The New School

Visual and Cultural Studies

There are a number of subtle and complex points about self-deception and fetishism that we didn't have time to discuss last week. This may also be a good time to review some of the semiotic and psychoanalytic concepts used by historians and critics of visual studies, and to address some questions that many of you have raised about the "humanistic" approach we're taking in this course and how it differs from a purely scientific analysis.

Understanding and Explanation

The first (minor) point has to do with the various uses of psychoanalytic concepts in cultural analysis. It's important to keep in mind the distinction between analyses used for purposes of interpretation and understanding, on the one hand, and analyses used in scientific explanations on the other. The two involve radically different goals and procedures.

The task of science is to **explain** a phenomenon. A good explanation must be grounded in, and stick very closely to, the data of events and facts in attempting to answer very specific kinds of questions. The political scientist interested in contemporary foreign affairs, for example, might address the following questions: What were the circumstances and events leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003? What were the causes of the military action?

The kinds of answers sought in these cases are responses to "why-questions": Why did the U.S. invade Iraq? Why Iraq rather than North Korea, Iran, or Venezuela? Why was it done in March of 2003 rather than some other time? Etc., etc. The first thing to notice is the way each question is framed and what would count as an adequate answer. The investigation is aimed at producing a rational connection between the causes and effects of the phenomena being investigated.

Consider another issue and hypothesis, one closer to our studies this semester: Persistent cultural representations of women as irrational, dangerous, and weak reinforce gender inequality in society. Is the hypothesis true? Is it born out by facts? How can we determine this? A properly **scientific** approach requires attention to **observable** data and the testing of psychological and social **mechanisms** sufficient to produce such a result. The successful inquiry will lead to an explanation of the phenomena in question, i.e. an understanding of the mechanisms responsible for producing the phenomena in question.

Understanding taken by itself bears a looser relation to the truth or facts of the matter. It appeals not so much to cause and effect as to **coherence**. Does a given account or story sound plausible? Does it make sense? I don't want to oversimplify matters here. Explanation and understanding are not unrelated. On the contrary, understanding is a preliminary stage and necessary component of explanation. One has to grasp the explanation in order to evaluate it. You can't do anything with it if it doesn't "make sense". So understanding is grasping an account — seeing it as coherent and meaningful. Explanation takes the analysis a step further in specifying a "model" or underlying mechanism that provides a sufficient account of the causal factors responsible for the object of explanation. Scientific analysis doesn't stop there; it also makes use of techniques for testing hypotheses and refining the model. But this much is enough for our purposes.

My point is simply this. Explanation is at the core of scientific method; understanding is part of our common, everyday, and pre-scientific engagement with the world and those around us.

What are we doing in visual studies? Our questions are typically focused on what images do — what effects they produce. This involves interpretive and descriptive analyses together with a certain measure of speculation. Concepts are also an essential part of our analyses. In some cases, new concepts are needed to focus our attention on, and group together, relevant phenomena. Without them, what you experience may not make apparent an explicit and identifiable phenomenon. I'll give an example of that in the next section. For now, suffice it to say that what you **know** about a thing, the **concepts** you have available, and what you **perceive** are the basic tools at your disposal for understanding the world and your experience of it.
Visual and Cultural Analysis

One of the central aims of visual studies and of this course in particular is to enable us to think carefully about the use of images in ways that both enable and limit human experience. To do this we need tools — concepts — in order to focus our attention on a range of phenomena that are often overlooked. A simple example illustrates how this might work.

Suppose you see a movie that you find puzzling, visually compelling, and disturbing. Your immediate response may be to sort of laugh it off as bizarre or offensive and go on without giving it much thought. But then suppose you find some of the images and situations depicted in the film staying with you. They replay in your head while you're walking down the street, riding the subway, drinking coffee, and lying in bed. Perhaps you connected with one of the characters in the film, experiencing a kind of empathy for that person. The character in question may do things that you would never do, or say things that you would never say. Yet you felt, even though you may not even be conscious of it, a kind of fascination, interest, and pleasure in watching them on the screen. Clearly, if nothing else, your imagination has been stimulated.

