

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Seven, Number Two

Identification and desire: Lacan and Althusser versus Deleuze and Guattari? A short note with an intercession from Slavoj Žižek

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Introduction

This paper constitutes an exploration of the construction of academic identity through a retrospective autoethnographic narrative analysis. In essentially experimental mode I set out to examine processes of identification evident in this account, and in particular, the understanding of *desire* that resonates within it for, it can be argued, without desire there is no identity. I began my analysis by following two lines of thought concerning desire. The first, drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, conceives of desire negatively as lack (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 2001). The second deriving from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2004) constructs desire as abundance, a positive flow. These two conceptualisations may, at first sight, appear to be in opposition but could things be otherwise? The question I arrived at was to what extent can these different conceptualisations of desire be held to be

incommensurable or is it possible to arrive at an accommodation between desire as both lack and abundance? Reaching an impasse I turned to Slavoj Žižek, who

as someone who is true to the late Lacan, is desperately searching for a way to come to terms with Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus/Thousand plateaus formulations, restaging in effect the late Lacan's own attempt to come to terms with Deleuze & Guattari. (Jagodzinski, 2010, p.12)

Žižek's '*encounter* between [these] two incompatible fields' (2004, p. xi; original emphasis) provided the inspiration needed to locate the crux of the matter, and enabled me at least to reach an understanding of the question being addressed: if identification is always (already?) an inherently unstable process, located within a space which I shall designate a narrative space, how does a mobilisation of desire which moves between lack and abundance enable a potentially fruitful re-conceptualisation of processes of identification to emerge?

The Discourse of the University.

[The university is] full of people who have adopted the master signifiers of their institutions as their own, in a position of hysterical identification, imagining that in belonging to a "venerable" or "dynamic" or "powerful" institution, they too acquire these characteristics. (Bailey, 2009, p.159)

I am becoming hysterical.

In the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE2008)¹ I desired, above all else, and in the language of the RAE , to be *Returnable*...

At first I was a

Possible (Returnable)

Then I became a

Probable (Returnable)

But finally I achieved

Full

Returnability

(Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life at last I've found thee!
Ah! I know at last the secret of it all!
All the longing, seeking, striving, waiting, yearning
The burning hopes, the joy and idle tears that fall...)²

This desire was about identification and recognition as an academic. My subjection within the academy was complete – or was it? Where did this desire come from, this ‘microfascism’? What causes us, as Foucault says, ‘to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us’ (Foucault, 2004, p. xv). This is the question that began to haunt me and it is this question that I set out to explore in this paper...

And I start with an exploration of desire from two seemingly opposed perspectives, first of all in the work of Jacques Lacan, for whom desire is understood within a negative ontology of lack; and secondly in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who see in desire a positive force characterised as abundance. Then I bring these different versions to bear in thinking about desire in relation to questions of identity and identification.

Lacan in 3½ minutes

Obscure objects of desire

A little known but interesting fact about Jacques Lacan was his predilection for Culebra cigars. Culebra cigars come in threes – braided together – but must be prised apart before being smoked. This may account for their rather odd appearance and tendency to look shabby when smoked. The reason for the existence of these strange objects is shrouded in mystery, as is the desire they provoke.

Lacan is notoriously difficult to follow. Indeed, McGee (1992, cited in Lather, 2007, p.85) says for Lacan ‘not being understood is an ethical imperative.’ Which explains a lot – but also creates possibilities, and of course, we should not fall into the trap of thinking of a singular Lacan – but instead a multiplicity – and not just an early or late Lacan, but in terms of a Lacanian exegesis.

Lacan famously said, '*le désir de l'homme, c'est le désir de l'Autre*' – desire is the desire of the Other (quoted in Fink, 1995, p.54). An enigmatic phrase meaning variously: we desire what the Other desires, we desire what the Other desires of us, we desire that the Other desires us etc. Why does he say this? To understand Lacan's desire we must go back to the infant stage, though I should say that my take on Lacan is 'as a fable of development rather than a strict psychogenetic account' (Rylance, 1994, p.116).

The Lacanian subject is not the subject associated with the conscious ego or 'I'. The primordial ego emerges at the 'mirror stage' at which the infant first recognises its reflection, or rather, as Lacan would say, mis-recognises it (Lacan uses the term *méconnaissance*) giving rise ever after to the ego's illusion of autonomy...

'It is autonomous! That's a good one' (Lacan, 2001, p.100).

This is entry into the first realm, the imaginary realm – the realm of the senses.

