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Desire and Fantasy: The Conditions of Reality between the Self and the Other

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Desire and Fantasy:

The Conditions of Reality between the Self and the Other

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I. Abstract

The human condition is constituted by the fluctuating operations of desire and fantasy, which emerge in response to one's fundamental differentiation between 'Self' and 'Other.' As infants, we exist in an expansive realm of sensational “sameness” with the world around us; but as we develop, we quickly learn to differentiate between our internal and external worlds, and are forced to divide and organize our once primordial experience of unity on the basis of isolated exclusion of difference. As we slip into the structures of our social and cultural reality, we absorb language, and are taught to construct our own identities by alienating the Otherness felt within our inner selves. Through repeated reinforcement of this alienation, we arrive at a sense of Self that is separate and distant from our notion of the Other.

But in our differentiated state, we cannot help but feel that something is missing within our innermost beings; we now contain a certain void, a “lack,” borne from our developmental separation from the Other. French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan asserts that this lack, which we come to realize is unfulfillable, constitutes the human condition of desire. Lacan asserts that “Man's desire is a desire for the Other,” contending that the “goal” of one's desire is to return to a primordial re-conflation between the Self and the Other. In unbearable agony, we pointlessly search for substitutions for our lost Other, but are only able to satisfy this incessant condition of desire through the temporary immersion into a projection of fantasy.

Through fantasy, we find relief from our desires, and are able to experience a pleasure in their satisfaction; but furthermore, fantasy grants us access into a realm where the Self and the
Other are able to merge, integrate and reassemble their relationship. Through fantasy, one may deny the rigid oppression that our social reality imposes upon our subjective identities. For this reason, fantasy itself contains the potential for the transgressive reconstitution of both identity and culture.

Through this thesis, I will examine the complementary operations of desire and fantasy, and their combined effects on our everyday experience of reality. By considering Jacques Lacan's theories of psychological and psychosexual development, this thesis will uncover just where our desires come from, what shapes them, and how fantasy is formed in response to their enigmatic qualities. In addition, this thesis will explore just what happens when desire and fantasy are ever-so-slightly slipped apart – when the vibrating wavelengths of human experience become warped within an “intermediary zone” between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders of Being. This intermediary zone, when traversed with the tools of creative expression and artistic activity, contains the rich and exciting potential for a radical renegotiation of the terms that define one's Self as separate from the Other.

Lastly, this thesis inspects the functions of desire and fantasy from a distinctly feminist perspective, questioning the repressive effects of society, culture and language, on the articulation of female subjectivity.
II. An Introduction to the Human Conditions of Desire and the Operations of Fantasy

“Man finds himself estranged from being, different from things and alien to himself. Otherness stuns us long before we even begin to think. For we are delivered over to this earth a raw, a wrinkled crease of flesh in need.” (Desmond, 1987: 4)

From the moment we are born, thrust forth from the realm of primordial sensory experience into the conscious domain of society and culture, we gradually encounter the duality between the Self and the Other. We enter a world that demands a distinction between things – a realm where things are “named” through a rubric of differences and exclusions, in order to organize the relationships between objects, creatures, persons, ideas, beliefs and experiences. Language is used to enforce these differences, replacing words for concepts and ideas, and attaching meaning to our experience in the world around us.

As infants, we are vulnerable to this divisive current of social organization. Without a centered sense of identity, we exist in an undifferentiated state of “sameness” with the world around us; our infant emotions, needs and dependencies connect us to our external world, but in ways that we can neither explain nor understand. We experience an anxious chaos within our inner beings, and in desperation, we scramble to assemble a sense of ‘Self,’ a cohesive unity, that establishes our existence within our own experience. This sense of ‘Self’ is reached through the alienation of that which seems different, both from ourselves and from the groups we learn to identify with. In essence, we learn to construct a sense of ‘Self’ through the active separation from that which is ‘Other,’ asserting our identities “by withdrawing from the fullness of otherness in such a way that the difference between
human beings and the rest of being becomes a dualistic opposition.”¹

The assembly of this duality within the human condition is a perpetual fact of social reality within the human condition, as experienced through through the contexts of society and culture. As philosopher Simone de Beauvoir writes, “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other against itself.”² We learn to construct oppositional positions – the 'Self'/'Other', Us/Them, and others – in order to mediate some stability for our own identities. We realize that the 'Self' has no meaning without its relationship to the 'Other', and although the disparities between these positions may seem present, their dichotomous relationship is almost always an arbitrary one, based on an over-accentuation of difference through the interjection of language; as Levi-Strauss writes,

“The passage from the state of nature to the state of culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms, constitute not so much phenomena to be explained, as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality.”³

The 'Other', in that it defines all ranges of difference, is fundamentally meaningless; it merely “stands-in” as a substitution for the non-self, for the unknown. The 'Other' is all that is different, and this expansive ambiguity allows for the exploitation of otherness.

Jaques Lacan sought to examine this dualistic social reality through the context of infantile psychological development. In doing so, Lacan identified the cognitive transition between two distinct 'Orders of Being' as the formative moment where the notions of Self and Other diverge within the human psyche. According to Lacan, an infant first experiences the world around it from the realm of the Imaginary Order – the domain of primordial, non-verbal experience. The Imaginary is marked by the fluid cohesion of internal and external worlds. A child in the Imaginary perceives itself to exist within and between the objects and persons in its environment, and it accumulates an amalgamous sense of identity through the repetitive experience of “sameness” with the world around it. The notion
of difference is imperceptible at this stage, and the infant's early conceptions of its Self and its Other are at once identical and indistinct.

Upon the first awareness of difference however (in the form of sexual difference by means of progression through the Oedipal Complex), the infant transitions into the Symbolic Order, the domain of society and culture, and must acknowledge itself as a distinct entity, separate from the world around it. Within the Symbolic, the infant must accept the “laws” of society, culture, and moral behavior, assuming a predetermined role and identity within the structures of family and social networks. The child learns that its Self must be differentiated from the qualities of Otherness, and that through the use of language, it must withdraw from the Other, both from within itself and its external world. The infant no longer simply exists, as it did in the Imaginary, but rather is defined, and given meaning through its divergent relationship to its external world; it is a Self separate from the Other.

Thus, through this transition from the Imaginary to Symbolic Orders of Being, the subject is forced to forge a separation between its notions of Self and Other. The fullness of the Imaginary is fractured, and the subject must forgo its primordial identifications with the Other to function in the strict currents of the Symbolic Order, its social reality. According to Lacan, the denial of the Other within one's inner being creates a void within a subject's sense of Self; a formative 'lack' is created through the alienation of our Imaginary experience of “sameness.” It is this absence of the Other, this sense that “something is missing” within our internal worlds, which constitutes the ontological conditions for human desire. In other words, we experience a “lack” within ourselves, and feel a desire to fill it in. For Lacan, all desire is constituted by the underlying pursuit to reconnect with our lost Other; as Lacan himself writes in his most famous dictum, “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other.”

