

# The Interpassive Subject

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## Fetish Between Structure and Humanism

According to the classic Althusserian criticism, the Marxist problematic of commodity fetishism relies on the humanist ideological opposition of "human persons" versus "things." Is it not one of Marx's standard determinations of fetishism that it deals with "relations between things (commodities)" instead of direct "relations between people"? In other words, that in the fetishist universe, people (mis)perceive their social relations in the guise of relations between things? Althusserians are fully justified in emphasizing how, beneath this "ideological" problematic, there is another, entirely different-structural-concept of fetishism already at work in Marx. On this level, "fetishism" designates the short circuit between the formal/differential structure (which is by definition "absent", i.e. it is never given "as such" in our experiential reality) and a positive element of this structure. When we are victims of the "fetishist" illusion, we (mis)perceive as the immediate/"natural" property of the object-fetish that which is conferred upon it because of its place within the structure. The fact that money enables us to buy things on the market, for example, is not a direct property of the object-money, but results from the place of money within the complex structure of socio-economic relations. Likewise, we do not relate to a certain person as a "king" because this person is "in himself" (on account of his charismatic character or something similar) a king, but because he occupies the place of a king within the set of socio-symbolic relations. Our point, however, is that these two levels of the notion of fetishism are necessarily connected. They form the two constitutive sides of the very concept of fetishism, which is why one cannot simply devalue the first as ideological, in contrast to the second as properly theoretical (or "scientific"). To make this point clear, the first feature must be reformulated in a much more radical way. Beneath the apparently humanist-ideological opposition of "human beings" and "things", there lurks another, much more productive notion, which is that of the mystery of substitution and/or displacement: how is it ontologically possible that the innermost "relations between people" can be displaced onto (or replaced by) "relations between things"? In other words, is it not a basic feature of the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism that "things believe instead of us, in place of us"? The point worth repeating again and again is that, in Marx's notion of fetishism, the fetishist inversion lies not in what people think they are doing, but in their social activity itself. Thus, typical bourgeois subjects are, in terms of their conscious attitudes, utilitarian nominalists — it is in their social activity, in exchange on the market, that they act as if commodities

were not simple objects, but objects endowed with special powers, full of "theological whimsies". That is to say, people are quite aware of how things really stand; they know very well that the commodity-money is nothing but a reified form of the appearance of social relations, that, beneath the "relations between things," there are "relations between people." The paradox is that, in their social activity, they act as if they do not know this and follow the fetishist illusion. The fetishist belief, the fetishist inversion, is displaced onto things; it is embodied in what Marx calls "social relations between things." And the crucial mistake to be avoided here is the properly "humanist" notion that this belief, embodied in things, displaced onto things, is nothing but a reified form of direct human belief.

The task of the phenomenological reconstitution of the genesis of "reification" is to demonstrate how original human belief was transposed onto things. The paradox to be maintained is that displacement is original and constitutive: there is no immediate, self-present living subjectivity to whom the belief embodied in "social things" can be attributed and who is then dispossessed of it. There are some beliefs, the most fundamental ones, which are from the very outset "decentered" beliefs of the Other; the phenomenon of the "subject supposed to believe" is thus universal and structurally necessary. From the very outset, the speaking subject displaces his or her belief onto the big Other qua the order of pure semblance, so that the subject never "really believed in it"; from the very beginning, the subject refers to some decentered other to whom he or she imputes this belief. All concrete versions of this "subject supposed to believe" (from small children for whose sake parents pretend to believe in Santa Claus to the "ordinary working people" for whose sake Communist intellectuals pretend to believe in Socialism) are stand-ins for the big Other.<sup>1</sup> So what one should answer to the conservative platitude according to which every honest person has a profound need to believe in something is that every honest person has a profound need to find another subject who would believe in his or her place.

### **The Subject Supposed to Believe**

In order to determine the scope of this notion of the subject supposed to believe as the fundamental, constitutive feature of the symbolic order,<sup>2</sup> it may be compared to another, better-known notion: the subject supposed to know. When Lacan speaks of the subject supposed to know, it is usually overlooked that this notion is not the standard, but the exception, and that it gains its value in contrast to the subject supposed to believe as the standard feature of the symbolic order. What is the "subject supposed to know"? In the TV series Columbo, the crime (the act of murder) is shown in detail at the beginning, so that the enigma to be resolved is not "whodunit?", but how the detective will establish the link between the deceitful surface appearance (the "manifest content" of the crime scene) and the truth about the crime (its "latent thought"), how he will prove the culprit's guilt. The success of Columbo thus attests to the fact that the true source of interest in the detective's work is the process of deciphering per se, not its result (the triumphant final revelation "And the murderer is..." is completely lacking here,

since we know this from the very outset). Even more crucial is the fact that not only do we, the spectators, know in advance who did it (since we see it directly), but, inexplicably, the detective Columbo himself immediately knows: the moment he visits the scene of the crime and encounters the culprit, he is absolutely certain that the culprit did it.

This reversal of the "normal" order has clear theological connotations: in true religion, I first believe in God and then, on the basis of my belief, become susceptible to the proofs of the truth of my faith. Here too, Columbo first knows, with a mysterious, but nonetheless absolutely infallible certainty, who did it, and then, on the basis of this inexplicable knowledge, proceeds to gather proofs. And, in a slightly different way, this is what the analyst qua "subject supposed to know" is about: when the analysand enters into a transference relationship with the analyst, he has the same absolute certainty that the analyst knows his secret (which only means that the patient is a priori "guilty," that there is a secret meaning to be drawn from his acts). Analysts are thus not empiricists, probing their patients with different hypotheses, searching for proofs, and so on; they embody the absolute certainty (which Lacan compares with the certainty of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*) of the analysands' "guilt," namely their unconscious desire.