This first attempt to produce a stable identity is thus a process of separation, 'an intellectual and schismatic act of narcissism – a separation in which the I is another' (Bailey, 2009, p.31). Primary or imaginary identification turns out to be a failure in terms of the production of a stable identity (being based on a complete mistake anyway), and is quickly followed up by entry into the second realm, the symbolic realm and acceptance of the 'law' of language. In effect we become alienated in language, the big Other, 'an invidious, uninvited intruder that unceremoniously transforms our wishes' (Fink, 1995, p. 6) but which nevertheless provides the only means by which we can communicate.

According to Lacan, the point at which the individual enters the symbolic realm occasions a split between conscious and unconscious thought. The unconscious becomes a repository of the discourse of the Other. The Lacanian subject then, arising in the split between the conscious and the unconscious as the point where the individual enters the symbolic realm of language, makes a choice (which is no choice really) to submit to language: to become an effect of language – in other words discourse writes the subject. Subjectification, in the Lacanian sense,

is subordination to language. But, in order to gain entry to the symbolic we lose access to the third of Lacan's realms – the Real.

In Lacan's system, paradoxically, the signified is the signified of the Real, but this is separated from the signifier from which it is barred. In the signifying system, therefore, the signified is a lack occurring at the intersection of the symbolic and the Real given an illusory appearance of reality by the continuous play of signifiers (Stavrakakis, 1999). Meaning is thus the meaning of the signifier, not the representation of some external signified. The Lacanian subject is the subject of the signifier – it is a relation of subordination. To enter the symbolic we have to accept the Law of Language. The symbolic order is the big Other.

Glynos and Stavrakakis (2000, p.205) put this rather neatly,

The real is what remains outside this field of representation, what remains impossible to symbolize. In fact, the gap between the real and reality is treated as *axiomatically* unbridgeable. Why? Because it serves to account for human desire, our unending (ultimately failed) attempts to colonize and domesticate the real with reality, to represent the real in discourse.

This subordination in language results in the loss of the Real that is forever barred to us. The subject is marked by lack that it attempts to cover over – again and again.

An aside

In making this move Lacan provides an ingenious solution to the problem of what we might call 'representationalism' i.e. the tendency, even in our sophisticated poststructuralist times, to privilege the signified as the carrier of meaning. Lacan's solution to this representationalist problem is to reverse the relationship between signified and signifier such that 'meaning springs from the signifier to the signified' rather than the other way round, in this way disrupting the relationship between signs and things. Lacan (2001, p.167) uses as an example of this two toilet doors each bearing a different signifier 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen',

the image of twin doors symbolizing, through the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home, the

imperative that he seems to share with the great majority of primitive communities by which his life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation.

Lacan admits this is a 'low blow' but he uses the example (and draws on the image of a myopic person whose 'blinking gaze' is directed towards the signifier) 'to show how in fact the signifier enters the signified'. (Cixous, cited in Klages, 2001, uses this illustration as a metaphor for the different doors through which women and men enter into the symbolic order and, one might add, the different positions taken up once there).

So, to sum up. When we enter the symbolic realm of language we lose the Real and our desire becomes colonised through language and the desire of the Other. The subject is driven by this lack: 'We never get what we were promised but that's exactly why we keep longing for it' (Stavrakakis, 1999, p.34).

At this point I want to introduce Louis Althusser. Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan knew each other quite well (though one hesitates to say they were friends). In fact, Althusser got Lacan a room at the École Normale Supérieure after he was thrown out of Sainte-Anne's hospital for making some disparaging remarks about the couples he was analysing (he was especially contemptuous of the wives). Lacan was in a bad way after this, Althusser writes, 'Lacan called me a few days later and we had dinner...I remember the extraordinary cigar he always had in his mouth and me saying to him by way of greeting: "you roll your own!"' (Althusser, 1994, p.186).

But this move to the École did not go down well. Althusser goes on,

I never went to one of Lacan's seminars. He spoke to a room full of people that was thick with smoke. It was for this reason that he was later asked to leave, because the smoke impregnated the books in the library immediately above. Despite severe warnings from Robert Flacelière, Lacan could never get his audience to refrain from smoking.

Though coming from different traditions ('I was going back to Marx and he to Freud, which meant we understood one another³' [Althusser, 1994, p. 333]) there is clear conceptual link between the formation of the Lacanian subject and Althusser's most enduring concept of *interpellation*.

Althusser (1971) argues that the function of ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects through a process of recognition that he calls 'hailing' or 'interpellation' by the Other. Althusser refers to these Others as 'ideological state apparatuses' – the state, church etc – but we can extend this to apply the concept to discourses in the Foucauldian sense (had Foucault ever used it in the Foucauldian sense, which Sawyer [2002] disputes) adapting this to encompass the ideological dimensions that inhabit discourses,

Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' among the individuals...by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or Other) hailing: 'Hey, you there'. (Althusser, 1971, p.174).