But Lacan also asserts that authentic desire is in itself essentially unfulfillable; its object remains so enigmatic within the realm of the unknown Other, that we never really know what we desire for or how to achieve it. We feel desire in our experience of lack, but our desires cannot be satisfied
even when all of our conditions of wanting are met. Instead, our desires are revealed through the pursuit of desire itself – the activity of desiring; the endless search for some reconnection with our lost Other. As we traverse the Symbolic Order, we find substitutions to fill in the void, but these never manage to fully extinguish our conditions of desire. Does the object of our desires reside in the Other itself? The thing the Other desires, or the thing the Other lacks? Or rather, do we desire for the experience of being another’s Other – being the thing the Other desires most of all?

“Desire, strictly speaking, has no object. In its essence, desire is a constant search for something else, and there is no specifiable object that is capable of satisfying it, in other words, extinguishing it...It does not seek satisfaction, but rather its own continuation and furtherance: more desire, greater desire! It wishes merely to go on desiring.”

Desire is an exhausting experience of questioning: it demands that we fling ourselves into a pursuit of the unknown Other, searching in endless uncertainty for something that we can never truly perceive. Although we may find substitutions along the way that momentarily fill in our voids of longing, they are never able to fully satisfy the desire which drives our search. This impossible quality is why we rarely experience desire without the gift of a correlative fantasy.

With this thesis, I attempt to investigate the intimate relationship between desire and fantasy. Where desire demands an incessant questioning, pulling us down-the-rabbit-hole in search for some mysterious essence of Otherness, fantasy provides a solution to our longing, an imaginary scenario that answers the questions of our desires. Fantasy, like an imaginary screen, functions to decode the enigmas of the Other, unraveling the deadlock felt within the pursuit of desire, and offering us the means to fulfill it.

Thus, we experience our realities through the complementary operations of desire and fantasy; where desire thrusts us forth into a pursuit of the Other, fantasy transforms this dialectic into terms we can understand and negotiate. As widely accepted by Freudian psychoanalysis, “even the most normal subject we encounter is to some extent neurotic; that is, she or he allows fantasy to shape her or his
experience of reality.” In helping us to slip back into the Imaginary Order, our fantasies allow us to renegotiate the terms of our realities, redefining the nature of our relationship to the Other.

Through this thesis, I argue that the role of art often provides such a fantasy place, where the separations between the Self and the Other can be dissolved and reconfigured. Art presents an alternative system of language, one which exists outside of the bounds of exclusion and difference. This creative language, when reintroduced into the Symbolic Order, may be able to shatter the conventional definitions of Self, and clear up the ambiguities that separate the Self from both the Other and from our own desires.

Furthermore, I assert that art provides the means of redefining the conditions of female desire, as distinctively unique from that of male desire. Invoking the voices of feminist theorists Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, this thesis argues that the female subject (in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis) is at a severe disadvantage in terms of acquiring her own subjectivity within the realm of the Symbolic Order. Language, the Symbolic framework of society and culture, is situated from a distinctly male perspective; for this reason, the female subject finds herself caught in the midst of the duality between the Self and the Other. She is both the Self, as a desiring subject, and the Other, the object of desire. Bound in this intermediary zone, the female subject is immobilized by the conflation of positions within the realm of her own experience, and is subsequently denied the authority over her own desire and access to fantasy.

My work attempts to realign this disorientation of the female experience. By creating images that call attention to the female's role as both subject and object, Self and Other, within her own experience, my work suggests the potential for a renegotiation and redefinition of these terms; a semiotic revitalization of the language within the Symbolic Order. Through re-entry into the realm of the primordial Imaginary, my work seeks to establish an alternative system of artistic language, based on the pre-Oedipal identifications of “sameness” and cohesion between the Self and the Other. When
inserted into the Symbolic Order, this language, which allows for definition without exclusions from
difference, gender or preexisting sociocultural biases, may have the potential to transform our
definitions of Self. Inclusive to both male and female experience in its pre-Oedipal origins, this
language could reconstruct the Symbolic's reliance of oppositional dualities, allowing one's Self to
include identifications of otherness and difference – a reconstruction that would disrupt the conventions
of female as Other, and the Object of desire.

Inspired by the visual conventions
of 16th Century 'Age of Discovery'
prints and early scientific
illustrations, *Traversing the Imaginary* presents a microcosmic
glimpse into the realm of a new
world. This world is constructed
from the Imaginary experience of
“wholeness” and “sameness” and
the fluid fusion of identifications
between the Self and the Other.
Mountains take figurative form; the
sky is peeled back to reveal a
humming texture of masks – the
faces of the Other – which are
undifferentiated from the illusory
atmosphere of the landscape. An
iceberg, in the form of a female
body, protrudes from beneath the
dark, primordial sea; she is attached
to a chaotic mass of vibrating red
energy through several thin umbilical cords, which enter the orifices of her body. This environment seems to
pulsate with a strange, unconscious life-force, its creatures and topography fused together by an Imaginary
harmony. Within this world, where the Self and the Other are merged, images and meanings are articulated
through “semiotic” terms, conveying the fullness of experience – the presence within the conditions of
existence.

Through an examination of Lacanian systems (of dualities between the Self and the Other), an
investigation of the operations of desire and fantasy in the human experience, and through the proposal
of a semiotic system of artistic language drawn from the phantasmic experience of the Imaginary
Order, my work and this thesis attempt to question the constructed positions of female as Other, and to
renegotiate the relationship between a female subject and her own desire.
III. The Journey Through Orders of Being: The Imaginary Realm of Reflection

In the mid 20th century, French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan sought to examine the psychological relationship between the Self and the Other, and the formative moments of development that establish the differentiation of these positions within the human experience. In doing so, Lacan drew heavily from Sigmund Freud's theories of psychosexual development, re-contextualizing Freud's assertions from the perspective of culture and society. Lacan asserted that the construction of the Self as separate and exclusive from the Other takes place within an infant's developmental transition between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders of Being. This transition not only lays the ground work for the subject's future definitions of identity, but also establishes an internal "lack" within the subject – some unique, missing thing, which reveals the subject's relationship to desire. In order to fully inspect the capacity of Lacan's assertions, let us first examine the process of transition between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders.

An infant experiences its earliest existence in the domain of the Imaginary Order, a realm constituted by a constant perception of "sameness" between identities and images, as the subject experiences a fluid cohesion between its internal and external worlds. Within the Imaginary, a child perceives itself to exist vicariously through the objects, persons, and images it encounters in its surrounding environment; these images are vital extensions of the infant's self, perpetually reflecting the infant back to itself in a cycle of "ceaseless exchange, where the 'self' seems to pass into objects, and objects into it." For this reason, the Imaginary Order is often seen as an inherently narcissistic domain, where the infant is blissfully unaware of the differences and separations between its self and
its world, and ignorant even to the dependencies it maintains with its mother, or other counterparts, for survival. An infant in the Imaginary regards its mother as an essential extension of itself, as she offers an “external reality for the child;”

“In the pre-Oedipal state, the child lives in a ‘symbiotic’ relation with its mother’s body which blurs any sharp boundary between the two: it is dependent for its life on this body, but we can equally imagine the child as experiencing what it knows of the external world as dependent upon itself.”

