

Notes on Lacan/Zizek

Quilting point (point de capiton):

The Lacanian notion of quilting fundamentally concerns the problem of the “subjectivisation” of reality, that is, how does the historical and social reality one inhabits become internalised and experienced? In what way does social world in which I am become something comprehensible to me, something that has an identity or unity for me, as an individual experiencing the world in which I am. And here the Lacanian answer is the reverse of the “commonsensical.” One’s first response might be to say that socio-historical reality takes on unity and identity because of something “in” that reality, because of “meanings” already there, which one then integrates into an already existing “I”, thereby creating a connection between self and world. The Lacanian answer, according to Zizek, is differently directed: socio-historical reality is this formless morass (the “real” as it were), there is no there there, nothing in it that has a coherent essence or form, it’s a bit like the child before he sees his image in the mirror and becomes through the image, an ego. In order for self and a reasonably coherent world for the self to emerge, the “signifier” has to act on “reality” for the subject, has to reach into reality to recreate as something meaningful for the experiencing subject (who, too, comes into existence as a particular kind of subject through that operation). This operation is “quilting.”

Thus, we can conceive of the ideological space of society as being made up of non bound, non tied elements, floating signifiers that are overdetermined---that is, are determined or delimited in different autonomous ways depending on which “chains” they participate in--- by articulation in a chain with other elements. Their “meaning” is undefined because defined through different kinds of differential relationships. In Saussure’s terms, these signifiers have a “value” but no immediate signification or meaning in themselves. Through quilting this free floating is halted and fixed: the different terms become parts of a structured network of meaning, and thereby each accrues its own “signification,” a signified corresponding to the signifier drops out.

Examples: democracy, freedom, feminism, ecologism, peace movement as floating signifiers. Quilt through the “master signifier” Communism (=class struggle) and each of these takes on a precise signification:

democracy becomes the demand for a “real” democracy (as opposed to the capitalist- bourgeois formal democracy); feminism becomes exploitation of women from class conditioned division of labour; ecologism points to the destruction of natural resources through capitalist exploitation of nature; war comes to stand for a result of adventurist imperialism and so on.

The quilting point is thus the nodal element that retroactively confers meaning on the “subject” once he/she gets “sewn” to it. This does not necessarily mean consciously “choosing” to be sewn to it. No doubt, one could choose in a sense---for example, if Christianity is consciously “chosen,” God/Christ becomes the master signifier that quilts

in order to create a consistent universe for the subject. However, the main point is that such a quilting exceeds consciousness, for the quilting operation marks the way in which subjective experience itself is structured, takes on consistency and shape. That is, beyond the conscious choice of “God,” one has to reach the moment of faith or belief that exceeds the conscious choice: it is that moment of interior transformation, so to speak, that quilting speaks to.

Crucially, for Lacan/Zizek, this quilting occurs through a pure signifier (indeed, ultimately a master signifier, though for the human subject specific local signifiers mediate the route to the ultimate signifier which gives the field of location its unity). As “a word, on the level of the signifier itself which unifies a given field, constitutes its identity: it is the word to which “things” themselves refer in order to recognise themselves in their unity.” Mass media symbols are Zizek’s examples:

Thus (1) Think of the Marlboro ad: connotes a certain image of America---wide open spaces, cowboys on horse back, freedom etc. This is the “content” it projects. But quilting occurs when “real” americans start identifying themselves (in their ideological self-experience) with the image, that is to say, they internalise the image as what America is, and by so doing they create “America” as Marlboro country, and themselves as “Americans” whose desire is what the Marlboro country now seems to embody.

(2) Similarly Coke connotes a certain vision of America through its “content” (the freshness, cold taste etc.), but point is that at the moment of quilting, it is rather that a vision of America itself achieves its identity by identifying with the signifier “Coke”. Coke itself is in this sense, utterly empty, it has no content, but through Coke, America becomes America. Hence, to the question What is coke?, we can answer with Coke’s own slogan: Coke is “it”! This undefinable “it” points to that “undefinable,” that “surplus” that Coke is meant to have, it is directed at, to quote Zizek, “what is in the object more than object.” the pure material signifier. In City Lights, the tramp is nothing, an outcast, lacking a social position (“a symbolic mandate”), and yet through the empty signifier of the car door slamming, he becomes for the girl associated with a position in her fantasy space (of the Prince Charming), and it is towards this imagined object that her blind gaze is directed---it is what is in the tramp more than tramp, and “it” needs the support of material signifiers, bits of the real that are themselves empty, slamming car doors, food, wool etc.

