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## From or Toward the Symbolic? A Critique of Žižek's The Sublime Object of Ideology

Won Choi

*Loyola University Chicago*, [wonchoi68@gmail.com](mailto:wonchoi68@gmail.com)

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## From or Toward the Symbolic? A Critique of Žižek's The Sublime Object of Ideology

Won Choi

In her biography, Jacques Lacan, Elisabeth Roudinesco offers us a sharp contrast between the positions occupied by Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan as follows: “Lacan . . . had traveled in the opposite direction from Althusser. Hence his constantly renewed attachment to Lévi-Strauss's idea of symbolic function. While Althusser believed that only by escaping from all filial symbolism could one achieve a founding act, Lacan showed that, on the contrary, while such an escape might indeed produce logical discourse, such discourse would be invaded by psychosis” (Roudinesco 1997, pp. 301-2). Many readers today may be dumbfounded by this passage, since the picture presented here about the two theorists is diametrically opposed to the picture they tend to hold true. In the latter picture, Althusser is depicted as an adamant structuralist who disallowed the subject any chance to escape from the dominant ideology, while Lacan is portrayed as a genuine critic of such a position, who, by stressing the irreducible dimension of the real, showed how the subject might be able to find a way to subvert the entire symbolic structure.

Of course, this latter picture cannot simply be whisked away as a theoretically unfounded popular belief. Althusser indeed began to be criticized as a structuralist (or a functionalist) not long after his famous essay on “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” was published. This criticism seemed to receive its long waited foundation as well as its theoretical weight when Slavoj Žižek wrote *The Sublime Object of Ideology* to confirm its validity precisely by comparing Althusser's theory with Lacan's. Twenty years after its publication, we still see this text heavily determines the way in which both Althusser and Lacan are perceived by various academic communities. So much so that even a critic like Ian Parker, so unsympathetic toward Žižek, embraces the idea that the latter's criticism of Althusser is valid and reliably represents Lacan's own position (Parker 2004, p. 86).

Should one think, then, that Roudinesco was simply mistaken? Much more recently, however, Yoshiyuki Sato made a similar argument in his *Pouvoir et résistance* by insisting that it is Lacan who took the most intransigent structuralist position in the whole debate that unfolded around

the question of the subject in France during the 1960s and 70s, and that the theoretical works of (the later) Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Althusser all may be viewed as various attempts to distance themselves from such a position of Lacan's. According to Sato (2007, p. 57), Lacan's entire theory can be characterized by its emphasis upon the "absolute passivity" of the subject in relation to the symbolic structure. Should one think, then, that the current dominant picture which says otherwise is simply mistaken?

In this article, I position myself among those who claim that Lacan was a much more orthodox structuralist than Althusser was; however, I simultaneously argue that it is crucial to see their agreements as well as their disagreements. In other words, we should begin our discussion by recognizing that structuralism itself was not a unified school of thought, and, therefore, the respective relationships that Althusser and Lacan developed with it cannot be thought of in a manner of all or nothing. Insofar as they both tried to move the category of the subject from a constituting position to a constituted one, Althusser and Lacan were both great structuralists (Balibar 2003). They did not simply nullify the category of the subject (including its activity and autonomy) but tried to explain it by investigating through what process and mechanism the subject is constituted as one who recognizes itself as autonomous while still depending upon the structure in a certain way. Only after clearly delineating their common interest in this way can one possibly begin to inquire into the different choices they made in their own theoretical works.

In order to carry out such an inquiry, I propose to revisit Žižek's discussion of the Althusser-Lacan debate in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. While attempting to reply to some of the critical questions that he raised for Althusser, I aim to differentiate the issues on which Althusser and Lacan converged from those on which they diverged. Admittedly, this article is limited in its scope: it does not consider changes that occurred in Lacan's theory in the 1970s,<sup>1</sup> nor does it explore relevant questions raised by Althusser in some of his posthumously published writings (see, for example, Althusser 2003). I will leave a discussion of these important issues for another occasion. But in this article I still hope to show that it is important to locate Žižek's misconceptions in order to reopen the debate in new light. In other words, I would like to make clear my intention which is not to

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<sup>1</sup> However, it should be noted that, as long as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is concerned, Žižek (1989, p. 132) considers the final third period of Lacan to begin from the late 1950s. This gives me a plenty of space in which to question his reading of Lacan.

conclude but to begin the debate; by trying to return the theorists to the places to which they properly belong, I intend to prepare a ground upon which they may eventually manifest their respective theoretical strengths as well as their weaknesses.

### 1. Žižek's Construal of the Althusser-Lacan Debate

In the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek points out that the famous contemporary debate between Habermas and Foucault represses another debate whose theoretical implication is far more important: the Althusser-Lacan debate. Žižek claims that the latter debate has been repressed because it brings to the forefront the issue of ideology which constitutes the “traumatic kernel” that the Habermas-Foucault debate does not want to face directly. According to him, each theorist in this double debate represents one of the “four different notions of the subject” along with their respective “ethical position” (Žižek 1989, p. 2). Habermas’s subject is the linguistically revamped version of the “old subject of transcendental reflection” whose universalistic ideal lies in establishing and mastering the transparent intersubjective communication; whereas Foucault’s subject is the aestheticized antiuniversalistic one whose tradition goes back to the Renaissance ideal of the “all-round” individual capable of mastering its passions and thus turning its own life into a work of art. Žižek argues that, despite the surface difference concerning universalism, they both enter the humanist tradition which highlights the supreme importance of the subject’s self-mastery or self-transparency.

