Subject to Reading
Subject to Reading:
Literacy and Belief in the Work
of Jacques Lacan and Paulo Freire

By

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To Sandra, Susan, Alison and Mary:
Thank you for reading and listening and for teaching me your language.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

I (1953-54).  The Seminar. Book I. Freud’s Papers on Technique
II (1954-55). The Seminar. Book II. The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in
              the Technique of Psychoanalysis
VII (1959-60). The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis
VIII (1960-61). The Seminar. Book VIII. The Transference
            of Psychoanalysis
XX (1972-73). The Seminar. Book XX. Encore, On Feminine Sexuality,
               The Limits of Love and Knowledge
INTRODUCTION

UNDER ATTACK

“We would all like to be simpler, Paul”, she says, “every one of us. Particularly as we near the end. But we are complicated creatures, we human beings. That is our nature. You want me to be simpler. You want to be simpler yourself, more naked. Well, I gaze in wonderment, believe me, upon your efforts to strip yourself down. But it comes at a cost, the simple heart you so desire, the simple way of seeing the world.”
—Elizabeth Costello in J.M. Coetzee’s Slow Man, 2006

It became a common suggestion at the time of the attacks on the World Trade Center that the West was ill-equipped to deal with the perpetrators of such acts as it could not conceive of a people prepared to sacrifice life in the name of a belief or owing to overwhelming conviction. This was seen as confirmation of the respect for, and love of, life that purportedly characterises Western neo-liberal democracies.

Slavoj Žižek, in his 2002 work Welcome to the Desert of the Real, astutely wonders, however, whether this inability to imagine a symbolic act superseding the will to life does not, rather, serve as an indictment of the West:

What if we are “really alive” only if we commit ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond “mere life”? What if, when we focus on mere survival, even if it is qualified as “having a good time”, what we ultimately lose is life itself? (89)

These questions acquire pronounced relevance in the context of a more widespread valorisation of the biological as the essence of human existence and well-being. This attitude derives from an epistemology which regards the real as quantifiable, measurable and, ultimately, accessible as unequivocal presence. The perfect objectivity made possible by the promise of a non-ideologically-informed real extends its aura of pragmatic authority to those who claim to be able to measure such a real and who are always developing tools to measure and catalogue it ever
more precisely. Empiricist scientific research takes centre stage and, consequently, politics is limited to the “administering and regulating [of] ‘mere life’” (op. cit.: 100) insofar as this becomes the only irrefutable, and therefore relevant, assessment of human beingness.

Such a state of affairs was neatly demonstrated by the recent “Make Poverty History” campaign, which, despite its name, addressed neither the historical context of the gross inequality plaguing our contemporary world nor the economic systems which perpetuate starvation. Indeed, in many respects “Poverty” became equated with hunger and thus a socio-economically induced condition became synonymous with biological need and an unavoidable scarcity of resources.

Much was also made, for example, of the British monarch attending a memorial service to honour those who had suffered and died under slavery; yet it remains the case that (even if one scapegoats Britain’s imperial past as ideologically aberrant) the symbolic fabric from which contemporary monarchy is woven remains fundamentally antithetical to social justice and equality. That the role of this monarch has been “reduced” to one which is supposedly purely symbolic should render this contradiction in meaning patently obvious. These clashes and collusions in the symbolic realm, however, it would seem, are beyond the concerns of sensationalist humanitarianism and royalist marketing.

It appears, then, that there is a dimension to human existence which it is proving ever more sentimental and inconvenient to point out, namely that human existence is that existence which also partakes of meaning: that ideology is an inevitable consequence of human attempts at meaning-
making and continues to influence human behaviour, no matter the extent to which it may be rendered unconscious. That this “other existence” is inescapable for all human beings is the contention of both Freire and Lacan and, hence, this book.

This book examines and parallels the thought of these two figures in an attempt to intervene not only in any academic debate concerning their work but also in what it views as a global move towards occluding and devaluing the symbolic dimension of human existence. Such a symbolic existence is contained in the notion of subjectivity deployed in this book. Central to the argument of this book is the contention that subjectivity is a universal human phenomenon. Indeed that subjectivity itself speaks to a particular kind of universality; such universality, however, is not the kind supposedly offered by master narratives. These narratives, as the violence of their imposition avows, harbour no true universality at all. Rather the universality under consideration in this book is that of the ongoing human attempt at narrating (attributing meaning to) existence. That is to say it relates to the shared, specifically human, obligation to translate being into meaning.

Freire and Lacan are both preoccupied with delineating the dynamics which govern and underpin the fact of human subjectivity. Although they do not deny the importance of the way in which subjectivity is invested owing to culture or context, it is the claim of this book that, for them, subjectivity is, ultimately, a fundamental inescapable element of human ontology which has common identifiable features. It might be said that they, to borrow a phrase from William Faulkner, are involved in tracing the “universal bones” of the human experience.