Thus, within the Imaginary Order, a infant is engrossed within this “sealed unit” of continual self exchanges, experiencing an undifferentiated fluidity, an Omni-self, that allows for a constant transposition of sensory experience. However, this Imaginary Order is not as entirely blissful as it may seem; the child experiences itself as “physically uncoordinated and overwhelmed by emotions and phantasies over which it has no control.” An infant in the Imaginary, while liberated in its conflation of internal and external experience, is also psychically unstable in the chaotic disintegration of its inner being. Through the continued exchange of identifications, the infant child progresses towards what Lacan calls the “Mirror-Stage,” a distinct developmental process within the Imaginary Order, which allows the subject to assemble the early versions of its rudimentary sense of Self.

The Mirror-Stage is a developmental process within the Imaginary order, which occurs when a child, between the ages of 6-18 months, is pivotally transformed by the self-recognition of their own unified image. Rather than existing through their perceptual world, a child in the Mirror-Stage is suddenly able to acknowledge the visual projection of itself, as a distinct and physical body that occupies the external environment.

“Unable yet to walk, or even stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial, he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.”

In this transformative moment of identification, the child recognizes a coherent vision of its own Self image, a physical unity which exists as the external counterpart to its internal experience.
Thus, through the reflection in the mirror, the child is at once actualized, in the reality of its physical body, and divided, by the perceptual separation between its internal and external worlds. This self reflection image presents a startling duality: “The mirror image both is and is not the baby; the baby is both subject and object at the same time.” The infant experiences a self-identification in the image, which it cannot “feel” within its own body; it is, in a sense, both unified and alienated from the recognition with its own reflection. The infant experiences an internal duality in the awareness of both Self and Other within the reflected image, as it struggles to understand the fundamental separation between its internal and external worlds. “For Lacan, aggression is produced in response to the mirror image. There is a rivalry over which is the self and which the other, which the ego and which the replica.”

*Mirror Stage* explores the transformative process of assuming one’s own Self image – an alter-ego of sorts – through the identification with an external reflection. Through the film, we watch a female subject shift and contort herself in attempted alignment with a projected self-image, which is superimposed over her body; however, this projection offers only a two-dimensional image, which subsequently becomes warped and distorted upon the three-dimensional terrain of the human form. A strange visual tension emerges from the slippage between images; the bizarre disjunction between the bodies obscures the boundaries between subject and object. At several points within the film, the figure tries to slip inside of her own image, concealing herself within the suggested projection of flesh. But her failed attempts to remain still prohibit a total unity between their forms. *Mirror Stage* discusses the duality of identifications present inside of ones own reflection; it reveals the subjective realization of Self, and the simultaneous alienation from the external translation of ones internal being.

Through repeated encounters with its mirror reflections, the developing infant in the Imaginary Order begins to accumulate an amalgamation of these dualistic self-images, which together assemble its rudimentary sense of identity. While these identifications may be reflections, they nonetheless offer the subject a distorted vision of themselves, an illusionary mirage of what the infant wants to be.14 “We identify with something which looks like what we want to be, but this is also alien and separate from us... The mirror image splits us in two.”15 The infant in the Imaginary, observing its mirror image, realizes itself as a subject, “something that creates meaning,” and its reflection as a mere symbol for that meaning. The repeated encounter with this duality in the Mirror Stage tears at the seamless fluidity of the Imaginary Order. For Lacan, the process of the Mirror Stage marks the beginning of the infant's sense of Self and reveals an early awareness of difference; it is a “fleeting moment of jubilation,” before an inevitable anxiety sets in.”16
IV. A Threshold From the Imaginary Order:
“Che voui?” – “What do you want?”

At this point in the Imaginary Order, the child has only experienced its existence through the interplay between its internal and external worlds, as offered by the child itself and its mother, and it similarly identifies with her as the most direct access to its primordial notion of the Other. However, upon the awareness of duality within the infant's mirror-image, the child begins to actively question its relationship with its mother, destabilizing the circuit of perpetual imaginary identifications and reflections. The infant questions their relationship through an expression of emotional concern about her motivations, movements and and activities, probing the reasons as to why their intimate symbiosis exists. The child wonders: *if we are in fact different, then why does the Mother do what she does? For what reason does she love me?* And in Lacan's own words, the child asks, “*Che vuoi?: What do you want?*”

The child comes to realize that there must be an explanation for the now discernible interdependency between itself and mother; from the infant's perspective, there must be some thing, which commands the mother to behave as she does, providing care and investment in the child's own well-being. This thing, the child believes, must be quite large and omnipotent, withholding then delivering an essential quality that the mother desires most of all; this thing, is what Lacan refers to as the 'phallus'. Through a perpetual questioning of their intimate relationship, the child proposes that 'phallus' itself is the mysterious operative solution that answers the enigmas behind the mother's movements and whims.

For Lacan, the phallus is the imagined object of the mother's desire; for the child, it represents
that enigmatic, impressive *thing*, which controls the mother through the temptation and promise of some sacred essence, which the child itself is fundamentally incapable of providing her with. The phallus disrupts the harmonious symbiosis between mother and child, imposing the potential for a 'third term,' which is more valuable and seductive than either the mother or child themselves. Furthermore, the phallus represents something that both infant and mother inherently “lack” within themselves, forcing the child to realize that “something is missing” within its internal self. But most importantly, for the child, the phallus hovers just above its horizon of perception; the child senses the phallus's presence through its interpretation of the mother's actions, but is unable to imagine, visualize or conceptualize just what the phallus might be. The mother's desire for the phallus “almost always goes beyond the child: there is something about her desire which escapes the child, [something] which is beyond its control...her desire's independence from her child's creates a rift between them...” This unfathomable desire incites an anxious competition within the child's sense of Self. In vain, the infant attempts to become the phallus, identify and conflate with it as an Imaginary identification, in hope of becoming the sole object of its mother's desire once again. But the ambiguous, ever shifting nature of the phallus, denies the child's embodiment of it. This 'triadic' relationship between infant, mother and phallus, and the child's aspirations to become the mother's object of desire, composes the scenario for entry into the *Oedipus Complex.*
V. The 'phallus', the Oedipus Complex, and the Entry into the Symbolic Order of Being