Althusser, on the other hand, represents a crucial break from this tradition insofar as he lays down the idea that the subject can never master itself because it is always in ideology that it recognizes itself; ideology in this sense is one of the fundamental conditions that accompany all its activities. Hence, the Althusserian subject, radically alienated “in the symbolic ‘process without subject’” (Žižek 1989, p. 3), is in fact a non-subject more or less completely reducible to a mere effect of ideology. To this Althusserian subject, Žižek opposes the Lacanian subject which is defined by the irreducible distance that separates the real from its symbolization. According

to this view, there is always a remainder or a surplus that resists the “symbolic integration-dissolution”; this remainder is what in turn gives rise to the dimension of desire through which the subject finally comes across a chance to separate itself from the symbolic structure. From Žižek’s point of view, the

famous Lacanian motto, “not to give way on one’s desire,” which is attributed to the indomitable tragic figure Antigone, sums up the ethical position proper to this kind of subject. It is not an attempt to return to the ethics of self-mastery, but on the contrary to subvert the symbolic structure that determines the very “self” or the “ego.” Žižek (1989, p. 124) illustrates this difference between Althusser and Lacan by referring to the difference between the two levels installed in the Lacanian graph of desire. While Althusser limits himself to the lower level in which the “alienation” of the subject in the symbolic transpires, Lacan adds to this yet another level in which the dimension of the real (jouissance) is introduced, and thus the separation of the subject from the symbolic becomes conceivable.

Although I am sympathetic towards Žižek’s view that emphasizes the importance of the Althusser-Lacan debate suppressed from the contemporary intellectual scene, nevertheless I am not in agreement with his way of characterizing the debate. There are at least two major problems that I see. The first one concerns the far too one-sided characteristic of the picture Žižek presents to us about the debate. Never trying to carefully reconstruct the way in which the debate actually unfolded, he is content simply to pass judgment on the alleged shortcomings of Althusser’s theory by imposing the Lacanian theoretical grid directly upon it. This imposition is problematic, not only because it ignores the respective ways in which the two theories were developed, but because it tends to give readers an impression that Lacan designed his theory, especially his graph of desire, at least in part to refute Althusser’s position, or that Althusser was criticized in a more or less unilateral manner by Lacan in this “debate.”

To see such an impression is questionable, it suffices to take into account some of the relevant historical facts. Lacan’s essay that becomes Žižek’s central reference point in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is, without doubt, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious.” It was originally written as a contribution to the *La Dialectique* conference held at Royaumont in 1960; it was printed in *Écrits* in 1966, just one year after the publication of Althusser’s *Pour Marx and Lire le Capital*. On the other hand, Althusser’s essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” which becomes the major target of Žižek’s criticism, was written in 1969 (published in 1970). There was no significant reply from Lacan’s side to this essay. Rather it was Althusser who later made a criticism

of Lacan, especially in his 1976 essay “The Discovery of Dr. Freud.”<sup>2</sup> Lacan again did not reply. The only explicit criticism he ever made against Althusser is found in the first two sessions of his Seminar XVI (1968-69), which preceded the publication of Althusser’s essay on ideology by more than one year; naturally, it did not directly address the issues raised by Althusser’s formulation of “ideological interpellation.”

Having this picture in mind, one might arrive at a hypothesis quite different from Žižek’s own. His claim is that the graph of desire proposed by Lacan has two levels, while Althusser’s theory has only one; this contrast in and of itself shows the weakness of the Althusserian theory which overemphasizes the role of the symbolic (or the symbolic identification) and ignores the dimension of the real. However, if Lacan’s graph was proposed in 1960, and Althusser’s thesis on ideology in 1969, is it not more likely the case that Althusser rejected the second level of the graph while accepting perhaps with certain modifications the first level only? Of course, one can still possibly argue that Althusser did not reject it, but rather simply missed it. However, as I already mentioned, he did make a criticism of Lacan in the 1970s. Then is it not rather fair to check out the points of his criticism first? However, Žižek oddly enough never mentions this criticism or the essay in which it appears.

The second problem closely connected to the first one concerns Žižek’s interpretation of the Lacanian graph of desire itself. He identifies the lower level with the symbolic, and the upper one with the symbolic cut through by the real. However, it seems much more appropriate to me to identify the lower level with the imaginary and the upper one with the symbolic. The real intervenes in the form of “anxiety” as some sort of catalyst to make the transition possible from the imaginary to the symbolic. In this perspective, it is Lacan who appears to insist on the necessity of the symbolic. Althusser, on the other hand, seems to problematize it by rejecting (or “missing”) the upper level in his theory of ideology. Hence, the crucial question we must ask ourselves is: are we moving from or toward the symbolic when we make a transition from the lower level to the upper level? By differentiating the symbolic that arrives in advance and the symbolic proper, I will try to show in this article that the lower level indeed represents the imaginary, while the upper one represents the symbolic.

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<sup>2</sup> Althusser gave up trying to publish “The Discovery of Dr. Freud” after he received criticisms from his colleagues. Later, however, some publisher printed it out without acquiring permission from Althusser. This incident became known as the “Tbilisi Affair” (see Althusser 1996, pp. 79-124).



In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek's criticism of Althusser appears at two different places: initially in chapter 1, titled "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?" and then again in chapter 3, titled "'Che Vuoi?'" which specifically deals with the question of the two levels in the graph of desire. In the following section, I will discuss chapter 1, in which he alleges that Althusser missed the Kafkaesque dimension of the real, namely what he calls the "interpellation without identification/subjectivation." In the last section, I will question Žižek's interpretation of the graph of desire by engaging myself in a textual analysis of Lacan's "The Subversion of the Subject."

## 2. The Encounter with das Ding

In chapter 1 of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek attacks Althusser's theory of ideology by making use of Lacan's discussion of das Ding that appears in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VII). In order to criticize Althusser for still taking an epistemological approach on ideology, Žižek raises the issue of the "objectivity of belief" which cannot be defeated or corrected by the subject's gaining proper knowledge. He illustrates his point with the example of commodity fetishism: everyone knows that money is a piece of paper, while they act as if it were the embodiment of wealth in its immediate reality. Everyone in capitalism is a fetishist in practice—not in theory.

