubjective mental and cognitive processes. I supplement this largely apolitical theory by stressing that the organization of mental and cognitive life is ideological and subject to the workings of power.

Garfinkel developed the method of “breaching experiments,” a set of techniques designed to break the various unstated ‘laws’ of social interaction and daily life, in order to study the ways we create order. Through these experiments, he intended to show how social order is overly-constructed but at the same time very precarious. Specifically, I re-work his concept of “breaching experiments” and discuss it in light of the uncanny disruption of discursive fields. With my work, I propose a type of ‘radical ethnomethodology’ that goes beyond the methods
described by such theorists as Garfinkel, and the earlier phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz.

At the completion of this thesis I will have made the argument that any model of subjectivity that ignores those aspects of the subject which refuse discursive/social incorporation is deficient, and should be reformulated to include consideration of Lacanian theories of subjectivity that provide an account of the extra-discursive, excessive elements of subject formation.
Chapter 2
Subjectivity

The vanity of existence is revealed in the whole form existence assumes… in the contingency and relativity of all things; in continual becoming without being; in continual desire without satisfaction; in the continual frustration of striving of which life consists.

Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Vanity of Existence*

On the surface, the inclusion of Jacques Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” (1949) in Slavoj Žižek’s edited collection of political writings on ideology, *Mapping Ideology* (1994), seems like a strange choice. For the reader unfamiliar with the context in which Lacan was writing, this work—on the development of the child’s ego through identification with one’s own image—could be mistaken for the cognitive psychology of Henri Wallon (1931) or the ethological studies of mimicry by Roger Caillois (1935). Yet despite the fact that it was written primarily for a clinical audience, Lacan’s work can be read as being closer to the themes of German Idealism or Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation and lectures on Hegel’s dialectic of recognition and desire in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806) than to the tradition of developmental psychology. Lacan’s work in “The Mirror Stage” can even be seen as hostile to the natural or “organic” developmental processes of cognitive psychology insofar as Lacan’s theory deeply implicates the social and how the processes at work here are not just a simple “stage” that one grows into and then advances beyond, but rather a “stage” in which the very social process of identity formation is negotiated and performed. In fact, the French for stage, *stade*, has a dual meaning where it is both the “staging” of a performance or action, and a developmental phase or period which one reaches and advances from. In this light, Žižek’s choice to include the “Mirror Stage” essay in the collection is a coherent one because of the way the text speaks of subject formation and how it is a constant and unfinished process.
In my discussion of the Lacanian theory of the subject, I will be making a move similar to Slavoj Žižek, explicitly placing Lacan’s work within the field of social and political theory. Specifically, I will be applying the Lacanian theory of the subject to a more political reading in that I will be positioning his theory of the subject against both the common individual/subject grounded by the *cogito* of modernist philosophy and the structural/post-structural theories of the subject and subject position. This choice underscores my contention that the Lacanian theory of the subject is an important supplement to any theory of ideology and discourse in the way it discusses psychic resistance and the manner in which the human subject is not simply reducible to either structure or discourse.

Before beginning with an explicit discussion of Lacan’s theory of the subject, or what can loosely be called the Lacanian ontology, it is important to first to discuss Lacan’s theory of the structuring of psychic reality and psychoanalytic experience through the three registers or orders of experience: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

Lacan uses a topology—a non-metaphorical way of describing relationships between objects—of psychic life which can be illustrated by his *mathème* of the “Borromean Knot,” where each intertwined “ring” of the knot refers to one of the individual registers—Imaginary, Symbolic and Real:
These registers are linked and structured in such a way that if one link were interrupted or severed the others would similarly collapse. This structural interdependence implies a lack of hierarchy or strict prioritization of one register over the other: each register exists simultaneously with the others, where “there is no privileged point and the chain is strictly homogeneous” (Lacan, 1998: 130). The subject, then, is comprised of “three terms which are bound together by a fourth which is at once part of the knot and paradoxically beyond it” (Thurston, 1999: 140). The “whole” subject—if it is possible to talk about the Lacanian subject in such a way—can be seen as the included/excluded fourth term—an empty placeholder for each of the divided “subject positions” of the registers. That said, when Lacan use the term “the subject” he is often referring to the Symbolic subject—the social, speaking subject that is within a signifying social field. Often, in attempts to translate Lacan’s work into quantifiable concepts in social/political theory this Symbolic subject stands in for the “whole” of the Lacanian subject, whereas I contend it is a mistake to ignore the constitutive effects that the other two registers—the Imaginary and the Real—have on the subject.
What follows is a discussion of each of the separate registers and their constitutive effect in Lacan’s theory of subjectivity. I have chosen to start this discussion with the Imaginary register and end with the Symbolic register in order to bookend the Symbolic register and to illustrate how the social subject is undermined by both self-identification attachments (Imaginary) and the presence of elements that persistently resist incorporation into the social (Real). This ordering is important since I will show how the ‘needs’ of the Imaginary register bleed into the Symbolic stage and how the Real affects both the Imaginary and Symbolic stages by never allowing them to be closed or “whole” systems.

**The Imaginary**

… [the subject] only perceives the unity of this specific image [of the body] from the outside, and in an anticipated manner. Because of this double relation which he has with himself, all the objects of his world are always structured around the wandering shadow of his own ego.

Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II*, 166

One of the temptations when working with Lacanian theory for the first time is to reduce his theories to a comparable category in Freudian psychoanalysis—after all, Lacan did claim his work was a “return to Freud” that was counter to the ego psychologists who, he felt, had defanged the more radical aspects of Freud’s work. Before beginning my discussion of the three registers I should be clear about the fact that the ego, superego and id are *not* analogous, respectively, to the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. Lacan is working with a theory of the psychic experience/mind that goes beyond the mind psychology of Freud to a theory that equally implicates both the social and psychic worlds of the subject. Although Freud’s greatest contribution to theory in general is his notion that the social and the individual are equally implicated in the human subject, his worked suffered from a reliance on biologism that was necessitated by the need to make psychoanalysis a “true” science. Lacan, being largely free of those constraints, explicitly
borrowed from the “soft” sciences of philosophy, and it is this aspect of Lacan that I will be stressing in the following discussion.

Although the “Mirror Stage” essay runs to only seven pages—pages 93 to 100 in the original French unabridged edition of *Écrits* (1966) -- given the thousands of pages written on it, the essay’s impact can hardly be overstated. With this essay, Lacan introduces the concept of the Imaginary register—a concept that would dominate his thinking until the mid-1950s (Nobus, 1998: 103). With the mirror stage, Lacan argues, the human subject and the ego are first constituted, structured and inserted in the Imaginary register. A discussion of the Imaginary register is inextricably linked to a discussion of the mirror stage, so before describing the nature of the Imaginary register, and its relation to the subject, it is important to first discuss the process of the mirror stage and how the Imaginary affects both subject and ego formation.

Lacan uses the theory of the mirror stage as way of discussing how the desire for self-mastery, at the expense of mis-identification and illusory self-deception, are constitutive aspects that stay with the subject long after the mirror stage is “passed.” As stated earlier, Lacan grounds this discussion in ethnological and developmental child/infant observations of mimicry, imprinting and behavioural transmission that were typical of developmental psychology (Jean Piaget, Henri Wallon, Lawrence Kohlberg), ethology (Roger Caillois), and social psychology or symbolic interactionist theories (George Herbert Mead, Charles Cooley, Herbert Blumer) of the time. Focussing on the infant and its cognitive and relational ability at the period of six to eighteen months, Lacan draws attention to a fascination that the child has with its own image as reflected in a literal mirror, the metaphorical mirror of another child who serves as a double to imitate, or an adult whose image and reflections can be controlled. What is important here is that these mirror surfaces create a *Gestalt* effect for the child: where the previous experience of the self and body is marked by fragmentation and disorder, this image provides the perception of a
fully integrated self/body that is autonomous from others, serving as an anticipation of the self-mastery and control that is to come. This (mis)identification with an image/illusion of a fully integrated self acts as a prototype ego which will become a constitutive aspect of the subject far beyond this stage of development. The misidentification of the image as the constituting the self, méconnaissance, will also figure in Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation and the subject’s search to find itself reflected in the world.

Not fully present in the original discussion of the mirror stage, Lacan subsequently stressed the importance of the metaphorical mirror—the figure of the adult or mother’s face—as an aspect of the mirror stage theory (Nobus, 1998: 104). What is important here is the child’s ability to recognize its self/image in the other by the way in which the other reacts to and reflects the child’s emotional outbursts or expression of a want or desire. The other (mirror) for example will smile and praise when the child has been good and will scowl or berate when the child has been bad. This type of play/control is further seen in the noises produced by a child, which not only draw the attention of other mirrors, but also exhibit a type of control over the type of reflection—the child attempts to create its own reflection by controlling the response of others. This is done through the production of various noises, outbursts and gestures—laughing, crying, gurgling, etc - and the imitation of adult noises, all of which produce very different reflections from the human mirrors. This behaviour can be seen as a proto-language of the Imaginary which anticipates the Symbolic subject and its use of language in order to both realise and locate its desire. In this process we can see that the anticipated self-mastery involves reconciling the inability to fully fulfil desire and wants with an image, or imago, which looks coherent, self-sufficient and apparently without any lack—this the moment where the specular “I” becomes the social “I” or Ideal-I (Lacan, 2001: 78).
Méconnaissance, or misrecognition, with this illusory “full” image of the imago, is the expression of a desire to be without lack; that is, the ability to experience oneself as coherent, unfragmented, and free of the regularly unbearable demands of desire. This process leads to the anticipation of the mastery of the self which ostensibly means that one is no longer reliant on others to fulfil desire—that is, adults providing food, emotional and physical security, etc. Of course, there is a disjunction between what the self actually experiences and the image which seems free of lack and promises the ability to free oneself from the overwhelming demands of desire—we see in this a type of alienation with this promise of a future mastery of the self, and a present that is marked by both anxiety and want:

Because the ‘me’ rests on a mirror image, it epitomizes a form that is completely alien to the one displayed by the child. By identifying with the mirror image, the child assumes a ‘me’ that is radically exterior, strictly inaccessible and unveraciously complete, and which does not lead a material existence beyond the mirror. (Nobus, 1998: 116-117)

As we can see in the above quote, a great deal of this alienation is grounded in the fact that we are trapped and tethered to a self that is so utterly inaccessible and foreign. Despite the anxiety this alienation produces, the self adamantly persists in maintaining that the (mis)identification is both authentic and vital—it is better to entertain and chase a cessation of want than to believe that one will always be inextricably bound to a body that demands too much. No matter how familiar this full image and our identification with it may be, it is still always alien to us since it is never fully actualized at the level of libido or affect—it remains a specular surface attachment at odds with the tumultuous experience of the body. Here, in this dual moment of enthrallment and alienation with one’s image, the ego forms. This moment comes at the expense of a near-unbearable ‘existential’ ambivalence that marks and inscribes the subject long after this stage is ‘passed.’ Jane Gallop in Reading Lacan (1985) illustrates this moment with an interesting analogy:
The mirror stage is a high tragedy: a brief moment of doomed glory, a paradise lost. The infant is ‘decisively projected’ out of this joy into the anxious defensiveness of ‘history’ much as Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise into the world… When Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge, they anticipate mastery. But what they gain is a horrified recognition of their nakedness. This resembles the movement by which the infant, having assumed by anticipation a totalized, mastered body, then retroactively perceives his inadequacy (his ‘nakedness’). (85)

Such a “doomed wager,” or paying a heavy price for moving beyond oneself to relations with others and then relations with the signifying/symbolic order, is a theme that runs throughout Lacan’s body of work. This is nowhere more apparent than in his discussion of the Symbolic register—where one acquires language at the expense of losing a ‘Real’ experience of the body—but it is here with the Imaginary subject [this sentence is a bit awk] that we see the subject split between a libidinal, ‘Real’ knowledge of the self and an attachment to a specular image which becomes the foundation for the social-I.

The subject created in this stage is only a “partial subject” in that it is only a type of ego subject which has yet to enter into a relationship with society (the Symbolic) and other active subjects. As we will see in the next chapter, Louis Althusser makes the error of appropriating this Lacanian (partial) ego subject for his whole ideologically interpellated subject—effectively making the subject far more coherent and stable than what is envisioned by Lacan (Eagleton, 1991: 144). As stated earlier, Lacan is using Freudian ego theory as a starting point, and it would be a mistake to confuse the Lacanian “ego subject” for the Freudian ego subject. Lacan makes this clear in the choice of terms he uses in his discussion of the mirror stage and formation of the ego:

It is evident that what he had in mind here is not the Freudian ego as he used the term je (I) rather than the moi which is the French rendering of Freud’s ich. Later he abandoned the
distinction and referred to the *moi*, which suggests that he believed that his theory of the ego and its links to the mirror stage should replace the Freudian ego (King, 2001: 114).

The Lacanian concept of the ego differs from the Freudian ego in several important ways. First, the Lacanian ego is constituted by an alienated identification (*mécognition*) not only with the *imago* Gestalt body image, but with the body/figure of the Other. The child during this stage begins to delineate between the self/non-self. We see, here, that the specular image (of the other) is “… both the framework for the ego and subject” (Libbrecht, 2001: 88). With the conclusion of the mirror stage and the child’s entry into the social there is a conversion of the “… specular I into the social I and the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through desire of the other” (Lacan, 2002: 5). We can draw two conclusions from this. First, the subject is always alienated, so attempts to “heal” the ego through therapy—a practice of post-Freudian ego-psychologists—are based on a false premise that the ego is fully knowable and solely located in the self. This is seen, by Lacan, as one of the primary alienations of the subject. Second, the source of the subject’s knowledge of the self is always “outside” of itself, but at the same time the “outside” inhabits the “inside” of the subject who:

… only perceives the unity of the specific image [of the body/self] from the outside, and in an anticipated manner. Because of this double relation which he has of himself. All the objects of his world are always structured around his own ego. (Lacan, 1986: 166)

With the Imaginary stage, the ego serves the function of an imaginary mastery/awareness of the self. What this means, as illustrated earlier in the discussion of the mirror stage, is that the ego attempts to provide a sense of unity for the fragmented body—this discussion of the internal/external and how ideology aids in organizing an image of a coherent self will be taken up further in the following three chapters. Third, and perhaps most importantly for Lacan’s later
theory of the subject, the subject is always dependent upon the puzzling and often contradictory signifiers in the field of the other that represent/reflect us as subjects: “The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier—it is the field of the living being in which subject has to appear,” (Lacan, 1997: 203) Thus, we are always separated from our “real” being, forever split, unstable and contingent beings who fade in and out of existence based on our relationship with the Other; but yet, as the mirror stage illustrates, the subject is always striving for the impossible specular social Ideal-I which promises the cessation of want or lack.

**The Symbolic**

Words kill the thing... as soon as things become caught up in the symbolic, they lose their autonomy; the joy of oneness in perpetual experience is lost once we try to represent it... the thing becomes present in the word rather than the immediate experiential reality... we can only know the thing through words (we can never return to an unmediated experience of things) once it is named.


The Symbolic order is, of the three registers in Lacan’s topology, the one which coincides most closely with the common perception of what constitutes our reality. The Symbolic order is comprised of language, social structure and the laws that govern how these systems operate and our relationship with them. Bruce Fink says that the Symbolic order creates ‘reality,’ and it is only those social objects and systems that can be named by language, and can thus be thought and talked about, that enter into structure (Fink, 1995: 25). The Symbolic order is also where Lacan first talks about “the subject” in a manner that coincides with the way it is commonly used in both political and social theory - that is, as an individual that is activated within a social field. For this reason, some theorists of the “Lacanian subject” consider only its Symbolic aspects. As I have stressed earlier, many social/political theorists make the mistake of ignoring the “non-social” effects of the Imaginary (the ego) and Real (unconscious) registers on the social subject. In this
section I will discuss the Symbolic subject and how it both emerges and operates in the social field. I will be challenging the standard division that is often made by social and political theorists between the individual (subject) and the social. I will also be placing special importance on the effect that the acquisition of language has on both experience and subjectivity.

Sherry Turkle, in her survey of the reception of Freud’s work in mid-twentieth century France, *Psychoanalytic Politics* (1978), states that Lacan’s most radical contribution, not only to psychoanalytic theory, but political and social theory as well, was his insistence on Freud’s claim that the social dwells directly in the individual (74). What such a claim disputes are those modernist social and political theories (existentialism, Marxist social theory, phenomenology, etc.) that stress the importance of ‘social influences’ on the individual. What ‘social influence’ theories posit is a subject that is self-aware and discretely opposed to a social world which exists outside of them. Turkle’s contention is that Lacan’s theory of the Symbolic order is deeply rooted in one of Freud’s most central contributions to social and political theory -- the recognition that:

… society doesn’t ‘influence’ an autonomous individual, but that society comes to dwell within him. Lacan’s theory of the construction of the symbolic order, when language and law enter man, allows for no boundary between self and society: man becomes social with the appropriation of language, and it is language that constitutes man as a subject. (Turkle, 1978: 74)

We see, here in Lacan’s theory of the Symbolic subject, a type of hybrid-subject that is both individual/social and interior/exterior. Such a theory challenges the absolute autonomy of the self-willed subject of modernist political and social theory. This “speaking” subject of the Symbolic order is doubled in that it operates at two different levels of discourse—in a sense, the subject exists alongside a foreign double. The first of these discourses, and the most apparent, is
“the discourse of the ego” which operates at the conscious level of everyday language—it is the level of discourse, or thought/speech, at which we reiterate what we think and believe about ourselves (Fink, 1995: 3). The second discourse, which operates alongside the discourse of the ego, is the discourse of the Other which operates at the level of the unconscious. The implication is that the human subject in inhabited by both a ‘conscious’ ego subject, and by the “Other”ness of the unconscious which is inassimilable by the ego subject and the Symbolic order. This ‘dispute’ between these two aspects of the ‘whole’ Lacanian subject is what is meant by the notion of the divided or split subject:

The subject is nothing but this very split. Lacan’s variously termed ‘split subject,’ ‘divided subject,’ or ‘barred subject,’—all written with the same symbol, $—consists entirely in the fact that a speaking being’s two ‘parts; or avatars share no common ground: they are radically separated (the ego or false being requiring a refusal of unconscious thoughts, unconscious thought having no concern whatsoever for the ego’s fine opinion of itself. (Fink, 1995: 45)

Up until the early 1960s, Lacan’s work focused on this opposition between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders and its ontological effects on the individual. After this point, Lacan shifted his focus away from this oppositional model of “subjectivity” and instead began to discuss a subject that is divided not only between the Imaginary and Symbolic, but also, at a more primary level, between the self and language (Verhaeghe, 1997: 164-165). This period is marked by the primary association of the Symbolic order and the importance of language for the human subject. Language is what “restores [the I], in the universal, its function as a subject” (Lacan, 2002: 98). By acquiring language the subject enters into the social and into a relationship with the Other.