The two notions, that of the subject supposed to believe and that of the subject supposed to know, are not symmetrical because belief and knowledge themselves are not symmetrical. At its most radical, the status of the (Lacanian) big Other qua symbolic institution is that of belief (trust), not that of knowledge, since belief is symbolic and knowledge is real (the big Other involves, and relies on a fundamental "trust").<sup>3</sup> Belief is always minimally "reflective", a "belief in the belief of the other" ("I still believe in Communism" is the equivalent of saying "I believe there are still people who believe in Communism"), while knowledge is precisely not knowledge about the fact that there is another who knows.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, I can BELIEVE through the other, but I cannot KNOW through the other. That is to say, owing to the inherent reflectivity of belief, when another believes in my place, I myself believe through him, but knowledge is not reflective in the same way: when the other is supposed to know, I do not know through him.

According to a well-known anthropological anecdote, the "primitives" to whom certain "superstitious beliefs" were attributed, when directly asked about them, answered that "some people believe", immediately displacing their belief, transferring it onto another. And again, are we not doing the same with our children: we go through the ritual of Santa Claus, since our children (are supposed to) believe in it and we do not want to disappoint them. Is this not also the typical excuse of the mythical crooked or cynical politician who turns honest? "I cannot disappoint them [the mythical "ordinary people"] who believe in it (or in me)." And, furthermore, isn't this need to find another who "really believes" also that which propels us in our need to stigmatize the Other as a (religious or ethnic) "fundamentalist"? In an uncanny way, belief always seems to function in the

guise of such a "belief at a distance": in order for the belief to function, there has to be some ultimate guarantor of it, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never present in persona. How, then, is belief possible? How is this vicious cycle of deferred belief cut short? The point, of course, is that the subject who directly believes need not exist for the belief to be operative. It suffices to presuppose its existence — to believe in it, in the guise of either the mythological founding figure who is not part of our experiential reality, or the impersonal "one" ("one believes"). The crucial mistake to be avoided here is, again, the properly "humanist" notion that this belief embodied in things, displaced onto things, is nothing but a reified form of a direct human belief, in which case the task of the phenomenological reconstitution of the genesis of "reification" would be to demonstrate how the original human belief was transposed onto things. The paradox to be maintained, in contrast to such attempts at phenomenological genesis, is that displacement is original and constitutive: there is no immediate, self-present living subjectivity to whom the belief embodied in "social things" can be attributed and who is then dispossessed of it. *Je sais bien, mais quand même...*/I believe : therein resides the dilemma — either we play the Jungian obscurantist game of "let's not focus on our superficial rational knowledge; let's embrace the profound archetypal beliefs that form the foundation of our being", or we embark on a difficult road to give an account of these beliefs in knowledge. Kierkegaard already rendered the ultimate paradox of belief: he emphasized that the apostle preaches the need to believe and asks that we accept his belief upon his word; he never offers "hard proofs" destined to convince nonbelievers. For this reason, the reluctance of the Church to confront evidence that may prove or disprove its claims is more ambiguous than it may appear. In the case of the Turin shroud, which allegedly bears the contours of the crucified Jesus, and thus his almost photographic portrait, it is too simple to read the Church's reluctance as expressing the fear that the shroud will turn out to be a fake from a later period. Perhaps it would be even more horrifying if the shroud were proven to be authentic, since this positivist "verification" of the belief would undermine its status and deprive it of its charisma. Belief can only thrive in the shadowy domain between outright falsity and positive truth. The Jansenists' notion of a miracle bears witness to the fact that they were fully aware of this paradox. For them, a miracle is an event that has the quality of a miracle only in the eyes of the believer — to the commonsense eyes of an infidel, it appears as a purely natural coincidence. Thus, the miracle is inherently linked to the fact of belief — there is no neutral miracle to convince cynical infidels. Or, to put it in another way, the fact that the miracle appears as such only to believers is a sign of God's power, not of His impotence.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Primordial Substitution**

This relationship of substitution is not limited to beliefs: the same goes for every one of the subject's innermost feelings and attitudes, including crying and laughing. Suffice it to recall the timeless enigma of transposed/displaced emotions, from the so-called "weepers" (women hired to cry at funerals) in

"primitive" societies to the "canned laughter" on a TV screen to the screen persona adopted in cyberspace. When I construct a "false" image that stands for me in a virtual community (in sexual games, for example, a shy man often assumes the screen persona of an attractive, promiscuous woman), the emotions I feel and "feign" as part of my screen persona are not simply false: although (what I experience as) my "true self" does not feel them, they are nonetheless in a sense "true", just as with watching a TV mini-series with canned laughter, where, even if I do not laugh but simply stare at the screen, tired after a hard day's work, I nonetheless feel relieved after the show. This is what the Lacanian notion of "decenterment", the decentered subject, is aimed at: my most intimate feelings can be radically externalized; I can literally "laugh and cry through another".

Is not the primordial version of this substitution, by which "somebody else does it for me", the very substitution of a signifier for the subject? In such a substitution resides the basic, constitutive feature of the symbolic order: a signifier is precisely an object-thing that substitutes for me, acts in my place. The so-called primitive religions in which another human being can assume my suffering, my punishment (but also my laughter, my enjoyment), in which one can suffer and pay the price for a sin through the Other (including prayer wheels that do the praying for you), are not as stupid and "primitive" as they may seem, for they harbor a momentous liberating potential. By way of surrendering my innermost content, including my dreams and anxieties, to the Other, a space opens up in which I am free to breathe: when the Other laughs for me, I am free to take a rest; when the Other is sacrificed instead of me, I am free to go on living with the awareness that I have paid for my guilt, and so on. The efficiency of this operation of substitution resides in the Hegelian reflective reversal: when the Other is sacrificed for me, I sacrifice myself through the Other; when the Other acts for me, I myself act through the Other; when the Other enjoys for me, I myself enjoy through the Other. Which is like the good old joke about the difference between Soviet-style bureaucratic socialism and the Yugoslav self-management socialism: in Russia, members of the nomenklatura, the representatives of the ordinary people, drive themselves in expensive limousines, while in Yugoslavia, ordinary people themselves ride in limousines through their representatives.