How does this commodity fetishism become possible? It becomes possible because the subject misrecognizes itself as an autonomous player in market merely pursuing its own self-interests while in truth it is the external Things (the social institutions of market) that think and act in place of the subject. This inversion of the active-passive relationship between the subject and the external market apparatuses is what places commodity fetishism well out of the range of the usual kind of criticism which simply condemns it as a subjective illusion. Our fetishistic belief in money, in other words, is not really ours but the objective belief that Things themselves have for us.

Žižek generalizes this point by linking it to the question of external obedience to the law. What he means by this is the subject's obedience in its external behavior: if it behaves according to the law, it does not matter whether it truly believes that the law is right. He argues that such external obedience is not the same as submission to the nonideological "brute force" represented in Althusser's theory by the repressive state apparatus; it is rather what remains totally unthought of by Althusser, namely "obedience to the

Command in so far as it is ‘incomprehensible,’ not understood; in so far as it retains a ‘traumatic’ ‘irrational’ character” (Žižek 1989, p. 37).

Now we can clearly see that this is the same kind of argument Lacan makes in his Seminar VII while discussing the role of *das Ding* in establishing the authority of moral commands. The mute *Wort als Ding* (le mot rather than la parole, and the signifier without the signified) is precisely what seems to the subject incomprehensible, traumatic and irrational. “*Das Ding*,” says Lacan, “is that which I will call the beyond-of-the-signified” (1992, p. 54). It is the signifier (or a chain of signifiers) that is not yet experienced by the subject as a meaning, but simply imposed upon it from without as a persisting piece of reality. This is ultimately what Lacan refers to as the real: “that dumb reality which is *das Ding*” (p. 55).<sup>3</sup> Why dumb? It is because it does not yet generate any meaning for the subject to understand; all it does is to stubbornly refer to itself as a signifier. Lacan identifies this dumb self-referential characteristic of the signifier as the secret source of the authority of moral commands by associating it with the (social) “reality principle” capable of restraining the subject’s “pleasure principle.” He argues that the Kantian categorical imperative as a pure structure lacking any empirical content or meaning is *das Ding* par excellence. It is from this standpoint that Žižek launches a full attack on Althusser:

Althusser speaks only of the process of ideological interpellation through which the symbolic machine of ideology is ‘internalized’ into the ideological experience of Meaning and Truth: but we can learn from Pascal that this ‘internalization’, by structural necessity, never fully succeeds, that there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it, and that this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it: it is precisely this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism which confers on Law its unconditional authority; in other words, which . . . sustains what we might call the ideological *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-meant), proper to ideology. (1989, pp. 43-44; original emphasis)

Ideology produces a meaning enjoyable for the subject only when the latter internalizes its symbolic machine comprised of a series of meaningless

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, here one should take into account the fact that in this seminar Lacan still uses the two terms “reality” and “the real” interchangeably

signifiers als Ding. This internalization/symbolization, however, cannot fully succeed because das Ding qua the real, by definition, resists symbolization. There is always something remaining outside of the meaning and truth that ideology provides for the subject. This remainder may appear to be a completely unnecessary thing which rather gets in the way of ideology's smooth operation; but, in truth, it is what constitutes the very materiality that sustains the spiritualized *jouis-sense* experienced by the subject. In order to draw attention to this nonsensical surplus dimension supporting ideology, Žižek proposes, against Althusser, that there is an interpellation which precedes or preconditions any ideological identification or subjectivation. He does so by calling out Kafka as a critic of Althusser. Žižek argues:

And again, it was no accident that we mentioned the name of Kafka concerning this ideological *jouis-sense*[;] we can say that Kafka develops a kind of criticism of Althusser *avant la lettre*, in letting us see that which is constitutive of the gap between 'machine' and its 'internalization.' Is not Kafka's 'irrational' bureaucracy, this blind, gigantic, nonsensical apparatus, precisely the Ideological State Apparatus with which a subject is confronted before any identification, any recognition—any subjectivation—takes place? . . . This interpellation . . . is, so to say, an interpellation without identification/subjectivation. (1989, p. 44; original emphasis)

Hence, the experience of the nonsensical bureaucratic machine that Kafka depicts in *The Castle*, for example, exhibits the dimension of the interpellation without identification/subjectivation, which forms a precondition for every possible generation of symbolic meaning. However, insofar as das Ding, the Castle, is characterized as something that cannot be exhaustively internalized or symbolized, there is always still a remainder or a reminder that returns and functions as a postcondition, so to speak, for the effective working of the symbolic law. This is why Žižek, right after introducing the idea of "interpellation without identification," links it to the idea of *objet petit a* and the Lacanian formula of fantasy:  $\$ \diamond a$ , both of which in principle can emerge only after the internalization of the symbolic machine. Let us also point out in passing that for Žižek this leftover is what will linger as something extremely ambivalent in its effects insofar as it simultaneously allows the subject a chance to separate itself from the symbolic law as in the case of Antigone or Christ.

At this point, however, I would like to bring in a piece of counterevidence that sufficiently shows that Althusser's theory indeed has the dimension of what Žižek calls the "interpellation without identification/subjectivation." Taking seriously the Lacanian thesis that the symbolic law arrives in advance,<sup>4</sup> Althusser in "Freud and Lacan" argues: "These two moments [of the imaginary and the symbolic] are dominated, governed and marked by a single law, the law of the symbolic. . . . [T]he moment of the imaginary [is] the first moment in which the child lives its immediate intercourse with a human being (its mother) without recognizing it practically as the symbolic intercourse it is (i.e., as the intercourse of a small human child with a human mother)" (1971, p. 210; original emphasis).