This is one way in which interesting questions can arise in situations we frequently encounter in our everyday lives. The fact that we usually drop such questions and go on to something else at this stage is not necessarily due to lack of interest. It may be that we're not really sure what to do next even if we wanted to pursue it. We can talk with friends about the film, if they're interested. But that doesn't always resolve the issues and provide the satisfaction you were looking for. What we may need in such instances are new ideas or concepts that will allow us see what's going on both in the film and in ourselves and the world around us.

My point here is perhaps an obvious one, but well worth remembering. It's simply that concepts enable us to think — they're the fundamental elements of thought. Like any tool, they're only good if they produce results. If you pick up a tool that doesn't work, you put it down and try another one. The result one needs from concepts is a shift in focus toward a range of phenomena that you might otherwise have overlooked. If they enable you to see something new or in a new way, they're useful. If not, don't waste your time; try another one.

How is it that concepts enable us to see things we might otherwise overlook? Take, for example, almost any of the serial episodes of "The X-Files". Scully and Mulder are out to uncover what's behind a series of murders occurring on the East Coast. During the course of the one-hour episode a number of questions and possibilities are raised. Are the murders parts of a government conspiracy? Are extraterrestrials responsible? Is there some supernatural explanation? Does the cigarette-smoking man have something to do with the murders? Are they connected to events in Agent Mulder's past? To Scully's abduction? We're told, "The truth is out there." But what is the truth?

One thing is for sure. No matter how large our toolbox of concepts becomes, we may never arrive at a definite solution. Why? Because at the time we were viewing the episode in question, the writers of "The X-Files" had not even formulated the solution. The truth that would explain the events depicted in the series may have been "out there" in some metaphysical sense of the term, but it had not yet been formulated by the writers. We had to wait for the final episode for narrative closure when everything would be explained. But, as is often the case with good suspense, even then we were left in the dark!

My point in developing this rather convoluted example is that one of the things that intrigues viewers of "The X-Files" and keeps them watching is a productive ambiguity in the plot which allows for numerous possibilities or ways of explaining the mysterious events confronting agents Scully and Mulder, but no clear or final answers. The nature of certain individuals and situations remains ambiguous. The cigarette smoking man may be an FBI agent, a conspirator, Mulder's father, or all three. His true identity is never made clear to the viewer, so he may be any one of these things or something else altogether. The killer may be a psychic or merely someone with access to inside information about the lives of the victims. Or there may be a growing population of extra-terrestrials who arrived on earth some time ago and are systematically replacing human beings with an alien life form. You get my point: It's these ambiguities that intensify the imagination and allow the viewer to project his or her own fantasies into the scenario. That's why I call it a productive ambiguity.

This phenomenon of productive ambiguity is not unique to "The X-Files". Some of the most compelling visual images in the arts and in advertising are ambiguous in ways that stimulate fantasies, desires, fears, and imaginings. My point is simply that through the use of this concept of productive ambiguity we can think not only about "The X-
Files" but about lots of other phenomena of both a fictional and non-fictional variety and recognize the stimulating and creative effects of ambiguity — something we might not have fully appreciated prior to our making use of the concept.

Notice that by introducing the concept of a productive ambiguity I have not really explained anything. The concept does not make clear why we take pleasure in some ambiguities and not others, or why the engagement of the imagination by an ambiguity is stimulating. But with it we may be in a better position to think about many of our own experiences and the experiences of those around us. In that sense, the concept has been productive and has given a movement and direction to our thoughts.

**Lacan's Three Orders and the Concept of Culture**

Next I want to borrow some concepts from the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to give us a way of thinking about fetishism, culture, and the way that we are frequently cut off from social engagement with others due to structural material relations. We'll start with a rough sketch of Lacan's three orders of human experience: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

Lacan attempts to explain human subjectivity, development, and experience with respect to these three orders. In Lacanian theory, the **imaginary** is characterized in part, as the name suggests and to put it very crudely, by images and imagination — the "order of appearances". By means of the imagination, one can identify with other people and images (see oneself as the other, or the other as oneself) and incorporate these images — this "misrecognition", as Lacan would say — into the constitution and reconstitution of the self or ego. Because this process of self-construction entails borrowing and appropriating images, Lacan characterizes the imaginary as the realm of **misrepresentation**. While Lacan diminishes the positive role of imagination in the acquisition of knowledge, others (such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray) attribute much greater value and significance to the (female) imaginary as that which resists certain constraints of the (patriarchal) symbolic order, to which we turn next.