Lacanian psychoanalysis was not designed to be exclusively practiced in France anymore than Freirean pedagogy was meant to be relegated to Brazil. These programmes, as this book hopes to demonstrate, cohere around a central ethical principle which relies on universality. This principle is that human beings, as subjects, are engaged in a symbolic project for which they need to accept shared responsibility. This project, namely that of articulating organic being, is undertaken at a personal level, a community level, a national level and also at a global level. These levels are, moreover, not exclusive. Every subject is called upon to recognise his or her complicity, defiance or active participation regarding a symbolic universe which extends well beyond him or herself.

Universality in this instance is not only a way of thinking, it is also an ethical stance. As Alain Badiou argues, the neo-liberal obsession with identifying and respecting cultural difference has not led to some sort of global democratic federation; instead it has led to a divisive form of
identitarian politics and a patronising ethics of aid. In a similar vein, Freire’s work stresses that humanitarian acts of charity are not as much use, ultimately, as a true engagement with alternative narratives for being. A true engagement would demand that one be prepared to have that way of understanding influence, or even become, one’s own way of interpreting experience; even that of one’s own being. Furthermore, I believe it is naïve to maintain that global capitalism can be sufficiently challenged by any movement that is not at least as capable of implying global membership.

It is the contention of this book that the thought of both Lacan and Freire be considered philosophical. To approach either Freire or Lacan as only applicable to a particular language, culture or historical moment is to misunderstand the impetus behind their work and commit an injustice against the expansiveness of their thought. It is, in short, to defeat the very spirit of their attempts to enable subjects to surmount seemingly inescapable socio-historical/linguistic circumstances and conditioning. Both Freire and Lacan attempt to address a universal audience and the strategies and concepts they adopt actively resist the vicissitudes of both translation and cultural appropriation. They were also anxious to see the practices they initiated preserved; these practices (or forms) were designed to sustain and convey the philosophies which had engendered them.²

The kind of intervention in meaning which both Freire and Lacan prompt subjects to make, and which they stage in their own work, is not primarily predicated on language but on a deeper existential vocabulary. Although such intervention might partake of and subsist in language, it is represented most effectively, beyond contingent linguistic expression, by existential attitudes communicated, primarily, through how and what we desire. Desire is housed in language but is perceptible beyond it (were this not the case a psychoanalytic session would have no object). Desire speaks of a space in which subjecthood stands divested of culture and any

² Freire employs motifs from Christianity for his own concepts (promoting, with a Marxist focus, its negation of cultural/national difference whilst tapping into its global dissemination). Lacan purposefully uses “mathemes” in an attempt to obtain a universal means for alluding to subjective structures. The ambiguity of the algebraically-inspired figures Lacan employs ensures that they will not become permanently mired or appropriated within a particular culture. Through these mathemes (the object petit a is an example) Lacan attempts to offer a cross-cultural account of the structures underlying human subjectivity. See Badiou’s (2003) and Žižek’s (2000; 2001) re-evaluations of Christianity and Evans (1996: 108) on Lacanian mathemes.
particular language and asks what and how it should mean. This is the space in which the ethical purpose behind the work of Freire and Lacan can be felt most acutely.

The literacy in the title of this book, which I argue is at the core of Freirean pedagogy as well as Lacanian psychoanalytic practice, is not ultimately one concerned with any particular language or even, primarily, with communicating linguistic skills. Rather it refers to an ethically-important awareness regarding the role representation plays in inaugurating subjectivity as well as one’s potential agency as a subject vis-à-vis existent symbolic constellations.

The ethical systems outlined by Lacan and Freire are not only applicable to all subjects but these very systems posit that all subjects are part of a global symbolic community. Any intervention achieved by any subject is potentially of universal significance because not only are we all subjugated to the necessity of meaning but the symbolic universe is a sensitive recording machine which tends towards communicability. A computer analogy might not be out of place here: if representation relies on a basic binary code of presence and absence (fort-da!) then, just as all computers are able to communicate with one another, fundamentally, all symbolic systems retain a degree of equivalency. All interventions speak to a prior human community based on the obligation to represent as well as freedom in (although not from) representation. Indeed an intervention is precisely that which demonstrates such freedom.