In the first encounter with the Other (as language) Lacan posits that children undergoes a primary alienation where they submit themselves to the medium of language and learn how to represent
their desire and themselves by words. As the child moves beyond the proto-language of the Imaginary (the utterances and gestures that try to control the reflection of others) and into the full and proper language of the Symbolic order, a major ontological shift occurs.

For Lacan, language is a gift as dangerous to humanity as the horse was to the Trojans: it offers itself to our use free of charge, but once we accept it, it colonizes us. The symbolic order emerges from a gift, an offering, that marks its content as neutral in order to pose a gift: when a gift is offered, what matters is not its content but the link between giver and receiver established when the receiver accepts the gift. (Žižek, 2006: 12)

We can see here how Lacan illustrates another doomed wager: the child can either reject the element of language and stay in the realm of direct experience—and thus become psychotic and un-social—or accept the necessity of representing their desire with words and thus be cut off from direct experience. Lacan locates another lack/alienation in the acceptance of this wager. Following from de Saussure’s theory of the relationship between the signifier and signified, words are not equivalent to the desired object—there is lack in the chain of signifiers—and this is expressed not on the conscious level but experienced at the level of desire (Verhaeghe, 1997: 167-168). Beyond this lack, as the child uses language “their wants are, however, moulded in that very process, for the words they are obliged to use are not their own and do not necessarily correspond to their own particular demands: their very desires are cast in the mould of the language or languages they learn (Fink, 1995: 6). So whereas before the entry into the Symbolic the individual desires objects existed in isolation from each other, in the signifying field certain objects become attached to other objects through the chain of signifiers, and other objects become forbidden because of social sanctioning.

With this entrance into the Symbolic order, the subject uses signifiers as a way of articulating the demands of their own desire, to both recognize and locate their needs and desires amongst the
other coherent circulating objects. In his 2006 introduction to Lacan’s thought, How to Read Lacan, Žižek discusses how subjects, in situating themselves in the Symbolic order, use the signifying field to gain a type of coherence for the self where, as subjects, they can measure themselves not only against other subjects, but also against the Ideal subject in the form of the big Other:

This symbolic space acts like a yardstick against which I can measure myself. This is why the big Other can be personified or reified in a single agent: the ‘God’ who watches over me from beyond, and over all real individuals, or the Cause that involves me (Freedom, Communism, Nation) and for which I am ready to give my life. (9)

We can see here that signifiers of the Other—embodied in the abstract ideal(s) of the big Other—operate with the same illusion of fullness, coherence and lack of lack that was seen as the ego subject encounters the full specular image of the Other (and itself) during the mirror stage. This provides an example of the ways in which the Imaginary register—and the ego subject—informs and influences how the Symbolic subject operates; that is, the ego’s desire to see itself reflected in a coherent and sensible signifier. Due to the inability of the signifier to fully cover the signified, the subject’s attempt to merge with this Ideal image/subject in the Symbolic field is doomed to fail, not unlike the child’s attempt to fully identify with the specular image it sees of itself. In Lacan’s theory of desire, the complete inability to satiate lack is the motor behind the subject’s incessant attempts to identify with an Ideal.

As the individual subjects emerges from a simpler isolated subjectivity (ego subject) to a more complicated signifying being within a social field (Symbolic subject), signifiers are used not only for the articulation of desire and need, but also act as ‘avatars’ in which we represent ourselves to other subjects—and, more importantly, to the big Other. The ego Ideal, or Ideal-I, of the Imaginary register, is constituted through (mis)identification with key signifiers in the Symbolic
order. As Lacan states in his second seminar: “the imaginary economy has meaning, we gain some purchase on it, only in so far as it is transcribed into the symbolic order” (Lacan, 1988: 255). What he means here is that the Symbolic order is used to supplement the demands of the Imaginary order—yet another example that is illustrated by the Borromean knot. By submitting to the Other the child gains something: “he or she becomes, in a sense, one of language’s subjects…the child, submitting to the Other, allows the signifier to stand in for him or her” (Fink, 1995: 49).

These signifiers which ‘stand-in’ for us, as identity-bearing words, are what Lacan calls *master signifiers*. According to Mark Bracher, who references Lacan’s untranslated XVII Seminar, master signifiers are powerful identity markers “that arise from *m’être à meme*,” which is our “urge to master (*maître*) myself by ‘being myself’ (*m’être*) to myself,” which means, to have an identity and ‘signifier’ which speaks of the truth of my being through which I can both recognize myself and be encountered and recognized by others in the social/Symbolic field (1993: 23-24).

We use these signifiers as an attempt to determine both our self identity and self worth as a subject. Master signifiers, therefore, carry far more weight than just simple words. They also represent an indomitable desire and will to being:

The way in which such signifiers function as bearers of our identity can easily be seen from our reactions when someone attempts either to damage one of our identity-bearing signifiers (eg., disparages a signifier bearing our familial, national, ethnic, racial or sexual identity) or to deprive us of one of these signifiers (eg., by calling us a girl if we are a boy or vice versa). (Bracher, 1993: 23)

The ‘naming’ of oneself is far more complicated than the simple choice between equivalent signifiers in the Symbolic field. Each ‘place-holder,’ avatar or identity that we ‘adopt’ carries with it cultural, social and political significations, and thus attendant social prescriptions about normalcy/dysfunction. Again, this process is neither natural nor essential but heavily coded by
ideology: “the very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention, as is exemplified by the fact that sexual object choice is dependent upon the Oedipus complex” (Lacan, 2002: 78). I think it is important to expand the notion of Oedipus, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari do in Anti-Oedipus (1983) and A Thousand Plateaus (1987), beyond the mundane Mommy-Daddy-Me Freudian triad to encompass the ways in which social apparatuses and institutions fix us in proper, definable symbolic space. As in the preceding quote by Lacan, the ‘maturation’ of the subject is a process that never ends -- we are constantly re-interpellated as we ‘advance’ through our lifecycle:

We are segmented in a binary fashion, following the great major dualist oppositions: social classes, but also men-women, adult-children, and so on... we are segmented in a linear fashion, along a straight line or a number of straight lines, of which each segment represents an episode or a ‘proceeding’: as soon as we finish one proceeding we begin another, forever proceduring or procedured, in the family, in school, in the army, on the job. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 209)

Master signifiers, then, as cultural/social avatars, constitute meaning and identity by fixing floating signifiers—that is signifiers that have open or contested signification—in discursive place by qualifying which attendant signifiers and utterances are associated with them. That is, identities and master-signifiers only have meaning through a closed system of articulation, where a restricted set of qualified signifiers is allowed to be represented in a discursive field. It is ideology, or what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the socius, which graduates and directs the subject to each of these new segments of proper subjectivity.

Depending on how or where these master-signifiers are invoked, the attendant supplemental signifiers may be configured and articulated very differently. As de Saussure suggests, meaning is only achieved through its articulation with other signifiers and is never permanent, eternal or fixed. Master-signifiers, then, can be seen to operate as the ideological limiting of the symbolic
field. This use of the concept can be seen in the Lacanian ideology critique employed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their project of ‘radical democracy,’ as outlined in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). Their project involves challenging the truth claims made by various master signifiers through the ‘radicalization’ of the interpretations of these master signifiers and an attempt to hegemonize discursive fields. Their central claim, following both de Saussure and Lacan, is that there is no consistent relationship between an extra-discursive reality and its symbolization in social and political fields, that this relationship is, in fact, arbitrary (Žižek, 1989: 97).

The concept of master signifiers is closely linked with the Lacanian concept of *points de capiton*, or quilting points, which are positioned in an effort to stop the slippage, or *glissement*, of the signifier over the signified in the signifying chain:

> Whether it be a sacred text, a novel, a play, a monologue, or any conversation whatsoever, allow me to represent the function of the signifier by a spatializing device…This point around which all concrete analysis of discourse must operate I shall call a quilting point…This is the point at which the signified and the signifier are knotted together, between the still floating mass of meanings that are actually circulating…Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of a material. It's the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively. (Lacan, 1993: 267-268)

Quilting points are used to bolster a stable Symbolic field in which meaning is both fixed and ordered. This fixing of meaning is most often ideological as its serves to privilege specific discursive utterances. Characterized by a lack of substantive content and emptiness, rather than fullness or abundance, master signifiers are “the word, which as a word, on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity” (Žižek, 1989: 9). This is important for
the interpellative effect of discourse/ideology where these “upholstery buttons” pin down the
subject and determine “whether a subject assumes or rejects the signifying part of a sentence—the
‘foreign body’ or attribute tied to it that one is attempting to make the receiver of one’s discourse
assume as their own” (Bracher, 1993: 29). An obvious example of this is in the simple rhetoric
surrounding the War on Terror, where members of the civilized, freedom-loving West are urged
to disavow the extremism of the freedom-hating fundamentalists who use violence as an end. The
“upholstery button” here would be the term “freedom”: anyone who values freedom must
renounce and disavow the violence of the extremists and fundamentalists. Such a process not only
creates binaries, but it also serves to neuter and justify the violence used by the freedom lovers by
claiming that it is not an integral component of freedom but only a reaction the barbarous
violence of the extremists.

In occupying the position of a master-signifier the subject always disavows both those competing
or disqualified master-signifiers and those binary opposites through which the master-signifier
articulates and positions itself.: boy cannot be girl, straight cannot be queer, white cannot be
black, left cannot be right, right cannot be wrong. Master-signifiers of the Symbolic field also
have an Imaginary constitutive effect, which enables us to locate ourselves and others within the
signifying field—in a sense we pin down our image/identity and that of others through the
reference to a stable and transcendental image or signifier. Master-signifiers are an attempt to
provide us with the coherent and full image that our Ideal-I demands from us:

One cannot be recognized as masculine or feminine by the Other (or by oneself) unless one
embodies certain specific attributes (signifiers), central among which are those attributes
concerning the nature, manner and objects of one’s desire. (Bracher, 1993: 30)

Following from the Freudian notion of the polymorphously perverse origins of the subject, not
only are we foregoing other identities but also subjectivities, desires, attachments, jouissances as
we disallow some master-signifier attachments for others. Judith Butler’s work, particularly *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), addresses this exact notion when she states that the ability of the subject to wholly subsume itself under a sign/identity is “impossible precisely because the subject desires to be identical with the signifier, and yet such an identification is precluded by language itself” (Butler, 1997: 193). With every identification the subject disavows any claim to a contradictory identification (as explained earlier, boy cannot be girl, straight cannot be queer, etc) and through this disavowal forecloses the ‘lost’ attachment, thus structuring both the psychic and libidinal economy of the subject (Butler, 1997: 24-25). Butler claims that the disqualified master-signifier of coherent gender operates with a “cultural logic whereby gender is achieved and stabilized through heterosexual positioning, and where threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender itself” (Butler, 1997: 135). What Butler is saying here, following from Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), is that not only do the ‘prohibited’ or subjugated master-signifiers panic the operation of ideology/discourse and the functioning of legitimate master-signifiers, attachments and identities, but that these disavowed aspects also haunt the subject in the form of a type of mourning and melancholia for those ‘lost’ objects of desire or unlived possibilities (Butler, 1997: 139). The normal, ‘coherent’ subject, then, is founded on an ontology of self-beratement where it cannot act or experience those desires it has lost when it chooses an attachment to a master-signifier. Depending on what the subject loses, discursive and ideological systems dictate how unsettling or traumatic these attachments to subjugated master-signifiers are: “forms of social power emerge that regulate what losses will and will not be grieved; in the social foreclosure of grief we might find what fuels the internal violence of conscience (Butler, 1997: 183).
The acquisition of language provides us with words that stand in for our ‘real’ self and ‘real’ experience. Lacan calls this process *castration* as the self is cut off from ‘real’ enjoyment as language inserts itself between the subject and experience. For example, in the Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1956), when Lacan says that “the letter kills, but we learn this from the letter itself” (Lacan, 2002: 848), he is saying that the pre-symbolic experience of the object has implications for the Symbolic subject. Far more than just simply ‘inserting’ itself, language comes to dwell in the subject acting as an Other that ‘speaks’ for the subject. Here, Lacan explains:

Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him “by flesh and blood;” so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and even beyond his death. (Lacan, 2002: 65)

The Symbolic subject can be seen as a viral host for the Otherness of language which operates within it. This is seen as an elaboration of the concept of *alterology*, where alienation is seen as what grounds the subject in the Symbolic order, so that that identity is always found in the Other, “outside” the self (Verhaeghe, 1997: 164). Access and knowledge of the self always operates through a medium that pre-exists us as subject and carries both social significance and weight.

With language, the inscription of signifiers, symbols, words and gestures on top of objects and desires/needs effectively transforms the experience of consumption or enjoyment of these “desire objects.” Language not only transforms experience but also the nature of desire/need itself. This is the second alienation alluded to earlier, and because it marks a threshold in the formation of the subject (from Imaginary and Real subject to the speaking Symbolic subject), it is also called the ‘second death:’
The concept of the ‘second death’ is an attempt to describe castration as a function of the structure of alienation wherein the symbolic order is taken on as a mortification (or castration) of the physical body. Language imposes a ‘no’ (a limit, or a ‘kind’ of law) on the immediacy of satisfaction. In this way language serves as a structure of ‘alienation’ from ‘jouissance.’ As such, language introduces a certain division in the subject. And humans are forever after ‘thrown’ by the experience of trying to recuperate forbidden ‘jouissance.’ (Ragland, 1995: 86)

With the acquisition of language the subject’s wants and desires are molded in the process, “for words they are obliged to use are not their own and do not necessarily correspond to their own particular demands: their very desires are cast in the mold of the language or languages they learn” (Fink, 1995: 6). What this illustrates is that the symbol/signifier not only never fully covers the object but it also transforms the way in which it is experienced. Here, the “Other”ness of language not only inserts itself between the self and object but also “enjoys” for us and ways that are new, foreign and alienated. This process, however, is not perfect, so that some traces of pre-Symbolic enjoyment still reside in the body as a remainder/reminder of what immediate experience was like—this has troubling consequences not only for the subject but also for discursive and ideological fields. In short, it can be said we are haunted by who we were before language inhabited us and stood in for Real enjoyment.

On the surface, the Symbolic order operates in the same manner that ‘structure’ operates for structural theorists: as subjects we are inserted into structure (class position, gender, race, etc.) before we are born, and our subject positions, and their relation to various ideological structures, affect how we act and how we are acted upon. Thus, structure, in this sense, can be conceived of as both the prison that restricts us and the vehicle that activates us as consistent and identifiable
subjects in a social field. Despite these similarities, however, it would be a mistake to simply conflate Lacan’s theory with structuralism, or even post-structuralism for that matter. Although there are elements of both structuralism and post-structuralism in Lacan’s work, there is equally a large aspect of it that cannot be to reconciled with either position. As stated earlier, Lacan’s work can be seen as posthumanist since, as Marshall W. Alcorn explains, his theory of the subject offers a “solution to the impasse attending the debates between the Freudians and the poststructuralists. For Lacan, relations between discourse and the subject are two sided. The subject operates upon discourse, and discourse operates on the subject” (Alcorn: 1994, 27). What is mean by this is that because of the composition of the psychic life of the subject (narcissism, repression, passionate attachments, etc.) the subject can both resist and “give idiosyncratic shape to social discourse as self-components within the self that interact to produce discourse effects” (ibid.).

It is, however, Lacan’s theory of structure—and otherness—that allows us to see a type of ‘tracing’ of the subject, where structure meets both exception and resistance.

As Bruce Fink states, in his preface to his The Lacanian Subject (1995), the exception of structure is found in the unconscious, or the register of the Real. This exception is twofold, and is found in both the subject and the object—object (a)—of desire (Fink, 1995: xi). In this statement, following from the Borromean Knot topology, Fink is implicating all three registers as constituting the “whole” of “the Lacanian subject and his discussion here related to how the first explicit and detailed conceptualization of the Real order, from Lacan’s seminar The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (1964), will have a radical effect on Lacan’s subsequent theory of the subject.
The Real

The lack of lack makes the real, which emerges only there, as a cork. This cork is supported by the term of the impossible—and the little we know about the Real shows its antinomy to all verisimilitude.


The Real is the register that marks the limit and boundary of both the Imaginary and Symbolic orders—the Real, then, is the limit of self-knowledge and the failure of the symbolic world to fully articulate or cover experience. The Lacanian concept of the Real follows the implications of Saussurean theory of the sign to an extreme conclusion in its attempt to delineate what inhabits the space between the signifier and signified, or “the world out there,” and the failed attempts to fully represent it in symbolic form. It is, however, a mistake to strictly think of this space as a negative, void, absence or emptiness—the Real is also “positive” in its content and it is composed of the inassimilable, remainders, reminders, leftovers, abortions, stains:

The paradox of the Lacanian Real, then, is that it is an entity which, although it does exist (in the sense of ‘really existing,’ taking place in reality), has a series of properties—it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects. (Žižek, 1991: 163)

Although unable to enter into the signifying realm, the Real has deep and fundamental constitutive effects not only on the human subject but also the social and discursive world: “… a cause which in itself does not exist—which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted and displaced manner. If the Real is impossible, it is precisely this impossibility which is to be grasped through its effects” (Žižek, 1991: 163).

Of all the three registers, Lacan stresses that it is the Real that “governs our activities more than any other,” in that as post-castrated beings we are haunted by both the demands of our unconscious and the reminder/remainder of experience/being that is unmediated by language.
(Lacan, 1998: 60). At a more pronounced and direct level, our encounters with the Real are experienced variously through uninterpretable kernels of resistance, trauma, psychoses, repetition, blockage, surplus jouissance, and anxiety. Both the interior and exterior life of the subject are a constant procession of thwarted and failed attempts at ‘self-mastery.’ This may be overt, in the form of direct conscious subversion, or indirect, where the subject resists discourse or full interpellation through anxiety, repetition, blockage, etc.