The **symbolic** is principally the order of language, differentiation, communication, and the regulation of desire (Law). Lacan characterizes the symbolic order as completely **autonomous**, **contingent**, and independent of genetics and biological determination. "Once the symbolic order has arisen, it creates the sense that it has always been there..." In Freudian terms, it rechannels the aims of the pleasure principle according to the dictates of the reality principle. The symbolic order is "the realm of culture as opposed to the imaginary order of nature".2

In contrast to the imaginary and the symbolic orders, the **real** is a "smooth, undifferentiated space" prior to language and the imposition of symbolic order and laws.3 It is "everything that has yet to be symbolized".4 "Reality" (not to be confused with "the real") is created in the symbolic order by "canceling out" the real, i.e. cutting it up and, thus, annihilating portions of it with names and propositions.

What cannot be said in ... [a given] language is not part of its reality; it does not exist, strictly speaking. In Lacan's terminology, existence is a product of language; language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality), things which had no existence prior to being ciphered, symbolized, or put into words.... [Thus] the real is perhaps best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization; and it may perfectly well exist 'alongside' and in spite of a speaker's considerable linguistic capabilities.5

A central assumption of Lacanian psychoanalysis, of course, is that the symbolic has the capacity to **transform** the real by bringing it into language and, to that extent, "erasing" it. For example, a blockage or fixation is an aspect of

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2 Evans, 202. "Like Claude Levi-Strauss and other anthropologists, Lacan points to the prohibition of incest as the kernel of the legal structure which differentiates culture from nature; 'The primordial Law is therefore that which in regulating marriage superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating'.” (120)
3 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 24. The real is "prior to language" not simply or solely in a *temporal* sense but in a *logical* sense as well.
4 Fink, 26.
5 Fink, 25. This characterization of Lacan's is derived from Heidegger.
the real that has become a stumbling block for the subject, which is to say the subject is unable to symbolize some problematic aspect of the real that lies outside signification. The result is a traumatic experience. "By getting an analysand to dream, daydream, and talk, however incoherently, about a traumatic "event," we make him or her connect it up with words, bring it into relation with ever more signifiers." The obstacle is removed; the stumbling block is "dialecticized".

Culture and the Symbolic Order

Now, given these rough distinctions, let's consider Lacan's claim that culture (in contrast to nature) can be identified with the symbolic order.

The contrast between culture and nature in the western tradition goes back at least to the ancient Greeks. The Greeks divided reality into

1. *phusis* ("nature" or, as Aristotle would say, that which arises spontaneously and has its principle of movement and growth within it), and
2. *nomos* (custom or control; that which is governed from the outside by rules and laws).

So, for example, Aristotle used this notion of spontaneous growth or movement to distinguish the natural from the artificial components of a wooden bed by means of the following thought experiment. If the bed was buried in the ground and something was to grow from it, it would be a tree and not another bed. His point is that we would not expect a new bed to grow from the existing bed because the form that makes the bed a bed rather than a table, a chair, a bench, etc. is imposed on the matter (wood) from outside, i.e. by human artifice, not by nature. Thus, we might say that the practice of making beds as well as all the arts belong to human culture, i.e. a realm in which things are governed by rules imposed from the outside (relative to a practice or custom) rather than from within.

But what would it mean for Lacan to identify culture as "external law" with the symbolic order? And what is the "nature" (matter) on which it is imposed? Is it the real?

Before attempting to answer these questions we need to introduce just a few additional concepts.

Discourse and Knowledge

Consider the following argument.

Forms, material objects, movements, marks on a page or a wall, sounds, etc. have no meaning or value in themselves. These things acquire whatever meanings they have only through interpretation within a discourse. If this is true, then nothing has meaning or value "in itself" outside of a discourse. Thus, to have knowledge of a thing is to recognize the role it plays within the set of relations that constitute a discourse. It's always within a discourse that knowledge is produced.

Our understanding of and assessment of this argument depends on our understanding the concept of a discourse. What is it? What is its object? What does it bring into focus? What we need are some concrete examples and, in this case, we'll borrow them from Michel Foucault.