To emphasize the shared subjugation (of all subjects) that operates at the heart of Freire and Lacan’s work is to open up the possibility of a radical re-imagining of belief and humility; a conjunction between Freire and Lacan’s thought may in fact offer an intriguing secular theology. For Lacan all theology is ultimately secular because God has only-ever been a way of articulating the fundamental unconscious dynamic which gives rise to subjecthood, namely, the encounter between organic being

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3 Subjectivity, for both Freire and Lacan, represents, most importantly, the renewal of freedom within established codes such that both culture and identity might be re-scripted. Subjecthood exists in the gap between the material world of organic experience and its translation into cultural form and meaning; indeed, for Lacan, “subjecthood” is nothing other than a name for this gap. Like synapses in the brain, the subject may only exist as an elusive firing in the absence of direct connection (between the real and culture in this instance), but it plays a decisive role. Subjecthood is thus bound to representation but not to any particular representation, language, culture or history. Indeed, as Lacan reflects in his third seminar on the psychoses, paranoiacs often invent their own language (or at very least have a penchant for neologism).
(from now on simple “being” with a lowercase “b”) and the symbolic realm. In this encounter the symbolic realm is mistaken for an intentioned Other and the subject’s relationship with this Other shapes desire and gives rise to identity. For Lacan the scandal of modern times is not that God is dead but that God has been returned to the unconscious (XI, 1964: 59).

Herein lie the seeds of a new theology, insofar as the functioning of subjective desire depends on the subject mistaking the symbolic realm as an authoritative Other. This means that belief and truth still have a place in the Lacanian account of subjectivity. As this book will argue, however, it is vital that this Other be re-encountered by the subject, no longer as a master, but as a representation of the universal community of subjects and a reminder of an individual subject’s obligations in this regard.

The far more explicit theology of Freire is also premised on a commitment to humanity as symbolizing community and therefore offers an extension of the unconscious “symbo-theology” which Lacan appears to be suggesting. The relationship between Freire’s thought and that of Lacan seems, at first, to be one in which Freire offers a social dimension to Lacan’s theorising of subjectivity. Things, however, are a little more complex because Lacan locates a symbolic template of society (in the form of the Other) at the origins of subjectivity, whilst Freire primarily appeals to the subjectivity of individuals in order to prompt them to engage in socio-cultural intervention.

This book argues against work by Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič and Joan Copjec, who have all suggested that Lacan means for the unconscious Other to be dismantled in favour of the agency of the subject. Yet neither does it concur with Judith Butler, who, certainly in her commentary on Antigone, asserts that Lacan offers the subject such limited agency as to effectively deny it any whatsoever.

Catherine Belsey, in her 2005 work Culture and the Real, suggests that, although Lacan argues the subject is a creative agent, he restricts such agency by making it function exclusively on behalf of a real which exists beyond, but insists on, symbolization. This real will always exceed the capacity, priority and authority of the symbolic and thereby the subject’s attempts to come to terms with it. Despite agreeing the real is a limit, Žižek suggests that it is one which is internal to the symbolic order.

In playing off Belsey’s interpretation against that of Žižek, and through offering an independent view of Lacan’s theory, this book aims to demonstrate that humility is vital to an ethics concerning the exercise of subjectivity. Žižek, Zupančič and Copjec, for example, fail to provide any compelling basis for humility in their celebrations of the agency of the
subject. The most productive source of such humility is, however, not an ineffable organic alterity (Belsey) which only makes itself heard (to any great effect at least) when it threatens destruction; rather it is an awareness that as a subject one is part of a shared symbolic existence and universal inter-implicating destiny.

The contribution this book hopes to make is threefold: to assert the importance of the symbolic dimension of human existence through a novel comparison between the work of Lacan and Freire and how they conceive of this existence; to emphasize the ethical impetus behind their thought concerning subjectivity and show how they emphasize intervention and humility simultaneously; finally, I wish to suggest that from an intersection of their thought a pedagogical practice might be derived that prompts awareness in individuals about their ethical responsibility qua subjects.

The “Great Clock of Nature”

Does the current lack of engagement with the symbolic dimension to existence automatically mean that it is no longer of any consequence or concern? Žižek makes the point, in his book dealing with September 11th, that it continues to dominate behaviour even under a neo-liberal dispensation which actively denies its significance, asserting the absolute independence of its citizens in terms of meaning and limiting itself merely to overseeing the management of their biological needs.

For him the hunger for war which seems to have gripped the West represents a mass subjective fantasy. Indeed not only this aggressive attitude, but the 9/11 attacks themselves, may well have been precipitated by the West’s predominant desire to marginalize or orientalise in order to better obtain self-definition. His argument is that an underlying fantasy concerning the evilness of the other intermingled with and supported the foreign policy and politico-economic strategies which motivated the attack by way of a response.