Contrary to Žižek's claim, Althusser here clearly acknowledges the bare existence of the symbolic machine at work that is not yet experienced by an individual (the child) as the meaning and truth of the law. The child's initial intercourse with the mother is an immediate one; there are no meanings produced yet. The child only experiences the mother als Ding—the Thing that speaks—and not as a "human mother" loaded with meanings. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," too, Althusser insists on the Pascalian thesis—"Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe"—in order to indicate that it is the subjection (and not the subjectivation)<sup>5</sup> of an individual to the rituals themselves that is both logically primary and chronologically prior in every ideological interpellation: "[An individual's] ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject" (1971, p. 169). Hence, it is only natural that the nonsensical, self-referential, dumb characteristic of the law that Žižek reveals with the tautological proposition, "Law is Law" (1989, p. 36), is in fact one of the crucial points that Althusser himself makes while discussing the example of Christian religious ideology. The only difference here is that, for Althusser,

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<sup>4</sup> Lacan's own thesis can be found in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" (2006, p. 231).

<sup>5</sup> Subjectivation takes place at the level of signification, allowing the subject a full access to the meanings of signs; whereas subjection (*assujettissement*) takes place at the level of affects, forcing the bodily submission of an individual to meaningless signifiers.

the prominent example is found in the biblical story of Moses: that is, God's answer to him, "I am that I am" (1971, p. 179), instead of "Law is Law."<sup>6</sup>

Yet, is it not also such a tautological characteristic of the law that Lacan points out at the very end of his exposition of the lower level of the graph of desire? Lacan writes in "The Subversion of the Subject":

Let us set out from the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. Any statement of authority has no other guarantee than its very enunciation, and it is pointless for it to seek it in another signifier, which could not appear outside this locus in any way. Which is what I mean when I say that no metalanguage can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. (2006, p. 311; emphasis added)

It is up to this point that Althusser more or less seems to agree with Lacan. What he does not really agree with is Lacan's construction of the upper level of the graph of desire. What is the reason for this disagreement, then?

Before we proceed with such a question, however, let us discuss another crucial point that Althusser makes with respect to the nature of the child-mother relationship in "Freud and Lacan." His claim is quite surprising: he maintains that the initial relationship that the child has with the mother is the imaginary one rather than the real. We should be clear about this. For Althusser, what is imaginary is not the mother herself as a Thing, but the immediate relationship that the child has with her before it enters the symbolic order proper. Therefore, to characterize the relationship between the child and the mother as imaginary does not necessarily mean that the dimension of the real is ignored. It means, instead, that the relationship between the imaginary and the real is thought of in a more complicated way. They are not caught up in the epistemological dichotomy of the true and the

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<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Judith Butler, for example, argues in her essay "Althusser's Subjection": "[T]he point, both Althusserian and Lacanian, [is] that the anticipations of grammar are always and only *retroactively* installed. . . . Wittgenstein remarks, 'We speak, we utter words, and only later get a sense of their life.' Anticipation of such sense governs the 'empty' ritual that is speech, and ensures its iterability. In this sense, then, we must neither first believe before we kneel nor know the sense of the words before we speak" (1997, p. 124; emphasis added). Mladen Dolar (1993), on the other hand, tries to supplement Žižek's original criticism of Althusser by making a further claim that Althusser misses the crucial difference that separates his emphasis on the "non-sensical materiality" of institutions and practices from Lacan's own emphasis on the "immaterial" characteristic of the "symbolic automatism." Although I cannot engage here in a full discussion of Dolar's position, I would still want to point out that this is merely a fictive issue Dolar himself created, since it is above all Lacan who emphasizes that what gives rise to "repetition automatism" is "the materiality of the signifier" (2006, p. 10; p. 16).

false. This is precisely why later in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” Althusser defines ideology not simply as a distorted representation of the real but as “a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1971, p. 162). Then, what is represented in ideology with more or less distortions is not the real itself, but individuals’ imaginary relationship to it, that is to say, the specific way or mode in which individuals live or experience the real. Therefore, ideology is neither a lie fabricated by “Priests or Despots” for the purpose of deceiving the masses (the Hobbesian idea of ideology), nor a result of the general ignorance of the masses (the Platonist idea of ideology). Nor is it even an illusory product of alienation or alienated labor (the Feuerbachian idea of ideology that Marx follows in *The Jewish Question*).<sup>7</sup> It is, rather, a social relationship that is as material as other kinds of social relationships (for example, the economical one). It is a relationship in which concrete individuals are interpellated into subjects of the society. The Kantian idea of constituting subjects is substituted for by the structuralist idea of constituted subjects. Althusser writes: “The category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (1971, p. 171)

Let us, however, pay attention right away to the fact that what we see in Althusser’s final formulation of ideology is the imaginary and the real—not the symbolic. Throughout the essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” he never uses the term “symbolic.” This is quite astonishing, since, according to Žižek, what Althusser lacks is the real, and not the symbolic. Why this discrepancy? From my point of view, it is because Althusser views the lower level of the graph of desire as the imaginary and the upper level as the symbolic (he just avoids theorizing ideology in terms of the pure symbolic), whereas Žižek sees the lower level as the symbolic, and the upper level as the symbolic cut through by the real (*jouissance*). Then, how about Lacan’s own account of the graph? His perspective laid out in “The Subversion of the Subject” is much closer to Althusser’s view than to Žižek’s.

Žižek, by imposing his own view upon Lacan’s graph of desire, not only distorts his intention behind the construction of the graph of desire but also makes Althusser’s criticism of the upper level unintelligible.