The concepts found in recent cultural analyses — madness, sexuality, justice, to name just a few — have meaning only in relation to other concepts and forms of social interaction. The same is true for knowledge about these things. Thus, Foucault claims, a discourse is determined by four components:

• **statements**, for example about sexuality ("We're addicted to sex today." "Sex sells". "The French don't think the sex life of a President is related to his or her capacity to govern effectively." “Sexual identity is culturally constructed.”)

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6 Fink, 26.
7 "Every craft [art; *techne*] is concerned with coming to be; and the exercise of the craft is the study of how something that admits of being and not being comes to be, something whose origin is in the producer and not in the product. For a craft is not concerned with things that are or come to be by necessity; or with things that are by nature, since these have their origin in themselves." [1140a11-15] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Terence Irwin (trans.), Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985, 153.
• **rules** prescribing certain ways of framing one's thinking about sexuality and "family relations" — a framework which makes possible some thoughts while excluding others. So, for example, in the context of and discussion about family life, the concept *family* is often understood solely in terms of the nuclear model. According to this way of thinking, i.e. these "rules" governing the discourse on family relations in western societies, there has traditionally been no place for two women or two men in the proper role of "parents". The rules or conventions "prohibit", in a largely subliminal way, our including any possible combination of two (or more) people as parents. The tendency is to imagine the traditional construct of a man and a woman.

• **subjects** who are implicated (constituted) in the discourse (These "subject positions" or "identities" vary widely. Consider, for example, the following: lipstick lesbian, macho male, pervert, sensitive and thoughtful lover, abusive husband, faithful wife, etc. These are types that one finds represented in conversation, advertising, film, TV, etc.)

• **practices** (e.g. punishment, confession, marriage) within institutions (i.e. prisons, asylums, churches) established for regulating the subjects created by the discourse.

Given these variables, it follows that any particular discourse or **assemblage** of discourses ("discursive formation") is **historical** and **contingent** — the rules, practices, subjects and statements will very likely change over time and vary from place to place.

For example, it has been claimed (by Foucault and others) that homosexuality and the primary subject of the discourse — "the homosexual" — did not exist prior to the late-nineteenth century.

While this may seem to be an extravagant and preposterous claim, it becomes more plausible if we distinguish

• objective acts (same-sex relations)
• concepts (the *homosexual*)
• connotations associated with the objective acts and the parties involved.

With these factors in mind, it becomes more plausible to claim that while certain physical acts have always occurred among humans (and other primates) of the same sex, it was not until the nineteenth century in Europe that a particular way of life — a "cultural identity" — emerged, was brought into focus, and made salient by the concept of the *homosexual*.

Finally, since discourse and knowledge play an instrumental role in the regulation, discipline, and control of various social practices within which some individuals exercise control over others, they are intimately linked to **power** relations, assume **authority**, and have real (material) effects. For example, it may or may not be true that single parenting is the leading cause of higher rates of juvenile delinquency and crime. But if the dominant culture believes that it is, perpetuates such a view through media images and narratives, and imposes painful sanctions on single parents, there are real consequences for both the parents and their children.

**Back to Lacan**

Now perhaps we can see a little better what Lacan's claim might mean. Human beings are, to a large extent, **self-defining** and **self-generating** organisms. We constitute and re-constitute ourselves as subjects through discourse. As **human** beings, distinct from other animals, we come to be the creatures we are **in and through language** and the **symbolic order**. This is the medium within which we create a world or reality to inhabit; where we "cultivate" what it means to be human, and engage in social practices that give meaning to our lives. In that sense, the symbolic order — the realm in which concepts, thoughts, and meanings are formed — is culture.