This liberating potential of mechanical rituals is also clearly discernible in our modern experience. Every intellectual knows the redeeming value of being temporarily subjected to the military drill, to the requirements of a "primitive" physical job, or to similar externally regulated labor — the very awareness that the Other regulates the process in which I participate sets my mind free, since I know I am not involved. The Foucauldian motif of the interconnection between discipline and subjective freedom thus appears in a different light: by submitting myself to some disciplinary machine, I transfer to the Other the responsibility to maintain the smooth running of things and thus gain the precious space in which to exercise my freedom.

The one who originally "does it for me" is the signifier itself in its external materiality, from the "canned prayer" in the Tibetan prayer wheel to the "canned laughter" on our TV: the basic feature of the symbolic order qua "big Other" is that it is never simply a tool or means of communication, since it "decenters" the subject from within, in the sense of accomplishing his act for him. This gap between the subject and the signifier that "does it for him," is clearly discernible in everyday experience: when a person slips, another person standing next to him and merely observing the accident can accompany it with "Oops !" or something similar. The mystery of this everyday occurrence is that, when the other does it for me, in my place, its symbolic efficiency is exactly the same as if I had done it directly. Therein resides the paradox of the notion of the "performative" or speech act: in the very gesture of accomplishing an act by uttering words, I am deprived of authorship; the "big Other" (the symbolic institution) speaks through me. It is no wonder, then, that there is something puppet-like about the persons whose professional function is essentially performative (judges, kings): they are reduced to a living embodiment of the symbolic institution, whereby their sole duty is to "dot the i's" mechanically, to confer an institutional cachet on a content elaborated by others. The later Lacan is fully justified in reserving the term "act" for something much more suicidal and real than a speech act.

This mystery of the symbolic order is exemplified by the enigmatic status of what we call "politeness": when, upon meeting an acquaintance, I say "Glad to see you ! How are you today?", it is clear to both of us that, in a way, I "do not mean it seriously" (if my partner suspects that I am really interested, he or she may even be unpleasantly surprised, as though I were aiming at something too intimate and of no concern to me — or, to paraphrase the old Freudian joke, "Why are you saying you're glad to see me, when you're really glad to see me?"). However, it would still be wrong to designate my act as simply "hypocritical", since, in another way, I do mean it: the polite exchange does establish a kind of pact between the two of us, in the same way that I do "sincerely" laugh through the canned laughter (as proven by the fact that I do effectively "feel relieved" afterward).

If we radicalize the relationship of substitution (i.e., the first aspect of the notion of fetishism) in this way, then the connection between the two aspects, the opposition "persons versus things," their relation of substitution ("things instead of people," or one person instead of another, or a signifier instead of the signified), and the opposition "structure versus one of its elements," becomes clear: the differential/formal structure occluded by the element-fetish can only emerge if the gesture of substitution has already occurred. In other words, the structure is always, by definition, a signifying structure, a structure of signifiers that are substituted for the signified content, not a structure of the signified. In order for the differential/formal structure to emerge, the real has to redouble itself in the symbolic register; a *reduplicatio* has to occur, on account of which things no longer count as what they directly "are", but only with regard to their symbolic place. This primordial substitution of the big Other, the Symbolic Order, for the

Real of the immediate life-substance (in Lacanian terms: of A - *le grand Autre* - for J - *jouissance*), gives rise to \$, the "barred subject" who is then "represented" by the signifiers, on whose behalf signifiers "act", or who acts through signifiers.

## Interpassivity

Against this background, it is tempting to supplement the fashionable notion of "interactivity" with its shadowy and much more uncanny double, the notion of "interpassivity".<sup>6</sup> In other words, it is commonplace to emphasize how, with the new electronic media, the passive consumption of a text or a work of art is over: I no longer merely stare at the screen, I increasingly interact with it, in a dialogic relationship that goes from choosing the programs, through participating in debates in a Virtual Community, to directly determining the outcome of the plot in so-called "interactive narratives". Those who praise the democratic potential of new media generally focus on precisely these features: how cyberspace opens up the possibility for the large majority of people to break out of the role of the passive observer following a spectacle staged by others, not only to participate actively in the spectacle, but more and more to establish its very rules. But isn't the other side of this interactivity interpassivity? Isn't the necessary obverse of my interacting with the object instead of passively following the show the situation in which the object itself deprives me of my own passive reaction of satisfaction (or mourning or laughter), so that it is the object itself that "enjoys the show" instead of me, relieving me of the superego duty to enjoy myself? Do we not witness "interpassivity" in a great number of today's TV or billboard ads, which, as it were, passively enjoy the product instead of us? (Coke cans bearing the inscription "Ooh! Ooh! What taste !" emulate in advance the ideal customer's reaction.) Another strange phenomenon brings us closer to the heart of the matter: almost every VCR aficionado who compulsively records hundreds of movies (myself among them) is well aware that the immediate effect of owning a VCR is that you effectively watch fewer films than in the good old days of a simple TV set without VCR; you never have time for TV, so instead of wasting a precious evening, you simply tape the film and store it for a future viewing (for which, of course, there is almost never time.). Although I do not actually watch films, the very awareness that the films I love are stored in my video library gives me profound satisfaction and, occasionally, enables me to relax and indulge in the exquisite art of *far'niente* — as if the VCR were in a way watching them for me, in my place. The VCR stands here for the "big Other", the medium of symbolic registration.<sup>7</sup>