### 3. The Issue of the Upper Level of the Lacanian Graph of Desire

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Balibar, 1993, p. 12.

What is the central question that Lacan tries to answer when he constructs the graph of desire? We can properly locate this question where Lacan makes a transition from the explanation of the lower level to that of the upper level. Right after he concludes his discussion of the lower level by pointing out the tautological nature of the authority of the law, Lacan states:

The fact that the Father may be regarded as the original representative of this authority of the Law requires us to specify by what privileged mode of presence he is sustained beyond the subject who is led to really occupy the place of the Other, namely, the Mother. The question is thus pushed back a step. (2006, p. 688)

Reading such a statement, we realize that the big Other that we encounter at the lower level of the graph is not the father, but actually the mother.<sup>8</sup> The whole construction of the upper level, then, was intended to show why the symbolic order of the father is still necessary besides the imaginary order of the mother, and how the transition is made from the latter to the former. This is also why, toward the end of the discussion of the upper level, Lacan confirms: “The shift of (-φ) (lowercase phi) as phallic image from one side to the other of the equation between the imaginary and the symbolic renders it positive in any case, even if it fills a lack. Although it props up (-1), it becomes Φ (capital phi), the symbolic phallus that cannot be negativized, the signifier of jouissance” (2006, p. 697). Through what, then, does this transition from the imaginary to the symbolic occur? It only occurs through “castration,” which is found at the right hand corner of the upper level, which truly ends the whole graph of desire.

Hence, as Althusser argues, what the lower level depicts is the imaginary relationship that the child has with its mother; whereas the upper level describes the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic or, according to Lacan’s own expression, the “symbolization of the imaginary” (Lacan 2006, p. 695). Žižek, on the other hand, confines the imaginary only to the ideal ego, *i(a)*, of the lower part of the lower level of the graph, while considering the ego-ideal, *I(A)*, as the symbolic proper. After

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<sup>8</sup> Žižek understands this transition in reverse way. After linking the symbolic identification at the lower level to the name of the father, Žižek relates the “*Che Vuoi?*” of the upper level to the function of the mother (1989, p. 121).

distinguishing I(A) qua the place from which the subject observes itself (a structural or formal place), from i(a) qua a collection of ideal features that one can imitate (contents), Žižek argues, “The only difference is that now identification [with I(A)] is no longer imaginary ( . . . a model to imitate) but, at least in its fundamental dimension, symbolic . . . It is this symbolic identification that dissolves the imaginary identification [with i(a)]” (1989, p. 110; emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

I would not say that such an interpretation of Žižek’s is utterly wrong, since it is Lacan himself who seems to formulate the i(a) and the I(A) respectively as the imaginary and the symbolic. However, it must be pointed out right away that this simplistic distinction is rather misleading, and Žižek seems to fall victim to it. In his Seminar I, Lacan not only says, “the superego is essentially located within the symbolic plane of speech, in contrast to the ego-ideal,” but links the function of the ego-ideal to the “imaginary structuration” (1988, p. 102; emphasis added). How should we then think of the two apparently opposing arguments, one of which says the ego-ideal, I (A), is symbolic, while the other says it is imaginary? Reading the following explanation of the ego-ideal from Dylan Evans’s *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* is helpful in understanding the issue:

In his post-war writings Lacan pays more attention to distinguishing the ego-ideal from the ideal-ego . . . Thus in the 1953-4 seminar, he develops the optical model to distinguish between these two formations. He argues that the ego-ideal is a symbolic introjection, whereas the ideal ego is the source of an imaginary projection . . . The ego-ideal is the signifier operating as ideal, an internalized plan of the law, the guide governing the subject’s position in the symbolic order, and hence anticipates secondary (Oedipal) identification. (1997, p. 52; emphasis added)

This explanation in itself seems contradictory, because it simultaneously says two apparently incompatible things: First, according to Evans’s *Dictionary*, the ego-ideal is something symbolic; second, the formation of the ego-ideal “anticipates” the secondary Oedipal identification. Does, then, this mean that the symbolic identification is not only different from the Oedipal identification but also precedes it? Žižek shares the same contradiction, since

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<sup>9</sup> I have replaced I(O) and i(o) with I(A) and i(a).



he argues that the symbolic identification already takes place at the lower level (what happens at the upper level is just that the symbolic thus generated at the lower level is cut through by jouissance, the real); in other words, Žižek is arguing that the symbolic identification takes place without going through the experience of the castration complex which is obviously placed at the upper level.

We would not be able to solve this riddle, unless we refer to the idea of the symbolic that arrives in advance, which Althusser emphasizes over and over again. As the Dictionary rightly points out, the ego-ideal is not really the result of symbolic identification, but that of “symbolic introjection.” This subtle difference is crucial: it shows that the ego-ideal is merely an introjection of the symbolic law which arrives in advance. Although, or precisely because, the symbolic law arrives in advance and thus is experienced by the subject prematurely, it is not experienced in a symbolic way, but merely in an imaginary way. The genuine symbolic identification, which is exactly what is meant by the “secondary (Oedipal) identification,” only comes after the child experiences the “castration complex,” as Lacan later shows in his essay. The primary identification that precedes such a secondary Oedipal identification is, of course, the imaginary identification whose effect is twofold: the formation of the  $i(a)$  and that of the  $I(A)$ . Both formations are the two results of the same process of the identification which is imaginary.<sup>10</sup>

Lacan explains:

This imaginary process, which goes from the specular image to the constitution of the ego along the path of subjectification by the signifier, is signified in my graph by the  $i(a)$  vector, which is one-way, but doubly articulated, once in a short circuit of the  $I(A)$ , and second as a return route of  $A \rightarrow s(A)$ . This shows that the ego is only completed by being articulated not as the  $I$  of discourse, but as a metonymy of its signification (2006, p. 685; emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> Lacan relates projection to the imaginary, and introjection to the symbolic in *Seminar I* (1988, p. 83). Later in *Le Séminaire, livre VIII : Le transfert* (2001, pp. 416-17), he argues that this symbolic introjection is the “primordial identification with the father” that comes well *before* the subject enters the Oedipal situation in which symbolic identification takes place. This is exactly what the symbolic law that arrives in advance means. Before understanding the meaning of the symbolic law, the subject is pre-fixed by it at the “exquisitely virile” position from which it sees and desires the mother as an ideal ego. Hence, the triangle here is not the symbolic triangle, but the imaginary triangle of the child, the mother and the imaginary phallus ( $\phi$ ) that circulates between them.