Upon intrusion of the phallus into the Imaginary Order, the unified symbiosis between an infant and its mother is dismantled, and the child, now repositioned in rivalrous opposition to the phallus itself, enters the phenomenological scenario of the Oedipus Complex. Originally theorized by Sigmund Freud in his studies of childhood psychosexual development, the Oedipus Complex explains that children (male) subjects, between the ages of 3-5 years, almost universally experience a period of libidinous sexual desire of their mothers, and aggressive hatefulness of their fathers, who represent the authority of their mother's love.\(^{20}\) For Lacan, the 'phallus' is a signifier for the authority of the father, who enters the triadic relationship at this point in the infant's development. An infant in the Oedipus complex enters a competition with the father for the libidinal acquisition of its mother's love; however, this comparison is an unavoidably pathetic one. The father is more powerful and desirous than the child in question, possessing the support from the structures of society, culture and social “law,” which assert his inevitable dominance. The child must recognize that the father controls the phallus, the very thing that the child inherently lacks and is subordinated by, and which is posed as the sole object of the mother's desire. In doing so, the child must eventually surrender its sexual ambitions towards its mother, and forge a new alliance with its Father; this is the child's gateway into a larger society. In identifying with the father, the child accepts its place within the Symbolic Order, acknowledging that familial and social patterns of behavior will determine the orientation of its own identity, and may provide a model for the evolution of its own future self. Freud referred to this moment of surrender as 'symbolic castration,'
“Symbolic castration represents the moment of 'truth', the acceptance of the reality rather than the phantasy; the closing of the door on most of the child's early personal history. The first repression, the giving up of both his desire for his mother and his identification with her, and his new kind of identification with the father as an authority figure, not a 'lost object' as in previous identifications, leads the boy\(^1\) out of the Oedipal crisis in the unconscious knowledge that if he allies himself with his father and becomes, like him, a 'man', he will eventually be able to have a substitute for his mother – a woman of his own.\(^2\)

The resolution of the Oedipus Complex, and the infant's eventual submission to the authority of the father as possessor of the phallus, marks the subject's transition into the realm of the Symbolic Order of Being. The Symbolic Order is the domain of society, culture and “law”, as organized by the exclusionary, divisive operations of language and signification. Within the Symbolic, the infant is forced to align its identity along the predetermined framework of existing social positions, which are kept distinct and separate from one another through the alienation of difference. The infant comes to learn that the formation of a stable sense of Self, one which is separate and distinct from positions of the Other, is necessary for its successful integration into the social world around it. In doing so, the child must actively separate from its identifications with the Other, denying its former Imaginary experiences of sameness and unity, within its new orientation within the Symbolic Order. This alienation of difference prohibits even the infant's former identifications with its mother, as she now represents the “Other” by command of Symbolic moral “law”.

This early confrontation with difference as the organizing operation of society necessitates that the infant absorb the use of language, in order to negotiate the terms of the world around it. Language, an act of symbolization itself, requires that previously authentic and indescribable concepts, positions and ideas be classified and separated, on the basis of their qualities of difference, then transformed into substitutive words or 'signifiers,' which convey a sense of meaning. These resulting signifiers, while they may refer to the original concept, cannot ever fully deliver the true essence of its meaning; rather, they accumulate a sense of collective meaning through their constant, multifaceted relation to
other signifiers, in a sort of “signifying chain.” This process of signification divides and transforms the infant's authentic experience into articulatory terms, which while fundamentally communicative, are essentially insubstantial, as their fullness is inevitably lost through the “slippage” of symbolization itself.

It is from this position within the Symbolic that the child comes to realize that the 'phallus,' as it had been perceived in the Imaginary as the object of its mother's desire, is not really a physical object, person, or set of qualities at all; instead, the phallus is a signifier – a symbol which conveys the meaning for the desire of the Other. “The child comes gradually to recognize (not in a conscious way) that it cannot somehow 'incarnate' the phallus for the mother...because the phallus is not an attribute of an individual but instead a signifier of sorts.” Within the Symbolic, the phallus acts as a “signifier of overwhelming importance,” symbolizing an object of desire, the Other, the Other's desire, and of lack within the Self.

The Symbolic Order both expands and constricts the infant's experience of existence. The child becomes the subject of its own experience – a Self, which is defined by its complex relationships to both similar and oppositional positions. Through the use of language, the infant can now forge new relationships and enter larger social networks, which support and flush out the definitions of one's developing identities. However, this insertion into the Symbolic Order also demands a significant loss of meaning within a subject's inner being. The denial of one's former Imaginary identifications with the Other creates an intense void within the subject's once full notions of Self. Within the Symbolic Order, our now differentiated infant is marked by a palpable condition of “lack”; the sense that something is missing within its innermost experience, a deep void formed by the removal of its connection to the Other. This void within the human psyche constitutes the conditions for desire; the Self within the Symbolic Order is now followed by its 'phallus', their own enigmatic and unreachable object of desire, which will command the direction of its future drives.
VI. Desire: the Void of the Other

Desire emerges from the experience of an unfulfillable lack. Erupting from between the cracks in a subject's formative separation between its definitions of Self and Other, desire represents the enigmatic, impassible void that Tempts a sublime re-conflation with Otherness. As infants, we encounter the phallus, the object of our mother's desire, and are disturbed from our Imaginary experience of sameness and unity with her and the world around us. It is while in the presence of the phallus that we acknowledge a certain “lack” within our inner beings. This lack remains with us through our transition from the Imaginary to Symbolic Orders of being; our initial encounter with the phallus informs and determines the shape of our own desire. Lacan refers to the role of the phallus, in its more general sense as part of the Symbolic Order, as our 'objet-a'.

Like the phallus in the Imaginary, 'objet-a' is essentially a signifier for desire; not an object or particular embodiment of desire, it rather represents the impression that desire makes upon the subject's experience. Similarly, 'objet-a' can be understood as “cause of desire...that which elicits desire: it is responsible for the advent of desire, for the particular form the desire in question takes, and for its intensity;” yet, this 'objet-a' remains just outside of the subject's grasp. Instead, 'objet-a' mysteriously hovers over the subject's experience of existence, determining in what direction the subject's desires will direct them. As Bruce Fink continues,

“Desire is of course metonymical, it shifts from one object to another; through all its displacements, however, desire nonetheless retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of fantasmatic features which, when encountered in a positive object, insures that we will come to desire this object. Object a, as the cause of desire, is nothing but this formal frame of consistency.”
A subject's particular form of desire, the “shape” of its 'objet-a,' is essentially derived from its initial encounter with the phallus; while attempting to understand the object of its mother's desire in the Imaginary Order, the phallus begins to reciprocally function as the cause of the infant's own desire. From here, we can begin to approach Lacan's most famous dictum: “Le désir de l'homme, c'est le désir de l'Autre.”

Interestingly, Lacan intended for this to be translated in a variety of different ways (in keeping with his interest in the potential for “slippage” within language).

With its most direct translation, “Man's desire is the desire of the Other,” Lacan explains that the subject's own desire is always founded on what it perceives the Other to desire; the developing infant establishes is own 'objet-a,' on the interpretation of the mother's relationship to the phallus. “In the child's attempt to grasp what remains essentially indecipherable in the Other's desire... the child's own desire is founded; the Other's desire begins to function as the cause of the child's desire.”

The phallus answers the question of what the mother wants ('Che voui?', 'What do you want?'), and subsequently provides a blueprint for the child to ask the same question of itself – 'What do I want or desire?'

“This is why the Other's question...in some such form as 'Che vuoi?’, 'What do you want?', is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire, assuming that... he takes up that question, even without knowing it, in the following form: 'What does he want from me?’”