This fantasy of a demonic other also inhabits the subsequent discourse of “retaliation”. Such a fantasy is just as destructive and subjectively engrossing as that which may have prompted the attacks themselves. The West’s actions are paradoxically, however, less ethical than those of the terrorists for the simple reason that its actions are not presented as a result of non-rational conviction or as primarily finding support in a set of ideological assumptions; rather they are paraded as measured, rational reactions to an objective threat. Western values are taken to be self-evidently valid and legitimate (representative democracy is simply the best
form of governance, for example). Such values are presented as the result of objective reasoning and not subjective (ideological) conviction. The neo-liberal West would like to believe that it has dispensed with determinant symbolic co-ordinates and that it deals with things “as they are”. Religious “terrorists”, on the other hand, however, have to proclaim self-consciously a non-evident world-truth and undertake an active leap of faith.

Despite the endless love affair between technology and neo-liberal propaganda (i.e., between pragmatic empiricism and a heroically democratic capitalism) which produced the myriad satellite photographs of Iraqi outbuildings, no actual weapons of mass destruction were discovered: “Some of the sources are technical (…). Indeed, the facts and Iraq's behaviour show that Saddam Hussein and his regime are concealing their efforts to produce more weapons of mass destruction”. ⁴ One is reminded here of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible and Reverend Hale’s assertion in it (as a man of science) that: “We cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise; the marks of his presence are as definite as stone” (1956: 38). An ideology which masquerades as science is no less an ideology (although possibly more dangerous because of it) and one can only fight against it if one unmasks it as ideology (i.e., as a political choice rather than any rational and unbiased reflection of the real).

As a bumper sticker once announced, “You don’t have to believe in God for God to believe in you,” which is to say, “Just because one cannot perceive ideology as instrumental in one’s identity and experience does not necessarily mean that it does not inform both”. It was Althusser who showed that the true goal of ideology is to mask itself; to become naturalised as unmediated perception and thereby render itself invisible (1984: 20). And it is indeed difficult to conceive of oneself as determined, at least in part, by an historical process whilst one is in the midst of that process; this despite, for example, the readiness with which one will point to the determining effect of a bygone era on the behaviour and attitudes of those who lived through it.

What I wish to explore in this book is the necessity of understanding and harnessing the symbolic aspect to being human; how one might take the temperature of an ideological body, or better yet, how one might teach someone to recognise, appreciate and engage with that body and, beyond it, a community of inter-implicated symbolic bodies. Furthermore I would like to sketch the territory which circumscribes such a body’s existence

⁴ Colin Powell speaking to the UN security council on February 6th (2003: 13-16, emphasis added).
and indicate how socio-symbolic boundaries might be (con)test ed or extended by that “body”.

Invoking the term “subject” to describe such a “symbolic body”, even if in doing so this book follows the example of Freire and Lacan, is somewhat problematic as it is a massively loaded term. In 1991, Eduardo Cadava, aware of the ravages the rational subject had suffered at the “hands” of psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism and post-structuralism, addressed—to a number of contemporary thinkers—the question, “Who comes after the subject?”. Most respondents, whilst denouncing the concept of a self-identical and autonomous subject, claimed that one does need to retain some notion of agency (however limited or informed by socio-historical processes) if one wishes to speak of ethics. What is required, as Jameson puts it, is a means of doing justice to a “post-individualistic experience of the subject” (1977: 382).

This book agrees that it is necessary and important to keep alive the idea of the subject whilst acknowledging the extent to which such a subject may be shaped, informed and traversed by social and discursive practices. In this way the concept “subject” takes on a double meaning: a kernel of some sort with a part to play in orienting and directing the experience/articulation of being and, at the same time, made up of (and acting as a channel to and from) the social and symbolic matrices beyond itself.

Such a dual nature or “ambivalence”, as Etienne Balibar refers to it, is precisely what might render the post-individualistic subject of greater significance than its forebear; this insofar as it includes a far fuller realisation of the ethically significant inter-subjective nature of expression and experience:

Precisely in his capacity as “citizen,” the citizen is (indivisibly) above any law, otherwise he could not legislate, much less constitute (...). In his capacity as “subject” he is necessarily under the law (...). Nevertheless, to understand that this subject (which the citizen will be supposed to be) contains the paradoxical unity of a universal sovereignty and a radical finitude, we must envisage his constitution—in all the historical complexity of the practices which it brings together—from both the point of view of the State apparatus and that of permanent revolution. The ambivalence is his strength, his historical ascendancy. (1991: 49)

I maintain in this book that the subject is a notion that should and can be rehabilitated. Subjecthood serves as a basis for promoting, firstly, a highly personalized and compelling awareness of how identity is determined by
socio-discursive formations whilst, in addition, offering a form of socially responsible agency.

In fact to diminish the importance of subjectivity would be to surrender a shared, specifically human, productive capacity to those who would seek to co-opt, negate or define the symbolic existence of their own or another people; one should not forget that an ideologically-motivated, but supposedly objective, science acted as an alibi for racist colonizing practice.