Lacan's last sentence here is decisive for our discussion. According to Žižek, the I(A) is the place from which the subject observes itself. Through a "symbolic identification" (and not just through a simple introjection of the symbolic), the subject becomes able to put itself in the very place of the Other and thus observes itself from there. This also means that the subject has now become its own master. Žižek says: "he becomes an 'autonomous personality' through his identification with [the ego-ideal]" (1989, p. 110). And yet we must realize that it is just unthinkable that the subject becomes its own master without simultaneously becoming "the I of discourse." According to Lacan's own argument, however, the completed ego of the lower-level process is not "the I of discourse," but merely "a metonymy of its signification." Lacan's argument here is only natural because the distinction between the enunciation and the statement (*énoncée*) is supposed to occur at the upper level of the graph. Žižek keeps bringing what belongs to the upper level down to the lower level. He would have been right if he had said that the game of mastery begins from the point where the distinction between the i(a) and I(A) is introduced; in other words, he is clearly in the wrong when he says that, at this stage of development, the subject already achieves its "autonomous personality." The structure and the vicissitude of such a dialectical game of mastery are in fact what Lacan attempts to demonstrate through the whole construction of the upper level of the graph of desire.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It is true that Lacan in *Seminar I* links the function of the ego-ideal to the question of the sight of the subject; however, he says that the ego-ideal is the place from which the subject observes *the ideal ego*. Of course, insofar as the ideal ego is also considered the mirror image of the ego itself, we may acquiesce in Žižek's interpretation that the ego-ideal is the place from which the subject observes itself. But Žižek further claims that the ego-ideal, unlike the ideal ego, is the place from which the subject can observe itself as likable *despite* its apparent defects (he argues this is why the subject is finally allowed a breathing space). In Lacan's own conceptualization, however, the ego-ideal should be defined as the place from which the subject can view itself as likable *because* all its defects seem to magically disappear. The ego-ideal is the "voice" that, by manipulating the inclination of the plane mirror placed at the center of the Lacanian "optical model," makes the subject see and desire the more or less successfully assembled image of itself. Lacan argues: "In other words, it's the symbolic relation which defines the position of the subject as seeing. It is speech, the symbolic relation, which determines the greater or lesser degree of perfection, of completeness, of approximation, of the imaginary. This representation allows us to draw the distinction between the *Idealich* and the *Ichideal* . . . The ego-ideal governs the interplay of relations on which all relations with others depend. And on this relation to others depends the more or less satisfying character of the imaginary structuration" (1988, p. 141). In other words, the ego-ideal is the Other's perspective in which the subject appears as an ideal image. In his more recent book on Lacan, Žižek rectifies his definition of ego-ideal, and says, "Ego-Ideal is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who watches over me and impels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize" (2006, p. 80). This new definition is almost the opposite of his original definition, and it certainly approaches better Lacan's own; Žižek no longer considers the ego-ideal as the place from which the subject sees itself as likable despite its apparent defects. Still, this new definition, as we can see, is not exactly the same as Lacan's own, which emphasizes the function of the ego-ideal that symbolically *structures* the ideal image of the ego for the subject.

As I mentioned earlier, Lacan's theoretical aim here is nothing but to provide a proper explanation of how the transition is made from the imaginary order to the symbolic. Lacan offers three different models of explanation by making a parallel distinction of three different kinds of death. Lacan's three models of explanation are: (1) the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave (2006, pp. 686-87); (2) Freud's "latest-born myth" of the dead father who does not know he is dead (pp. 693-94); and finally (3) Freud's "castration complex" which is "not a myth" (pp. 695-98). The three kinds of death that respectively correspond to those three models are: (1) the imaginary death (this is why Lacan deals with the Hegelian dialectic while still explaining the lower level); (2) the real death (the father really died; he just does not know that he is dead); and finally (3) the symbolic death. And Lacan claims that it is only through the symbolic death that the "subversion of the subject" can be properly achieved. What he means by subversion here has nothing to do with the revolutionary fiction that Žižek makes up out of Lacan's analysis of the upper level of the graph, namely the fiction in which the subject rises up against the symbolic law, and heroically dies while simultaneously demolishing it. In fact, the Lacanian subversion of the subject is pretty much the same as the Hegelian reversal of the subjective positions between master and slave; it is a matter of the slave's becoming his or her own master—an individual—and becoming free. Lacan's only contention with Hegel is that this reversal or subversion cannot be brought about through the proposed Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. After claiming that the important question to ask is not just the question of death, but exactly the question of "which death, the one that life brings or the one that brings life," Lacan says:

This is clearly the theme of the cunning of reason, whose seductiveness is in no wise lessened by the error I pointed out above. The work, Hegel tells us, to which the slave submits in giving up *jouissance* out of fear of death, is precisely the path by which he achieves freedom. There can be no more obvious lure than this, politically and psychologically. *Jouissance* comes easily to the slave, and it leaves work in serfdom. . . . Paying truly unconscious homage to the story as written by Hegel, he often finds his alibi in the death of the Master. But what about this death? In fact, it is from the Other's locus where he situates himself that he follows the game, thus eliminating all risk to himself

—especially the risk of a joust, in a “self-consciousness” for which death is but a joke. (2006, pp. 686-87; emphasis added)

Lacan’s argument, therefore, is that the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave cannot achieve its goal: the ultimate liberation of the slave subject (the child) from the master (the mother). It cannot do so because all it offers is just a game of imaginary death, that is, the death that involves no real risk and therefore is nothing but a “joke.” No liberation is possible, if no real confrontation with death is carried out.