Thus, Lacan asserts that our desires are never truly our own; “Desire full stop is always the desire of the Other. Which basically means that we are always asking the Other what he desires.”

According to Lacan, desire is not a natural or innate quality of the infant subject, but a condition that is must be learned through the appropriation of the Other's desire. But because it impossible to discern what the Other clearly desires, our own desires in response must constantly mutate and shift in relation to our hazy perception of the Other. Through this process, our desires take on a kind of autonomy, a unique 'objet-a,' which at once resembles and is distinct from our initial encounter with the (m)Other's
desire.

“When we call our desires our own what we really mean is only that we have succeeded in seeking out the gaps in the desire of the Other, and carving out a space for ourselves there...In order to become a subject, an infant must first identify the mother's desire, and then pick a position in response to it.”\(^{32}\)

This appropriation of the Other's desire – or rather, what one thinks the Other desires – is always an influence on the cause of the subject's own desire; this is even the case in relatively insignificant desires, “as the squabbling of children more readily testifies, it is fully possible for an object to become desirable for individuals because they perceive that others desire it, such as when the others' desire is withdrawn, the object also loses its allure.”\(^{33}\)

This sympathetic excitation of desire reveals an alternative translation of Lacan's maxim; that Lacan's “Le désir de l'homme, c'est le désir de l'Autre,” may also be translated along the lines of “Man's desire is a desire \underline{from} the Other,” or \underline{for} the Other to desire him.\(^{34}\) With this statement, Lacan asserts that a subject's desire is a desire \underline{to be} desired – to have one's own desire recognized in the Other's desire. As he himself writes, “the desire for recognition dominates the desire that is to be recognized, preserving it as such until it is recognized.”\(^{35}\) We can see this articulation in the infant's attempts to \underline{become} the phallus for the mother in the Oedipal Stage. The child, fearing an inevitable loss of its unity with its mother, attaches its own desire to the activities of her 'desiring': her “gaze” and the attention paid to her act of desiring the phallus. In its fascination with becoming the phallus, the child establishes its true desire, which is to \underline{be} desired, “to find that the Other is not different but a self-reflection and hence the same.”\(^{36}\)
Desire of the Other discusses the relationship between the Self and the Other in the differentiated realm of the Symbolic Order. Positioned within a minimal, psychological space, a female subject peers through a red transitional screen, towards an enigmatic vision of her Other. This ambiguous Other, built from abstracted shapes and animal-like textures, represents a construction of “Otherness” as established through one's subjective alienation of difference. This Other is separated from the subject, as it exists in a realm of the unknown, but the compositional balance between the two suggests that they were once merged in a conflation of Imaginary “sameness.” As the female subject tries to access a vision of her Other through a slit in the red screen, a wispy black energy – the manifestation of desire – is exuded through an opening in her spine. This dark voluminous mist also encircles the figure of the Other, and we see that their desires are intrinsically and intimately connected. As desire tempts a conflation between the subject and the Other, the rigid structure of their environment prohibits their potential integration. The static wood floor and the illogical perspective of the walls refer to the repressive enforcement of the terms of the Symbolic Order. These architectural elements, which insist on adherence to the physical rules of space, freeze the subject and the Other in static opposition. The billowy gas of desire, however, evades any Symbolic regulation. Pulsating within the piece, this emanating blackness represents the perpetual shifting and continual questioning of desire, ever deepening in response to ones fascination with the Other.

In a subject's attempts to interpret the Other's desire, specifically the cause of the Other's desire, its own desire is founded. For Lacan, the question 'Che vuoi?' indicates the establishment of the subject's own desire, and its relationship to its own 'objet-a,' explaining that, “interpretation is directed towards desire, with which, in a certain sense, it is identical. Desire, in fact, is interpretation itself.”

But as we have seen, desire itself is essentially unsatisfiable; through its ever shifting direction and form in response to the ambiguous interpretation of the Other, desire is an inherently infinite condition within the human experience. Desire insists on its perpetuation; its “utility function” is to “reproduce itself as desire,” to maintain itself in a never-ending process of questioning and deepening.

“Other's desire escapes the subject – ever seeking, as it does, something else – yet the subject is able to recover a remainder therefore by which to sustain him or herself in being, as a being of desire, a desiring being.”
VII. $\Diamond a : The Operation of Fantasy

If desire is constituted by an unfulfillable lack emerging from an encounter with the Other's desire, then *fantasy* functions as a solution for that lack, an Imaginary scenario which decodes the cryptic ambiguities of Otherness. Fantasy “fills out the void,” in both our desires and the Other's desire, and offers a position from which one can answer the questions of desire, thus providing relief from the incessant cycle of questioning.

“Fantasy appears, then, as an answer to 'Che vuoi?', to the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other, the lack in the Other; but it is at the same time fantasy itself which, so to speak, provides the co-ordinates of our desire – which constructs the frame enabling us to desire something.”

Where desire pulls us into an incessant cycle of questioning, fantasy provides an Imaginary answer – a stage where one can approach the Other's desire and identify with it, without losing one's essential subjective grasp of Self. In this way, fantasy can be seen as a lens or phantasmic frame which, when superimposed upon an experience of “reality,” can smooth over the gaps caused by the traumatic separation from the Other, granting “an underlying support for our sense of reality... [as it] acts as a compensation for what the social reality – the world in which we can only desire – does not provide.”

Desire and fantasy operate simultaneously with one another, working in overlapping unison to shape our experience of reality. As Žižek elegantly puts it,

“Fantasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the *desire of the Other*: by giving us a definite answer to the question 'What does the Other want?,' it enables us to evade the unbearable deadlock in which the Other wants something from us, but we are at the same time incapable of translating this desire of the Other into a positive interpellation, into a mandate with which to identify.”
In making the ambiguities of our desire easier to understand, fantasy offers a source of
relief from the incessant, unbearable conditions of desire.

According to Lacan, the construction of a subject's fantasy is determined by the “shape” of its
particular ‘objet-a’. The relationship between a subject and the objects of their desire composes the
Imaginary scenario that reveals one's ideal orientation towards, and exchange with, their lost Other.
Furthermore, one's fulfillment of desire allows for the excitation of a sublime pleasure, termed by
Lacan as jouissance. Jouissance, inaccessible in one's experience of reality, is an extreme and often
dangerous pleasure which must be experienced through mediation. As Bruce Fink writes, jouissance
stems “from a traumatic encounter with the Other's desire”; it is a pleasure that is “excessive, leading to
a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination.”