The Western liberal academic's obsession with the suffering in Bosnia might be taken as the outstanding recent example of interpassive suffering. One can authentically suffer through reports on rapes and mass killings in Bosnia while calmly pursuing one's academic career. Another standard example of interpassivity is provided by the role of the "madman" within a pathologically distorted intersubjective link (for example, a family whose repressed traumas explode in the mental breakdown of one of its members): when a group produces

a madman, do they not shift upon him the necessity of passively enduring the suffering that belongs to all of them? Is the ultimate example of interpassivity not the "absolute example" (Hegel) itself, that of Christ who took upon himself the (deserved) suffering of humanity? Christ redeemed us all not by acting for us, but by assuming the burden of the ultimate passive experience. (The difference between activity and passivity, of course, is often blurred: weeping as an act of public mourning is not simply passive; it is passivity transformed into an active, ritualized, symbolic practice.) In the political domain, one of the recent outstanding examples of "interpassivity" is the multiculturalist Left intellectual's "apprehension" about how even the Muslims, the great victims of the Yugoslav war, are now renouncing the multi-ethnic, pluralist vision of Bosnia and conceding to the fact that, if Serbs and Croats want their clearly defined ethnic units, they too want an ethnic space of their own. This Leftist's "regret" is multiculturalist racism at its worst, as if Bosnians were not literally pushed into creating their own ethnic enclave by the way that the "liberal" West has treated them in the last five years. However, what interests us here is how the "multi-ethnic Bosnia" is only the latest in the series of mythical figures of the Other through which Western Leftist intellectuals have acted out their ideological fantasies: these intellectuals are "multi-ethnic" through Bosnians, break out of the Cartesian paradigm by admiring Native American wisdom, and so on, in the same way that, in past decades, when they were revolutionaries by admiring Cuba, or "democratic socialists" by endorsing the myth of Yugoslav "self-management" socialist as "something special," a genuine democratic breakthrough. In all of these cases, they have continued to lead their undisturbed upper-middle-class academic existence, while doing their progressive duty through the Other. This paradox of interpassivity, of believing or enjoying through the other, also opens up a new approach to aggressivity: what sets aggressivity in motion in a subject is that the other subject, through which the first believed or enjoyed, does something that disturbs the functioning of this transference. See, for example, the attitude of some Western Leftist academics toward the disintegration of Yugoslavia: since the fact that the people of ex-Yugoslavia rejected ("betrayed") Socialism disturbed the belief of these academics (i.e., prevented them from persisting in their belief in "authentic" self-management socialism through the Other that realizes it), everyone who does not share their Yugo-nostalgic attitude was dismissed as a proto-Fascist nationalist.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Subject Supposed to Enjoy**

Are we not, however, confusing different phenomena under the same title of interpassivity? Is there not a crucial distinction between the Other taking over from me the "dull" mechanical aspect of routine duties, and the Other taking over from me and thus depriving me of enjoyment? Is "to be relieved of one's enjoyment" not a meaningless paradox, at best a euphemism for simply being deprived of it? Is enjoyment not something that, precisely, cannot be done through the Other? One can already offer a response on the level of elementary psychological observation by recalling the deep satisfaction a subject (a parent,



for example) can obtain from the awareness that his or her beloved daughter or son is really enjoying something; a loving parent can literally enjoy through the Other's enjoyment. However, there is a much more uncanny phenomenon at work here: the only real way to account for the satisfaction and liberating potential of being able to enjoy through the Other (i.e., of being relieved of one's enjoyment and displacing it onto the Other) is to accept that enjoyment itself is not an immediate, spontaneous state but is sustained by a superego-imperative: as Lacan emphasized again and again, the ultimate content of the superego-injunction is "Enjoy!"

In order to grasp this paradox properly, one must first elucidate the opposition between the (public symbolic) Law and the superego. The public Law "between the lines" silently tolerates, incites even, what its explicit text prohibits (adultery, for example), while the superego injunction that ordains *jouissance*, through the very directness of its order, hinders the subject's access to it much more effectively than any prohibition. Let us consider the figure of the father who advises his son on sexual exploits: if the father warns him against them, formally prohibits him from dating girls, between the lines he only propels the son to do so, (i.e., to find satisfaction in violating the paternal prohibition). If, on the contrary, the father obscenely pushes him to "behave like a man" and seduce girls, the actual effect of this will probably be the opposite (the son's withdrawal, shame of the obscene father, even impotence). Perhaps the briefest way to render the superego paradox is the injunction "Like it or not, enjoy yourself !" Suffice it to recall a father who works hard to organize a family holiday and, after a series of postponements, tired of it all, shouts at his children: "Now you'd better enjoy it !" On a holiday trip, it is quite common to feel a superego compulsion to enjoy: one "must have fun", and one feels guilty if one doesn't enjoy it. (In the Eisenhower era of the "happy 50s", this compulsion was elevated to an everyday patriotic duty, or, as one of the public ideologues put it: "Not to be happy today is un-American.") The Japanese have perhaps found a unique way out of this deadlock of the superego: bravely confronting the paradox by directly organizing "fun" as part of their everyday duty, so that, when the official, organized fun activity is over, they are relieved of their duty and are finally free to have fun for real, to relax and enjoy. Another attempt to resolve this same deadlock is the typical hysterical strategy of changing (suspending) the symbolic link while pretending that nothing has changed in reality: a husband, for example, who divorces his wife and then continues to visit her home and children regularly, as if nothing had happened, feels not only as much at home as before, but even more relaxed. Since the symbolic obligation to the family has been undone, he can really take it easy and enjoy it — like the Japanese who can enjoy once the injunction to enjoy is over. Against this background, it is easy to discern the liberating potential of being relieved of enjoyment: in this way, one is relieved of the monstrous duty to enjoy.

On closer analysis, one would thus have to distinguish between two types of "the Other doing (or, rather, enduring) it for me":

— In the case of commodity fetishism, our belief is displaced onto the Other: I think I do not believe, but I believe through the Other. The gesture of criticism here consists in the assertion of identity: no, it is YOU who believes through the Other (in the theological whimsies of commodities, in Santa Claus).

— In the case of a video-recorder viewing and enjoying a film for you (or the canned laughter, or the weepers who cry and mourn for you, or the Tibetan prayer wheel) the situation is the reverse: you think you enjoyed the show, but the Other did it for you. The gesture of criticism here is that, no it was NOT YOU who laughed, it was the Other (the TV set) who did it.