This process is transparent – we think of ourselves as free subjects, this seems 'obvious' to us - but this apparent obviousness, Althusser argues, is an effect of ideology. It is so obvious that we recognise what hails us, at the very moment at which it subjectivises us, 'You and I are always already subjects and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition' (Althusser, 1971, p.161).

Drawing on Lacan, Althusser talks about the 'specular' nature of this process of interpellation by which ideology, through recognition, brings about subjection of the individual and at the same time calls them into being as a subject. He draws attention to the strange ambivalence in the term 'subject' – as one who is subjected and as one who, as a subject, is a free agent, 'the individual is interpellated as a (free subject) in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject i.e. in order that he shall freely accept his subjection' (p.169). This 'identification with' is the process of subjectivisation: we become subjects through the process of desiring what the Other desires of us. Going back then to Returnability as the object of my desire we can see this as a process of interpellation, I desired what the Other desired of me – I had been hailed by the ideological institution of the University-at-the-time-of-the-RAE.

Deleuze and Guattari and a 'machinics of desire'

Aside

It is tempting to use the forward slash when referring to Deleuze/Guattari (see Penley, 1997).

For Deleuze and Guattari (2004) however, desire is not constituted within a negative ontology of lack, instead, desire is a productive force.

Whereas for Lacan, entry into the symbolic results in the loss of the Real with desire posited as driven by this originary lack, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the idea of 'desiring-machines' connected by positive and productive flows:

One machine is always coupled with another. The productive synthesis, the production of production, is inherently connective in nature: 'and...' 'and then...'. This is because there is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of this flow (the breast-the mouth)...Desire constantly couples continuous flows...(Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p.5).

Like Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari radically decentre the subject. In their case the 'subject' is an assemblage of desiring machines, 'the actualization of desire on the incorporeal surface of bodies', as Bogard (1998, p.53) puts it. And he goes on 'Bodies only become subjects through an expression of their sense that is simultaneously a distribution of desire' (p.58).

Deleuze and Guattari conceive the desiring-machines as linked to a recording surface over which heterogenous patterns of flow are possible, and which is able to interrupt and re-direct desire. They refer to this recording surface as the 'body without organs' (BwO). The BwO is an abstract machine - an *abstracting* machine - and

the liberation of the subject is equivalent to its transformation into an abstract machine, a revolutionary force of decoding, of breaking with the segmentary inscriptions that connect bodies and desires into oppressive, microfascist systems of production. (Bogard, 1998, p.71)

The BwO is not itself productive. It halts the flow of desire in order to organ-ize it, to enable new connections and other forms of production, new patterns of desire to be

established between the desiring-machines that attach to it. It is a plane of immanence, of becoming, of possibility. A deterritorializing surface over which the autonomous 'nomad' strides. In this mobilisation of desire my desire for Returnability in the RAE becomes a positive flow arising from connections between desiring machines which stimulate my productivity, and increase my power.

Lacan and Althusser contra Deleuze and Guattari?

The tension between these two positions is only too evident. Lacan's negative ontology of lack versus Deleuze and Guattari's positive drive and abundance. The Lacanian view appears rather pessimistic and diminishing. Desiring only what the Other desires of me, and this desire 'more exactly, is supported by a fantasy which has at least one foot in the Other, and precisely the one that counts, even and particularly if it happens to limp' (Lacan, 1989, p.67). The Deleuze/Guattari take, by contrast, is affirming, voluptuous even. Who wouldn't prefer this conceptualisation of desire with all its associations of excess and abundance, of sensual *flows* (and risqué talk of sperm and shit), over a rather depressing notion of lack? But though it may be tempting, given the persistence of binary opposites in the traces of Western Humanist thought, perhaps we shouldn't reduce the question of desire to a 'choice' between desire-as-lack (implying control by the big Other) and desire-as-abundance (granting freedom and autonomy).

As previously intimated, Lacan's dictum that desire is the desire of the Other is ambiguous. Another of Lacan's famous statements is: there is no Other of the Other, no transcendent signifier which could act as 'meta-guarantee of the consistency of the big Other' (Žižek, 1997, unpaginated⁴). Something is lacking in the Other. This is because entry into the imaginary and then the symbolic realms occurs through processes of separation. This separation 'brings forth being: creating a rift in the subject-Other whole, as a result of which the Other's desire escapes the subject...Separation results in the splitting of the subject into ego and unconscious, and in a corresponding splitting of the Other into lacking Other (A barred) and object a' (Fink, 1995, p.61). The object a (or *petit objet a* - a for *autre*) is the object of desire, a tiny kernel of the Real precipitated out as a void when the Other becomes split.