Then, how about the real death? The real death, for Lacan, is what is paradigmatically expressed in the case of the death of Christ. According to Žižek, Lacan privileges Christianity, the religion of love, over Judaism, Abraham’s religion of anxiety. Žižek argues that Christ is the ultimate answer because he is the one who becomes a “saint” by occupying “the place of objet petit a, of pure object, of somebody undergoing radical subjective destitution” (1989, p. 116). Just like Antigone, he enters the realm of the real (that is, outside or beyond the symbolic) by never compromising his desire. The relation between him and the big Other is thus inverted. By simply persisting in his inert presence, he himself becomes a questionable subject for the big Other (“Che Vuoi?” or “What does he want?”), revealing that it is rather the big Other itself that lacks something and thus desires him qua a miserable bodily human being. He heroically embraces his own death while accomplishing the impossible, namely, the revolution that wipes out the symbolic order of the big Other of that time—the Jewish God.<sup>12</sup>

Is this, however, a correct interpretation of Lacan? First of all, Lacan never opposes Judaism to Christianity. Second, he privileges Abraham over Christ. Lacan says, “There is nothing doctrinal about our role. We need not answer for any ultimate truth; and certainly not for nor against any particular religion . . . No doubt the corpse is a signifier, but Moses’ tomb is as empty for Freud as that of Christ’s was for Hegel. Abraham revealed his mystery to neither of them” (2006, p. 693) Therefore, the issue is not laid down as Judaism versus Christianity; Lacan puts into the same class Moses, who is

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<sup>12</sup> Žižek first identifies Christ with Antigone (1989, pp. 114-17), and then links Antigone’s act of revolt to Walter Benjamin’s notion of revolution (“the obliteration of the signifying network itself” or “the total ‘wipe-out’ of historical tradition”). Žižek writes: “If the Stalinist perspective is that of Creon, the perspective of the Supreme Good assuming the shape of the Common Good of the State, the perspective of Benjamin is that of Antigone—for Benjamin, revolution is an affair of life and death; more precisely: of the second, symbolic death” (p. 144). In his later works such as *For They Know Not What They Do* (2002) and *The Fragile Absolute* (2000), Žižek renounces Antigone as a figure swayed by a fantasy of phallogocentric heroism, while keeping Christ and Benjamin as true revolutionaries.

definitely not a Christian, and Christ. Furthermore, the one who possesses the secret solution is not Christ but Abraham. Abraham did not let Christ know what he knew.

Why is Christ's real death not the ultimate answer to the question of a possible salvation of the subject? Lacan answers:

We cannot ask this question of the subject qua I. He is missing everything he needs in order to know the answer, since if this subject, I, was dead, he would not know it, as I said earlier. Thus he does not know that I'm alive. How, therefore, will I prove it to myself? For I can, at most, prove to the Other that he exists, not, of course, with the proofs of the existence of God, with which centuries have killed him, but by loving him, a solution introduced by the Christian Kerygma. It is, in any case, too precarious a solution for us to even think of using it to circumvent our problem, namely: 'What am I?' (2006, p. 694; emphasis added).

Hence, Lacan's argument is that one cannot achieve his salvation by embracing his own real death, namely by sacrificing himself for the love of the Other. He cannot do so because there remains the ultimate question that the self-sacrifice of Christ never properly answers: What am I? In other words, what is the use of the saintly love of the Other if I am dead, that is, if I turn into a Non-being? Thus we see Lacan continue, "I am in the place from which 'the universe is a law in the purity of Non-Being' is vociferated. And not without reason for, by protecting itself, this place makes Being itself languish. This place is called Jouissance, and it is Jouissance whose absence would render the universe vain" (2006, p. 694). In short, without my jouissance, the whole universe would be vain.

On the other hand, it is precisely Abraham who survives the big Other. The body of his precious son (the corpse, the signifier) does not disappear like Christ's or Moses's. What is, then, the mystery that Abraham is holding in his hand without ever revealing it to Moses or Christ? The answer is the symbolic death, in which one dies a little. Abraham kills his precious son in a symbolic ritual, and thus paradoxically brings life to him. Let us here remember Lacan's original question again: "We need to know which death, the one that life brings or the one that brings life." As we already saw, the first death brought by life is the imagined natural death of the master that

Hegel's slave awaits indefinitely whereas the second death is the symbolic one through which life is finally brought to the subject.