I won't go into the many implications that follow from this conclusion. But we must at least keep in mind and question the very claim itself. What does it mean to be self-defining? Is there anything "outside discourse" that plays a role in human experience and behavior? Is the imaginary limited to pre-linguistic experience? Is it possible to draw on the imaginary in ways that enable one to circumvent or escape the symbolic order? How has the gendering of the imaginary as feminine and symbolic as masculine shaped or distorted the representations of men and women, as well as the rules, practices, and subjects of our everyday lives?
Theories of the Fetish and Fetishism

Now we are ready to explore the phenomenon of fetishism. Our analysis will focus on late modern and contemporary uses of the concept, setting aside the interesting history of the concept going back at least to the eighteenth century. The modern discussion of fetishism has been traced back to an article published in 1887 by Alfred Binet. The author argues that the psychological mechanism that causes a particular type of "sexual perversion" is the same mechanism responsible for ritual practices in so-called "primitive" societies. Binet's hypothesis exerted significant influence in the development of clinical psychology and, ultimately, the writings of Sigmund Freud. Karl Marx also argued that there is a close link between the irrational belief in the divine powers associated with certain material objects in traditional societies and the way commodities are often over-valued in modern capitalist societies.

Fetishism involves the attribution of autonomy and power to an artificial object, i.e. a mere thing. This typically involves a split between belief and knowledge. Belief in the inherent value or autonomy of the object is accompanied by a willful disregard for one's knowledge that the thing is only an object. Thus, as Freud points out, there is both a displacement, i.e. ascribing to the object powers and relations typically associated with living beings of some sort, and a disavowal of what one knows to be the case, viz. that the object in question has, in fact, no such powers. The "splitting of the subject" was articulated by Freud in his essay on fetishism.

The ego often enough finds itself in the position of fending off some demand from the external world which it feels distressing and ... this is effected by means of a disavowal of the perceptions which bring to knowledge this demand from reality. Disavowals of this kind occur very often and not only with fetishists; and whenever we are in a position to study them they turn out to be half-measures, incomplete attempts at detachment from reality. The disavowal is always supplemented by an acknowledgement; two contrary and independent attitudes always arise and result in the situation of there being a splitting of the ego. Once more the issue depends on which of the two can seize hold of the greater [physical] intensity.9

Precisely the same structure is present in both sexual and commodity fetishism. Take, for example, a recent ad for Gucci. Here it is clearly suggested that the material objects, Gucci clothes, are imbued with the power to control another person's behavior, to make them blindly submit to one's desires and commands, to become a sex slave, etc., etc. Or, this ad for CK One — a kind of Viagra for twenty-somethings. The charade is both obvious and amusing to

9 Sigmund Freud, quoted in Laura Mulvey, "Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture", October, Vol. 65 (Summer 1993), 6.
the sophisticated viewer, but the allure remains. One should never under-estimate the "pleasure to be gained from belief in imaginary systems of representation". But, at the same time, what we witness in such cases is the longing for that which we inherently lack as subjects — that undefinable and unspeakable power to command the desire of the other. By believing in the object, we struggle to retain our belief that "something special" does exist. Our only hope of achieving it is by attaching ourselves to that which has it. The irony here is that every instance of this fetishist belief is accompanied by the knowledge, albeit disavowed, that the "something special" we seek is not really in the object at all. And, perhaps, it's that traumatic realization of the double lack — in both subject and object — that we avoid at all cost.

Let's go back to Marx for just a second. What is the "true" source of value of an artifact, for example, a pair of shoes? Marx claims it's to be found in the material conditions of production, i.e. the labor power of its producer — the time, effort, and skill brought to bear in the design and fabrication of the shoes.

If this labor power could ever inscribe itself indexically on the commodity it produces, if it could leave a tangible mark of the time and skill taken in production, there would be no problem [in determining its value]. But the index, the sign based on direct imprint, fails. Value has to be established by exchange. Marx shows how value can be marked by the equation of different commodities of equal value. One commodity acts as a mirror, reflecting and thus expressing the value of the value of the other or, indeed, of as many others as it takes for the equivalence to balance. This stage is analogous to the Peircian icon. Slavoj Zizek has pointed out that this process is analogous to Lacan's mirror phase, in which the two sides of the exchange literally have to represent each other. While value may be inscribed through this reflective process, it depends on the literal presence of the goods, a barter that has to be repeated as often as exchange takes place. Complex economic systems, with wide-scale production, exchange, and circulation, developed a means of expressing equivalence through a generalized sign system: money. The exchange of money takes place on the level of the symbolic, and the expression of value acquires the abstract and flexible quality of language. Not only does money, as the sign of value, detach itself from the literalness of object exchange, but it also facilitates the final erasure of labor power as the primary source of value. The referent, as it were, shifts away from the production process toward circulation and the market, where the commodity emerges and circulates with an apparently autonomous value attached to it. In Marx's terms, this appearance of self-generating value gives rise to commodity fetishism, the disavowal, that is, of locating the source of value in labor power. And, at the same time, a commodity's market success depends on the erasure of the marks of production — any trace of indexicality, the grime of the factory, the mass-molding of the machine, and, most of all, the exploitation of the worker. It instead presents the market with a seductive sheen, competing to be desired. While money appears as a sophisticated, abstract, and symbolic means of exchange, capitalism resurrects the commodity as image.