“The subject – lacking in being – is thus seen to consist in relation to, or a stance adopted
with respect to, the Other's desire as fundamentally thrilling and yet unnerving,
fascinating and yet overwhelming or revolting...The subject's precarious existence is
sustained by fantasies constructed to keep the subject at just the right distance from that
dangerous desire, delicately balancing the attraction and repulsion.”43

Thus, through the realm of fantasy, one may approach and satisfy the desires within one's
experience of reality; fantasy functions “to provide an object for our states of mind, and, by
making that object subservient to the will, to enable us to enjoy a magical power which we
frequently long for but can never possess.”44 For this reason, our experience of reality is
essentially influenced by an unconscious imposition of fantasy: “no one experiences reality
without some phantasmic investment. This means that what we imagine that we see informs, to
some extent at least, what we do see.”45
A Mindscape: Teasing the Thresholds of Desire, presents a panoramic composition that reveals an atmospheric articulation of fantasy. We observe a theatrical mise-en-scene in the room before us: female figures recline on Victorian furniture, which are positioned in eerie, empty-seeming configurations within the enormous space of a windowless palace. This room, with its distorted perspective and convoluted architecture, seems to introduce a disjunction into the logical perception of physical space. Animals also inhabit this room, drawn into visual conversation with their surroundings through the placement of several large oval shapes, which lay integrated into the heavily-grained wood floor; these ovals are at once rugs and volume-less pools of metaphysical matter. Unusual white specters pop out from the walls, and their exposed areas of whiteness vibrate within the intricate patterning of the textural environment. We become aware that we are viewing a conflation of multiple dimensions, layered upon one another to form the illusory fabric of fantasy, and that this scene depicts a kind of harem of Otherness. The female figures – embodiments of the Other – emit an unusual frequency of desire; this strange desire, concealed by a mask or by incomplete articulation, seems to unify the figures within the dreamlike energy of the surrounding environment. The viewer then finds themselves in relation to the deer, elk and rabbit within this room; these animals represent the phantasmic version of the viewer, having entered the realm of the Other's desire. In other words, through the absorption fantasy, we are transformed into a phantasmic version of ourselves, one which is able to enter the realm of the Other and interpret the enigmatic quality of the Other's desire.

Given the powerful influence of fantasy, its intentional exploration may have the ability to alter one's experience of reality; through the active navigation of the Imaginary Order, as entered through the threshold of fantasy, one may find ways to redefine notions of Self in integration with primordial identifications of the Other. The activity of creative expression allows for such a redefinition. By creating an inherently artistic language, drawn from the expression of Imaginary experience, one can present the Symbolic with new, authentic terms for
signification, terms which are essentially unbounded by previous determinations and exclusions of difference.

Certainly not all forms of artistic activity expose the potential for a transformative renegotiation of language; rather, the majority of artistic production throughout history relies on the seamless fusion between fantasy and desire, mimicking the conditions of our familiar experience of reality, keeping notions of Self and Other separate and distinct. In these cases, the operations of fantasy and desire are kept so entwined that their individual effects are imperceivable. This fusion maintains the fundamental separation between one's internal and external world, the realms of the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders. However, when a work of art disturbs this seamless union between desire and fantasy, we are at once able to engage with the Imaginary and find ourselves arriving at the conflation between the Self and the Other.
VIII. The Function of Fantasy in Cinema

In most narrative cinema, we observe a seamless overlapping of desire and fantasy, which functions with such fluid synchronicity that we experience a replication of our familiar reality (we watch a film and think, “That's me! I've had that experience”). Through the narrative of such films, we become aware of the character's desires and blindly accept the processes of fantasy that work to make those desires achievable, or at least understandable. For example, in his film noir classic, *Double Indemnity*, director Billy Wilder presents a story whose structure is reliant on the imperceptible fusion of desire and fantasy. In the film, we are introduced to Walter Neff, the relatable main character and personified “Self” figure for the viewer. We are also introduced to Phyllis Dietrichson, the supporting female character, who represents the “Other,” the object of Neff's desires, and who seems to contain her own mysterious desire that we are, at first, unable to understand. Through the progression on the film, we come to interpret Dietrichson's behavior through the fantasy lens of the “femme fatale” role. Via the use of this phantasmic frame, the viewer is able to “make sense of her and her desire...all the ambiguities in her desire that follow in the film...emerge against the background of this initial phantasmic frame.”

(see endnote 48 for photographic credit)
This seamless interweaving of fantasy allows us to decode the enigmas of the Other, such that we may arrive at a resolution that seems to satisfy the desire of our reality. This resolution pushes the viewer to draw meaning from the Symbolic signification of Dietrichson's role; as a “femme fatale” she is therefore the Other, the object of desire, and the evil antagonist of the film.

On the other hand, when a work of art disrupts the complementary functions of desire and fantasy within the narrative, one is left with a vision of the Other that is far more difficult to understand and reconcile. It is within this disturbance that one can re-enter the realm of the Imaginary Order and arrive at a reflection of the Other.

We are confronted with the enigma of the Other and forced to accept an Imaginary expression of experience within Peter Weir's haunting classic, *Picnic at Hanging Rock.* The film follows a class of Victorian-era adolescent school girls in their visit to the Australian wilderness. It is Valentines day, and the girls, bound in lacy corsets and colonial-style white dresses, venture out to the base of Hanging Rock, a mysterious, ancient volcanic formation. The girls themselves simultaneously embody the roles of Self and Other for the viewer, though we are able to understand their characters as representations of youth and innocence; they are beautiful, precious objects, and although they behave with an alien, dreamlike manner, we can interpret their desires as essentially repressed by the constructs of Victorian society and culture. At this point in the film, desire and fantasy are still merged into a harmonious fabric that mimics a vision of reality. However, these operations quickly separate when, in the midst of their idyllic afternoon, several girls decide to break off from the group and journey towards the top of Hanging Rock. They are led by Miranda, the film's chosen focus, who is
marked with a deeply transcendent and sublime beauty; she is the film's, as well as the viewer's, object of desire. As they ascend Hanging Rock, the girls are lulled into a hypnotic, metaphysical daze, overcome by the magnetic and supernatural properties of the ancient formation. The viewer understands that the girls are entering a potentially dangerous realm of the unknown, although we are unable to comprehend just what that means within the frame of the story.50 (see endnote 51 for photographic credit.1)

“The Hanging Rock, a dense bulk sticking out from the surrounding countryside, appears to project a mysterious gravitational force. A 'grimace of the real' inscribed into symbolic reality, it designates a forbidden, sacred zone, reminiscent of the holy places of the Australian aborigines.52"

It is at this point that Weir pulls the phantasmic frame from the cinematic reality, and we enter a purely Imaginative realm that offers an immersive conflation with Otherness. The viewer becomes aware of the sun-drenched overexposure of the film and the mesmeric undertones of the musical score (composed from slowed-down field recordings and pan flute). We watch, from a purely atmospheric perspective, as the girls become enveloped in the heavy supernatural pulsations of the landscape; time slows, their watches stop, and both their and our realities warp in response to the ancient origins, the “enormous time scale” of the mountain itself. After awakening from rest upon the mountain’s sun-baked rocks, three of the four girls walk with slow, inebriated steps into tight crevasse in the summit of the rock face. Of the girls, Miranda is last to speak, reciting, “Everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place.” As they slip out of screen, they seem to completely disappear – to dematerialize within the heavy, powerful essence of the atmosphere.