Thus, the experience of a given historical reality (an approximation to the “real”) can achieve unity (become something) only through the agency of the signifier. It is not the real object that guarantees as point of reference the unity of a certain ideological experience, but the pure signifier that gives identity to our experience of historical reality. And this unity is supported by some pure, meaningless signifier, without a signified. This halts the metonymic sliding of the field of the signified by “representing, within the field of the signified, the agency of the signifier.” It’s signification coincides with its own act of enunciation: it is a signifier without a signified. So, now to the graphs

Retroactivity of Meaning (Graph 1)

This graph essentially replaces the Saussurean image of the relationship between signifiers and signifieds, that Saussure envisaged as an articulation, a cutting and jointing, across two parallel internally undifferentiated levels, those of “sounds” and “meanings,” thereby creating two differential systems without positive terms that were mapped on to one another. Lacan reads the emergence of the signifier-signified relationship differently, from the point of view of the signifier, one might say, for signifieds emerge in this graph through the agency of, as the effects of, the signifier. What we have, on the one hand, is a realm of floating signifiers, the S---S’ curve, a system of differential relations without positive terms (the symbolic order); on the other hand, we have that undifferentiated morass of instincts, proto-meanings, “pre-symbolic intentions” that make up the human being. To communicate these to someone else, the human being has to enter into language, the system of signifiers (S---S’) that exists outside it, and this entry, crucial for “meaning” and “communication” entails a transformation of those pre-symbolic intentions, and in a manner that has consequences for the human being attempting to externalise those intentions. For meaning to emerge, it must be a meaning for a subject, that is, there must be a process of subjectivisation through which subject and the meaning for that subject come into being: and this is the process of quilting. So:

1. A “pre-symbolic intention quilts the signifier’s chain: the product of the quilting is the “barred subject” and the empty or effaced signifier in the signifier’s network.

Example: Althusser’s notion of interpellation. Some individual “X” who must be interpellated into a Subject via a signifier. When that individual responds to the call (“Uncle Sam wants you!”), when he takes up the position of addressee, he changes from an individual into someone who has a particular place in an intersubjective network. The pre-symbolic X becomes a “you.” But this moment is also a moment of a splitting of the subject, because he identifies himself or is identified through the agency of the signifier (the “you” that Uncle Sam wants) with a positional location that he can never be quite identical with, even if he sees himself from this point on as a “being” who is the “you.” Thus he is a split or barred subject, and the “empty or effaced signifier” “you” takes on the special status of being the signifier through which he has been quilted into the symbolic order. The point de capiton is that point through which the subject is “sewn to the signifier, and at the same time the point at which the individual is interpellated into subject by addressing it with the call of a certain master signifier (God, Communism, America).”

2. Quilting is a retroactive operation, hence the direction of quilting is backwards. That is, the signified “stays behind” with respect to, comes after, the signifier. Thus, signifiers are floating, unfixed, and at some point “intention” pierces that chain, and only after it does, do we have a signified, or meaning.

For example, in *City Light*’s, the flower girl’s call asking whether he wants to buy a flower, which Chaplin hears and responds to, is a moment through which Chaplin’s “meaning” as a subject for her (and for him) is constituted. Prompted by an arbitrary signifier (the car door slamming), her call demands his response, and by responding he sews himself to that signifier, and by so doing becomes for

her what the signifier claims he is, a rich man stepping out of a car. Had he not responded, the signifier would just return to itself, a noise among other noises, but his response pierces that chain of noises, halts its sliding by attaching him (herself) to the signifier, and out of that halting he is precipitated out retroactively as the signified (the rich man, soon to become the Prince Charming of her fantasy)

3. The Quilting operation (Capitonnage) hides its traces (or the transferential illusion). This final step marks the shift from this first graph to the next one. The transferential illusion is the fact of the subject's misrecognising the process whereby he came to be a subject, his not seeing that he only became who he now is through the operation of the signifier to which he got quilted. Instead, the subject believes that this retroactively created "being" was what he has been all along, that it is his immutable essence, in other words, he misrecognises the split in himself, covers it up to believe that he is whole, and wholly present to his intentions. It is thus the illusion that the meaning of an element, which was fixed by the intervention of the master signifier (the sound of the car, the money Chaplin gives the girl for the flowers), was present from the very beginning as an immanent essence: thus Chaplin takes on as his symbolic mandate the identity conferred upon him by this moment (that of the Prince Charming, the object of the girl's desire, the rich benefactor) as if this were in reality his hidden essence. Outwardly I may look like a tramp, he seems to say, but on the inside, in my essence, I am pure gold, the man who will save you and become thereby in reality what you want in your fantasy. [The split subject that results is thematised in the film by being projected onto the millionaire, who ironically "recognises" Chaplin when he, the millionaire, is not himself (i.e., drunk), but fails to recognise Chaplin when he is sober. Or, to put it another way, misrecognises Chaplin as like him, as his friend when drunk, but recognises him as tramp when sober.] This misrecognition of the self and how it came to be is the transferential illusion. It is the way in which America becomes for some American's Marlboro country, whereby the ideological experience of America created by the ad is misrecognised as the pre-existing reality which the advertisement copies or points to.