Lacan’s formulation of what might be termed a circular causality between the Symbolic and the Real also makes it possible to account for the fact that individual subjects are produced by discourse and yet manage to retain some capacity for resistance. (Bracher, 1994: 1)

The point being made here is that the subject is never equivalent to structure or discourse, and always exceeds discourse or discourse’s attempt to fully cover it. The capacity for resistance is therefore found in the “space” of failed interpellations, incoherent or mis-matched subject positions, contradictory and unwanted desires, unconscious taunts, unfulfilled and disappointing satisfactions, hauntings. The Real subject, then, is this element that exceeds and resists discourse.

In this section I will discuss the Real subject, or rather how the Real order of effects and experiences affects the way the “whole” subject operates as both an individual (Imaginary) and a social (Symbolic) being. That is, I will discuss the limits of the social subject. Again, I should stress that I am taking liberties—and operating in direct opposition to my own larger argument—by dissecting the Lacanian subject into discrete categories of the self, the social and the inassimilable—the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, respectively. By employing this performative contradiction I am not only attempting to delineate a clear model of the Lacanian subject, but I am also seeking to expose the deficiencies of those models which not only operate with a strict and artificial distinction between the self and social, but also neglect that which
escapes (and haunts) symbolization. As stressed throughout this chapter, it is important to not only think of the interrelations of the self and society and how each is absolutely implicated in each other, but also how the subject is ultimately a failed and unfinished project that is not simply reducible to either structure/social effect (as in liberal/analytic philosophy and structuralist theories) or even a subject position (as in some modes of post-structuralist theorization). By discussing the failure of symbolization and the constitutive effects of the Real register, it becomes apparent that models of subjectivity that ignore either the effects of the unconscious or the instability of the subject are incomplete and fundamentally flawed:

The problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully ‘covering’ the Real, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemable symbolic debt. *This Real (the part of reality that remains non-symbolized) returns in the guise of spectral apparitions.* (Žižek, 2005: 262)

The argument that Žižek is making here—an argument upon which I will later expand—is that the failed symbolization of the Real involves far more than the creation of discursive blindspots and gaps. It also brings on the uncanny return of disavowed or repressed elements created by the identification with master signifiers.

Before going further with any discussion of the Real subject it is necessary to ground the discussion to the subject’s relation to the object—be it material objects, abstract objects, other subjects, or the Other and the experience of enjoyment. The foundation for this discussion is how, as castrated beings cut off from direct experience of the Real, we mediate our contact with objects in lieu of real-enjoyment. This discussion is most clearly articulated in Lacan’s untranslated IV Seminar: *La Relation d’object et les Structures Freudiennes* (1957) and then later in his XX Seminar: *Encore* (1973). In both of these seminars he conceptualizes three objects that illustrate
how the three registers, in their interrelation, attempt to deal with the problem of the-real-of-enjoyment and how to protect the self from direct exposure to raw enjoyment-in-the-real that can be disruptive for the subject (Kay, 2003: 54-55). Although each of these objects indirectly refers back to the real enjoyment at the centre—in an attempt to satisfy desire-in-the-real—these objects instead direct us to ‘real world’ objects which are both safe and attainable. In Seminar XX Lacan provides a schema, and designates three algebraic objects, that map out the registers in a triangular relationship with the real of enjoyment—jouissance—positioned in the centre:

Each of the different axes are represented by a symbol/object which attempts to summarize the failure of their interrelations. These objects are the stand-in for the-real-of-enjoyment and are thus a way of dealing with how experience is mediated by both Others (Imaginary) and language (Symbolic), and how this mediation puts distance between a direct relationship between the self and the object. It is important to note that each of these objects is abstract and does not refer to real-world objects, but rather to how we graft the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real registers onto real-world objects. Briefly, here’s and explanation of each of the three axis:
\textbf{S(A) true = Symbolic/Imaginary.} This axis Designates the failure of the Symbolic to fully capture the illusory wholeness that the Imaginary order provides: “On the other side, what is S(A) but the impossibility of telling the whole truth (\textit{tout le vrai})” (Lacan, 1998: 95). We see an example of this effect in two different ways where the self image, or imago, fails to match up with the desired identity that circulates in the Symbolic. Entering this axis from the Symbolic position, we can see the failed attempts of the subject to match its own ego ideal with popular media depictions of masculinity, for example. Conversely, if we approach this axis from the Imaginary side we can see where one’s ego or conception of self does not cleanly fit into the discreet Symbolic identity categories which often demand exclusive investments. With the barred A in the algebraic formula—representing the big Other, or \textit{Autre}, in French—Lacan is drawing attention to the fact that “the Other does not exist.” What Lacan means by this is that the Symbolic order operates on surface play of signifiers without actually referring to any deep, transcendental truth about the object or subject in question. Part of psychoanalytic practice, and part of any political project that operates with a Lacanian model of the subject, is bringing the subject to the realization/acceptance that the Other is inconsistent and impermanent, and hence that their current and continued existence is neither permanent nor dependent on the master and identity signifiers provided within the Symbolic realm.

\textbf{Ф reality = Imaginary/Real.}

This axis represents the failure of the Imaginary to capture the Real: “To the right is the scant reality (\textit{peu-de-réalité}) on which the pleasure principle is based, which is such that everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality is rooted in fantasy” (Lacan, 1998: 94-95). More so than any other relationship between the registers, this axis references the impossibility of enjoyment-in-the-real and the impossibility of fullness or satiation. The algebraic representation
of this axis, the Greek letter phi (Φ), stands in for the phallus which the child erroneously believes the (m)Other possesses. Examples of objects found in this register axis include the patriarchal society’s over-privileging of the penis as a possible site of the full enjoyment-in-the-real that the illusory phallus promises: “the Φ is the signifier for a non-existent signified. Because it results from the boy child’s foolish overprivileging of his penis, Φ is also associated with masculine, idiotic masturbatory enjoyment” of patriarchal narcissism (Kay, 2003: 56).

*a semblance = Symbolic/Real.*

This axis is the point at which the Symbolic fails to represent the Real, where the object fails/resists incorporation or translation into a shared system of reality or experience: “Lastly, the Symbolic, directing itself toward the Real, shows us the true nature of object (a). If I qualified it earlier as a semblance of being, it is because it seems to give us the basis (support) of being” (Lacan, 1998: 95). This object—most commonly referred to as objet petit a, objet a or object little a or object (a³)—is the most famous of all the Lacanian psychoanalytic objects, and indeed perhaps the most famous of all of Lacan’s concepts since it can be said that object (a) is the object that ‘centres’ and ties the Borromean knot of the subject together. Because of the importance of this concept—and the way my broader argument hinges on this failure of the Symbolic to capture the Real—it is necessary to devote particular attention to this concept and how it relates to both the Lacanian subject and politics and social theory built around a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity. Object (a) is a polyvalent concept which Lacan kept revisiting and revising throughout his writing and lectures. For the purposes of clarity, I will limit my discussion directly to how object (a) relates to his theory of subject and object relations.

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3 I have adopted Bruce Fink’s representation of objet petit a—object (a)—and will from this point on refer to this concept by this notation.
To begin, by way of a type of definition, the small “a” in object (a) stands for two things. First, the a stands in for the small (autre) Other—one’s own ego and the ego of others—this differentiates the object from the big Other and locates it specifically within a field of ostensibly attainable objects rather than within an abstract field of the big Other. Less commonly discussed is the second meaning of the “a,” through which Lacan references the Greek word agalma which means either a hidden treasure or statue of the Gods. Lacan specifically roots his discussion of agalma in a passage from Plato’s Symposium, where it takes on the meaning of a precious or glorious object hidden in a worthless container—a secret, hidden part of us that a lover detects and finds desirable (Fink, 1995: 59, 86). In many ways this can be seen as the perfect metaphor for in object (a) since what we seek in desire is not the vessel but rather the hidden, hoped-for content that has always eluded us: “I love you, but because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the object (a) – I mutilate you” (Lacan, 1998, 268). Although we mutilate the other through loving them, we also mutilate ourselves in attempt to discover the agalma within ourselves in order to answer the question: “Che vuoi?” or “What does the Other want from me? Why do they love me?” Far from being a simple narcissistic reflection, looking for the agalma or object (a) within ourselves provides us with a way to orient ourselves as subjects:

In the late Lacan… the focus shifts to the object that the subject itself ‘is,’ to the agalma, secret treasure, which guarantees a minimum of phantasmatic consistency to the subject’s being. That is to say: object (a), as the object of fantasy, is that ‘something in me more than myself’ on account of which I perceive myself as ‘worthy of the Other’s desire’ (Žižek, 1997: 8).

Read in this light, of the subject taking themselves as an object, we can see how this supports one of Lacan’s most famous claims about desire: “Desire is desire for the Other.” Although this formula is open to many interpretations within Lacan’s own work, for our purposes it has
significance for the subject and object \( (a) \) in two complementary ways. First, desire is always desire for something else—one cannot desire what one already has—and object \( (a) \) exemplifies this since desire has no real object and moves from one object to another in pursuit of what eludes it. In this serial movement from one object—or body—to another the subject oscillates between attainable symbolic objects (which both ideology and fantasy help facilitate) and the almost never obtainable objects in the Real, which appear to offer what we feel is forever lacking from symbolic objects, i.e. *jouissance*. Object \( (a) \) is the lost object *not* to be found:

If the object was never found, strictly speaking, that is perhaps because it is essentially phantasmatic in nature, not corresponding to a remembered experience of satisfaction. There never was such an object in the first place: the "lost object" never was; it is only constituted as lost after the fact, in that the subject is unable to find it anywhere other than in fantasy or dream life. Using Freud's text as a springboard, the object can be viewed as always already lost (Fink, 1995: 94)

Desire’s goals, then, are both symbolic and libidinal. The self becomes “libidinalized” in the Symbolic order as we sublimate Symbolic fantasies, through the ideological semiotics of romance, success, power, fulfillment, etc. within the existing social order. There is no such thing as “private” desire, since desire can only find its articulation in ideological fantasies within the social field.

Secondly, following from a quite literal (and Hegelian) interpretation of the aphorism “desire is desire for the Other,” the subject desires recognition from the Other and wishes that the Other desires them. What this means is that the ‘source’ of desire is located outside of the self and in the Other. What the subject is trying to do is fill the lack in the Other—as seen during the Oedipal stage where the child desires to be the phallus for the mother—but at the same time answer the vexing enigma posed by the Other: “Che vuoi?” The Other as a stand in for “Nation,” for example, may be asking the subject “What is it about you that makes you a member of this country?” or the Other as “Man” may ask “What make you a man?” As we will see in upcoming
the chapter on fantasy, the answers to these questions often result in a subjective supplemental attachment (xenophobia, homophobia) to a variety of master signifiers that provide a consistency for the subject.

Žižek’s reading of various media texts in light of the theory of the object \((a)\) provides another excellent metaphor for understanding this concept: the Hitchcockian McGuffin. Hitchcock claimed that the actual substance/content of the MacGuffin itself is unimportant to the plot but it serves to set the plot in motion. So the fact that the good guys/bad guys are pursuing plans to an experimental jet fighter, an invisibility formula, a collection of Faberge eggs, etc. is immaterial to the actual plot, the point is that it provides a plot device that allows the protagonist to pursue something or someone, generating tension around whether the object will be retrieved, fall into the wrong hands, etc. Beyond the canon of films which Žižek discusses (Hollywood, middle-brow foreign films, American b-movies, etc.) the greatest example of the MacGuffin in film is seen in Terry Gilliam’s 

*Time Bandits* (1981), where it is described as “The Most Fabulous Object in the World.” The allure of this object causes a group of the Supreme Being’s lackeys to “fall from grace” and steal a time map which allows them to travel through time and plunder various historical eras (ancient Greece, the Titanic voyage, Sherwood Forest during the time of Robin Hood, etc.). Despite the wealth they have accumulated, they still pursue “The Most Fabulous Object in the World” that is hidden in “The Time of Legends.” In the end “The Most Fabulous Object in the World” is revealed to be a sham created by the Supreme Being to test his lackeys. Object \((a)\), like desire itself, does not necessarily seek to achieve its “goal” or full satiation but seeks to perpetuate the very act of pursuing or desiring: for the subject, it is the value he or she is seeking in all of his or her activities and relations” (Fink, 1995: 96). Although object \((a)\) can be conceived of as a “hidden treasure” or “The Most Fabulous Object,” most commonly it acts as a source of anxiety for the subject since desire’s ultimate aim is not attainment but rather
the perpetuation of the act of desiring itself. The point of the MacGuffin is not the attainment of the elusive object—since that ends the movie and the tension which its attraction is based upon—but rather the pursuit of it.

As illustrated in the earlier diagram, object \((a)\) is the object that represents the failure of the Symbolic to capture the Real. This failure is the effect of two processes. In the first process, as explained in an earlier discussion, object \((a)\) is a reminder of pre-castration experience-in-the-Real before the Symbolic world inserts itself between the subject and experience. For this reason, object \((a)\) is conceptualized as a *reminder* of a hypothetically lost unity and this effect is demonstrated by the previous diagram of how the different orders attempt to deal with impossibility of *jouissance*:

Desire in the Real is an effort to attain the missing part of one’s own being or jouissance either through possessing what Lacan calls the object \(a\), a precious object or substance associated with the Real body, or through being oneself the object \(a\) that the Other wants to be or to have. The object \(a\), which functions as the ultimate object around which the drive turns and upon which fantasy is constructed, ‘designates precisely what of the effects discourse presents itself as the most opaque and… misunderstood, though essential’ (Seminar XVII, 47) (Bracher, 41)

Secondly, because language cannot fully cover either experience or objects, object \((a)\) is also thought of as a *remainder* that cannot be incorporated into either social or conscious experience. This is experienced in the way that Real causes both language and the subject to trip over themselves in order to deal with the gaps, interruptions and fissures caused the unincorporated Real, and the frustrated attempts by subjects to match their imago up with the master signifiers of the Symbolic order. Further to this, Bruce Fink thinks of object \((a)\) as “… the residue of symbolization—the Real that remains, insists, and ex-sists after or despite symbolization—as the
traumatic cause, and as that which interrupts the smooth functioning of law and the automatic unfolding of the signifying chain,” (Fink 1995: 83).

**Conclusion.**

The best way to conclude this chapter on the Lacanian subject is to return to a discussion of Symbolic subjectivity and how the remainders and reminders of the Real interrupt the smooth functioning of subjects. As stated earlier, master signifiers are the result of discursive attempts to totalize and wholly represent the subject to all other subjects within a social field. In Lacan’s discussion of the master’s discourse (Lacan, 1998: 33-37), the failed attempt to fully represent the subject creates a surplus that escapes representation—this surplus is object (a) and it is a surplus of both meaning and enjoyment (plus-de-jouir). In other words, the object (a) “figures in discourse as the return of the being or jouissance that is excluded by the master signifiers,” (Bracher, 1994: 41). There are resonances here with Marx’s concept of surplus value, in this theory of surplus jouissance, since this remainder/reminder “gets trapped in bits of the body, in borders which constitute the erotogenic zones, or in the nuclei of hysterical symptoms” (Evans, 1998: 12). This is exactly the “disavowed object” that Judith Butler discusses in *The Psychic Life of Power*. For Butler, the object and way of being persists within the body and is never drained out once a master signifier is used to represent the subject. Rather, the disavowed or forbidden object is set up inside the subject’s imago as a binary counterpoint to the subject’s attachment to a master signifier. The social world, however, attempts to elicit the subject into stable and coherent being by providing it with a consistent set of objects which both provide a reflection, but also a sustenance, to desire. Social and ideological structures are premised on and exacerbate the object (a) that resides at the centre of subjectivity. Additionally, the act of identifying with certain signifiers forecloses other ways of being:
Cultural artefacts, then, in addition to eliciting desire, also guide it toward some objects and aims and away from others, by means of such networks of signifiers in the unconscious and in the ego. This occurs by virtue of the alliances and oppositions that determine that subjects, who, for example, have identified with signifier A will do all they can to avoid identifying with signifier B, if A and B are established as incompatible in the subject’s Symbolic Order. (Bracher, 1993: 49)

The subject, then, exceeds structure by its very inability—as precluded by both language and the psychic composition of the subject—to fully identify with the (master) signifiers provided in the Symbolic realm. Subjectivity, as understood by Lacanian theory, is a continual unfinished becoming where one is always chasing an impossible completion that is promised by the social and ideological field.
Chapter 3
Interpellation

In the previous chapter I laid the foundation for the theory of the ‘subject’ upon which I found the rest of the argument of this thesis. I claimed, following a reading of Lacanian theory, that the subject is multiply invested across different registers (Imaginary, Symbolic and Real), and suggested that this multiple investment makes the subject far less stable than the subject found in analytic/Liberal or even poststructuralist theory. Further to this claim, I made an argument for the Lacanian Real as an irreducible aspect of the subject—involving both the unconscious and object (a) investments—that cannot be accounted for in discourse but nonetheless has constitutive effects on subjectivity.

This chapter will be a discussion of the subject’s relationship to ideology and how power is anchored in subjectivity. I will be using Louis Althusser’s work on interpellation as a starting point to discuss the ways in which the subject is “called into being” by ideology. In my discussion I will be challenging the simple distinction made between the “internal” and “external,” and will be advancing a theory of the subject based on the Lacanian notion of extimité—where the exterior is present in the interior. This discussion is grounded in a larger structuralist/poststructuralist debate on how structure affects subjectivity. I will argue that most structure-oriented theories neglect those aspects of the subject that resist and exist outside of structure and discourse—this, in turn, is an argument for the necessity of psychoanalytic concepts in discourse analysis/ideology critique.

In this section I will be adopting the Marxist conception of ideology which can be loosely defined as an instrument of social reproduction which ensures the reiteration of both social structure and relations and thus the continuance of the means of production. It was famously
stated in *The German Ideology* (1845) that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx and Engels, 1970: 64). Although my discussion here will primarily focus on the relationship between the subject and structure, I want to first define the terrain in which this discussion of ideology takes place: the social reproduction of capitalist relations.

One of the difficulties in discussing the Marxist concept of ideology is that there is a ‘common-sense’ perception of what Marx’s theory of ideology entails, despite the fact that Marx said very little about the concept of ideology. In fact, his treatise on ideology, *The German Ideology* (1845), says little about what constitutes ideology, nor does it provide a definition. When using the term ideology, Marx would qualify its usage with such adjectives as ‘German’, ‘liberal’, ‘political’ or ‘Hegelian’ in order to discuss both bodies of speculative philosophy and cosmologies (Pines, 1993: 11). If classical Marxist theory is said to have an explicit theory of ideology it is to be found in his more general theory of alienation (Eagleton, 1991: 70).