Isn't the key to this distinction that we are dealing here with the opposition between belief and *jouissance*, between the Symbolic and the Real? In the case of (symbolic) belief, you disavow the identity (you do not recognize yourself in the belief that is yours); in the case of (real) *jouissance*, you erroneously recognize the decenterment in what you (mis)perceive as "your own" *jouissance*. Perhaps the fundamental attitude defining the subject is neither that of passivity nor that of autonomous activity, but precisely that of interpassivity. This interpassivity is to be opposed to the Hegelian *List der Vernunft* ("cunning of reason"). In the case of the latter, I am active through the other, which means that I can remain passive while the Other does it for me (like the Hegelian Idea that remains outside of the conflict, letting human passions do the work for it). In the case of interpassivity, I am passive through the Other. I concede to the Other the passive aspect (of enjoying), while I can remain actively engaged (I can continue to work in the evening, while the VCR passively enjoys for me; I can make financial arrangements for the deceased's fortune while the weepers mourn for me). This allows us to propose the notion of false activity: you think you are active, while your true position, as it is embodied in the fetish, is passive. Do we not encounter something akin to this false activity in the paradox of predestination (the very fact that things are decided in advance, i.e., that our attitude to Fate is that of a passive victim, instigates us to engage ourselves in incessant frenetic activity), as well as in the typical strategy of the obsessional neurotic, which also involves a "false activity": he or she is frantically active in order to prevent the real thing from happening (in a group situation in which some tension threatens to explode, the obsessional talks all the time, tells jokes, etc., in order to prevent the awkward moment of silence that would make the participants aware of the underlying tension).<sup>9</sup>

The object that gives body to the surplus-enjoyment fascinates the subject, reduces him or her to a passive gaze impotently gaping at the object; this relationship, of course, is experienced by the subject as something shameful, unworthy. Being directly transfixed by the object, passively submitting to its power of fascination, is ultimately unbearable: the open display of the passive attitude of "enjoying it" somehow deprives the subject of his or her dignity.

Interpassivity is therefore to be conceived as the primordial form of the subject's defense against jouissance: I defer jouissance to the Other, who passively endures it (laughs, suffers, enjoys) on my behalf. In this precise sense, the effect of the subject supposed to enjoy (i.e., the gesture of transposing one's jouissance to the Other) is perhaps even more primordial than that of the "subject supposed to know," or the "subject supposed to believe." Therein resides the libidinal strategy of a pervert who assumes the position of the pure instrument of the Other's jouissance: for the (male) pervert, the sexual act (coitus) involves a clear division of labor in which he reduces himself to a pure tool of her enjoyment; he is doing the hard work, accomplishing the active gestures, while the woman, transported in ecstasy, passively endures it and stares into the air. In the course of the psychoanalytic treatment, the subject has to learn to assume directly his relationship to the object that gives body to his jouissance, bypassing the proxy who enjoys in his place, instead of him. The disavowed fundamental passivity of my being is structured in the fundamental fantasy that, although a priori inaccessible to me, regulates the way I relate to jouissance. For that precise reason, it is impossible for the subject to assume his fundamental fantasy without undergoing the radical experience of "subjective destitution": in assuming my fundamental fantasy, I take upon myself the passive kernel of my being (i.e., the kernel whose distance sustains my subjective activity). The substitution of the object for the subject is thus in a way even more primordial than the substitution of the signifier for the subject: if the signifier is the form of "being active through another," the object is the form of "being passive through another": the object is primordially that which suffers, endures it, for me, in my place — in short, that which enjoys for me. Thus, what is unbearable in my encounter with the object is that in it, I see myself in the guise of a suffering object: what reduces me to a fascinated passive observer is the scene of myself passively enduring it. Far from being an excessive phenomenon that occurs only in extreme "pathological" situations, interpassivity, in its opposition to interactivity (not in the standard sense of interacting with the medium, but in the sense of another doing it for me, in my place), is thus the feature that defines the most elementary level, the necessary minimum, of subjectivity: in order to be an active subject, I have to get rid of — and transpose onto the other — the inert passivity that contains the density of my substantial being. In this precise sense, the opposition signifier/object overlaps with the opposition interactivity/interpassivity: signifier is interactive, it is active on my behalf, in my place, while object is interpassive, it suffers for me. Transposing onto another my very passive experience is a much more uncanny phenomenon than that of being active through another: in interpassivity, I am decentered in a much more radical way than in interactivity, since interpassivity deprives me of the very kernel of my substantial identity.

Consequently, the basic matrix of interpassivity follows from the very notion of subject as the pure activity of (self)positing, as the fluidity of pure Becoming, devoid of any positive, firm Being: if I am to function as pure activity, I have to externalize my (passive) Being — in short, I have to be passive through another. This inert object that "is" my Being, in which my inert Being is externalized, is

the Lacanian *objet petit a*. Insofar as the elementary, constitutive structure of subjectivity is hysterical, in other words, insofar as hysteria is defined by the question "What am I for an object (in the eyes of the Other, for the Other's desire)?", it confronts us with interpassivity at its purest. What hysterical subjects are unable to accept, what gives rise to an unbearable anxiety in them, is the presentiment that the Other(s) perceive them in the passivity of their Being, as objects to be exchanged, enjoyed, or otherwise "manipulated". Therein lies the "ontological axiom" of Lacanian subjectivity: the more I am active, the more I must be passive at another place, the more there must be another object that is passive in my place, on my behalf. (This axiom is realized in its utmost simplicity with the proverbial senior manager who, from time to time, feels compelled to visit prostitutes in order to be exposed to masochist rituals and "treated as a mere object".) The theoretical problem that arises here is the one formulated long ago by Adorno (and to which he proposed his solution of *Angstlose Passivitaet*, "passivity without anxiety"): is it possible for the subject to be passive toward the domain of objects, to acknowledge the "primacy of the object," without falling prey to fetishism?<sup>10</sup> In Lacanian terms, the same problem may be reformulated as: does *objet petit a* always and necessarily function as a fetishist object, as the object whose fascinating presence covers up the lack of castration (the small *a* over minus phi of castration, in Lacan's mathemes)?