I would suggest that the unremitting scientifization of human interaction and expression is no less a form of debilitating colonization. It is patently a disenfranchising manoeuvre but is defended from all critique by science’s “ability to identify the absolute with knowledge of nature, taken as a quantitatively apprehended series of appearances” (Aronowitz, 1988: viii). As a result science is awarded the right, if not charged with the duty, of (a)voiding subjective meaning in favour of measurement; for example, the mind becomes equated with the quantity of chemicals in the brain.

From the moment man thinks that the great clock of nature turns all by itself, and continues to mark the hour even when he isn’t there, the order of science is born. The order of science hangs on the following: that in officiating over nature, man has become its officious servant. He will not rule over it, except by obeying it. And like the slave, he tries to make the master dependent on him by serving him well. 5 (II, 1954-55: 298)

As the human being is reduced to biological machinery, performativity and efficiency become the sole criteria for evaluating existence. Consequently any science which eschews the “fuzzy” questions of ethics and social value in favour of a conviction in its self-legitimating progressive objectivity is readily “incorporated into the practices and discourses of [capitalist] production” (Aronowitz, 1988: 9). In this mode science becomes largely concerned with profitability and, hence, the development of technology (military, industrial, medical or pharmaceutical). As Lyotard reflects, the result is “a game pertaining not to the true, the just, the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical ‘move’ is ‘good’ when it does better and/or expends less energy than another” (1984: 44). Such science is in no way concerned with which socio-political or ideological agenda the technology it produces will be made to serve or, indeed, with the way in which such technology will affect the meaning

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5 Lacan does not wish to imply that nature, whatever it may be in itself, ceases to exist without humankind but rather that any notion of intention or order disappears with the absence of humankind: “the clock of nature”.
individuals make of their lives, the “phenomenology of everyday life” (Jameson, 1977: 392).

It remains the case, however, that, despite its most fervent imaginings, science cannot fully account for subjectivity. Consider Equus’ challenge to Shaffer’s psychiatrist, who is one of Virginia Woolf’s rational “gods of proportion”: “Do you really imagine you can account for Me?” The man of science is forced to respond:

A child is born into a world of phenomena all equal in their power to enslave. It sniffs-it, sucks-it, strokes its eyes over the whole uncomfortable range. Suddenly one strikes. Why? Moments snap together like magnets, forging a chain of shackles. Why? I can trace them. I can even, with time, pull them apart again. But why at the start they were ever magnetized at all—just those particular moments of experience and no others—I don’t know. (1977: 75-76)

The drive to control the world, subjective experience and, ultimately, mortality which scientific explanation represents (as Dickens suggests, there is “Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself” [1959:26] in the mystery which subjectivity constitutes) is very likely the result of a fantasy concerning the possibility of mastery. Such “mastery” is not, however, the only or inevitable fantasy. Indeed, even if we, as subjects, are required to fantasize in order to mean, there are numerous examples from literature, religion and history which would suggest that it is possible to mean and desire differently. These examples serve to demonstrate, amongst other things, that the human concern with symbolism (integrity, sacrifice or freedom) can supersede survival and elude even the most rigorously-researched behavioural blueprints.

The appeal of science may ultimately owe more to a particular aesthetic than any ability on its part to deliver a submissive and univocal real. Neo-liberal capitalist discourse, for example, which seems to have co-opted science—or at least that part of it that receives corporate funding—partakes very much of an aesthetic of autonomy and performativity: the machine processing data smoothly, becoming increasingly efficient and self-sufficient; the individual becoming increasingly richer, slimmer, fitter, younger, living for longer with less and less need for external regulation, intervention, recognition or care.

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6 “‘[I]f (…) self-objectivization is complete, who is the ‘I’ who intervenes in ‘its own’ genetic code in order to change it? Is this intervention itself not already objectivized in the totally scanned brain?’” (Žižek, 2001: 49).
Terry Eagleton in his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* demonstrates to what extent such an aesthetic of efficiency is significant in providing the middle class with the “model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations” (1990: 9). Indeed it becomes increasingly evident that all ideology must partake of an aesthetic in order to harness desire and thereby orientate subjectivity. Just as any ethical theory must take desire into account and indicate how it is to be contained, directed, or educated; any theory of ideology must consider the aesthetic through which the subject’s desire and idea of self are interpellated: aka the subjective hook.