It was Marx’s collaborator, Friedrich Engels who provides the most coherent definition of ideology:

> Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously indeed but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or his predecessors’. (Letter to Mehring, 1893 cited in Williams 155)

This conception of ideology should be noted for its epistemological claims since Engels mentions both the ‘real’ and the ‘false.’ The issue of ‘false consciousness’ has been problematic for subsequent Marxist theories of ideology since true/false claims rest on a theory of a reason-using subject that can come into ‘true’ (class) consciousness after being exposed to the realities of class struggle (Eagleton, 1994: 10-12). In my own work I have chosen to avoid an epistemological
theory of ideology, working instead with a theory based on the organization of social and material relations in society that comes from the work of Etienne Balibar and Louis Althusser, specifically in *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading Capital* (1970). Althusser’s theory of ideology is primarily concerned with the social functions of ideology and not its cognitive claims (Pines, 1993: 4-5), and it is here I locate my specific discussion. Following Žižek, I agree that ideology is not an illusory veil that is placed over the subject but involves a far deeper constitutive organization of the subject’s psychic and libidinal economy (Žižek, 1989: 45).

The social reproduction of the means of production can be seen as occurring in those relations that structure the economic and individual patterns of distribution, circulation and consumption (Balibar, 2006: 265). Further to this, in an attempt to avoid both the idealist and historicist labels that have plagued Marxist theory, Étienne Balibar, in *Reading Capital* (1970), provides a structuralist account of social change where certain elements (workers, means of production and non-labouring appropriators) are held to the combinatory rules of property and appropriation relations (Balibar reference, 2006: 26). Balibar argues that social change, for any society, involves changes in the combination between these elements and not the wholesale displacement of one structure or set of relations for another. As Mark Poster notes, the rules of transformation follow “Freud’s concept of the process of displacement, in which one element takes the place of another even though the former has no logical connection with the latter” (Poster, 1975: 355). Historical change, then, involves a displacement of a set of relations and a recombination of elements:

The dissolution of a structure, like feudalism, took place without apocalyptic drama. The structure was simply less able to integrate its subordinate levels, which floated, so to speak, in the social field. The loose elements gradually combined through a process of bricolage… which assembled sections from the junk heap of the previous structure, like a tinkerer in his workshop filled with used remnants. Gradually but discontinuously, a new
structure emerged, containing contradictions or imperfections since it was not designed ahead of time by a perfect planner using appropriate materials and proceeding systematically, but rather through fits and starts, with materials suited for a different social machine (Poster, 1975: 355-356).

It is a mistake, then, to posit that these relations have laws or an autonomy of their own, since they are determined by the means of production and are thus patterned on a mutually reinforced reproductive relationship. These social and productive relations are reproduced not only at the ideological level, but also at the level of the material. This materiality of structured social and productive relationships provides a ‘lived’ consistency of ideological relations that provides not only permanence but also the structure for reproduction. Balibar explains:

The concept of reproduction is thus not only the concept of ‘consistency’ of the structure, but also the concept of necessary determination of the movement of production by the permanence of that structure; it is the concept of the permanence of the initial elements in the very functioning of the system, hence the concept of the necessary conditions of production, conditions which are precisely not created by it (Balibar, 2006: 272).

The materiality of structure ensures the consistency of a set of relations, but it is the relations of social reproduction that express and determine its specific form. What we have in this process is a mutually constitutive pattern of unity in which it is difficult to demarcate a beginning or end.

A specific mode of production survives only if the conditions of its existence are present in the social, political and economic structures and relations. Therefore, in any given society, the elements that configure—social, political, economic—are asymmetrically related but autonomous (or even contradictory) at the same time (Brewster in Althusser, 2005: 255). These relationships are marked by overdetermination, which Althusser describes as being a state of uneven development and contradiction between the elements which form the whole or totality of the
system (Althusser, 2005: 101-102). In the previous chapter on subjectivity, I alluded to this process where the subject is acted upon by different and often confusing and contradictory claims made upon them within the social field. This concept of overdetermination, or unevenness or contradiction within a system, provides an explanation as to why subjects are not fully determined by, say, consumerist culture but are impelled by other forces as well (such as gender, family, religion, etc.). What characterizes each individual society, then, is that one of these elements is dominant and all the other elements are in some way determined or shaped by it. In the context of my earlier discussion of subjectivity and master signifiers, this “structure in dominance” limits the field in which the elements can operate and play. The totality of society is never “separable in this way from the elements that constitute it, as each is the condition of existence of all the others; hence it has no centre, only a dominant element” (Brewster in Althusser, 2005: 112). Ideology, then, is not a singular, heterogeneous force but rather an ensemble or totality of residual, emergent, and dominant formations, limited at the same time by what determines/dominates the character of the given society (Jameson, 1991: 6).

In capitalist societies, as Althusser famously stated in For Marx (1965), “the economy is determinant, but in the last instance” as the ‘structure in dominance’ through which all other elements are configured (Althusser, 2005: 112). It is important to note that the phrase “in the last instance” does not indicate that there ever was/will ever be a time when the economy was/will be the sole determinant of how society is structured. Instead, this phrase indicates that ‘the last instance never comes’, the structure is always the co-presence of all its elements and their relations of dominance and subordination—it is an ‘ever-pre-given’ structure” (Brewster in Althusser, 2005: 255). It is important, then, to see how both the material and ideological effect one another, but that this relationship is in some way limited and determined by the way in which a society is first defined.
This process, I will next argue, can be extended to the subject’s relation to the forces of capitalism. Simply put, it is not possible to separate the subject from capitalist relations—the subject is constitutive of capitalism and capitalism is reiterated within the subjectivity of the subject.

**Ideological State Apparatuses.**

In Althusser’s influential essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses—Notes Towards an Investigation” (1970), he begins by posing one of the most well-worn questions of Marxist theory: *how are the relations of production reproduced and what contributes to the stability of capitalist societies?* Althusser begins to answer this question by expanding upon the Marxist conception of the State.

Althusser makes it clear to his reader (Althusser, 1970: 138) that traditional Marxist theories of the State—from such classic sources as Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* (1872) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) to Vladimir Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* (1917)—explicitly and typically conceived it as a repressive apparatus, or ‘machine,’ which ensures the domination of the ruling classes over the working class. What is meant by repressive apparatus are both the juridical-legal institutions (the government, the courts and the laws themselves), and those mechanisms which use force (the police and the army), to obtain compliance from the population. The State, then, is determined by the capitalist mode of production and it turn functions to both protect the interests of the capitalist class and maintain the structure of society and social relations.

To this traditional conception of the State, as a repressive entity, Althusser introduces a second discreet category of the *Ideological State Apparatus*. The reason behind the erecting of these two categories is to rectify what appears to Althusser to be a long-standing problem of
Marxist theory, i.e. the conflation of both the repressive and ideological functions of capitalist societies under the monolithic category of the State.

Before describing their function and content, Althusser provides the reader with a list of ISAs:

- the religious ISA (the system of the different Churches),
- the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private 'Schools'),
- the family ISA,
- the legal ISA,
- the political ISA (the political system, including the different Parties),
- the trade-union ISA,
- the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.),
- the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.). (Althusser, 1970: 143)

Although it might be self-evident from the above list, ISAs operate very differently from the (Repressive) State Apparatus in that the multiple ISAs function ‘by ideology’ whereas the singular (Repressive) State Apparatus operates through violence; although, as Althusser states, the use of violence or ideology is not exclusive to either apparatus. It is through the tandem of repressive and ideological apparatuses, where each secures the conditions for survival of the other, that the State system is able to maintain the domination of the ruling class. Here, Althusser explains:

The role of the repressive State apparatus, insofar as it is a repressive apparatus, consists essentially in securing by force (physical or otherwise) the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production which are in the last resort relations of exploitation. Not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction (the capitalist State contains political dynasties, military dynasties, etc.), but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression (from the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses. (Althusser, 1970: 149-150)

So, for example, the ISA of public schools not only transmits ideology explicitly though its curriculum but implicitly, and more effectively, through the civil ordering of the student’s behavior. Thus its reach extends beyond both the classroom and school hours to where the civil
lessons of the classroom become the template through which subjects order their lives and prepare themselves for the labor force. The very material setup of classroom architecture, with its unidirectional ordering of rows facing a singular authority to which both obedience and attention are directed, is an example of how both the affective and the material combine to create compliance in ideological setups.

The dual system of the ideological and repressive apparatuses as means of maintaining State power is the quick answer to the original question: how are the relations of production reproduced? Considered more closely, however, Althusser’s work complicates the sacrosanct classic Marxist relationship between the base and superstructure. A relative autonomy is given to ideology and its ability to determine the structuring of the material/base. Thus, it “… is possible to say that the floors of the superstructure are not determinant in the last instance, but that they are determined by the effectivity of the base; that if they are determinant in their own (as yet undefined) ways, this is true only insofar as they are determined by the base” (Althusser, 1970: 135). Of course, Althusser’s emphasis on ideology is his way of combating the economic determinism that plagued Marxist theory until the mid-20th century, when it was abandoned by all but the most dogmatic adherents.

This discussion of how the RSAs and the ISAs structure and direct the social composition of capitalist societies, and they how they act to reproduce the relations of production, only half answers the original question. At this point in the text, Althusser radically shifts gears, and begins to discuss how ideology permeates consciousness and how individuals are made into subjects. Again, such a discussion would not necessarily be out of place during this period—Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844) had been translated into French in 1937, and
every thinker of the decades following the post-War period, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Jean-Luc Goddard, was (re)discovering the ‘humanist’ Marx.

Althusser, however, was at odds with the incorporation of humanist concepts into Marxist theories. Specifically, Althusser took issue with the concept of the ‘individual’ at the centre of modernist philosophy. In many ways, the ‘younger’ post-War generation of French thinkers, like Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, were reacting against the self-determined Cartesian subject of philosophy that dominated the intellectual climate. For Althusser, humanism was deeply ideological and was a type of bourgeoisie ruse.

Althusser, in the remainder of the “Ideology and State Apparatus” essay, discusses how ‘individuals’ are constituted as ideological subjects. This discussion, of how subjects are inserted into ideological structures, is arguably Althusser’s most important contribution to contemporary social and political theory. In the remainder of this chapter I will first discuss Althusser’s theory of interpellation and then supplement/critique his theory with explicit Lacanian and post-Lacanian references.

**Individuals Into Subjects.**

Althusser has been rightly criticized (Pêcheux: 1980, Butler: 1997) for being vague about his theory of interpellation. For this reason, before going further, it is important to discuss the meanings of this term in French, and how certain nuances are missed in the ways that it is used in English.

The French verb interpeller (most English translations being “to hail” or simply “interpellate”) and the related synonym, which shares the same root word, the verb appeler (to
“call” or to “name”), are at the centre of Althusser’s theory of subjection. These verbs are quasi-synonyms when used in the sense that when you call (appeler) or hail (interpellate) someone you are inviting them to come towards you while pronouncing their name, or by using a phrase. This is an important part of the process of subjection—the interpellator is simultaneously calling out to the subject and bestowing a name upon them. For this reason it is necessary to examine the way Althusser uses the verb interpellate and how it differs from the similar verb appeler.

**Appeler:**

In French when you call yourself something, appeler, two things are happening simultaneously: you are both naming and calling out to yourself. For example, the phrase “je m’appelle Ryan,” is both a call and a naming. This effect, the simultaneous calling and naming, also happens when someone addresses us—we are summoned and come into being at the same time. Althusser, following from Lacan, would say that we come into being the moment that we are named and that we come into being as subjects each time our name is called. Appeler can also act as designation in general: the naming of a child, baptizing, and the electing of someone to a position (job, presidency, etc.). As we can see from this, we are not only named and labeled but we are also ‘elected’ into our existence or subject position and told ‘where’ we are.

**Interpellation.**

English translations of Althusser usually translate the French verb interpellate into either “hail” or the more obscure “interpellate.” Interpellation, as it is used in English, is to be understood as an act of appealing and ‘hailing’ an individual and secondly, as the act of interrupting speech (Compact Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, 1996, 867). The French

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4 I would like to thank Emile Fromet de Rosnay for helping me with this discussion of French verbs.
usage of interpellate, where the verb is much more common, carries multiple connotations that are missed in the strict English usage. The French *interpeller* carries this same notion of interjection and calling out to an individual and, for this reason, it signifies something much more jarring and unsettling than the simple naming/calling of *appeler*. Beyond this interjecting or ‘hailing’ aspect that is found in the English usage, the French usage of this verb contains additional connotations that should be stressed in relation to Althusser’s work, and in understanding how the concept of interpellation is used in political/social theory. In French, *interpeller* is also be used to mean question or interrogate; for example: “La police doit toujours interpeller les témoins.” Here, we can see how interpellation, as a form of questioning and interrogation, is used to draw information or ‘the truth’ out of a subject under question--this notion cannot be stressed enough when discussing Althusser’s theory of interpellation. Closely related to this interrogative sense, interpellation can also be used as a way of registering attention or concern, where issues or subjects ‘become the concern of’ individuals (or police and politicians); for example: “Le terrorisme nous interpelle énormément.”

This dual notion of interpellation, the hailing of subjects of concern, is why Althusser invokes both the figure of authority and the jarring interruption of the everyday in his famous theoretical staging of ideological interpellation on the street, where interpellation: “can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!’ ”(Althusser, 175). A more mundane example of the call in the street interpellation can be seen in a game/gag played by teenagers called “fuckface,” where one hails a stranger in public with the call: “hey you, fuckface!” When the ‘interpellated’ subject turns around to answer the call—usually because they are startled from being addressed in public by strangers—they are

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5 The police have yet to question the witnesses.
6 Terrorism is a concern to us all.
then ridiculed by the hailer for answering the call and recognizing themselves as a “fuckface.” This game can be seen to incorporate both the heckling and hailing aspects of interpellation—a startling call that names me and tells me who I am. As Althusser states, and as Judith Butler later problematizes in *The Psychic Life of Power*, we tend to always answer any call:

> Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences'. (Althusser, 175)

Although the examples of interpellation I have used thus far stress both authority and the external nature of interpellation—that a policeman, for example, interjects on our interior life to interpellate us as a guilty subject—I have primarily used these examples as a theatrical device in keeping with the metaphors that are used in the ‘classic’ theory of interpellation. In the following discussion, I will argue that as subjects we are in a constant process of interpellating ourselves through our actions and living/through ideology. It is my contention that the most convincing and compelling interpellative calls are not the shouts in the street but the hushed whispers that originate from our own skull.

**Interpellation.**

An aspect that Althusser under-develops in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus…” is the question of how the subject internalizes the ideological “belief” or subject positions supported by the ISAs. Seemingly, interpellation is the quick answer to this question; however, as demonstrated in my last chapter, the strict Althusserian concept of interpellation makes a too easy distinction between the external and the internal or the social and the individual. A Lacanian reading of the subject of the Symbolic order does not allow for such a simple
distinction, and it is in this light that I want to re-work the concept of interpellation as a form of
subjection where ideology and the social *always already* dwell in the individual and direct their
actions, rather then the simple notion that the individual internalizes ideology and their own
subject position at some determinant point in time. In the remainder of this chapter I will trace
theory of interpellation, or how ideology constitutes the subject, and then critique/supplement his
theory with my own original contributions and the work of some of Althusser's interlocutors--
Butler, Pêcheux and Žižek.

One of the most often-stressed aspects of Althusser’s work, and that of structuralist
theory in general, is that there is no ‘outside’ to ideology or discourse. Additionally, the subject is
always already a subject. For Althusser, there is no act or practice except by and in ideology, and
there is “no ideology except by and for subjects” (Althusser, 1970: 170) Subjects, then, believe
themselves to be of independent origin and determination—we believe that our thoughts,
emotions and desires are independently generated by us and us alone. It is in this exact moment,
when we believe we are self-determined and beyond the influences of ideology, that we are most
fully seduced, or interpellated, by ideology. We see in Althusser’s discussion that the subject is
essentially identical to the subject of ideology and that, in keeping with structural theory,
structure always precedes the individual who “… is always-already a subject, even before he is
born, is nevertheless the plain reality, accessible to everyone and not a paradox at all” (Althusser,
1970: 176). Although such a statement is clearly not a paradox, it is also not entirely convincing
and one feels that several steps are missing in the quick movement from ‘ideology out in the
world’ to ‘ideology in the subject.’ The concept of interpellation, as Althusser conceives of it,
describes the process through which the individual is made equivalent to the subject of ideology.
The remainder of this chapter will critique Althusser on this point, and I will argue that the
subject is *not* equivalent to the subject of ideology, because there are aspects of the subject that cannot be incorporated into the Symbolic or ideological field.

In discussing the process of interpellation, Althusser states that “… *all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (Althusser, 1970: 173). Here, we come to the idea of interpellation as a calling or ideological beckoning. As described earlier in this chapter, the governing metaphors surrounding this concept are those of an external call, a shout in the street, the interruption of an authority figure who calls us into ideological ‘being.’ Unerringly, we believe that these calls are always addressed to us. More importantly, the ‘name’ each one of these callings confers on us provides us with a certain stability within the ideological (Symbolic) field, where we are able to recognize other subjects but also ourselves in each of these callings. As Foucault discusses in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1980), there is a certain “will to truth” at the heart of the subject—subjects attempt to find the ‘truth’ of themselves through their positioning and location in a ideological/discursive field, and hence are willing to answer calls that are addressed to them from the outside.

If we are to operate with this model of an external ideological hailing, how, then, can we understand how ideological subjects *choose* which calls are really addressed to them? Are we really a “fuckface” simply because we turn to respond to the caller? Additionally, how do we reconcile the multiple and often contradictory calls to being that we invariably encounter in our daily life (“niche market consumer,” “negro,” “liberal democrat”) or those calls which we refuse but still haunt and insistently call us (“pervert,” “failure,” “nigger”)?

Since Althusser provides only one abstract example of interpellation, that of a policeman hailing us in the street, he has been justly criticized (Butler 1997, Pêcheux 1994, Žižek 1991) for
having an under-developed theory. I would concur with these critiques, and would particularly point out that he shifts too quickly from ideology ‘out in the world’ to ideology ‘in the subject’ without discussing the social, libidinal or psychic processes involved in such a movement. The question, then, is what is exactly is the process involved in these external ‘calls’ to ideological being?