So, we can never identify fully with the Other because the Other is also lacking – a gap always remains. This lack in the Other creates a crack – a crack opening up possibilities for (a kind of) ‘autonomy and freedom of the subject’ (Zupančič, 2000, p.28). Ultimately, interpellation fails and we become caught in the interplay between complicity and resistance. And what of Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring machines and the BwO as the surface over which the nomad strides, able to couple and redirect flows of desire? Well, the BwO turns out to be rather more of an ambivalent concept than you might suppose, simultaneously ‘the locus of repression’ and ‘the potential for freedom’ as Holland (1999, p.31) puts it.

To appreciate why this is so, we have to think of the BwO as something which attracts desiring machines to itself, which then seem to emanate from it, in this way establishing new connections between desiring machines and so organ-izing desire. What seems like my desire is in fact the desire of the BwO. What seems like my agency is in fact the emergence of subjectivity in this process. The BwO describes the interpellatory space within which a narrative of self finds its identification, re-organ-izing my desire. In this version of events then, the University captured, *hijacked*, my desire – re-organized it and channelled it as returnability in the RAE. The University was the Body without Organs!

Hence, we have a productive lack which gives rise to the possibilities of some sort of freedom of the subject through the failure of interpellation, and an abundance which holds out the promise of autonomy but which can paradoxically become the locus of repression. But has the Other really morphed into the BwO and vice versa? Or is this a move to far? It would be presumptuous of me to try to claim credit for arriving at a *rapprochement* between these apparently ontologically distinct positions, after all, others too – including Žižek - have tried (as Jagodzinski’s remarks, quoted earlier, attest) but perhaps Žižek’s difficulty allows us a way to examine this problematic. In *Organs without bodies* Žižek (2004, p.20) talks about the good Deleuze and the bad Deleuze – the good Deleuze is Deleuze alone, the bad Deleuze is when he is with Guattari. For Žižek, Guattari is a bad influence (indeed, Žižek holds that *The Anti-Oedipus* is Deleuze’s worst book and bemoans the prominence granted it in the Anglophone world). The good Deleuze, Žižek says, is a Lacanian, the bad Deleuze has been led astray by Guattari. So, there is a constant tension or contradiction within and between both Deleuze/Guattari and Deleuze *seule*. Deleuze of course, is (in)famous for his method of *philosophical*

buggery 'taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous' (Deleuze 1995, p.6). Perhaps we can suggest that (for Žižek) Deleuze/Guattari is the monstrous offspring produced as a result of Guattari's seduction of Deleuze (hence the appositeness of the forward slash). Or maybe (and not to be outdone in the homoerotic reference department) the relationship is more *spintrian* (Lacan, 1989) – Lacan, Deleuze, Guattari - with Žižek the unnatural result (though surely now too old, too established, frankly, too *bearded* to play the role still so frequently attributed to him of 'enfant terrible'⁵). But I digress. Why does Žižek make this accusation?

Sinnerbrink (2006), in a highly critical account of Žižek's *Organ without bodies* (2004), nevertheless sets out Žižek's argument quite neatly.



Figure 1. 'The Body without Organs' (© Bruce Tuckey⁶) . Or could it, in fact, be Žižek's *Organ without bodies*?

'Deleuze I' – the early pre-Guattarian Deleuze - arrived at an impasse between the 'virtual and actual' or 'becoming and being' and his response to this was to posit a third mediating figure 'the 'quasi-cause' or 'pure agency of transcendental causality' (Žižek 2004, quoted in Sinnerbrink, 2006, p.66). The quasi-cause 'designates the advent of the New', 'that might account for the unforeseeable excess of the effect (the New) over its antecedent causal conditions' (ibid). This move, Žižek insists (and it is hard not to agree with Sinnerbrink that this comes across as 'triumphal'), positions Deleuze as a Lacanian: 'is the Deleuzian quasi cause not the exact