Retroversion (Graph 2):

Before moving to this graph, I should perhaps add another analogy that might help you understand the logic of the first graph. It seems to me that one can grasp the logic by seeing a parallel between the process described in the graph and the imaginary formation of the ego. Let us, in the mirror stage, equate (1) the child who is simply a loose conglomeration of impulses and needs---unformed as yet as an 'I'---with 'delta,' the pre-symbolic intention, and (2) the image in the mirror as the empty signifier to which the child gets "sewn." Then, we have the retroactive emergence of the child's "meaning," the "I" of the child. via an identification with the image (the empty and effaced signifier) that promises to him his future unity and identity as a being (its ideal-ego). What emerges thereby is the child's "meaning" (the child's 'I') and the child itself as a split or barred subject in the moment of its constitution. The transferential illusion would be the moment of misrecognition wherein the child sees its unity and identity has having been its essence all along, so that the image becomes simply the inessential copy of what had always been

there (rather than that essential signifier through whose agency alone the child achieved its experiential unity or identity). [This analogy is somewhat loose, because strictly speaking the Lacanian graph is focused on the operations of symbolic insertion rather than imaginary insertion, but it may be useful in understanding the logic of the Lacanian diagram, and indeed to some degree explains the shift from delta to S-bar, below]

What Lacan (according to Žižek) adds in this second and more developed graph is the (a) the specification of the two points at which “intention” cuts the chain: O and s(O), the Big Other and the Signified as its function; and (b) the lower parallel line of the imaginary process, spanned by i(o) and e(o), that supports the insertion into the symbolic order represented by the Big Other and the Signified. That is, we have here, the process of subjectivisation, the emergence of the subject, specified through the registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

In this rendition, the Point de Capiton represents or holds the place of the Big Other, it stands for the synchronic code of the symbolic order in the diachronic signifier’s chain. It suggests that the Big Other is embodied in a singular element, a signifier, whereas meaning (the subject’s being) retroactively emerges as a function of the Big Other, drops out after the fact, retroactively, as s(O). This is basically just restating in more specific terms the description of Graph 1. So what else is added here? What else is changed in this graph with respect to the prior, more primitive version?

(1) Delta becomes S-bar, the split or barred subject: This change incorporates what Žižek terms the transference illusion: so that rather than a pre-symbolic intention, we have the subject itself (who thinks of its essence as something it always had) as that which pierces the signifying chain. By so doing it experiences something that happens to it and that changes it, as what was there all along. The product of this quilting is now what Lacan calls the symbolic identification: I(O), which is the identification of the subject with some trait (I) in the big Other. The trait (I) is what represents the subject for another signifier, the name or mandate that the subject takes upon himself or that is bestowed upon him (as in the tramp wanting to be the millionaire, the prince of her dreams, the one who will bring her to see and to love him). More on symbolic identification below.

(2) The term Voice added to the signifier’s chain: This is not particularly crucial for our purposes, but I’ll cite Žižek’s rationale all the same. Voice here is not seen (as Derrida might see it) as representing presence, as a bearer of plenitude and fullness of being. Rather, voice stands for a meaningless object that remains after the operation of quilting or signification, it is the left over objectal remnant of the signifying operation, an inert meaningless drone. City Lights actually provides an almost literal instance of this in the opening scene, when the symbolic order gathers to unveil the symbol of the city’s prosperity, the statue. That signifying operation (which will be interrupted by the stain of the tramp, whose very presence gives a lie to the symbolic claim of the unveiling) has as its leftover the drone of voices: the mechanical, incomprehensible gibberish that the mayor and dignitaries spout before the raise the curtain on the statue. That drone interrupts

the “silent film,” functioning as a grotesque staging of “sound,” reminding us of the emptiness of the symbolic order itself, the leftover of its creation of meaning through symbols.