It is my contention that these calls occur primarily in the domain of the Imaginary, where we respond to calls to being not simply because we have a servile relationship to authority and power (although, this is certainly true in interpellations of, say, nationalism or proper civil ordering of the self), but because ‘answering’ calls to being promises a certain coherence to not only our desire but also our identity. This turn towards authority then “… is not necessitated by the hailing; it is compelling, in a less than logical sense because it promises identity” (Butler, 1997: 108).

A problematic area in Althusser’s theory of interpellation and subjection is the perceived ability for the subject to discern not only the interpellative call, but also the interpellative message. For Althusser, the interpellative call is always transparent and addressed to us. The call “Hey, you!” or even “Fuckface!” always causes us to turn around. Seemingly, as Judith Butler argues, Althusser does not give his subject the critical ability to first ask: “Who is speaking? Why should I turn around? Why should I accept the terms by which I am being hailed?” (1997: 108) *You talkin’ to me?* Butler asks us to think about the naming process of interpellation and how the strength behind an interpellative call locates us within a social category or in the Symbolic field. Here, the hailing call can be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on the context, The addressee may view the hailing as an affirmation—which the Imaginary subject actively seeks
from others and the Other. The hailing can be viewed as an insult or a type of taunting where one is trying to deny an aspect of one's identity.

If we are even to receive the call, how then are we to understand it? For Althusser, ideological subjects are not given the faculties to refuse or reject or the hailing, but they are given enough critical capacity to understand what is meant by the interpellative call. Such calls involve injunctions like: you belong here, this is who you are, this is who you are to fuck, this is who you listen to, these are your people, etc. Such transparent messages and the ability to decipher the messages of the Other are not to be found in the work of Lacan. One of the defining aspects of the Lacanian subject is that they are confronted with the enigma of the desire of the Other—this relates to the famous Lacanian maxim: “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (1997: 235).

What this means is that the subject, in the course of trying to locate their being, is always asking from the Other: what do you want from me? what am I to you? This aspect of Lacanian thought owes itself to Alexandre Kojève’s reading of Hegel and the need of the subject to find in the Other recognition:

Desire is human only if the one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other . . . that is to say, if he wants to be 'desired' or 'loved', or, rather, 'recognised' in his human value. . . . In other words, all human, anthropogenetic Desire . . . is, finally, a function of the desire for 'recognition'. (1969: 6)

What the subject encounters in the Other is an enigma, or more specifically, a lack which they feel compelled to fill. In an effort to verbalize their own desire, subjects identify with a continuous series of signifiers through which they unsuccessfully try to fill the gap between themselves and the Other. Lacan explains this process/movement in a passage from Four Fundamentals Concepts of Psychoanalysis: “A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in
the intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse… *He is saying this to me, but what does he want?* …desire crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret.” (1997: 214).

Michel Pêcheux, in his work *Language, Semantics, and Ideology* (1982), describes the so-called “Munchausen effect” that is at the centre of Althusser’s theory of interpellation. Pêcheux takes issue with the apparent ‘self-grounding’ of the theory of interpellation, likening it to the Baron Munchausen character who is able to raise himself, and his legendary horse, Bucephalus, out of a certain watery grave and straight into the air simply by pulling himself upwards by his own pony tail. In other words, those who are “always-already a subject” call themselves into being and interpellate or “pull” themselves into full ideological subjectivity. What Althusser avoids theorizing, as Pêcheux explains, is the existence of a *non-subject* upon which the ideology acts.

The problem here, as Pêcheux explains, is a question of causality where the subject is posited “as the origin of the subject,” (Pêcheux 1994: 150). Are we to believe, then, that there are non-subjects that are then only constituted into the ideological field by interpellation? Such a notion of a non or pre-subject greatly upsets Althusser’s concept of the subject as an entity totally determined by ideology. Here, Dolar explains what is at stake for Althusser’s theory:

To put it the simplest way, there is a part of the individual that cannot successfully pass into the subject, an element of ‘pre-ideological’ and ‘pre-subjective’ *materia prima* that comes to haunt subjectivity once it is constituted as such (Dolar 1994: 75)

Dolar’s contention that we are haunted by traces of the pre-discursive and non-discursive, and his choice of the word 'haunt', will be the centre of a discussion which I will engage in fully in a later chapter. It suffices to say now that Althusser’s totalizing concept of interpellation is deeply troubled by that which cannot be reduced to ideology.
Another problem with Althusser’s theory of interpellation is his reliance on a strict division between the external (social) and the internal (subjective). This is one of the reasons why his theory of interpellation is unconvincing. Subjects, under this conception, are discrete and separate units infected or injected by ideological forces that exist ‘out there’ in the form of the various ISAs. Althusser’s theory, like other structuralist and poststructuralist theories, flattens the differences between the individual and society. Such non-psychoanalytic theories of the subject discuss the external/internal relationship as being a unidirectional flow of society or structure on the subject (Turkle, 1978: 74). In the first instance the social is seen as influencing or distorting the subject; and in the second, the subject is seen to be a ‘function’ of language or structure or an effect of discourse that ‘operates’ the subject (Alcorn 1994: 19). Psychoanalytic, and specifically Lacanian, theories of the subject, however, do not allow for such a separation between the social and the individual or subject.

Counter to the ‘separate’ social-subject relationship of modernist/Marxist theory and the ‘flattened’ social-subject relationship of structural/post-structural theory is the porous psychoanalytic theory of the subject that is best exemplified by Jacques-Alain Miller’s development of Lacan’s theory of extimacy, which was introduced in his 1985-1986 seminar (1994). Extimacy, a mixture of the words ‘external’ and ‘intimacy,’ posits a theory where the subject is no longer opposed to the object and that the subject and object, the external and internal, are both implicated in each other. Such a theory radicalizes the mirror structure of the Imaginary order, where the core of the subject’s ‘being’ is found outside of itself. Mladen Dolar explains that the subject “… is neither exterior nor interior, but not somewhere else either. It is the point of exteriority in the very kernel of interiority, the point where the innermost touches the outermost, where materiality is the most intimate. It is around this intimate external kernel that
subjectivity is constituted,” (Dolar 1994: 77). It is my contention that this theory of extimacy can be used to supplement Althusser’s theory of interpellation and explain the missing ‘movement’ between ideology ‘out in the world’ and ideology ‘in the subject.’

The discrete subject of the modernist cogito exists with a stable set of subject-characteristics and has a definite boundary where, as stated by Althusserian theory, ideology enters via interpellation. Such a theory works with the Marxist theory of alienation and false consciousness, whereby the ‘corrupting’ effects of ideology enter into the subject but can also, through a proper ordering of consciousness, be exorcised.

The goal of completely scourging the corrupting effects of ideology and the social from the subject is an impossible project according to Lacanian theory. There is no way to separate what is part of the subject and what is ideological, since the big Other is constituted within/as subjectivity itself. Here, Marshall Alcorn explains: “The Lacanian Other, in part a discourse structure, is always at the conflictual core of the subject” (Alcorn, 1994: 31).

Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” essay contains several misreadings, or misappropriations, of Lacan’s work. As stated in an earlier chapter, Lacan’s intentionally obtuse style does not necessarily allow for an orthodox reading or appropriation, but Althusser’s loose incorporation of Lacanian terms and concepts provides, at times, not only for an uncomfortable fit, but also an unconvincing argument. Althusser’s “imaginary” subject of ideology is really only comparable to the Lacanian ego which only comprises a fraction of the Lacanian subject (Eagleton, 1994: 144). Althusser’s direct usage of the word “imaginary” does not refer to the Imaginary register of Lacanian theory. His “imaginary” is far closer to the way Lacan uses the term Symbolic to refer to a type of social cognitive map of ‘reality.’ This usage is also similar to the way in which ideology is used in the classic Marxist sense of false consciousness. However, we can see in his discussion of the subject’s relation to the ‘big’
Subject, and the use of the mirror as an organizing metaphor, that Althusser is employing a
subject based in the Imaginary register in the Lacanian sense:

We observe that the structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the
name of a Unique and Absolute Subject is *specululary*, i.e. a mirror-structure, and *doubly*
specululary: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning.
Which means that all ideology is *centred*, that the Absolute Subject occupies the unique
place of the Centre, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a
double mirror-connexion such that it *subjects* the subjects to the Subject, while giving them
in the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image (present and future) the
*guarantee* that this really concerns them and Him. (Althusser, 1970: 181)

Following from this, Althusser’s concept of the Absolute Subject is far closer to the way the
young Marx employed the Feuerbachian concept of God in his analysis of liberal democracy. We
see in Feuerbach that God, in the religious imagination, embodies an ideal and eternal subject
through which Christian subjects seek to not only orient themselves, but also to seek recognition
and acceptance. Marx, in *On the Jewish Question* (1843), saw the liberal democratic State, in the
political imagination of capitalist subjects, as embodying ideal aspirations of civil society—social
equality, notions of freedom and rights, mutual community, etc. Marx saw the political
consciousness of liberal democratic subjects as being religious because they orient to the State as
representative “of their higher, universal ‘species-life’ or social community in opposition to their
‘profane’ selfish and competitive life in civil society” (Pines 1993: 112).

Althusser, in his discussion of the imaginary subject’s relation to ideology, collapses
Marx’s State, as an ideal subject, into a concept of the Absolute Subject which also functions like
the Freudian superego “inserted” into our psyche, policing our thoughts and behavior. Althusser
also incorporates the Lacanian concept of specular relations in his discussion of how Imaginary
subjects orient to the ideal subject as a way of finding coherence. Althusser summarizes the
subject’s relationship to the Absolute Subject and the duplicate mirror-structure of ideology in the following four clauses:

1. the interpellation of ‘individuals’ as subjects;
2. their subjection to the Subject;
3. the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of himself;
4. the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen -- ’So be it’ (Althusser, 1970: 181-182).

This can be re-phrased in Lacanian terms this way:

1. entry into the Symbolic provides us with subjectivity;
2. we orient to the big Other in order to find a coherent self;
3. subjects orient to the Imaginary other and use the big Other to recognize themselves, and this (mis)recognition expresses a wish or desire (of being);
4. Fantasy, as an ideological supplement, acts as a suture and reduces the fissures/gap between our ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ experiences, and within the Symbolic field there are points de caption that ensure the stability of signifiers and identities. If we are to follow the structure/roles provided to us by the big Other, we can exist as stable subjects.

Although, on the surface, the above two versions of the subject’s relation to ideology may not seem all that different and may only differ in semantics, what underpins these two theories of the subject is radically different.

First, as mentioned earlier, Althusser reduces the subject to a simple ego subject which is both coherent, stable and centered. Absent from this “flattened” ego subject is the complex psychic/libidinal life of psychoanalytic subjects. For this reason, Althusser appears to be pessimistic towards the possibility for the subject to reject or resist the effects of ideological subjection. For Althusser, there is no depth model of subjectivity, so that the subject formed by
ideology is equivalent to the whole human subject. For Lacan, and the whole of psychoanalytic theory, the ego is only the “tip of the iceberg” when it comes to the composition of the subject and, for this reason, the subject is never fully determined by ideology.

It can be said that the Lacanian subject is a subject of desire. What Althusser has done is to remove the potentially disruptive effects that subjects generate from “within” themselves, and hence their ability to resist structure. Terry Eagleton explains: “To expel desire from the subject is to mute its potentially rebellious clamor, ignoring the ways in which it may attain its allotted place in the social order only ambiguously and precariously” (Eagleton 1991: 144). Althusser, like those theorists who operate with a modernist/Marxist subject, faced critiques in the post May-1968 period by the so-called libidinal theorists, such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983) and Jean-Francois Lyotard (1993), for not incorporating notions of micro-politics into their political analysis of capitalist societies. Following from a hybrid post-structural-psychoanalytic subject, these theorists of desire challenge the determinism of structuralist theory with a subject whose desire is in constant production of affective and libidinal flows that disrupt the ways in which structures determine them. This position challenges the society/self dichotomy, and Lyotard has gone as far to say that “every political economy is libidinal,” (Lyotard 1993: 108).

Despite their respective desire ontologies, we can see the similarities between Deleuze and Guattari’s “desiring machines” (1983) and Lacan’s theory of extimacy, where boundaries between the self, other and social are blurred to the point where it is difficult to demarcate where one ends and another begins. Although in regards to lack, both models operate with where desire is decentered, fragmented and perpetually active, with one of the only major differences being found in both the founding premise (productions vs. lack) and the endgame. The Imaginary
subject of Lacanian theory, with its insatiable and volatile desire and unending pursuit of (mis)recognition, is active in the same way desiring machines are active in their productions. Lacan, however, is far more pessimistic than Deleuze and Guattari and does not believe in the potential of subjects to actualize the revolutionary aspect of their desire. Rather, he sees within capitalism our great inability to conceive of our desire or *jouissance* except in relation to the cultural and symbolic Other (Lacan 1990: 32). This, however, is also a feature of Deleuze and Guattari’s revolutionary theory that “to code desire... is the business of the socius,” (1983: 139). Again, I will be expanding this discussion, of desire and the subject, further in the upcoming both chapters on fantasy and the uncanny.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed Althusser’s concept of interpellation as a process of recruiting subjects into ideological subject positions. In the course of my discussion, however, I questioned the external ‘hailing’ metaphor that grounds Althusser’s concept of interpellation as creating an artificial and unsustainable division between the subject and society. I posited a counter-model of the porous subject based in a relationship of extimacy with society where there is little division between the self and the social. It is my contention, following from Lacan, that it is impossible to demarcate the boundaries between the social and the subject. The organization of consistent identities, subject positions and desires is ideological. In the chapter that follows I will be using the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy to discuss how ideological fields maintain our subject position by providing us with consistent identities and roles that in turn supply us with the coordinates to desire objects and to properly order ourselves.
Chapter 4

Fantasy

In the previous chapter I discussed Althusser’s theory of interpellation as a process through which the subject is called into being and placed within the ideological field. Following from critiques advanced by Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, Michel Pêcheux and Slavoj Žižek, I challenged Althusser’s theory on several fronts. First, it relies on a false distinction between interior/exterior or between the subject and social. Following from a Lacanian conception of the subject, I maintained that with the acquisition of language and entry into the Symbolic, the subject is deeply composed of “the social.” Related to this is Althusser’s contention that ideology fully “covers” the subject and that the ideological subject is equivalent to the whole human subject. As seen in the work of Mladen Dolar and Judith Butler (among others), there are both psychic and libidinal traces in the subject that are never brought fully into signification and discourse (repetition compulsion or even same-sex desire) that undermine the proper and full ideological subjection (into heteronormativity, for example) of the subject. Like these two authors, I maintain that the even the most “perfect” subject is haunted by pre/non-discursive elements that trouble the way we operate in ideological fields. We see, then, that Althusser’s ideological subject, which is essentially an ego subject, is far more stable, determined and centered than the subject of psychoanalytic theory.

Another area I took issue with Althusser’s work is the ontological relationship between the subject and the idealization of ideology itself as the Absolute Subject. In pursuit of this discussion, I critiqued Althusser’s Feuerbachian subject/Subject relationship for being too transparent and intelligible. It is my contention that the way any subject relates to the greater
ideological/discursive field is akin to the Lacanian relationship between the subject and the big
Other. In this relationship, the subject is always trying to solve the enigma of lack and desire in
the Other—or what the subject should be in relation to this Other. This relationship between the
subject’s desire and the dictates of the social Other will be the focus of this chapter.

In short, I will demonstrate how such ideological/discursive systems as advertising,
popular political discourse and various social institutions have been very adept in creating
fantasies that have made us dependent upon them for both our desire and identity. We become
bound to the state and market through their ability to sustain, regulate and code our desire. Desire
is ‘allowed’ within this system only insofar as it follows the contours of a regulated and restricted
fantasy system. Fantasy, then, can be conceived of as the ‘grip’ or ‘hold’ that retains us as ordered
subjects within any ideological system. Additionally, fantasy acts by creating a system of co-
dependence where ideological systems are dependent on our desire to reiterate ourselves, but we
at the same time are dependent upon ideological systems to sustain us as ‘coherent’ subjects of
desire.

In the concluding section of this chapter I will advance a political application of
psychoanalysis that stresses not only individual ‘psychic de-territorialization’ but also political
projects that utilize strategies and tactics that will allow us to detach from the fantasy systems that
support the ideological base of the state and market. Again, I will be employing a Lacanian model
of fantasy strongly influenced by Slavoj Žižek’s ideology critique as found in such works as The

**Fantasy in Psychoanalytic Theory.**
The category of ‘fantasy’ in psychoanalytic theory can be found at the very origins of psychoanalysis itself, with Anna O, whose ‘private theatre’ of the imagination consisted of various hallucinations, delusions and psychotic symptoms and episodes. This notion of ‘fantasy’—as a state of delusions and hallucinations—is the most common-sense understanding of the term, but as I will show in the following discussion, the category of fantasy has evolved throughout the history of psychoanalytic theory, and has been influenced by many other disciplines and traditions. I will be providing the history of the term ‘fantasy’ to serve as a genealogy of sorts, which will provide a background for the operational use of fantasy. That is to say, I will trace a selective history of fantasy in psychoanalytic theory to set up my subsequent discussion of the Lacan/Žižek variant of fantasy, to show how the ‘history’ of fantasy has influenced both Lacan and Žižek’s conceptions of how the subject is bound by fantasy.

Throughout Sigmund Freud’s writings, the German term *phantasie* is used in numerous places, and it should be stated that with every new phase in his writing career, the term shifted in meaning and definition. During his career, fantasy was used to express a complex variety of different categories. Herman Rapaport, in his study of visual and linguistic constructions of fantasy, *Between the Sign and Gaze* (1994), lists Freud’s different uses of fantasy as: “… dreams, delusions, hallucinations, primal scenes, day dreams, imaginary objects, introjected symbols, fantasies, complexes, phylogenetic imaginary constructions” (Rapaport, 1994: 17).

Generally, the German term *phantasie*, and Freud’s use of it, denotes the imagination—and not so much the analytic imagination of philosophers or scientists (which would be designated as *Einbildungskraft*), but rather the creative imaginings of the artist or the withdrawal of the delusional. Freud used the term to describe “… scenes which the patient describes… [where] the fantastic element is unmistakable. It is difficult therefore to avoid defining this world into what it is not—the world of reality” (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1964: 6). This meaning of
fantasy applies to the Anna O case, where Josef Breuer, acting as a clinician, invades her fantastic ‘private theatre,’ in order to impose the structure of bourgeoisie normalcy. This is, of course, an example of the ‘Oedipalizing’ nature of the psychoanalytic discourse—of which I will have more to say later.