equivalent of Lacan's *objet petit a*, this pure, immaterial, spectral entity that serves as the object-cause of desire?' (Žižek, 2004, p.27). This recourse to the transcendental is however, Žižek says, problematic for Deleuze as the philosopher, *par excellence*, of immanence and it was this traumatic realisation that drove Deleuze into the Guattarian embrace: 'Therefore, was Deleuze not pushed toward Guattari because Guattari presented an alibi, an easy escape from the deadlock of his previous position? (Žižek, 2004, p.21). The BwO, as the plane of immanence, is the Deleuze/Guattari way out from the impasse. But this resolution, Žižek suggests, leads to some unfortunate consequences for Deleuze/Guattari and the BwO conceived as 'the neo-romantic figure of the dissolved nomadic subject, whose decoded flows and libidinal becomings would supposedly provide a radical political critique in the face of globalised capitalism' (Sinnerbrink, 2006, p.76). Žižek's 'productive misreading' (2004, p.ix) of Deleuze/Guattari enables us to see the source of the ambivalence of the BwO. Far from providing a radical political critique of global capitalism, the BwO, which can be interpreted as given over to 'the need to reinvent oneself permanently, opening oneself up to the multitude of desires that push us to the limit' (Žižek, 2004, p.183), in fact justifies calling 'Deleuze the ideologist of late capitalism' (Žižek, 2004, p.184⁷).

Smith (2004, p.636), however, argues that Žižek is simply wrong and that Deleuze has not been diverted from his Lacanian position by a (personally motivated) anti-Lacanian Guattari. Rather, Deleuze/Guattari *is* Lacanian – at least, the Lacanian that Lacan would have become had he not been led astray by his followers. Thus, Smith holds, Deleuze was of the opinion that the co-implication of desire as both negative lack and as positive abundance was indeed present in Lacan's own thought. Though it is fair to say Lacan was rather less generous towards Deleuze fuelled, as he was, by a paranoid obsession with plagiarism. While telling Deleuze to his face 'what I absolutely need is someone like you' he was simultaneously bad mouthing him, convinced that *Anti-Oedipus* was based on his seminars, 'which already, according to him, contained the idea of a "desiring machine"' (Roudinesco, 1997, p.348).

This anecdotal evidence provides some interesting insights into the Parisian milieu in which these ideas were being fomented, an excess which is all too easily

lost in academic prose. Against the sterility of the page, Žižek opens up an uberous field for critique with his provocations.

So, a conclusion: identity and narrative

I have talked about Lacan's lacking subject in two ways. Firstly, when we enter the symbolic realm we are colonised by language and our discourse becomes the discourse of the Other; and secondly, through this process we lose the Real. But this is to conflate two 'poles of desire' as Deleuze puts it (Smith 2004, p.642). Entry to the symbolic and the acceptance of the 'law of language' is a quasi-transcendental position; but Deleuze suggests the *objet petit a*, the tiny kernel of the Real precipitated out when the Other is split, can be regarded as 'a desiring machine, which defines desire in terms of real production' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p.28). In this conceptualisation, desire shifts between transcendence and immanence such that 'lack and abundance are mutually implicated as one is the condition of possibility for the other' (Howarth, 2008, unpaginated).

Thus, I constitute, through my identification, the University-at-the-time-of-the-RAE at the exact same time as the University-at-the-time-of-the-RAE calls me into being as a subject. We are mutually constitutive. Both transcendent and immanent.

A final note. At the outset I referred to identification as a narrative space and there is something that connects this oscillation between the two poles of desire with the theory of narrative which sees narrative arising precisely in the movement between equilibrium and disequilibrium (Todorov, 1971) producing narrative as a motive force. Conceptualising identity as narratively constructed, predicated on an unstable accommodation between transcendence and immanence as the precarious condition of existence presents a rather neat climax to this initial exploration. Perhaps too neat, after all, in moving between equilibrium and disequilibrium narrative always seeks to undo that which it has so carefully gathered together. But perhaps that is what drives identification.

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¹ 'Research Assessment Exercises' are the means by which research in UK universities are assessed and through which they receive block funding for research. It was last held in 2008. The next round of assessment is the 'REF' the Research Excellence Framework. It reaches its climax in 2014.

² *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, Composed by Victor Herbert, Lyrics by Rida Johnson.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZPnsGYGXac>

³ Althusser's connection between Freud and Marx is interesting, given Deleuze/Guattari's project in the *Anti-Oedipus* to connect political and libidinal economies (Holland, 1999).

⁴ A point over which Žižek (2002, p. 72) takes Judith Butler to task in that perennially popular activity of 'Butler Bashing'.

⁵ Though this hasn't stopped the Royal Opera House commissioning *four* operas based on Žižek's work. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2013/jan/13/observer-profile-slavoj-zizek-opera> [Accessed: 19.02.2013]

⁶ 'The Body without Organs'. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist, Bruce Tuckey, 6 Dene Gardens, Bill Quay, Gateshead NE10 0RT, UK.

⁷ It is interesting that once he has made his attack Žižek tends to airbrush Guattari out of the picture, referring to Deleuze alone as the author of the *Anti-Oedipus*.