### Sexual Difference

Crucial here is the reflective reversal of "the Other does it for me, instead of me, in my place", into "I myself am doing it through the Other". This reversal renders the minimal condition of subjectivity: the attitude that constitutes subjectivity is not "I am the active autonomous agent who is doing it", but "when another is doing it for me, I myself am doing it through him/her" (a woman who is doing it through her man, etc.). This reversal is repeatedly at work in the Hegelian dialectical process, in the guise of the reversal of determining reflection into reflective determination. As is known, determining reflection is the dialectical unity of positing and external reflection. On the level of the subject's activity, "positing reflection" occurs when I am directly active; in "external reflection", the Other is active and I merely observe it passively. When the Other does it for me, instead of me, acting as my proxy, my relationship toward him or her becomes that of determining reflection — external and positing reflection already overlap in it (the very act of observing the Other doing it for me, the moment of external reflection, makes me aware that he or she is doing it for me, that, in this sense, I myself "posited" that person's activity, that it is "mediated" by my subjective position); it is only when I posit direct identity between the Other's activity and my own when I conceive of myself as the truly active party, as the one who is doing it through the Other, that we pass from determining reflection to reflective determination (since, on this level, the Other' activity is not only determined by my reflection, but directly posited as my reflective determination). Or, to refer again to the Yugoslav joke, we are dealing here with the shift from "representatives of the people who drive limousines in the place of the ordinary

people" to "ordinary people themselves who drive limousines through their representatives". In the domain of *jouissance*, this is a shift from the Other enjoying it instead of me, in my place, to myself enjoying it through the Other.

This paradox also allows us to throw some new light on sexual difference. When, at the outset of his argumentation for distributive justice, John Rawls states that his hypothesis excludes the presence of envy in rational subjects, he thereby excludes desire itself in its constitutive mediation with the Other's desire. However, the logic of "envy" is not the same for both sexes. How then does "desire is the desire of the Other" differ in the case of men and women? The masculine version is, to put it simply, that of competition/envy: "I want it because you want it, insofar as you want it." In other words, what confers the value of desirability on an object is that it is already desired by another. The aim here is the ultimate destruction of the Other, which, of course, then renders the object worthless — and therein resides the paradox of the male dialectic of desire. The feminine version, on the contrary, is that of "I desire through the Other," in the sense of "let the Other do it (possess and enjoy the object, etc.) for me" (let my husband, my son, succeed for me), as well as "I only desire what he desires, I only want to fulfill his desire" (Antigone who only wants to fulfill the desire of the Other in accomplishing the proper burial of her brother).<sup>11</sup> The thesis that a man tends to act directly and to assume his act, while a woman prefers to act by proxy, letting another (or manipulating another into) doing it for her, may sound like the worst cliché, which gives rise to the notorious image of the woman as a natural schemer hiding behind the man's back.<sup>12</sup> But what if this cliché nevertheless points toward the feminine status of the subject? What if the "original" subjective gesture, the gesture constitutive of subjectivity, is not that of autonomously "doing something", but rather that of the primordial substitution, of withdrawing and letting another do it for me, in my place? Women, much more than men, are able to enjoy by proxy, to find deep satisfaction in the awareness that their beloved partner enjoys (or succeeds or in any other way has attained his or her goal).<sup>13</sup>

In this precise sense, the Hegelian "cunning of reason" bears witness to the resolutely feminine nature of what Hegel calls "Reason": "Look for the hidden Reason (which realizes itself in the apparent confusion of egotistic direct motifs and acts)!" is Hegel's version of the notorious *Cherchez la femme*! This, then, is how reference to interpassivity allows us to complicate the standard opposition of man versus woman as active versus passive, for sexual difference is inscribed in the very core of the relationship of substitution — woman can remain passive while being active through her Other, man can be active while suffering through his Other.<sup>14</sup>

### **The "Objectively Subjective"**

The ontological paradox, if not scandal, of these phenomena (whose psychoanalytic name, of course, is fantasy) resides in the fact that they subvert the

standard opposition of "subjective" and "objective". Of course, fantasy is by definition not "objective" (in the naive sense of "existing independently of the subject's perceptions"); however, it is also not "subjective" (in the sense of being reducible to the subject's consciously experienced intuitions). Rather, fantasy belongs to the "bizarre category of the objectively subjective-the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem that way to you".<sup>15</sup>

When, for example, the subject actually experiences a series of fantasmatic formations that interrelate as so many permutations of each other, this series is never complete: it is always as if the actually experienced series presents so many variations of some underlying "fundamental" fantasy that is never actually experienced by the subject. (In Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten", the two consciously experienced fantasies presuppose and thus relate to a third one, "My father is beating me", which was never actually experienced and can only be retroactively reconstructed as the presupposed reference of-or, in this case, the intermediate term between-the other two fantasies.) We can even go further and claim that, in this sense, the Freudian unconscious itself is "objectively subjective": when, for example, we claim that people who are consciously well disposed toward Jews nonetheless harbor profound anti-Semitic prejudices they are not consciously aware of, do we not claim that (insofar as these prejudices do not render the way Jews really are, but the way they appear to such people) they are not aware of how Jews really seem to him?

This brings us back to the mystery of "fetishism": when, by means of a fetish, the subject "believes through the other" (i.e., when the fetish-thing believes for the subject, in his or her place), we also encounter this "bizarre category of the objectively subjective". What the fetish objectivizes is "my true belief", the way things "truly seem to me", although I never effectively experience them this way; apropos of commodity fetishism, Marx himself uses the term "objectively necessary appearance". Thus, when a critical Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, the Marxist's reproach is not "A commodity may seem to you like a magical object endowed with special powers, but it is really just a reified expression of relations between people"; the actual Marxist's reproach is rather, "You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations (that, for example, money is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but this is not how things really seem to you. In your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers".