Another way in which Freud uses the category fantasy is in his discussion of primal scenes or the events of original fantasies. What I see as important for the ‘improbable’ theory of primal scenes is Freud’s use of fantasy to link sexuality, trauma and defence where fantasy is used as the screen to bind the subject. Briefly, there are three important ‘original’ fantasies in Freud’s theory. First, the so-called primal scene is the origin of ourselves as individuals. This scene is the supposed staging of our parents having intercourse. The second fantasy, seduction, is the origin of sexuality, where the child is introduced to sexuality by a corrupting adult. The last fantasy, that of gender and sexual differentiation, is the most famous. For Freud, the Oedipus complex is a perverse fantasy or wish of the child. Though the content of each of these fantasies are important—and have important implications for the subject—I want to stress not the content, but rather the way in which fantasy is employed to stage and bind elements that are involved in creating the subject’s position.

Freud explains this from his own “History of the Psychoanalytic Movement,” and uses the example of childhood seduction:

If hysterical subjects trace back their symptoms to traumas that are fictitious, then the new fact which emerges is precisely that they create such scenes in fantasy, and this psychical reality requires to be taken into account alongside practical reality. This reflection was soon followed by the discovery that these fantasies were intended to cover up autoerotic activity of the first years of childhood, to embellish it and raise it to a higher plane. And now, from behind the fantasies, the whole range of a child’s sexual life came to light (Sigmund Freud cited in Laplanche and Pontalis, 1964: 9).
Thus, we can see that for Freud fantasy is like a setting – one that operates to bind the subject to particular fictitious scenes (those of the primal scene, seduction and castration). While these scenes are fictitious, they serve as important markers for the subject, relating to the origins of the individual (primal scene), the origin of sexuality (seduction) and the origin of gender and sexual differentiation (castration) (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1964: 27). In other words, there is no actual ‘primal scene’ in the empirical sense – rather these original fantasies are only reconstructions of scenes of illusory origins that are only recollected as if they were something that happened in childhood (Rapaport, 1994: 33)— but what is critical is that we operate as if these scenes did occur. These fantasies as linked to the over-coding of the libidinal body by social forces, and the fantasies are a form of subject binding in the sense that they tether the individual to each of these ‘interventions.’ In a sense, these fantasies give permanence to the ‘events’ by way of giving a ‘history’ to the subject’s current position.

Staying true to form, Jacques Lacan did not craft a truly coherent concept of fantasy in his work, so it only possible to talk about Lacan’s concept of fantasy as it relates to the phases during his development as a theorist, and even then his work cannot be distilled down to a single formula or theory. For Lacan, fantasy did not play a primary role as it did in Freud, but instead played a secondary role as a symbol. One interesting use of fantasy in Lacan’s theory is in his discussion of desire and the demand of the Other.

Our primary “central defect,” (Lacan, 2002: 205) as Lacan calls it, is that access to our own being is located with the Other, our supposed complement. Paradoxically, there is no way to gain access to ourselves without the social; our bodies are objects that are culturally and socially inscribed, are never ‘private’ bodies but rather they are always social bodies; divided, differentiated, territorialized and codified. There is no private access to our bodies, only ‘public’ access. Public access can only be through the social and the Other. This creates a dependency on
the social “…by the fact that the subject depends on the signifier and that the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other” (Lacan, 1964: 205). Here, we come into the act of fantasy in social relationships, where our ‘frame of desire’ is structured by the fantasy that is located in the demand of the Other. Lacan explains in this lengthy, but important, excerpt from Écrits:

Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need: this margin being that which is opened up by demand, the appeal of which can be unconditional only in regard to the Other, under the form of the possible defect, which need may introduce into it, of having no universal satisfaction (what is called ‘anxiety’). A margin which, linear as it may be, reveals its vertigo, even if it is not trampled by the elephantine feet of the Other’s whim. Nevertheless, it is this whim that introduces the phantom of the Omnipotence, not of the subject, but of the Other in which his demand is installed… and with this phantom the need for it to be checked by the Law. (Lacan, 2002: 311)

What we are to understand here is that Lacan is explaining how fantasy springs up in reaction to the inability of the subject to meet his/her own desire. The subject then creates a chimera of the Other where, in between demand and need, desire is enacted—but this is an uncomfortable desire because it rests on the indecipherable Other and its whims. The castrated subject’s relation to object (a) is only through fantasy, and ideology creates the scope and structure of fantasies, allowing us to consume sanctioned and safe forms of pleasure. Thus, the reciprocity between fantasy and ideology becomes apparent, where fantasy directs the subject towards codified and ideological objects of desire—which, in effect, allows ideology to reiterate and reproduce itself—and ideology sets the ‘field’ for fantasy to take place, a ‘field’ that interpellates subjects within the ideological system.
Closely following from the above excerpt, Lacan in his sixth seminar: *Desire and Its Interpretation* (1958-1959) provides the following diagram which explains the circuit of the unconscious and the role of fantasy:

\[
\begin{align*}
S (A) & \quad D \\
\downarrow & \quad \downarrow \\
 D & \quad S (A) \\
\end{align*}
\]

Here, “$D$” is the split, or incomplete, subject in relation to the demands (D) of the Other – the external field that ‘castrates’ the subject. The small “d” stands for desire. “$a$” represents the fantasy (the relation between the incomplete subject and their object of desire), and “$S (A)$” represents the desired *jouissance* that the Other can never satisfy – the perfect whole subject through the perfect Other. So, following the above excerpt from *Écrits*, we see how desire is threatened with castration, giving rise to fantasy which aims at an impossible and unachievable jouissance (Rapaport, 1994: 63).

Desire, for Lacan, is fundamentally never satisfied. Instead, desire orbits the object (a), without ever meeting the object of its desire. The object (a), then, for Lacan, is the gap between the Real and desire, between the subject and the Other. The object filling this gap is a fantasy, precisely because of the incommensurability of these realms – desire never meets the Real, the subject can never know its Other. The object (a) thus appears as a fictitious bridge over the gap. Desire, then, is mediated by the threat of castration (which always symbolizes the social field of the Law). This threat gives rise to fantasy, which aims at a satisfaction that is necessarily impossible to achieve (Rapaport, 1994: 63). Desire is always desire for the Other, and fantasy is
the staging of the ‘Omnipotent Other.’ Basically, what this means is that as a subject I am uncertain and afraid of what the external Other wants from me, but I am also certain that I will never satisfy the Other’s desire, so I set up a screen, a façade, that allows me to believe that I can be the object of the Other’s satisfaction. Our relation to the Other’s (and this can be read as the external social field) desire is always phantasmic. It is my contention, as I will argue later, that the ideologies of the market and the neo-liberal society aid in maintaining and propping up fantasies of fulfillment that mediate our relationship with the Other. I believe that the interpersonal fantasies staged in the ‘demand of the Other’ are exacerbated by capitalist/modern/western society in the sense that they create a type of ‘hyper-real’ desire that is based on simulation.

Slavoj Žižek in his work “Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach” (1997), systematically describes the function of fantasy in maintaining the consistency of subjects and their place within a group or social dynamic. Throughout the course of the article, which employs Lacanian categories strongly supplemented by Althusser’s work on ideology and interpellation, Žižek describes four different ways in which fantasy aids in constituting the subject. First, Žižek asks the question “How is the (fantasizing) subject inscribed into the phantasmic narrative?” (Žižek, 1997: 92) Within any phantasmic social narrative/situation, the subject’s focus is not in the first person—they do not ‘identify with themselves;’ but rather, the subject appeals to the third-person perspective of their own ego ideal. Here, from their ‘own’ gaze, fantasy is used to make the subject’s actions appear in an ordered and affable manner—we use fantasy to universalize our behaviour; allowing us to shift our identification. Žižek explains this aspect of fantasy by using the interesting example of the male viewer of hardcore pornography:

The spectator, far from identifying with the male actor, rather identifies with the Third implicit position, that of pure gaze observing the woman who fully enjoys herself.
spectator’s satisfaction is of a purely reflective nature it derives from the awareness that a woman can find satisfaction in phallic enjoyment. (Žižek. 1997, 92)

The adoption of this third-person gaze in phantasmic narratives, Žižek argues, allows the subject to adopt multiple ‘subject-positions’ of the observing or fantasizing subject who is beyond a type of self-reproach.

It is clear that this is similar to both Lacan’s notion of the ego ideal governing the subject and the ego ideal as an ‘external’ embodiment. Lacan in his seminar Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis discusses this very same thing, stating that:

In fantasy, the subject is frequently unperceived, but he is always there, whether in the dream or in any more or less developed forms of day-dreaming. The subject situates himself as determined by fantasy. (Lacan, 1997, 185)

This relates to the idea of the ego ideal ‘sitting outside’ of us, setting itself up as the ideal ego from an external position in the social field.

For Žižek, the second important aspect of fantasy involves a type of ‘impossible’ gaze of the Other that freezes the subject within an eternal and fixed position; allowing the subject to believe that their ‘substance’ or ‘being’ has always existed. This has an effect of de-politicizing the subject’s environment or situation. Here, fantasy restricts the subject within a system that allows for the subject’s constant reiteration of their own position, a process supplemented by the feeling that it is both ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable.’ Again, Žižek furnishes another interesting example in the case of the charity work of Mother Teresa, whose ethic of the ‘dignity’ of poverty re-casts the slums of Calcutta as a doomed squalor immune to political or social intervention, redeemed only by charity and compassion of committed Catholics (Žižek. 1999, 94).

The third aspect of fantasy is its support of the Law. This at first appears to be counter-intuitive to the ‘mundane’ notion of fantasizing that appears to revel in transgression and the
hallucinatory realization of illicit desires that are barred by the Law; but rather than contravention, fantasy is the re-staging of the installation of Law and the accompanying symbolic castration. Fantasy attempts to re-stage this ‘impossible’ scene castration, and for this reason, “… fantasy as such is, in its very notion, close to perversion,” and this perverse staging of castration, invokes the “… loss that allows the subject to enter the symbolic order” (Žižek, 1997: 94). Žižek explains that the difference between the ‘normal’ subject, for whom prohibitive Law regulates their desire and their access to objects, and the pervert, is that the pervert’s object of desire is Law itself; that is, law is the desire ideal, the object in to which the pervert wants to be integrated (Žižek, 1997: 94). This is indeed what Lacan is arguing in his lecture “Subversion of the subject and dialectic of desire” (1960). For the ‘pervert’, fantasy acts as a way of gaining power over anxiety by inscribing him or herself in the social field – in the realm of Law. It is an attempt to grasp and order that which is necessarily slippery and dangerous.

The fourth point in fantasy’s constitution of the subject is the maintenance of the space between ‘everyday life’ and fantasy. In a sense, fantasy has to be kept separate from the ‘everyday’ symbolic life that it supports. When one’s reality comes too close to their fantasy, there is a type of aphanesis where the subject loses their symbolic consistency, but there is also the peril of coming to close to our object of desire:

The famous Lacanian motto not to give way to one’s desire [ne pas céder sur son désir] – is aimed at the fact that we must not obliterate the distance separating the Real from its symbolization: it is this surplus of the Real over every symbolization that functions as the object-cause of desire. (Žižek, 1989: 3)

Fantasy and desire only operate when there is a gap between the phantasmic kernel and the subject’s being, so it is never possible for the subject to assume the full properties of the
phantasmic kernel of their being. When the subject does come too close to this kernel, this is when a type of subject disintegration takes place. Here, Žižek explains:

And, perhaps, the forced actualization in social reality itself of the phantasmatic kernel is the worst. Most humiliating kind of violence, a violence that undermines the very base of my identity (of my ‘self-image’). (Žižek, 1997: 97)

Žižek uses the example of rape fantasies, where the actualization of this ‘kernel’ compounds the violence of this act.

The above four aspects of fantasy help explain fantasy as a political category, as a support for ideological systems. Žižek is quite clear that the maintenance of the space between reality and fantasy is essential to the operation of social systems. We have to believe in the system when we see that we are not identical to it; that we have autonomy within the system, that we can operate outside of it. Interpellation into ideological systems is only possible if subjects are able to see themselves ‘outside’ of the phantasmic/ideological system.

**Traversing the Fantasy**

When discussing the conjunction of desire and fantasy, it is important to stress that fantasy is not just simply the hallucinatory fulfilment or realization of desire—but rather, as Slavoj Žižek states in *The Plague of Fantasies*, fantasy “…constitutes our desire, provides its co-ordinates; that is, it literally ‘teaches us how to desire.’” (Žižek, 1997: 7). In this sense, fantasy fulfils an ideological purpose by binding subjects through the creation of a type of dependency and identification with objects of desire. This can be seen as a type of ideological illusion that structures and regulates the subject’s social reality. For Žižek, this illusion is a double process which “…consists in overlooking the illusion which structures our real,” and this overlooked “… unconscious illusion can be called *ideological fantasy*” (Žižek, 1989: 32-33). Fundamental to this notion of ideology is
that it is not simply the orthodox Marxist notion that stresses an ‘essential’ species being beneath ideological chimeras, but rather an unconscious fantasy that has both a material presence in our actions and is reflected in our beliefs.

Contrary to the popular notion that belief is an internal and intimate process, the Lacanian thesis proposes that belief is located in the exterior where it is embodied in the “practical, effective procedure of people” (Žižek, 1989: 34). Belief, then, is materialized in social activity and supports the fantasy that regulates not only social reality, but also the social field. Simply, if belief (the effective functioning of subjects within the material world) disintegrates, so does the social field. Ideology, therefore can be seen as the act of ritual and repetition where subjects follow Law or ideological precepts not because they are true, but because they are necessary. In this passage from Écrits Lacan explains:

I have myself shown in the social dialectic that structures human knowledge as paranoiac why human knowledge has greater autonomy than animal knowledge in relation to the field of force of desire, but also why human knowledge is determined in that ‘little reality’ (ce peu de réalité) which the Surrealists, in their restless way, saw as its limitation. (Lacan, 2002: 3-4)

So, not only does fantasy direct our desires and social reality, it also protects us from the Real of our desire. As Lacan says: “Reality is a fantasy-construction which enable us to mask the Real of our desire” (Lacan cited in Žižek, 1989, 45). Žižek believes that the same is true about ideology. Ideology is not an illusion we create to escape an insupportable reality, but is rather a support for ‘reality’ itself. An illusion, Žižek says, “… structures our effective, real social relations,” but at the same time masks the fact that we suffer from lack, and thus hides us from the Real of our desire (Žižek, 1989: 45). Here Lacan discusses this very thing:
The phantasy is the support of desire; it is not the object that is the support of desire. The subject sustains himself as desiring in relation to an ever more complex signifying ensemble. This is apparent enough in the form of the scenario it assumes, in which the subject, more or less recognizable, is somewhere, split, divided, generally double in his relation to the object, which does not show its true face either. (Lacan, 1964: 185)

Following Lacan, it is only outside of waking (and the mediation and regulation of our desire), and therefore outside of fantasy and ideology, that we are able to come close to the Real of our desire. In thinking this way, Žižek warns us against reducing this to the naïve belief that ‘life is but a dream,’ and instead directs us to the hard kernel that persists in dreams that cannot be reduced to illusion: “the only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed the dream… It is only in the dream that we approach the fantasy-framework which determines our activity, our mode of acting in reality itself (Žižek, 1989: 47). Yet Lacan enigmatically says: “The Real supports fantasy and fantasy protects the Real” (Lacan, 2002: 41).

The ‘dream’ of ideology can be viewed in much the same way. There may be an attempt to wake up from this so-called ideological dream, to see things as they 'really are', but it seems that we are always stuck with the consciousness of our ‘ideological dream.’ When we arrive at this point, Žižek optimistically announces that “[t]he only way to break the power of our ideological dream is to confront the Real of our desire when it announces itself in this dream” (Žižek, 1989: 48). This is quite familiar in Lacan’s own words, as witnessed by the following passage from *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*:

> The Real has to be sought beyond the dream—in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation of which there is only one representative. This is the Real that governs our activities more than any other and it is psychoanalysis that designates it for us. (Lacan, 2002: 60)
Again, we are reminded of that unsymbolized kernel that refuses to announce itself, yet still vexes us.

Žižek only playfully hints at the deployment of ‘libratory’ tactics. He stresses the need to detach from phantasmic systems and the ways in which they direct and structure our jouissance. This is what he calls ‘traversing the fantasy:’

… the crucial precondition for breaking the chains of servitude is thus to ‘traverse the fantasy’ which structures our jouissance in a way which keeps us attached to the Master—makes us accept the framework of the social relationship of domination. (Žižek, 1997: 48)

However, that is as far as Žižek is willing to take it. There appears to be a reluctance by Žižek to take the next step, and whether it is an unwillingness or a lack of imagination is not for me to say, but reading Žižek’s work definitely is a frustrating affair where he abandons the reader at perhaps the most critical point. Of course, this may be a Lacanian approach, allowing the reader to develop their own reading. But, as I will soon demonstrate, Žižek’s political method remains a ‘fantasy’ rather than a pragmatic vehicle for political action.

Essential to the method of ‘traversing fantasy’ is ideology critique and the deconstructing of ideological structures and the ways in which they support phantasmic systems. Here, Žižek provides two complementary methods of analysing ideological systems:

--one is discursive, the ‘symptomal reading’ of ideological text bringing about the ‘deconstruction’ of the spontaneous experience of its meaning – that is, demonstrating how a given ideological field is a result of a montage of heterogeneous ‘floating signifiers,’ of their tantalization through the intervention of certain ‘nodal points;’

--the other aims at extracting the kernel of enjoyment, at articulating the way in which – beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy. (Žižek, 1991: 125)
This first method of ideology ‘deconstruction’ describes the ways in which the imaginary structures identities (say, that of a consumer); the ways the subject makes symbolic identifications within the phantasmic ‘field’ (‘the ideal lover’); and finally, the processes in which these moments are linked (the purchase of Viagra, ‘love-making’ guides and manuals, adjustable Craftmatic beds, etc.). What we see at work here, is how the subject locates themselves (in a type of phantasmic self-interpellation), how they find they make identifications within the larger field, and finally how they utilize the ‘services’ available to them to complete the fantasy.

The second method describes how jouissance is structured and used by ideological systems and how these systems utilize symptoms and meanings. The important part of Žižek’s second ideological clause is that ideology seizes upon and exacerbates the distance between the Symbolic (and its consumption/use) and the Real (what is consumed/used). There is nothing intrinsically different between the “…enthusiasm of fans for their favourite rock star and the religious trance of a devout Catholic in the presence of the Pope -- [they] are libidinally the same phenomenon; they differ only in the different symbolic support network that supports them” (Žižek, 1997: 50). This is close to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the codification of desire onto rigid and segmented lines. Despite some major differences, we see in both Žižek’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s work the operation of an essentialist concept of desire, where desire exists prior to any discursive formation.