But the camera doesn't follow them – a perspectival shift which incites a traumatic horror into the filmic experience; the girls, in their complete integration with Otherness, disappear from the viewer; we are suddenly snapped out of the Imaginary and back into “reality” of the narrative. The rest of the film follows the desperate, frantic, and inevitably fruitless search for the lost schoolgirls. Several characters attempt to re-enter the realm of the Other by returning to Hanging Rock, attempting
to penetrate the abyss into which the girls have disappeared, but they are unable to traverse the fantasy into their Imaginary dimension. In many ways, we see that film establishes a *desire* in ourselves, reflecting the primordial passage from the Imaginary to Symbolic Orders of being; we lose our identification with the girls, our Other, and then experience a “lack” and a desire to reconnect with them.

In a similar way, David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* employs the separation of desire and fantasy, to reveal a traversal of the Imaginary realm of experience; like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, we observe in *Blue Velvet* that the encounter and conflation with the Other, through fantasy, has the potential for horror and trauma. In one particular scene, arguably the most brutal and disturbing moment in the film, the phantasmic frame of narrative is not merely withheld, but rather tessellated, resulting in “strange reverberations” of Imaginary identifications with the Other, and an overwhelming expression of jouissance. This scene occurs when Dorothy Vallens, having returned home to her ominous apartment, is raped by Frank Booth, while a young Jeffrey Beaumont secretly watches from within an onlooking closet. The viewer assumes Jeffrey’s perspective, and observes the entirety of this obscene and particularly bizarre sexual display from this voyeuristic vantage point. Frank orders Dorothy to sit in various positions, yells, breathes deeply through a nitrous tank, and thrashes himself about with increasingly bizarre intensity; his elaborate and grotesque behavior prohibits a phantasmic frame from clearing the ambiguities of this expression of desire. Similarly, Dorothy’s languid impartialness to Frank’s actions disturb our ability to interpret the violence of his actions. We are instead left to witness a traumatic expression of desire – the desire of the Other, as represented by both Frank and Dorothy.
In *Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Slavoj Žižek asserts that the disturbance of this scene is not merely due to the suspension of fantasy, but rather to the “mutual interlocking” of each of character's fantasies. Žižek suggests that we analyze this scene from three distinct angles of interpretation. Firstly, we may view Jeffery's perspective like that of a young child, still unable to understand sexuality and the range of sexual activity, witnessing parental intercourse. Hidden within the closet, Jeffrey overhears deep breathing and movements; the scene that unfolds may actually reflect his imagined interpretation of sexual intercourse, which he is not able to fully comprehend. Secondly, from Frank's perspective, this scene may reveal an exaggerated display of authority; Frank imagines a “ridiculously violent spectacle,” choreographed in excessive over-articulation, that acts to assert his power and to “cover-up” his actual impotence. Lastly, Žižek contends that we might view this scene as Dorothy's imagined scenario, and that Frank, in his extreme brutality and almost ridiculous behavior, is Dorothy's fantasy, which “awakens her out of her lethargy,” and fulfills her own enigmatic desire. Žižek maintains that while Frank's treatment of Dorothy is obviously abusive, but her “passivity” and momentary expressions of pleasure suggest the potential for an alternative interpretation. 

Thus, the suspension of a singular fantasy frame that might translate and decode the enigmas of desire allows for one's reinsertion into the Imaginary Order and confrontation with the Other.
IX. The Broader Capacity for Art

Beyond cinema, many forms of art present the potential for a creative traversal of the Imaginary realm of experience; by entering the threshold of fantasy and into a domain of Imaginary identifications with Otherness, the activity of creative expression reveals the potential for a “semitic” renegotiation of the Self within the Symbolic Order. The semiotic, like an 'Other of language,' refers to the meanings and connections drawn from the experience of Imaginary unity; it is “fluid and plural, a kind of pleasurable creative excess over precise meaning, and it takes sadistic delight in destroying or negating such [Symbolic] signs.”\(^57\) The formation of an inherently artistic semiotic language may be able to convey the “fullness” of meaning without the exclusion of Otherness, “express[ing] the wholeness of certain attitudes which logic and science, on their own, can never do.”\(^58\) By redefining one’s Self through more creative terms, one may manage to disassemble the separations between the Self and the other, and reconstruct one’s relationships to their own desires. This transgressive ability of art is why many “anti-essentialist” feminists view creative activity as an arena for a significant restructuring of socially and culturally enforced gender roles. Through artistic expression, a female is able to “reveal what is an 'otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe,' that is their own denied experience,”\(^59\) as well as develop new terms of Self definition, uninfluenced by sexual gender, which can be accessed by both male and female subjects.

A transformative expression of creative activity occurs in a transitional threshold, an
intermediary zone, where one's Imaginary identifications of “sameness” can be examined and expressed. Like the act of childhood play, art made within this zone is suspended in constant fluctuation between its roles in the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders, and offers “a resting place for the individual involved in the continuous task of trying to keep inner and outer reality separate, but interrelated.”

Concerned with this very potential of artistic creativity, many Surrealist artists sought to distill the methodologies of art-making into a pure activity of play, oscillating between modes of conscious and unconscious expression from an intermediary zone of creation. Surrealists referred to this creative process as “automatism,” following their own instinctual actions towards the establishment of a visual language. In doing so, artists would inhibit their inclinations to define and direct a creative gesture, instead creating authentic, expansive works from “a level where 'unconscious forces' are active.” These intuitive and spontaneous artworks were seen to reveal the route of travel through an Imaginary realm – the trajectory and conversation between fields of internal and external experience, which come together to represent a visual residue from the pursuit of desire; a process which functions “as the medium through which desire demands attention and takes definition.” As Man Ray writes,

“The developed mind creating an image that moves us to the deepest level of our unconscious by its strangeness and its reality, the awakening of a desire is always the first step toward participation and experience. Every effect prompted by desire must also rest on an automatic or subconscious energy that helps in its realization. Of this energy we possess unlimited reserves; all that is needed is the wish to reach down into ourselves, eliminating all feeling of restraint and propriety...the creator concerning himself with human values allows the unconscious forces to filter through, colored by his own personality which is only the universal desire of man and brings to light motives and instincts long repressed which are, after all, a basis for brotherhood and confidence.”

Man Ray asserts that, because desire is inherent to the human condition, we all possess an unconscious “energy” which has the potential to expand the boundaries of creative expression;
when liberated from the constraints of repression, this fantastic energy functions to merge the
positions of the Self and the Other, and surfaces as an exquisite remnant of desire itself. (see endnote
64 and 65 for photographic credit and quote citation)  

For many surrealist artists, the search was considered essentially more significant than the find, explaining that the activity involved in the intuitive pursuit of desire, may reveal more meaning than the eventual product of that activity. This assertion is what André Breton defines as 'convulsive beauty.'66 For Breton, upon completely “abandoning himself to desire,” an artist may experience an authentic, phenomenological encounter with pleasure and beauty, one which is only achieved in the precarious pursuit of desire through intuitive creative expression. In Lacanian terms, Breton is identifying a certain jouissance which erupts by means of a total immersion into fantasy, and fuses the subject with object, the Self with the Other.