Under neo-liberal capitalism this hook is very much the aesthetic of obtaining optimum performance, including that of the body. The beautiful body is the healthy body; the body that is able to perform (athletically, sexually, visually, commercially). Even current efforts towards ecological reform are concerned with the earth-as-science (ensuring optimal performance) and do not see it as a sphere that is shaped or inhabited by meaning-making animals; this extends (under the guise of the Left) the neo-liberal biologically-based notion of “health” (never mind that such “biology” has already been ideologically informed). If eco-conservation promotional campaigns continue to cosy up to the discourse of science they will unwittingly shore up the neo-liberal capitalist complex. What is required, as Elizabeth Costello points out, is not a stripping down of what is human but rather a building up of agency which emphasizes the importance of subjectivity rather than its irrelevance or impotence in the face of imminent disaster.

Eagleton equates the oppressive, ideologically-determined aspect of aesthetics with that which defines the Beautiful, reserving the Sublime for a humbling experience of inassimilable infinity and difference. I would prefer to make a Lacanian distinction between any aesthetic (the ideological

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7 Refer to Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* Vol. 1 for his description of the deployment of the discourse of “health” in the nineteenth century as the exclusive and privileging province of the emergent bourgeoisie as part of their bid for ideological ascendancy.

8 Here Eagleton adopts what he interprets as Kant’s distinction. Eagleton suggests that, following Kant, a distinction be made between the Beautiful and the Sublime as two separate aspects of aesthetic experience. The first would be the ideologically-determined ameliorating aesthetic experience: namely of unity and mastery, whilst the second encompasses an underlying perception of a humbling infinity which eludes control. Between these two experiences he locates a dialectic which has both oppressive and revolutionary potential. The Sublime, if interpreted as the aesthetic or ideological bordering of inassimilable alterity, may bear a resemblance to the Lacanian notion of sublimation. The concept of sublimation will be explored in later chapters.
clothes which subjective desire must invariably don) and desire as that which may not only modify a dominant aesthetic but which reaches beyond all aesthetics to the gap between the real and its translation into culture.

This is a gap which, according to Lacan, is prior to the adoption of any aesthetic; it is the zero point of desire: an unsolvable riddle that initiates desire and differentiates it from biological need. Desire goes well beyond any requirements for physical survival; unlike the filling of one’s belly, filling this gap requires the unequivocal inclusion of being in meaning, that is, an irrefutable explanation for (the full range of) human experience. This, Lacan maintains, is impossible.

We, as a global culture, still appear to be very much in love with the image of mastery and much of this book is devoted to the question of subverting such an aesthetic in order to locate desire in a potentially revolutionary but still socially-responsible form. Any attempt at concrete revolutionary change which neglects subjective experience and the negotiation of desire is doomed to fail (this is very much the contention of Freire).

The concept of transference, central to psychoanalysis and deepened by Lacan’s consideration of it, is essential for understanding the role the image of mastery plays in the lives of all subjects. Furthermore, psychoanalytic practice provides a model for manipulating this fascination with mastery to emancipatory and creative ends. Exploiting and subverting transference, which otherwise results in identification (oftentimes with the figure of oppression), is perhaps the best hope for inducing critical subjective awareness. It will become clear that perhaps ironically, in order to evade mastery, it may be necessary to preserve the illusion of it.

This book is dominated by two figures, Jacques Lacan and Paulo Freire, who come from two very different directions to meet on the field of the subject. Freire, a radical literacy pedagogue concerned with socialist transformation and the redress of inequality, begins to realise to what extent literacy education is purely “extension” or colonization if it fails to acknowledge, engage, translate and empower subjective meaning formations. Despite emphasizing the necessity of praxis (the unity between thought and action) he falls foul of hard-line materialist Marxists who have called him an idealist.

Lacan, psychiatrist, psychoanalytic practitioner and theorist, begins to assert the primacy of language and socio-symbolic structures in the construction of subjective experience and desire. Lacan is labelled a trouble-maker and twice “exiled” from psychoanalytic organisations. Together these figures emphasize a vital dialectic: the importance and
socially transformative potential of the experience of subjectivity as well as the influential effect of established modes of social practice and representation on that experience.

Both concern themselves with the therapeutic necessity of respecting the dignity and power of the second, symbolic or psychical body as well as the importance of recording its scars and its deaths. Both are also becoming increasingly relevant in an age which equates progress, development or satisfaction with scientific, technological, economic and medical “advancement”. It is vital, according to their work, that we, as subjects, regain a sense of agency concerning the way in which sense is made of the world.

Lacan and Freire, however, both assert that any intervention on the part of a subject is never fully independent or isolated. A truly revolutionary subjective act must interact with and extend symbolic capacity at the broadest human level.