For Žižek, ideology is the manifest content of social structures, while fantasy acts as the latent ‘unwritten’ underside. Since fantasy directs our jouissance, Žižek believes that it is a far
more insidious form of control: “… the paradoxical role of unwritten rules is that, with regard to the explicit, public Law, they are simultaneously transgressive (they violate explicit social rules) and more coercive (they are additional rules which restrict the field of choice by prohibiting the possibilities allowed for—guaranteed, even—by the public Law)” (Žižek, 1997: 28-29). More explicitly, to Žižek political fantasies are the system of unwritten rules that support the formal Law. These rules are in fact in opposition to the Law, but are paradoxically necessary for its maintenance. Fantasy designates “… this unwritten framework which tells us how we are to understand the letter of the Law. And it is easy to observe how today, in our enlightened era of universal rights, racism and sexism reproduce themselves mainly at the level of the phantasmic unwritten rules which sustain and qualify universal ideological proclamations” (Žižek, 1997: 29).

In stating this, it appears, that Žižek is saying that the ideology of modern, liberal social institutions is not the ‘problem’, but rather the fantasies that support them are the issue.

Strangely, as a self-professed Leninist, Žižek proposes a method of ‘traversing the fantasy’ which, when followed to its most logical conclusions, appears as a tacit support for the very capitalist/neo-liberal ideologies that he supposedly opposes. One of the elements of Žižek’s understanding of fantasy, as illustrated earlier, is that a certain distance must exist between popular/public discourse and ideals, and actual ‘fantasy’ itself. Too close of a proximity undermines both the fantasy and the symbolic ideals of popular discourse: “In order to remain operative, fantasy has to remain ‘implicit,’ it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it…” (Žižek, 1997: 18). That is, the unwritten (phantasmic) rules must maintain a separation from the public Law. This is why he says that the modern world believes itself to be ‘post-ideological.’ What Žižek means by ‘post-ideological’ is that the average citizen is a ‘cynic,’ who fully acknowledges the distance between the illusions of ideology and social ‘reality,’ but still insists on operating under the rule of illusion despite knowing that behind
these illusions, forces operate that work against his or her own interests (Žižek, 1989: 29). Žižek, however, maintains that the cynic is active and looks for reasons to live his or her life governed by ideological fantasies and illusions. The cynic is neither a resigned nor naïve political subject, but someone who exists with a complicated form of ‘double-think:’

They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the **ideological fantasy**. (Žižek, 1989: 32-33)

So, we see again that ideology and fantasy involve more than just the simple matter of illusion masking a true, essential reality. Cynical distance is a method that allows us to question the machinations of power and ideology, but yet at the same time, it does not force us to change our attitudes or behaviours.

Instead of cynicism, Žižek proposes a method of subversion based not on a disidentification but rather an **overidentification**. The reasoning behind this is based on the necessary distance needed to maintain fantasy. Žižek proposes that in the collapsing of the distance, we collapse the fantasy system that supports ideology: “… an ideological edifice can be undermined by a too literal identification, which is why its successful functioning requires a minimum distance toward its explicit rules” (Žižek, 1997: 99). In a sense, he suggests that by following the explicit public Law, we are overriding the unwritten phantasmic rules that indeed corrupt this Law. This is the political method that Žižek calls ‘traversing the fantasy.’ Thus, his political strategy advocates attempting to follow and uphold the rules of formal democracy.

Žižek, in *Plague of Fantasies*, says: “… the truly subversive thing is to not disregard the explicit letter of the Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies, but to **stick to this letter against the fantasy that sustains it**” (Žižek, 1997: 29). In *Looking Awry* (1991), he makes it clear that he
believes in formal democracy as opposed to ‘concrete’ (or substantive) democracy as advocated by ‘new social movements’ (164). His objection to these forms of democracy is that they attempt to prescribe too deeply what the ‘life-world’ should be. Thus, they limit and circumvent the individual’s (or the Other’s) fantasy, which Žižek sees as being linked to totalitarianism. Hence his advocacy for ‘formal’ democracy as a type of empty shell. He believes that formal democracy is able, unlike any other political system, to recognize its own limits, but to still remain operable. Žižek says, “The democratic attitude is always based on a certain fetishistic split: I know very well (that the democratic form is just a form spoiled by stains of ‘pathological’ imbalance), but just the same (I act as if democracy were possible)” (Žižek, 1991: 168). This is the ‘as if’ component to democracy – we act as if what we know to be false is true.

It is simply unrealistic to believe that the ideological ‘subject’ would suddenly decide to choose “freedom” and “justice” over “gluttony” and “excess” as their favoured ideals, when the whole purpose of ideological and phantasmic conditioning has directed them throughout their lives to pursue the “freedom” of gluttony and the universal “justice” of personal excess. Why would a passionate attachment to the ideals of justice and the principles of liberal democracy—which would probably require effort—trump a free-for-all at the local buffet line or a extended marathon of porno viewing at home? Žižek devotes the majority of this time to describing how we are prisoners of ideology, but then makes a move that imbues the ideological/phantasmic subject with enough ‘sense’ and autonomy to choose his or her ‘identification’ properly at a time of crisis. He thus makes a move similar to Jean Baudrillard, who in his essay In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities (1983), advises for the ‘masses’ a type of resistance that is predicated on an overidentification with both apathy and consumption, two ‘unwritten’ components in contemporary liberal democracies:
They haven’t waited for future revolutions nor theories which claim to ‘liberate’ them by ‘dialectical’ movement. They know there is no liberation, and that a system is abolished only by pushing it into hyperlogic, by forcing it into an excessive practice which is equivalent to a brutal amortization. “You want to consume—O.K., let’s consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose. (Baudrillard, 1983: 46)

Following from this quote, we can see a difference between Žižek and Baudrillard is visible in their understandings of revolution and implosion—however, the difference is a subtle one. Both theorists are advocating a type of political action based on the following of the ‘hyperlogic’ of fantasy and ideology—the difference is in what ideals are followed. Uncharacteristically, Žižek grants ‘the masses’ a type of autonomy that will enable them to rise to the occasion, traverse the fantasy systems that have kept them subjugated, and finally choose what is right for them—to seize their ‘species being’ as embodied in contemporary social institutions. Though Žižek is quite straight-faced about his prescription for social change it is Baudrillard, in his typical facetious and pessimistic manner, who is more convincing.

Overidentification with popular discourse only leads to two paths. The first, advocated by Žižek, is the more positive, and can be labelled the ‘manifest’ liberal position. Žižek optimistically sees this position as an ideal form (yes, almost in the Platonic sense) of democracy, where phantasmic distortion is expelled, opening space for a type of transparent public discourse and political subject. With this overidentification with institutional ideals, Žižek valorizes contemporary liberal democracy; and not unlike the work of the Frankfurt School theorists or Jürgen Habermas he believes that it is not the social institutions that are ‘rotten’ but rather some foreign object (fantasy, false consciousness, unwritten rules, etc.) that undermines true democratic political life.
Baudrillard, on the other hand, in what can be called the ‘latent’ liberal position, sees something more sinister at work within liberal doctrines of universality and democracy. To Baudrillard, it seems, there is no true separation between public liberal discourse and the underlying ‘unwritten’ current—the ‘unwritten’ content is only an extension, or logic of democracy. Thus freedom also entails the freedom to over-indulge, the freedom to indulge in irresponsible fantasies, etc. Now, these type of pursuits that Baudrillard is off-handedly advocating, epitomize the ‘unwritten’ content that Žižek is railing against, but it is Baudrillard’s contention that there is no clear way to separate the fantasy from the ideological structure.

Fantasy is on the side of reality; that is, fantasy is a support system for the many headed Hydra that is the family/market/Oedipus/libidinal economy. Fantasy can be seen as the stage and screen in which relations under these conditions take place, the support for the ideological base of society. Fantasy, as Žižek claims:

…sustains the subject's 'sense of reality': when the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'irreal' nightmarish universe. . . ; this nightmarish universe is not 'pure fantasy' but, on the contrary, that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy (Žižek, 1997: 66).

However, fantasy’s support of reality does not suggest that fantasy, or particular fantasies more specifically, are ‘functional’ and therefore desirable. When fantasy supports ideological systems based on exploitation, racism, homophobia and a myriad of other nightmares, one wonders whether those who explore the (sur)‘irreal’ are not in fact dismantling the nightmare.
Chapter 5
The Uncanny

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many presentations, images, of which none happens to occur to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all round it, here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings on the eye—into a night that becomes awful, it suspends the night of the world here in opposition. In this night, being has returned.

GWF Hegel, The Philosophy of Spirit (Jena Lectures 1805-6)

The ethic of modern life in neo-liberal societies is characterized not by experiences of the uncanny, but rather by experiences that try to establish a hegemony of a proper of the self, affect, desire and space. Against canonical ‘postmodernist’ claims that contemporary life is characterized by disorder, confusion and disorientation; I argue the opposite, that contemporary life in the urban metropolises of the industrialized world is the experience of the un-uncanny. Rather, the capitalist ethic demands that manufacturers, movie moguls, editorial boards, etc. all attempt to make life as un-uncanny as possible—desire can only be controlled if it is properly coded, packaged and reiterateable. This is the reason why a Big Mac is the same in Oslo as it is in Vancouver, Detroit, Tokyo, etc. There is very little that causes any sort of crisis in our self or our ‘nature’ when modernist consumer identity is hegemonic and its successful reiteration is achieved perfectly across the globe. What may be uncanny about life in this era is that, despite the incessant promises of complete fulfilment and satisfaction, this promise is never delivered.
Fantasy, against the subject that exceeds structure, attempts to provide the same structuring of desire and psychic life that allows for a perfect reiteration that is analogous to the Helsinki Big Mac.

In this chapter I will discuss situations in which the phantasmatic structuring of our psychic life fails -- when we find a severed finger in our Big Mac. I will make the argument that it is in the psychoanalytic category of the unheimlich, or the uncanny, that we can find ways of locating and exposing moments when the ideological fantasy that supplements ideology fails to adequately cover the gaps and fissures that are hidden from us as subjects. To end, I will propose a method of dealing with and studying these ideological ruptures via a practice of radical ethnomethodology, which I see as drawing from the practice of the social sciences and the theory of posthumanist psychoanalytic theories of the subject.

Sigmund Freud finished his piece “The Uncanny” in 1919, just a few months after he completed Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1919), and it is evident that these works follow similar themes. The concept of the uncanny, for example, borrows from the concept of repetition as the revisiting of the traumatic that is articulated at length in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Whereas repetition as a concept became part the psychoanalytic canon, the uncanny as a concept has remained relatively uncanny itself in the way it has been neglected within a clinical setting, and has only been adopted on the periphery of literary studies. This may partly have to do with the scope of each of these studies. Where Beyond the Pleasure Principle was a response to the neurosis of returning World War I veterans and the study of the uncanny was more of a (un)homely theorization of the struggle—and confusion—between the life and death drives that played out in households. Although Freud’s work in “The Uncanny” is a direct application of
psychoanalytic concepts to literary studies—the text in question is E.T.A Hoffman’s short story ‘The Sandman’ (1809)—I believe it would be worthwhile to apply the theory of the uncanny directly to social and political issues, since it reveals instances when fantasy fails to provide a coherent or convincing structure to cognitive or affective life.

Freud’s approach to discussing the uncanny is interesting in that he himself seems unsettled and unsure of how to proceed. He first attempts to get an entry point into the meaning of the term unheimlich by consulting foreign language dictionaries—Latin, Greek, English, French, Spanish—and then turns to several German dictionaries. When Freud finally decides that these dictionaries “tell us nothing new” about the concept, he sets out his own definition and defines the uncanny as a “class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar;” (Freud, 2003: 123) a type of shock or trauma that marks the return of the familiar or long established made strange and alienated by repression. Freud also discusses triggers for the uncanny—for example in foreign or new environments where the individual is uncertain of their bearing, or within situations when “intellectual uncertainty is aroused as to whether something is animate or inanimate, and whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living” (Freud, 2003: 141). Freud also sees feelings of the uncanny as being awakened not when we are unable to clearly differentiate living objects from the inanimate, but also cases where there is disturbance between the self and the surrounding environment—where we are uncertain of physical or psychical boundaries. This happens when “… a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged” (Freud, 2003: 142). This figure of the doppelgänger, or double, marks an instance where the subject identifies too strongly with an Imaginary image outside of themselves which they set up as an ‘external’ ideal ego. This image haunts them since it reveals their inability to perfectly merge with their imago.
In short, what all these multiple processes define for Freud is that the uncanny is an event, condition or process where the repressed elements confuse or change the subject’s understanding of previously familiar settings/events—when the common cognitive or affective way of relating to the world slips and reveals contradictions, reversals, repression, confusions. What we are seeing, furthermore, in the concept of the uncanny is a breakdown of boundaries between the self and environment that brings to mind the Lacanian concept of extimité. The maintenance of the self/social boundaries is not only important to how fantasy operates but, as Mladen Dolar explains, it is also the foundation of the modernist cosmology:

All the great philosophical conceptual pairs—essence/appearance, mind/body, subject/object, spirit/matter, etc.—can be seen as just so many transcriptions of the division between interiority and exteriority. Now the dimension of extimité blurs this line. It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety (Dolar, 1991: 6).

Fantasy, then, can be conceived as an affective system that attempts to maintain and demarcate the discrete boundaries that underpin the foundation for the atomistic Liberal/capitalist individual. The uncanny questions the status not only of the subject but also what we agree to be objective reality and how it is maintained and reiterated through everyday life: “in Lacanian terms it is the eruption of the real in the midst of familiar reality; it provokes a hesitation and an uncertainty and the familiar breaks down” (Dolar, 1991: 18).

The concepts of the uncanny and extimité also find an analogy in Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, where troubling liminal objects like vomit, snot, saliva, semen, blood and shit exist in an uneasy space between the self/non-self, interior/exterior—what was once us now expelled into the world (Kristeva, 1982: 3). Our bodies—and especially their products—reveal to us that
we are not fully in control of ourselves. It is at those moments when we see those who have lost control that the truth of our own bodily autonomy is revealed to us: “... the uncanny effect produced by epileptic fits and the manifestations of insanity, because these arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic—mechanical—processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person” (Freud, 2003: 135).

Although Freud’s “The Uncanny” was not published in France until 1933 (well after the start of both dadaism and surrealism), there are definitely some strong themes that can be found in both Freud’s work and that of the surrealists. For example, well before André Breton’s First Surrealist Manifesto (1924), which articulated the notions of confusion between self and object, self and environment, inanimate and living, real and imagined Louis Aragon, Georges Bataille and were writing on these issues before they became canonized in a manifesto. Obviously there’s no doubt that the surrealists were very much influenced by Freud’s work, The Interpretation of Dreams (1901) being a notable example, but at the same time the surrealists also anticipated many of Freud’s own theories and this can be cited as an uncanny example in itself.

The surrealists, it appears, also used a type of uncanny principle in their work, the difference being that they used the moments/feelings of the uncanny towards critical ends. That is, the encounters with the Real were projected outwards as a means of opposing/critiquing the capitalist rationalizations of social reality. The surrealists believed that shock and trauma were two ways of both accessing and mastering encounters with dreams, or encounters beyond phantasmic structuring. Shock and trauma were also two ways of externalizing psychoanalytic inquiry. Simply, the surrealist project, as Hal Foster argues in Compulsive Beauty (1993), was intended to shock the person in the street out of the rigid everyday fantasies of consumption and good civic behaviour, and expose them to the unstructured desire of their unconscious. The surrealists, for example, prescribed the method of automatism—or automatic writing-- as a way
of accessing the unconscious outside of sleeping. Actually, such a process confuses the waking/sleep dichotomy in a way that exposes the very constructed nature of waking ‘reality’ itself, without necessarily falling into a Marxist notion of reality as a false ideological veil. What the surrealists are positing is that there is very little difference between our surreal dreams and the way we project those dreams onto the ‘real’ world. Much like Dolar’s contention that the uncanny breaks down the divisions that act as the foundation for much of the modernist cosmology, André Breton in The Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1929) states that the goal of the surrealist project is to locate and undermine the stability of the rationalist ordering of the social world:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point. (Breton, 1972: 123-124)

Although the surrealist project was clearly articulated in its many of manifestos, it is through the vehicles of art and expression that the surrealists were able to project the uncanny outwards—using the liminal and taboo to shock the social body out of the restrictive fantasies that keep it bound to the ideological base of society. Max Ernst’s body of work, for example, clearly shows an intention to disrupt the everyday. His strongest work involved the collection of images from earlier pulp novels and magazines—materials that every consuming individual would have been familiar with—and the composition of these materials around images of bedrooms and interiors of nineteenth-century and Victorian homes—which is itself an idealization of domestic fantasy and retreat. In collage novels such as La Femme 100 Têtes (1929) and Une Semaine de Bonté (1934) Ernst pastes animal heads onto well-dressed gentlemen and inserts images of young nude girls sprouting from the bookcases and furniture of the bourgeois household. His method employs unbalancing these typical drawing-room scenes (which were to reflect the aspirations of the
consuming public) with depictions of the awakening of childhood sexuality, the fear of castration, or the fear of becoming an animal or consumable object. The purpose behind Ernst’s work is clearly to disrupt these interior sites that are the retreat of the repressed and meek structured fantasies of domesticity, to show that the “bourgeois interior had failed as a refuge from the industrial world” (Foster, 1993: 179).

Up to this point I have discussed the concept of the uncanny and how it is deployed in both psychoanalysis and within avant-garde art movements. Now I would briefly like to link this concept to certain practices within the social sciences, and specifically, the practice of ethnomethodology.

Harold Garfinkel and his ethnomethodological approach, which is discussed and deployed in texts such as Studies in Ethnomethodology (1967), is rooted in the earlier phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz (1932). Phenomenological sociology starts with the premise that there is no ‘objective’ reality and that ‘reality’ as we know it is constructed in the minds of individuals who experience it. Meaning and everyday life is filtered through cognitive heuristics that Schutz calls typifications, which act as a shorthand for negotiating social situations (Pfohl, 1985: 292). Typification involves making use of symbols which provide judgments about what is right or wrong, normal or deviant behaviour. Typification thus allows the individual to infer the motives behind the behaviours of others based on judgments already made about them. The behaviour of, say, alcohol drinking, will produce very different interpretations for the individual based on whether or not they have defined the actor as normal (occasional social drinker) or deviant (chronic alcoholic). Not unlike Lacan’s concept of master signifiers, the social sanctioning of some symbols and actors over others "institutionalize[s] versions of social
reality...(operating) as controls over what we experience as real" (Pfohl, 1985: 292). Again, not unlike Lacan’s theories, the individual in phenomenological sociological theory ‘internalizes’ symbols in order to easily make sense of experience.