“Such beauty can emanate only from the poignant feeling of something revealed, from the full certainty obtained through the irruption of a solution which, by reason of its very nature, could not come to us by ordinary logical paths.... Now, it has happened that I have come upon it [produced the artwork], unique no doubt among other man-made objects. Obviously this was it, even though it different in every regard from my expectations. One might have said that, in its extreme simplicity,...it made me ashamed of the elementary nature of those expectations. The fact remains that pleasure here is a function of the very dissimilarity existing between the object wished for and the find. The find, whether it be artistic, scientific, philosophical or as shabby utilitarian as you like, in my eyes takes away from any beauty that is not the find itself. In it alone do we have the opportunity to recognize the marvelous precipitate of desire. It alone has the power to enlarge the universe, in part to reject its opacity, to reveal to us the universe's capacity for extraordinary concealment, proportionate to the innumerable needs of the spirit.”67

André Masson was among the first surrealist artists to experiment with an “automatic” process in drawing, explaining that an automatic work, “as if dictated by the unconscious,” contains images and patterns that could later be interpreted as the remnants of desire. Masson's drawings exist in a fluid, ambiguous zone between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders. His works, containing both figurative and gestural imagery, seem to convey a visual language that translates the Imaginary experience of cohesive “sameness” with the Other. Within his drawings, we see body parts, genitalia, mouths, hair, and delicate, expressionistic textures, which merge and pulsate within a psychological environment. Like a poem written under hypnosis, Masson's drawings speak of the openness of unconscious experience and the reconstitution of language towards more immersive, expansive and authentic significations of meaning and experience.
It is from this place of Imaginative investigations and psychological inquiry that my own work takes its form. Following the experimental processes of the Surrealists before me, my work enters through the veil of fantasy into an exploration of the Imaginary realm of experience; from this place, I draw forth an expression of Imaginary “wholeness,” a semiotic translation of language that is capable of conveying the authentic identifications between the Self and the Other, in order to reconstitute the “marvelous precipitate” that is desire.

Through a psychoanalytic blueprint of the human condition, as conveyed through the writings of Jacques Lacan, my work seeks to examine an artistic capacity for a renegotiation of the female role within the Symbolic Order – the social reality that positions the female as Other within the greater structures of culture and social discourse. As Terry Eagleton writes, “the symbolic order of which Lacan writes is in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class-society, structured around the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the father embodies. There is no way, then, in which a feminist or pro-feminist may uncritically celebrate the symbolic order at the expense of the imaginary.”

When a female subject undergoes the Lacanian transition from Imaginary to Symbolic Orders of being, thus becoming a gendered and sexually differentiated entity, she enters a world whose structure denies her fundamental subjectivity. In her progression through the Oedipus Complex, a female subject must acknowledge that she will eternally lack and be controlled by the phallus signifier. Unlike a male subject, who comes to realize that he will become, like the father, a possessor of the phallus in the future, the female subject is resigned to the role of a substitute for another's prohibited Oedipal desire. Thus within the Symbolic Order, we see that a female subject is placed into the role of “object,” and is therefore denied her own subjectivity.
“She strives to be affirmed as a unique, desirable, special subject, an individual distinct from all other women; yet romantic love relations involve, instead, ‘putting her on a pedestal’... and/or a reduction to the position of a sexual object (receptacle of active masculine desire). What is clearly more affirmed is not her subjectivity but her ability to be reduced to desired object, which she shares in common with all women in patriarchy.”

A female within the Symbolic Order is suspended within a confusing and toxic relationship to desire. On the one hand, she possesses desire; she is severed from the Imaginary experience of sameness, which essentially defines her ability to participate and communicate within the networks of society and through language. On the other hand, she is an object of desire; she inhabits the Symbolic position of the Other, and is relegated to an existence that necessitates its oppositional relation to a Self. This overlapping perspective seems to negate her authority over her own experience; she is a signifier with an unclear signification.

“Because her body serves as a lure to desire, Woman is essential-ized by males as containing secret truths, the answers to enigmas, answers from, or to, the Otherness that the masculine denies and rejects and projects onto others. In this sense she is the phallus.”

Sullivan continues to explain that a female subject becomes the Other because, “the *raison d’être*[utility function] of the masculine is that it differs from the feminine.” Femininity is then portrayed, through Symbolic language, as the antithesis of masculine identity. As the result of this impossible duality, the female subject is thus barred from ownership of her own desires; pursuit of desire in the Symbolic would mean a journey through a male-oriented framework of language which unconditionally positions her as the Other within her own experience. Thus, female desire cannot be articulated by means of an inherently male language.

As a response to this problem, my work investigates the possibility of a semiotic alternative to Symbolic language, composed on the basis of visual terms, which is capable of articulating and investigating the experience of female desire. Through such a language, I argue that one may disassemble the patriarchal framework of the Symbolic Order, and reconstitute notions of Self and
Other that refuse to rely on previous exclusions of difference. My work suggests the potential for this renegotiation of female subjectivity by calling attention to the existing contradictions of the female experience within the Symbolic Order.
15 Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, 43.
19 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 59.
21 Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), 70. (According to Freud, such is the case for an infant male subject, while the infant female subject experiences a fundamentally different resolution.)
22 Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, 43.
27 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 91.
29 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 59.
34 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 59.
39 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 61.
42 Slavoj Žižek, Sublime Object, 114-5.
43 Bruce Fink, The Lacanian Subject, xii.
44 Roger Scruton, Sexual Desire, 22.
48 Billy Wilder, Double Indemnity (screen shot from “Bette's Classic Movie Blog,” 2010), directed by Billy
Wilder/performd by Barbara Stanyck (1944; United States; Paramount Pictures [Universal Studios], 2006.), DVD.
49 Peter Weir, Picnic at Hanging Rock, film, directed by Peter Weir (1975; Australia: Greater Union [Janus
Films/Criterion], 1998.), DVD
50 William Earnest, “How the Thing Spoils the Picnic or Does Psychoanalysis Restore Symbolic Capacity or Provide a
51 Peter Weir, Picnic at Hanging Rock (screen shot from “Vint Condition,” 2010), directed by Peter Weir (1975; Australia;
Greater Union [Janus Films/Criterion], 1998.), DVD. Accessed April, 2014
53 David Lynch, Blue Velvet, directed by David Lynch (1986; United States: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 2002.),
DVD.
54 David Lynch, Blue Velvet (screenshot from “Princess Cornflakes: “Dorothy Vallens, the Witch and the Wardrobe,”
55 David Lynch, Blue Velvet (screenshot by Raleigh Gardiner), directed by David Lynch (1986; United States: De
Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 2002.), DVD.
Guide Ltd, 2009.), DVD.
57 Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory, 163.
58 Rosalind Minsky, Psychoanalysis and Gender, 129.
59 Rosalind Minsky (on Julie Kristeva), Psychoanalysis and Gender, 185.
60 Rosalind Minsky, Psychoanalysis and Gender, 124-126.
Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012), 25.
64 Andrè Masson, Délire végétal (Vegetal Delirium), ink on paper, 1925 (private collection, Paris); photo, 2012 (Museum
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