Recall that for these thinkers subjectivity itself is the result of a demand, experienced universally, that human animals also mean something. Freire begins his investigations by considering the way in which subjects respond to this deafening call as part of a broader community or culture whilst Lacan examines, by way of a starting point, the role this call plays in characterising the experience of subjectivity. Both thinkers, however, attempt to outline a primary and universal dialectical relationship (contained in their notions of subjectivity) between humans, as beings, and their symbolic existence, as subjects. A subjective intervention is most profound when it speaks to and from the fundamental intersection between being and meaning: here a subject can speak on behalf of all humans as part of our attempt to make sense of the real. The universal subjugation of human beings to symbolic necessity is, paradoxically, that which empowers them as subjects to undertake acts which might alter the way in which all subjects experience the world.

Authentic intervention expands the range of symbolic practice through bringing such practice face to face once again with the excluded remainder of being. As desire is that which recalls and articulates this ontological remainder, it is necessary to foster an awareness within subjects, which is in accordance with the projects of Freire and Lacan, of their capacity to intervene globally through what and how they desire. Such awareness would be the ultimate goal of any pedagogy derived from a conjunction between Freirean and Lacanian thought. This book’s concern with suggesting a form of Freire-Lacanian teaching is aided by the fact that the practice of both thinkers is implicitly or explicitly pedagogical; Lacan, after all, spent his life teaching and training analysts.
That the dominant ideology of performativity and efficiency has infiltrated contemporary educational practice should come as no surprise: “The market economy in turn has a growing influence on all sectors of education: utilitarian pragmatic thinking increasingly dominates educational thought, policy and practice” (Barnett and Griffin, 1997: 4). Education is no longer perceived as transformative but merely instrumental; as subjectivity is no longer of concern or consequence, any education which aims for the refinement of subjectivity is dismissed as reactionary or superfluous. This has the advantage of exposing purely elitist educational traditions which, rather than promoting a critically self-reflexive and socially responsible subjectivity, are prescriptive regarding what constitutes cultured “subjectivity”.

However, the solution to an insular or conservative ideological consideration of subjectivity is not to neglect subjectivity altogether. Indeed the current subordination of subjectivity to capitalist and “natural” machinery is itself inherently conservative as it precludes any utopian thinking and counsels adaptation to an irrefutable reality (economic and natural) which, it claims, is slowly but carefully being revealed (served up) to an expectant but otherwise passive public. This constitutes the epistemological trap of pragmatism, something Freire warns radical pedagogy against:

[Radical pedagogy must never make concessions to the trickeries of neoliberal “pragmatism,” which reduces the educational practice to the technical-scientific training of learners, training rather than educating (…). [Neoliberal] ideology seeks the demise of ideology itself and the death of history, the vanishing of utopia, the annihilation of dreams. It is a fatalistic ideology that, taking a despotic approach to education, reduces it to mere training in the employment of technical dexterity or scientific knowing. (Freire, 2004: 102)

In addition the widespread (mis)interpretation of postmodernism has done little for the profile of subjectivity. Postmodernism is largely understood as depicting subjectivity either as multiple, arbitrary and disposable or hopelessly determined. In this regard much avant-garde academia has played into the hands of the neo-liberal/science/technology alliance. Then again there is good with the bad, insofar as postmodernism has also done much to unseat the presumption that knowledge is neutral and teleological. The destabilisation of knowledge and the problematization of autonomous subjectivity do not, however, necessitate an end to either knowledge or subjectivity; rather both become sites of contestation.
Postmodernism need not mean the indiscriminate retailing of knowledges and subjectivities and the reinvention of universities as self-ironic Warholian factories where both are casually mass manufactured and made into accessories as interchangeable as hats. The revelation that broader discursive forces are instrumental in orienting subjectivity and in determining what counts as knowledge does not spell an end to responsibility nor to the responsibility of piecing together a subjectivity (even if freedom is only conceived of as a by-product of inter-discursive fault lines).

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[The recognition that foundations and universals are themselves discursive constructions within certain human practices does not entail that “anything goes”. Our discourses and our practices are neither monolithic nor univocal. There is always more that can be said and more that can be done. To subvert foundations is not to court irrationality and paralysis but to foreground dialogue, practical engagement and a certain kind of self-referentiality. In the postmodern, the claim is not that there are no norms but that they are not to be found in foundations. They have to be struggled over, and in this struggle, everyone must assume a personal responsibility. (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 27)
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Between the Scylla of a mechanistic subjectivity, chemically or even historically/discursively-determined, and the Charybdis of an absolutely fluid flow of multiple and equally valid subjectivities, there must be a navigable route or education would become either altogether pointless, on the one hand, or an arbitrary, disposable smorgasbord on the other: a “sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (Corinthians 1:13).