Lacan links this notion of symbolic death to the problematic of castration complex. He declares this is indeed the moment of the "subversion": "In the castration complex we find the mainspring of the very subversion that I am trying to articulate here by means of its dialectic" (2006, p. 695). And yet the freedom that the subject finally achieves through the castration complex is not a freedom from the law, but a freedom through the law. Thus Lacan argues:

In fact, the image of the ideal Father is a neurotic's fantasy. Beyond the Mother—demand's real Other, whose desire (that is, her desire) we wish she would tone down—stands out the image of a father who would turn a blind eye to desire. This marks—more than it reveals—the true function of the Father, which is fundamentally to unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law (2006, p. 698; emphasis added)

Accordingly, it is just far from Lacan's intention to show how the symbolic law is cut through by the real (jouissance) and thus becomes vulnerable, allowing the subject to heroically rise against the law of the father and fight it. What is cut through by jouissance is not the symbolic law of the father, but the child's own imaginary relationship with the mother which appears as an imaginary game of mastery and control (think of the famous Fort-Da game here). Jouissance that results from an infantile masturbation stirs up a great amount of anxiety in the child. This anxiety which manifests itself in the fantasmatic image of the child's being devoured by its mother, can be resolved only by the intervention from the side of the father who castrates the child and thus kills it a little. The two deaths, the imaginary death of the master (the mother) and the real death of Christ (the child), represent the child's failed attempts to become its own master while still staying in the imaginary relationship with its mother. The symbolic death is the escape the child finally finds. While being submitted to the law of the father, the child is simultaneously set free under the very same paternal law, because this law is the kind of law which does not exclude or repress the subject's desire but rather liberates it paradoxically by setting certain limits on it.

Now we can see why Althusser could not accept such a conclusion of the upper level of the Lacanian graph of desire. From Althusser's point of

view, all that the upper level does is theoretically justify the necessity of the symbolic law of the father. In 1976, Althusser wrote two essays relevant to this issue: “The Discovery of Dr. Freud” and “Note on the ISAs.” In “The Discovery of Dr. Freud,” Althusser intensely criticizes Lacan and argues: “Lacan thus continued by constituting a whole theory distinguishing the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. Freud, who knew what was up when it came to the unconscious, had never resorted to such a theory, in which all is conceived not as a function of the unconscious but as a function of the symbolic, that is, of language and the law and thus of the ‘name of the father’” (1996, pp. 90-91). We can clearly see from this that one of Althusser’s major complaints about Lacan’s theory indeed revolved around the symbolic, whose necessity Lacan tried to elevate to the level of scientific necessity by famously claiming that “a letter always arrives at its destination” (2006, p. 30). Criticizing such a necessity as a teleological illusion, Althusser opposed to it his “materialist thesis”: “it happens [il arrive] that a letter does not arrive at its destination” (1996, p. 92). Although he did not reject the notion of the symbolic in its entirety (for one thing, he kept the idea of its early arrival which prepared for the subject an empty place within the ideological coordinates of a given society), it seems Althusser never accepted the idea that it was possible to make a complete transition from the imaginary order to the pure symbolic and thereby effectively pacify antagonisms and contradictions through an introduction of the name of the father.<sup>13</sup> He argues in the same essay (though in a different context),

That peace [transacted with the father] . . . represents for [the child] his sole chance of one day becoming ‘a man like daddy,’ possessing ‘a woman like mommy,’ and being able to desire her and possess her not only unconsciously but consciously and publicly, either in marriage or in the freedom of a love relation, when the state of the society’s law allows it. I say that this strength can be quite fragile because if the Oedipus complex has not been negotiated sufficiently well, if the peace (which in truth is never completely achieved) has not been suitably realized in the child’s unconscious, elements of contradiction subsist in the child’s unconscious that then give rise to what Freud calls neurotic formations. (1996, pp. 99-100; emphasis added)

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<sup>13</sup> Balibar (1994, pp. 168-69) argues that a major point of the confrontation between Althusser and Lacan was formed around the category of the “symbolic.”

It would be interesting to juxtapose this passage with another from “Note on the ISAs.” Althusser writes:

There are several reasons for the fact that the unification of the ruling ideology is always ‘incomplete’ and always ‘has to be resumed’ . . . Just as the class struggle never ceases, so too the struggle of the ruling class for the uniformity of the existing ideological elements and forms never ceases. This means that the ruling ideology—even though it is its function—can never completely solve its own contradictions, which are a reflection of the class struggle. (1983, p. 456; 1995, pp. 254-55)

How can one miss that such arguments of Althusser’s are in fact quite similar to Žižek’s claim of “the inconsistent Other of jouissance”? For, as we can see, Althusser too claims that the ruling ideology is always “incomplete.” What Althusser has is, of course, class struggle instead of jouissance. However, it is also true that, for Žižek, as long as ideology is at stake, the real implies above all social antagonisms (the two most often mentioned examples being class antagonism and sexual antagonism). Is it then too wild an idea that, at least on this point, Žižek shares more with Althusser than with Lacan?<sup>14</sup>

As we have seen thus far, Žižek criticizes Althusser for taking an obsolete structuralist position, which reduces the subject to a mere effect of the symbolic structure. Žižek, on the other hand, characterizes Lacan as an exceptional theorist who, by not surrendering to the predominant structuralist ideology, opens up a path to a possible theorization of the subject’s subversion. He often goes so far as to daub Lacan as a thinker most proper to a radical left. However, I believe I have amply shown in this article that this description is dubious. Žižek’s portrayal of the debate, furthermore, fails to notice that, when the two theorists collided on the question of structuralism in the 1960s, the issue did not really concern whether the subject was separable from the structure, but how the ideological formation as a social practice was to be situated in relation to other social practices such as politics and economy. It was actually Lacan who upheld structuralism in this debate. I cannot engage with this issue in this article. I would simply like to suggest, by way of a conclusion, that the question of structuralism seems

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, this is not to say that Althusser’s category of the real is the same as Lacan’s. On this issue, too, they diverge as well as converge. In order to discuss their difference properly, I will need to take another long detour.



to be much more complicated than that of choosing in the last analysis between subject and structure, or between freedom and necessity. We would do much better if we stay away from such sterile dual oppositions, which themselves seem to belong to a vulgar version of structuralism. In order even to properly inquire into a possible theorization of the subversion of the dominant ideology, it is necessary to find another set of questions, just as great structuralists, including both Althusser and Lacan, once did in their own ways. This would be one of the positive lessons of structuralism that may not easily be reversed.

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