Like most theories derived from a phenomenological foundation, the emphasis in ethnomethodology is on ‘individuals’ and the way in which they experience everyday life and reality. This is, of course, quite different from theories that operate with a concept of a ‘subject’ which is affected by the social reality that shapes them. Ethnomethodology, like phenomenological sociology before it, operates with a theory of the individual that is largely unaffected by power and social structure. The individual in these theories is ‘affected’ by structure largely through the process of human interaction and it does not go deeper than this in the way in which the individual is constituted through power or discourse. Again, this model operates with a theory that erects discrete boundaries between the self and social which I have previously shown to be flawed.

Ethnomethodology can be described as the study of the methods we use when we orient to specific social objects (tradition, figures of authority, norms and mores, etc.) by employing various heuristics (routine, ‘common sense,’ repetition, etc.) in order to both make sense of everyday life and to enable meaningful exchanges with other individuals in society. Not unlike the related Symbolic Interaction theories, ethnomethodology is premised on the concept that social order is merely illusory and that individual actors create order through various mental and cognitive processes. Where these theories differ, however, is that ethnomethodology does not posit that individuals share the same understanding of symbols. What individuals share is a set of techniques and devices that allow them to believe that they share the same interpretive understanding of experience and situations. Social reality, for the ethnomethodologist, is
precarious and contingent and is only tenuously held together by an unwritten contract between actors.

Garfinkel sought to expose the precariousness of social life through the practice of breaching experiments, which can be described as a set of techniques designed to break the various unstated laws of social interaction and daily life, in order to study the ways we create order. Garfinkel intended to show through breaching experiments how social order is overly-constructed but at the same time very precarious. Although Garfinkel labelled them experiments, his breaching techniques merely illustrated the fact that symbols and signifiers do not refer back to an actual concrete object or concept but are negotiated through interaction. Additionally, the experiments came off more as troublesome pranks or frustrating plays on words than a study of the ways in which ‘social reality’ is constructed and maintained by social structure and power. Here are some examples of Garfinkel’s breaching experiments:

CASE 1

The subject was telling the experimenter, a member of the subject’s car pool, about having had a flat tire while going to work the previous day.

(S) I had a flat tire.

(E) What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered in a hostile way: "What do you mean, 'What do you mean?' A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question!" (Garfinkel, 1967: 42 )

CASE 2
(S) Hi, Ray. How is your girl friend feeling?

(E) What do you mean, "How is she feeling?" Do you mean physical or mental?

(S) I mean how is she feeling? What's the matter with you? (He looked peeved.)

(E) Nothing. Just explain a little clearer what do you mean?

(S) Skip it. How are your Med School applications coming?

(E) What do you mean, "How are they?"

(S) You know what I mean.

(E) I really don't.

(S) What's the matter with you? Are you sick? (Garfinkel, 1967: 42-43)

**CASE 3**

"On Friday night my husband and I were watching television. My husband remarked that he was tired. I asked, 'How are you tired? Physically, mentally, or just bored?''"

(S) I don't know, I guess physically, mainly.

(E) You mean that your muscles ache or your bones?

(S) I guess so. Don't be so technical.

(*After more watching*)

(S) All these old movies have the same kind of old iron bedstead in them.

(E) What do you mean? Do you mean all old movies, or some of them, or just the ones you have seen?
What's the matter with you? You know what I mean.

I wish you would be more specific.

You know what I mean! Drop dead! (Garfinkel, 1967: 43)

What all of these experiments confirmed is that context, background and other signifiers are necessary for any singular signifier to have any sort of meaning. Garfinkel’s intention was to extend this idea into the social realm in order to show how ‘common sense’ is actually highly regimented in order to provide smooth functioning social interactions.

An analogy to these breaching experiments can be found in the so-called poetic terrorism that Hakim Bey advocates in such works as The Temporary Autonomous Zone (1991). Bey’s work undoubtedly refers back to both Situationist and surrealist tactics, rather than to the staid and apolitical work of Garfinkel. One cannot, for example, imagine Garfinkel asking his student to shit on the floor in the middle of a bank line-up in order to study such a breach in everyday life. But their intention and effect is the same: to expose the artificial ordering of everyday life. The obvious difference between breaching experiments and poetic terrorism—beyond the specificity of their respective practices—is that Bey and the surrealists are mobilizing to confront the artificiality of the social order and power, whereas the ethnomethodologists seek merely to study and document the way order happens in micro-interactions.

What I would like to propose would be a method somewhere between pretending to be a boarder in one’s own home and shitting on the floor at a bank. I’d like to suggest a method of so-called radical ethnomethodology, which looks at how order is created in micro-interactions by referring back to how power constitutes us as subjects. I agree with the ethnomethodological premise that social order and understanding are contingent and precarious, but I would argue
further that order is constructed and maintained not only through social cognition and interactions but at the level of the subject—psychic, affective, libidinal. Such a practice is very much in keeping with my earlier invocation of psychoanalytic model of the subject since, as Slavoj Žižek claims, “the ultimate ethical task is that of the true awakening: not only from sleep, but from the spell of fantasy that controls us even more when we are awake,” (Žižek, 2006: 60).

As the discussion in previous chapters has demonstrated, the subject is multiply ‘ordered’ by its need for recognition (Imaginary), investment in a coherent and reiterateable identity (Symbolic) and the pursuit of an unattainable enjoyment-in-the-real (Real). Part of what radical ethnomethodology entails is uncovering the artificiality of these investments/pursuits and how they are reliant upon, and supportive of, ideological forms that are predicated on relations of exploitation. Although none of these investments are mutually exclusive—in fact, they invariably bleed into another—in delineating the practice of radical ethnomethodology I will show how these investments can be targeted in order to expose the ways in which everyday life and subjectivity are contingent and mediated by ideological fantasies.

One of the best vehicles for radical ethnomethodology is through the tactical use of the artistic practice of détournement. Taken from the French, and best translated into English as ‘derailment,’ détournement was first associated with Dadaism and the work of Marcel Duchamp—and most famously his drawing of a moustache on the Mona Lisa. The practice of détournement has subsequently moved out of the galleries and museums and has been used as a tactic by many radical social movements (the Situationists, anti-global activists, culture jammers, etc.) as a way of exposing and subverting the taken for granted social order.

Détournement can be defined as taking an object—usually an artistic or cultural object—and (re)introducing elements back into it that change its originally intended message.
Détournement differs from both satire and parody since it does not work to broadly exaggerate the qualities of the object in a caricature but, rather, it seeks to draw out the latent or hidden qualities. Furthermore, détournement is most often intended to serve as an act of sabotage or subversion rather than comedy. Any humour that arises from an act of détournement can be seen as the uncanny “result of contradictions within a condition whose existence is taken for granted” (Debord and Wolman, 1956: 14). The logic of détournement, then, can be found in the insertion of a repressed or illegitimate element into contested discursive contexts in order to invoke the experience of the uncanny, to unsettle previously unquestioned or sacred contexts and/or discursive fields. The power of such a tactic, I argue, is that it allows for an opening to question the basis of how we as subjects are maintained in a discursive field, and how certain acts and objects sustain such relations—a type of ontological terrorism that looks for spaces of intervention and insurrection.

As a political act détournement can be viewed as a type of direct action in the arena of social space and communication in neoliberal societies, where seemingly the only legitimate forms of communication are not interpersonal but commercial and politically reactionary. Radical ethnomethodology, in using détournement as a tactic, looks to breach the way everyday life is mediated by cognitive and affective heuristics that draw from discursive and phantasmatic forms—such as advertising, media, civil and public life, etc. This involves working on an affective level at the sites where the subject is interpellated. Many of the efforts to combat the effect of ideological interpellation through the strategy of ‘consciousness raising’ involve what might be called a ‘informational dialectic’ in which one position is countered by another through the rational presentation of arguments through such methods as pamphlets, workshops, slogans, brochures, banners, etc. One thing that may be obvious, even to the those who employ such strategies, is that overly sincere and didactic counter-interpellations are far easier to ignore than
the original interpellation they are seeking to counter. This situation is discussed by Debord and Wolman when they claim that the tactic of détournement is “less effective the more it approaches a rational reply” (Debord and Wolman, 1956: 15). Although Debord and Wolman do little to elaborate on this maxim, I believe that it is this aspect of détournement that is most central to its strength, since it engages the imagination of the viewer and does more to interrupt the way cognitive and psychic space is mediated by images and fantasies. Much of advertising, for example, relies on playing with master signifiers that directly attempt to interpellate viewers through appeals to their ego ideal and desire, which invite/compel them to recognize themselves in certain images. Radical ethnomethodology, through the tactic of détournement, instead seeks to invoke disgust or malaise with these identifications by a tactical insertion between the object—which is often a vehicle for master signifiers—and the subject. This type of tactical intervention into everyday life is best exemplified by the so-called urban interventionists groups, whose activities are premised on challenging the way urban space is used and colonized by late capitalism. Such efforts include guerrilla gardening, pedestrian and flash mobs which take over pedestrian space, the beautification of sites such as bus shelters to make them more functional for the homeless, “spontaneous” subway parties, etc. Such efforts, as the arts-activist group Critical Arts Ensemble argue, go far beyond simple disruptions of “space” but affect the viewer’s sense of self, subjectivity and their own participation in their environment. The over-colonized urban spaces of late capitalism can be viewed as a … foundation of homogeneity, that allows only a singular action within a given situation. For example, in a mall one may only consume. The mall is a bunker of perpetual discomfort. There is no place to rest, unless one is consuming (usually in the food court), and in this situation only the most uncomfortable of accommodations are provided so the consumer will hurry, finish, and rejoin the dynamic flow moving from shop to shop (Critical Arts Ensemble, 1996: 38).
In other words, we are interpellated into a single role that is functional within only a given space and time, and we are to resist any other aspects of our self that may compete with the master signifier which dominates our use value within that role. The logic of radical ethnomethodology, which can be seen in the acts of urban intervention, for example, works to “create the conditions for people to engage in the transgressive act of rejecting a totalizing and closed rational order, and to open themselves up to social interaction beyond the principles of habituation, of exchange, and of instrumentality,” (Critical Arts Ensemble, 1996: 52).

The question that these groups and tactics beg is their actual political effect. What separates, say, the détournement of a McDonald’s billboard versus the pranks played by a fraternity or engineering student group? How does an audience read intention into an act of guerrilla gardening or a flash mob? These are all relevant questions and issues, but my discussion of these groups was not to access their effectiveness but rather was directed at the logic that these groups work with; that is, to expose to contradictory elements within a system and infect it with a virus that makes all the repressed elements manifest.

In the previous chapters I have shown how master signifiers organize experience at the level of the social and how fantasy organizes both psychic and affective life. Master signifiers and fantasy, I have argued, are deeply implicated in social structure, which means that it is erroneous to separate social interaction out of the workings of power in order to study social interaction. I would now suggest that both fantasy traversal and the uncanny are types of breaching experiments that expose not simply the precariousness of social interactions but, the precariousness of social structures and the ways in which power works on subjects. Radical ethnomethodology would be a way of looking at those moments when the veil of fantasy slips or when intractable contradictions reveal themselves in the field of master signifiers. We can learn
from the poetic terrorist experiments of the surrealist and situationists in their attempt to expose the artificiality of social life.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have advanced the claim that, by the very nature of both language and subjectivity, the subject always exceeds its incorporation in discrete social and ideological categories. I maintain that such theories ignore the inability of language and discourse to fully capture experience or ‘reality’ and, further, that such theories cannot adequately explain the subject’s resistance to discourse, or their passionate attachments to discourses that operate against their best interests.

In the first chapter, I discussed the ‘excessive’ aspect of the subject that causes it to exceed the limits of structure. I operated with a Lacanian theory of the subject which posits a fragmented and decentered subject that is invested across various registers of psychic experience: the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. I operated with the organizing trope of the Borromean knot, which implicates each of the registers into each other and shows how the ‘whole’ Lacanian subject—if one can speak of such of thing—is composed of each of these registers interacting and competing with each other in their investments.

I then continued this theme by discussing each of the registers and noting how they constitute a part of the ‘whole’ subject. Starting first with the Imaginary register, I showed in detail how the subject uses the Other to provide a consistent and agreeable ego image. I argued that such Imaginary attachments are always based on a type of misrecognition in which the subject mistakenly believes that it is equivalent to the reflection that Other casts back to it. From there I discussed the Symbolic register with a focus on how the subject attempts to identify with master signifiers in the social field. This discussion was important because it showed how social life is ideologically organized by identity markers that demand that the subject forsake other
competing signifiers. This led into a discussion of the Real subject, where I detailed the organizing thesis of this chapter: the Symbolic fails to capture the Real experience and this results in constitutive remainders and reminders that undermine and haunt the subject. To this end I discussed two remaining/reminding objects: jouissance and object (a). Jouissance is experience-in-the-real that, as post-castrated subjects, we are forever trying to pursue or recover. This concept of jouissance is linked to object (a), which is the element we are always pursuing, but never capturing, in our desire quests. I ended this chapter by discussing how these non-discursive, ‘excessive’ elements have constitutive effects on the subject, and suggested that theories of the subject which exclude such an aspect are deficient and incomplete.

After establishing my theory of the subject I moved into the second chapter on interpellation, or how the subject is called into being within social structures. I used Louis Althusser’s Lacanian-inspired theory of interpellation as a starting point but, at the same time, I critiqued his theory on several fronts. First, Althusser’s theory of the subject assumes an entity that is far more stable than the subject that is used in Lacanian theory. Althusser’s subject is merely an Imaginary subject that seeks specular recognition. Selectively missing from Althusser’s theory of the subject is the role that the Real or unconscious plays in how the subject is constituted. Such a selective omission is, of course, telling of Althusser’s project to create a type of scientific Marxism, since ‘science’ cannot tolerate the wild undermining presence of the Real. Second, Althusser operates with a false dichotomy between the interior/exterior or self/social. Such a dichotomy is common in humanist (and even most antihumanist) theories of the subject, and ignores one of Sigmund Freud’s most fundamental contributions to theories of subjectivity. Namely, Freud's claim that society does not simply influence the subject, but dwells within it . Here, I used the Lacanian theory of extimité—an ‘intimate exterior’ model of subjectivity where there is little division between the self and social—to supplement the theory of interpellation.
Lastly, in Althusser’s claim that the subject is always a subject of ideology he misses those Real aspects of the subject that refuse incorporation into the social world. What Althusser is doing in such a move is making ‘the subject’ equivalent to ‘the subject of discourse.’ Such a move not only neglects the unconstituted psychic and libidinal life of the subject but it also provides a pessimistic prognosis for forms of resistance. This is where Althusser’s extreme antihumanist theory comes into conflict with my own posthumanist model of the subject, which involves a level of agency and large potential for resistance since subjection is never full, complete or total.

Up to this point in my thesis I discussed the subject and various theories of how it is brought into being in social/ideological structures. In my third chapter I detailed how the subject is maintained and tethered to social ideological structures. Using another psychoanalytic concept originating with Freud, *fantasy*, I discussed how the psychic life of the subject is ordered and maintained through a phantasmatic structuring and fulfilment of desire. Fantasy, then, structures our ‘reality’, in ways not unlike those assumed by the Marxist category of ideology. Fantasy, however, differs from the common use of ideology in three primary ways. First, fantasy makes no claims about truth or consciousness—for fantasy there is no ‘pure’ position from which one might make claims about the true or false consciousness of subjects. Second, fantasy is not a false illusory veil which obscures true conditions, it is that which supports the very structuring of reality through the structuring of psychic life. Lastly, fantasy’s grip or hold on the subject is based in affect and not cognition, and for this reason making claims about how social fields are structured is much more difficult and precarious. With that said, in my work I do employ a theory of ideology as a *category of discourse* but not as a *method of critique* commonly used by Marxists, for all of the reasons I listed above.

Fantasy as a psychoanalytic category provides an answer to the question that the Other poses to us: *Che vuoi?* In providing an answer to this question we are able to fill a void of the
question of the desire of the Other or what they want from us. In effect this tells the subject not only how to desire but also how to order our desire in order to be properly recognized by the Other and other subjects as consistent and identifiable actors. Fantasy supports ideology since it relies on a specific and ‘interested’ way of ordering the social world and intersubjective relations. Master signifiers, for example, are ideological phantasmatic categories of discourse that teach us what it is to be a properly ordered subject—such as “boy” or “girl”—that can be recognized by (O)ther subjects. What fantasy is fundamentally doing is hiding the fact that such categories, and the big Other itself, are contingent and inconsistent and neither necessary nor permanent. Fantasy, then, supports discursive systems by intertwining the subject’s desire with them in a way that causes the subject to support ideological systems affectively rather than cognitively.

I ended the fantasy chapter by discussing the political uses of the psychoanalytic process of traversing fantasy, which assumes one can re-organize one’s psychic economy so that one is not fully tethered to the ideological big Other. Traversal involves the understanding that there is ‘nothing’ behind fantasy and that we as subjects are all, always, inconsistent, contingent and incomplete.

In the previous chapter I discussed yet another psychoanalytic category, that of unheimlich, or the uncanny. I defined the uncanny as the return of the repressed, or the unsettling confusion brought on by the subject’s inability to fully incorporate its surroundings. My intention with this discussion of the uncanny was to illustrate those moments at which the phantasmatic veil slips and gaps within the big Other are exposed, or when the Real subject interrupts the way the Symbolic subject functions. Although the uncanny as a category has been primarily used to discuss literary texts, I have shown with my brief discussion of radical ethnomethodology how this psychoanalytic category can be used as a method of not only abstract discourse analysis/ideology critique but also as a method for political use. I have shown how acts of so-
called culture jamming employ the logic of radical ethnomethodology in the way they expose not only the cognitive heuristics of everyday life but also how we orient to power and ideological forms when the fantasy underlying structure is exposed. My own work here is closer to the ways in which the subject seeks to understand how they are constituted as subjects and why they persist in relations that support exploitation, violence, wastefulness and stupidity.


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---. “What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib.” In These Times. May 21, 2004