Both Lacan and Freire retain a notion of the subject as a means for thinking the intersection between individuality and society as well as for imagining the encounter between being and meaning. Yet neither have time for the autonomous, ego-centric subject of consumerist ideology. According to both, subjectivity, when experienced authentically, is the site of an ethical choice concerning the insertion of human organisms and their organic world into the socio-symbolic complex. This is a process which, necessarily, has determinate (and often dire) consequences for both that world and organism. For both thinkers subjecthood (a symbolic existence shaped by a network of social relationships, symbols and gestures, carrying with it a capacity for shame and dignity) is a uniquely human destiny; it is, in fact, that which defines being human.

The dialectic between the socio-symbolic sphere and the individual organism entering it is so fundamental for Lacan that he even conceives of it as a natural necessity (owing to the fact that human organisms are born
before they can survive on their own). As Eagleton powerfully points out, however, the fact that human animals need society in order to survive does not automatically mean that humans create societies which prioritize the survival of all.

Human nature has an “expectation” of culture built into it, and to this degree certain kinds of values are entailed by certain sorts of facts. “Culture” is at once a descriptive and evaluative concept: if it designates on the one hand that without which we are factually speaking unable to survive, it is also a qualitative index of the form of social life which really does shield the weak and welcome the stranger, which allows us to thrive rather than simply subsist. There may here be the seeds of a political morality which has its roots in the body without being, in some naturalistic manner, reducible to it. What is most important about our biology is that it is structured around a gap or vacancy, where culture must implant itself.

(1990: 285)

Within this gap there exists the freedom which founds the agency and ethics of the subject.

Lacan further suggests that the first and most powerful need is the need for recognition as without recognition survival is impossible. Such need gives rise to desire which extends beyond the satisfaction of basic physical requirements for survival. We will see how the need for recognition, once it intersects the socio-symbolic matrix, apotheosizes this matrix as an all-powerful Other whose recognition it will continue to seek. Desire emerges as a question concerning the place of the creature qua subject in this socio-symbolic matrix. Suffice to say at this point that the subject, as such, can never escape its relationship with this Other as it is this relationship which sustains desire, just as it is the inevitable lack, owing to prematurity, experienced by the infant, that animates this Other as a seemingly-intelligent authority. The subject ceases to exist as such without the Other.

A relationship between the subject and society or history is inescapable for both Lacan and Freire and is, in fact, that which shapes subjectivity and desire but not in such a way as to foreclose agency. The Other needs to be preserved in order to serve as a basis for recognition and meaning.

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9 One way in which Lacan charts the genesis of the subject is through the evolution of desire: the expression of biological “need” (which requires the recognition of a caregiver in order to be answered) becomes intermingled with the “demand” that the subject mean something to the socio-symbolic dispensation represented by the caregiver. This subsequently becomes “desire” when the subject attempts to guess what meaning he or she should pursue in order to obtain the fullest recognition (see Evans 1996:121).
(desire and truth). Yet it needs to be undermined in its specificity and prevented from operating as a mesmerising image of mastery.

It would, in fact, be wilfully irresponsible not to accept that subjectivity and the desire which directs it are subject in some respect to a process of socialisation. Without this dimension to subjectivity, desire is no longer of ideological significance nor is it critically educable; both of these assumptions concerning desire are central to this book.

Gayatri Spivak in a lecture delivered at Glasgow University in 2007 related her experiences of returning to facilitate development work in India. She spoke of being on a train and encountering a young Indian woman who, in a trouser suit, was yelling into her mobile phone about stock prices. This put Spivak in a double bind insofar as she would have liked to indicate to the woman in question that she was participating in a global economic model based on exploitation which would, ultimately, as it had done historically, disenfranchise her and her people. Yet, by the same token, Spivak recognised her own complicity in her position at Columbia University in New York. She was also forced to acknowledge that this woman obviously felt herself to be very much empowered relative to the poverty and patriarchal values of her community.

Spivak concluded that what is in fact required is an “uncoercive rearrangement of desire”, which is to say that one cannot effect any truly transformative development work (at least of the sort that invites dialogue as to what transformation and development should mean) without addressing the desires and subjectivities of not only the oppressors but also the oppressed. Here of course she is echoing the concerns of Frantz Fanon.

A similar conviction that studying desire is unavoidable if one wants to effect any sort of radical transformation, that it can be educated and that it represents perhaps the most fundamental kind of knowing, is the driving force of this book. If we are to seek to profoundly change how we know and what it is we think we know then we must consider desire. As Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan’s son-in-law, writes: “one never understands anything but one’s fantasies” (1990: xxvi). Let me reiterate here that there can be no ethical system which does not account for desire and add that there can also be no educational system which does not account for subjectivity and the ways in which it knows beyond and before other forms of knowing.

Can one educate desire? Does our desire educate us and others even though we are not aware of it doing so? It is perhaps imperative that one conceive of the ways in which both of these processes are possible if one wishes to envision an ethical world and a global human community. If it were only the study of desire, psychoanalysis would be a vital component