Any indexical trace of the producer or the production process is wiped out, in a strange reenactment of the failure of the workers' labor power to stamp itself on its products as value. Any ghostly presence of labor that might haunt the commodity is canceled by the absolute pristine newness and the never-touched-by-hand packaging that envelops it. And the great intellectual achievement of capitalism, the organization of an economic system as a symbolic system, can continue in its own interests. The commodity fetish masks something that is disturbing and secret for a particular form of economic exploitation and combines the topographical with the semiotic. It represents the logic of symbolic exchange as an imaginary investment in object as such. And that object then becomes endowed with a phantasmagorical otherness of hidden 'something' behind its surface appearance. Surface and depth. It is this dichotomy that psychoanalysis and semiotics have challenged with the concept of displacement. And it is here, in topographical imaginaries, that homologies between the otherwise incompatible Marxist and Freudian concepts may emerge.

This account combines classical Marxist theory with familiar semiotic and psychoanalytic concepts. In doing so it provides a framework for understanding fetishism in structural and institutional terms. According to Marx, Freud and Lacan, fetishism entails both displacement of belief and disavowal of knowledge captured in the fetishist's response, "I know very well, but just the same...." But, of course, that's not the whole story.

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10 Ibid., 11.
11 Ibid., 9f.
In Zizek's more recent analyses of fetishism, by bringing together aspects of the theories of Marx, Louis Althusser, and Lacan, he attempts a more radical interpretation of the Marxist claim about the fetishist inversion. We begin with the observation that fetishism is one among many forms of "reification", i.e. a phenomenon of ascribing real, material existence to that which exists only in thought or imagination. In many familiar cases of reification, one takes as a natural property of a person or object that which derives solely from its place within a structural system of relations. So, for example, in the Middle Ages one might treat a king as having powers that were inherent to his very being as king, rather than attributing those powers to the position he occupies within the symbolic network of social relations, powers which are independent of the particular individual who happens to occupy the position. The situation is similar in the case of the commodity fetish which is treated as if it had magical powers when, in fact, one knows that it is merely a thing which plays an instrumental role within a symbolic system of exchange. In both cases there is a "belief" (displacement) in the value and power of the object that persists along with a disavowal of what the subject knows about the real nature of the object.

[T]he 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. 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.12

In order to grasp Zizek's radical and paradoxical claim, a number of observations are needed. First of all, he claims that the "subject supposed to believe" is a constitutive feature of the symbolic order. It is contrasted with the "subject supposed to know". These are both technical terms within the lexicon of Lacanian theory. The "subject supposed to know" is, among other things, the embodiment of absolute certainty and, as such, associated not with the "big Other" of the symbolic order (which is based on belief and "trust") but with the Real.

But here we must make explicit note of Zizek's counter-intuitive characterization of belief.

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. 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.13 [Emphasis added.]

This notion of belief may strike you as a bit strange. Zizek gets it from German Idealist philosophy (Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, etc.). We can't go into it in detail, so think of it as that which finds a necessary correlate in the other or external phenomenon. An analogy might be light. It makes its appearance felt only when it reaches a limit, e.g. when it makes contact with an opaque, reflecting surface. The reflection of light is the necessary condition for its manifestation as light. So with belief; it exists only in its finding its being in the external object. I'm not sure how much that helps, but try holding on to whatever you can and we'll see where it goes.


13 Ibid.
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" ([as in] "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…. 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…. Is not the primordial version of this substitution, by which "somebody else does it [believes] 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…. By way of surrendering my innermost content … 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 [as in the Christian account of Jesus dying for the sins of others], 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…. 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…. Therein resides the paradox of the notion of the "performativa" 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. 14 [Emphases added.]

14 Ibid.