(3) The distinction between i(o) and I(O), imaginary and symbolic identification:
The lower level of imaginary identification specifies the way in which meaning is made into meaning for the individual subject, that is, signification requires a point of view, a consciousness (if you will) for whom meaning becomes present as its meaning, an experiencing ego. In this sense, the symbolic operation of signification has to be supported by the level of the imaginary, which is the only way by which meaning can be present to someone, so that s/he is the one for whom that meaning exists. That process is exemplified by the mirror stage, the imaginary identification connecting the ego to its imaginary other; it is the process whereby we constitute ourselves through the image reflected back to us from someone else. Now, crucially, this imaginary relationship to the ideal ego---suggesting a subject already born of a split---is mediated by the symbolic relationship to ego ideal, that is, the symbolic identification determines the structure of the space within which imaginary identification occurs, and in this sense it shapes the “imaginary.” This is in part the point of Lacan’s reading of “The Purloined Letter”: that the subject in his very being, in the imaginary relationships through which he experiences his place in the world, is fundamentally shaped by the symbolic order, represented by the letter, the allegory for the phallus, itself the signifier which stands in for the Big Other.

At the same time, this imaginary level supports the structure: it marks the illusion of the self as an autonomous agent present to itself from the very beginning, and one who at the same time in its imaginary self-experience misrecognises (or is blind to) its radical dependence on the Big Other. In a sense, this is what Chaplin plays out throughout the film in the very failure of his various attempts to gain money: attempting to fill out the symbolic space of the rich man, to be adequate to that role, he can only do it by acquiring the money (the master signifier) he needs to be a benefactor to the girl. And to do this, he tries to earn money in different ways, but repeatedly fails, each failure underscoring the gap between the symbolic mandate and the level of self-experience: you identify with the rich man, but it turns out that all you really are is a sweeper of dung, a boxer, and indeed you fail at all those, so really you are nothing at all, unsupported by the symbolic order, simply a tramp (as he is at the film’s end).

So, what is the difference between symbolic and imaginary identification? Žižek describes this as the distinction between “constituted” and “constitutive” identification: “Imaginary identification is the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, that is the image representing what we want to be, whereas symbolic identification is the identification with the place from where we are being observed, the place from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love.” To specify further: Imaginary identification is always the identification on behalf of a certain gaze in the other, so that with every imaginary imitation of a model image (pop singers, teachers, whatever) one identifies oneself (positively or negatively) with an ideal that one wants to be. But the additional question to be asked is “for whom is the subject enacting this role?” “Which gaze is being considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain

image?” And the answer is often something quite different from the explicit point of identification. Thus, take, for example, the classic “hysterical female,” whose theatrical outbursts might be said to show that she is offering herself to the Other as the object of its desire. But who, which specific subject, embodies for her this other? As it turns out, behind the female imaginary figure of identification (the ideal ego), lies the symbolic point of the paternal gaze: fragile femininity turns out to be symbolic identification with the father, in the sense of fashioning oneself in order to be the object of his desire.

Another example: Chaplin’s sadistic attitude towards children: teased, mocked, laughed at etc (often, as in *The Kid*, *Modern Times* etc.). This would be the level of “imaginary representation”: the tramp identifies as victim with the children who are being teased, mocked at, and so on. But through whose gaze must we look at children in order to see them as objects to be teased and mocked rather than as beings needing protection. Žižek claims that it is indeed from the gaze of the children themselves (for only children treat each other in this way, only children act without apprehending the others as full human beings, only children tear wings of dragon flies). The sadistic distance from children that the social world of Chaplin’s films repeatedly emphasise implies, consequently, a symbolic identification with the gaze of the children themselves. Indeed, *City Lights* brings out the sadism of the child through the figure of the two boys selling newspapers, who mercilessly pick on Chaplin over the course of the film.

The Forename as point of ego-identification versus the last name or patronymic as symbolic identification, marking the name of the father: *i(o)* always subordinated to the *I(O)*, so that the symbolic identification dominates and determines the image, the imaginary form in which we appear to ourselves as likeable, it creates the space within which imaginary identification functions. To put it another way, imaginary identification is imitation at the level of resemblance, while symbolic identification with the other occurs at the point at which he eludes resemblance, at which he is inimitable. [Woody Allen’s *Play it again sam* is Žižek’s example here: as long as the protagonist, played by Woody Allen, is weak, he needs the ideal ego, and thus identifies with the Bogart in *Casablanca*-- but not thereafter. But the film carries out a distinctive subversion: for becoming an autonomous person is true identification with Bogart, that is, a symbolic identification rather than an imaginary one. So that he ends up identifying with Bogart not as model, but as symbolic mandate: by identifying with Bogart’s role in *Casablanca* (sacrificing a woman for a friend, and so on, that is, by living in real life what the character played by Bogart lives through in the film). This symbolic identification ‘dissolves’ the imaginary identification, restructures it: consequently, rather than aiming to be the filmic hero that is Bogart (cool and with it), he can now identify imaginarily precisely through the ugliness, the smallness, etc.

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