On a more general level, is this not a characteristic of the symbolic order as such? When I encounter a bearer of symbolic authority (a father, a judge, etc.), my subjective experience of that person may be one of a corrupted weakling, yet I nonetheless treat him or her with due respect because this is how he or she "objectively appears to me". Another example: in communist regimes, the semblance according to which people supported the party and enthusiastically

constructed socialism was not a simple subjective semblance (nobody really believed in it), but rather a kind of "objective semblance", one that was materialized in the actual social functioning of the regime, in the way the ruling ideology was materialized in ideological rituals and apparatuses. Or, to put it in Hegelian terms, the notion of the "objectively subjective", of the semblance conceived in the "objective" sense, designates the moment when the difference between objective reality and subjective semblance is reflected within the domain of the subjective semblance itself. What we obtain in this reflection-into-semblance of the opposition between reality and semblance is precisely the paradoxical notion of objective semblance, of "how things really seem to me". Therein resides the dialectical synthesis between the realm of the Objective and the realm of the Subjective-not simply in the notion of subjective appearance as the mediated expression of objective reality, but in the notion of a semblance that objectivizes itself and starts to function as a "real semblance" (the semblance sustained by the big Other, the symbolic institution) against the mere subjective semblance of actual individuals. This is also one of the ways to specify the meaning of Lacan's assertion of the subject's constitutive "decenterment": its point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective, unconscious mechanisms that are "decentered" with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but rather something much more unsettling-I am deprived of even my most intimate "subjective" experience, the way things "really seem to me", the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the kernel of my being, since I can never consciously experience and assume it. According to the standard view, the dimension that is constitutive of subjectivity is that of the phenomenal (self-) experience. I am a subject the moment I can say to myself: "No matter what unknown mechanism governs my acts, perceptions, and thoughts, nobody can take from me what I see and feel now." Lacan turns this standard view around: the "subject of the signifier" emerges only when a key aspect of the subject's phenomenal (self-)experience ("fundamental fantasy"), becomes inaccessible, is "primordially repressed". At its most radical, the Unconscious is the inaccessible phenomenon, not the objective mechanism that regulates my phenomenal experience.

The prima facie philosophical observation apropos of this paradox, of course, would be that modern philosophy long ago elaborated such a notion of "objectively subjective". Therein resides the whole point of the Kantian notion of the "transcendental", which indeed designates objectivity, insofar as it is "subjectively" mediated/constituted. Kant again and again emphasizes that his transcendental idealism has nothing to do with the simple subjective phenomenalism. His point is not that there is no objective reality, that only subjective appearances are accessible to us. There definitely is a line that separates objective reality from mere subjective impressions, and Kant's problem is, precisely, how do we pass from the mere multitude of subjective impressions to objective reality. His answer, of course, is through transcendental constitution-the subject's synthetic activity. The difference between objective reality and mere subjective impressions is thus internal to subjectivity; it is the difference between

merely subjective and objectively subjective. This, however, is not what the Lacanian notion of fantasy aims at. To grasp this difference, we must introduce here the seemingly hair-splitting but nonetheless crucial distinction between "subjectively objective" and "objectively subjective": the Kantian transcendently constituted reality is subjectively objective (it stands for objectivity that is subjectively constituted/mediated), while fantasy is objectively subjective (it designates an innermost subjective content, a product of fantasizing, which, paradoxically, is "desubjectivized", rendered inaccessible to the subject's immediate experience). However, it would be a crucial misunderstanding to read this radical decenterment involved in the notion of fetishism (I am deprived of my innermost beliefs, fantasies, etc.) as "the end of Cartesian subjectivity". What this deprivation (i.e., the fact that a phenomenological reconstitution that would generate "reified" belief out of the presupposed "first-person" belief necessarily fails, the fact that substitution is original, the fact that even in the cases of the most intimate beliefs, fantasies, etc., the big Other can "do it for me") effectively undermines is the standard notion of the so-called "Cartesian Theater," the notion of a central Screen of Consciousness that forms the focus of subjectivity, and where (on a phenomenal level) "things really happen".<sup>16</sup> In clear contrast to this, the Lacanian subject qua  $\$$ , the void of self-referential negativity, is strictly correlative to the primordial decenterment: the very fact that I can be deprived of even my innermost psychic ("mental") content, that the big Other (or fetish) can laugh for me, believe for me, and so forth, is what makes me  $\$$ , the "barred" subject, the pure void with no positive substantial content. The Lacanian subject is thus empty in the radical sense of being deprived of even minimal phenomenological support: there is no wealth of experiences to fill in its void. And Lacan's wager is that the Cartesian reduction of the subject to pure cogito already implies such a reduction of every substantial content, including my innermost "mental" attitudes — the notion of "Cartesian Theater" as the original locus of subjectivity is already a "reification" of the subject qua  $\$$ , the pure void of negativity.



## Notes

1. The actuality of the subject supposed to believe in Stalinist "totalitarianism" is perhaps best exemplified by the well-known incident concerning the Great Soviet Encyclopedia that occurred in 1954, immediately after the fall of Beria. When Soviet subscribers received the volume of the encyclopedia containing the entries under the letter B, there was, of course, a double-page article on Beria, praising him as the great hero of the Soviet Union. After his fall and denunciation as a traitor and spy, all subscribers received a letter from the publishing house asking them to cut out and return the page on Beria; in exchange they were promptly sent a double-page entry (with photos) on the Bering Strait, so that, when they inserted it into the volume, its wholeness was reestablished: there was no blank to bear witness to the sudden rewriting of history. The mystery here is: for whom was this (semblance of) wholeness maintained, if all subscribers knew about the manipulation (since they had to perform it themselves)? The only answer is, of course: for the nonexistent subject supposed to believe.

2. See Michel de Certeau, "What We Do When We Believe", in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 200. See also Chapter 5 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, Verso, 1989).

3. For that precise reason, Lacan speaks of the "knowledge in the real", not of the belief in the real. Another way to put this is to say that belief and knowledge relate to each other like desire and drive: desire is also always reflective, a "desire to desire", while drive is not "drive to drive".

4. The logic of "subject supposed to know" is thus not "authoritarian" (relying on another subject who knows on my behalf) but, on the contrary, productive of new knowledge: the hysterical subject who incessantly probes the Master's knowledge is the very model of the emergence of new knowledge. It is the logic of "subject supposed to believe" that is effectively "conservative" in its reliance upon the structure of belief that must not be called into question by the subject ("whatever you think you know, retain your belief, act as if you believe.").

5. A further interesting fact concerning the relationship between belief and knowledge is that attempts to "demonstrate the existence of God" (i.e., to confer the status of knowledge upon our assurance that "God exists") as a rule emerge when nobody seems to (i.e., to confer the status of knowledge upon our assurance that "God exists") doubt His existence (in short, when "everybody believes"), not in times when atheism is on the rise and religion is in crisis (who is today still seriously engaged in "proving the existence of God"?). One is thus tempted to claim that, paradoxically, the very endeavor to demonstrate the existence of God introduces doubt, in a way creating the problem it purports to solve. According to the standard Hegelian notion, attempts to prove God's existence through reasoning bear witness to the fact that the Cause (our immediate faith in Him) is already lost, i.e., that our relationship to Him is no longer a "substantial" faith but already a reflectively "mediated" knowledge. In clear contrast to this notion, reflective knowledge seems to have the status of an "excess" we indulge in when we are sure of our Faith (like people in an emotional relationship who can allow themselves to indulge in gentle mockery of their partners, precisely when they are so sure of the depth of their relationship that they know such superficial jokes cannot hurt it).

6. I rely here, as well as in the remaining part of this text, on Robert Pfaller's contribution to *Die Dinge lachen an unsere Stelle*, conference held in Linz, Austria, 8-10 October 1996.

7. It seems that today even pornography functions more and more in an interpassive way: X-rated movies are no longer primarily the means destined to excite the user in his (or her) solitary masturbatory activity. Just staring at the screen where "the action is" is sufficient — it is enough for me to observe how others enjoy in my place.

8. Exemplary here is the case of Peter Handke, who for many years interpassively lived his authentic life, free from the corruption of Western consumerist capitalism, through the Slovenes

(his mother was Slovene): for him, Slovenia was a country in which words related directly to objects (in stores, milk was called "milk" directly, avoiding the pitfall of commercialized brand-names, etc.) — in short, a pure fantasmatic formatic. Now, Slovene independence and willingness to join the European Union have unleashed a violent aggressivity in him: in his recent writings, he dismisses Slovenes as slaves of Austrian and German capital, selling their legacy to the West, and all this because his interpassive game was disturbed, because Slovenes no longer behave in the way that would enable him to be authentic through other Slovenes. No wonder, then, that he has turned to Serbia as the last vestige of authenticity in Europe, comparing Bosnian Serbs besieging Sarajevo to Native Americans besieging a camp of white colonizers.

9. It would be interesting to apply this paradox of interpassivity to Schelling's notion of the highest freedom as the state in which activity and passivity, being-active and being-acted-upon, harmoniously overlap: human beings reach their acme when they turn their very subjectivity into the Predicate of an every yield, as it were, to the Other, "depersonalize" their most intense activity and perform it as if some other, higher Power is acting through them, using them as its medium-like the mystical experience of Love, or like artists who, in the highest frenzy of creativity, experience themselves as a medium through that some more substantial, impersonal Power expresses itself. (See Chapter 1 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* [London: Verso, 1996].) This notion of the highest freedom designates the impossible point of perfect overlapping between passivity and activity in which the gap of inter-(activity or passivity) is abolished: when I am active, I no longer need another to be passive for me, in my place, since my very activity is already in itself the highest form of passivity; and vice versa, when, in an authentic mystical experience, I let myself go entirely, adopt the passive attitude of *Gelassenheit*, this passivity is in itself the highest form of activity, since in it, the big Other itself (God) acts through me.

10. See Mladen Dolar's contribution to the conference cited in note 6.

11. See Darian Leader, *Why Do Women Write More Letters Than They Post?* (London, Faber and Faber, 1966).

12. When applied to our everyday ideological perceptions of the relationship between women and men, the term "cliché" is theoretically wrong. That is to say, when one denounces these perceptions as "clichés," this is as a rule said in such a way that it exempts us from a close analysis of what, precisely, these "clichés" are. Within the social space, everything is ultimately a "cliché" (i.e., a contingent symbolic formation not grounded in the immediate "nature of things"). "Clichés" are thus something to be taken extremely seriously, and the problem with the term "cliché" is that it is misleading insofar as one can always hear in front of it an imperceptible "mere" ("cliché" equals "a mere cliché").

13. In the case of men, the presupposed Other's enjoyment is rather the source of obsessive anxiety: the ultimate goal of compulsive rituals is precisely to keep the Other mortified, to prevent that person from enjoying.

14. When, in his scheme of four discourses, Lacan puts \_ (subject) under S1 (the master-signifier), is not one possible way to read this substitution to put Woman under Man, i.e., to conceive of man as woman's metaphoric substitute, as her proxy? (The opposite substitution, \_ under objet a, would be, of course, woman as man's substitute.)

15. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1991), p. 132. (Dennett, of course, evokes this concept in a purely negative way, as a nonsensical *contradictio in adjecto*).

16. For this notion of "Cartesian Theater," see Dennett, op.cit.

<http://www.lacan.com/zizek-pompidou.htm> (18 Nov 05)