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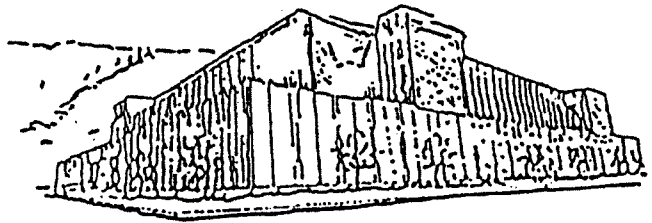
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Gazing at Subculture With Lacan.

by

Aaron Goodfellow

B.A. The University of Vermont, 1990

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

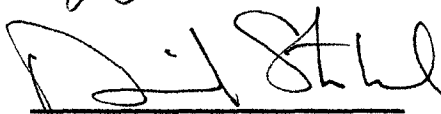
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The works of Dick Hebdige and Ann Bolin provide two examples in which the commodity form serves as a point of departure for the discussion of the meaning of subculture. Although the subject matter of each work is radically different -- Hebdige's study concentrates on the stylistic displays of British post - W.W.II youth subcultures while Bolin focuses on cross-dressers in contemporary American society -- both authors find something more in the commodity form that enables them to describe subculture.

For Hebdige, commodities, when used as signifiers of identity, do not signal the emergence of liberated subjects; they signal the reification of pre-existing categories of identity. For Bolin the opposite is true; the commodity form can be used as a signifier to construct different identities. By investigating these differing conceptions of the commodity form and its place in the analysis of identity, we can question the role of the commodity in our understanding of subjectivity. My concern is that scholarly efforts that view the commodity form as a determining factor in the construction of identity have wrongly depicted those who use commodities for self expression.

I will employ the psycho-analytic theory of Jaques Lacan to illustrate how both authors miss, or pass over the subjectivity of those represented in their studies. It will become apparent that both authors portray those who use commodities for the expression of identity inaccurately due to an erroneous conception of the commodity form. Describing how these texts result in an inaccurate portrayal of subjectivity allows for a discussion of the recent theoretical debate surrounding representation in the social sciences to be approached from a Lacanian perspective. It will be shown how Lacanian theory might provide an avenue for future ethnographic research that circumvents the perceived crisis of representation effecting contemporary anthropology.

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Chapter One: Introduction to Dispute

As Dick Hebdige states, the meaning of subculture is always in dispute. “The word ‘subculture’ is loaded down with mystery. It suggests secrecy, Masonic oaths, an underworld.”(Hebdige1979:4) Its very existence seems to beg contradiction and conflict, calling into question the customary repetitions and practices of daily life by introducing difference where non is expected. As a result subculture has the capacity to problematize the accepted and routinized occurrences of daily life. It problematizes the cultural significance of such mundane acts as dressing or choosing a hair style, adding an extra layer of significance to the daily rituals we all take part in. I say subculture adds significance to the practices and objects of everyday life because in subculture the quotidian appears displaced and deformed, begging interpretation. In subculture practices and objects are continually “made to mean and mean again”(Hebdige1979:3) as something different, something we don’t understand.

An example might be an encounter on the street with a punk or a cross-dresser. We see a safety pin stabbed through someone’s cheek and worn as jewelry or the latest Haute Couture being adorned and paraded down the street by a Latin man, illuminating foreign desires within our midst. In these two instances everyday objects are being placed in a context that challenges the accepted cultural use and meaning of the objects themselves. The tendency is to develop an understanding of subculture by emphasizing the role of volitional subjects who have chosen specific objects for the purpose of

presenting themselves to the world as different. We look to the object and some mysterious quality embedded within that might provide the key for unlocking the meaning of subculture. We assume a certain degree of likeness to ourselves since in many cases the difference expressed by subculture seems on the brink of being eclipsed by similarity if it weren't exaggerated. As a result the material objects, such as safety pins and articles of clothing often become the focus of efforts directed towards deciphering the meaning of subculture. And the fact that in contemporary society the objects of subculture are commodities, the fascination and appeal of describing subculture in terms of its material objects can be understood when given the legacy of Karl Marx in the social sciences.

This thesis examines the work of Dick Hebdige and Anne Bolin, two efforts in which the significance of the material objects presented to us by subculture guides their exploration of subcultural subjectivity. I challenge their readings of subculture by questioning the role of choice, volition, and the reading of significance into these attributes by looking at the subjects themselves who are using commodities for self expression. Although the subject matter of each work is radically different -- Hebdige's study concentrates on the stylistic displays of British post - W.W.II youth subcultures while Bolin focuses on cross-dressers in contemporary American society -- their arguments share a common dependence on the commodity form. Both authors find significance in the commodity form, enabling them to explain the experience as well as the meaning of their subjects practices. As a result, the particular conception of

the commodity form held by each author determines the image of the subjects whose lives are represented in these texts.

For Hebdige the commodity form cannot provide the means to transcend the dominant ideology. Commodities, when used as signifiers of identity, cannot signal the emergence of liberated subjects; they can only signal the reification of pre-existing categories of identity. Bolin finds the opposite to be true. She finds new potential for expressing one's "self" in the commodity and its surrounding aesthetic forms. For Bolin commodity form can be used as a signifier to express differently constructed identities. Such a conclusion posits the commodity as providing the means for the emergence of transcendent subjectivities resistant to the dominant ideological structure. By investigating these differing conceptions of the commodity form and its place in the analysis of identity, we can question the role of the commodity in our understanding of subjectivity. This leads to an analysis of the role of the commodity form in ethnography. My concern is scholarly efforts that view the commodity form as a determining factor in the construction of identity have wrongly depicted those who use commodities for self expression.

Psycho-analysis, and in particular the work of Jaques Lacan, provides a theoretical approach that explores the correlation between the commodity form and subjectivity. Lacan advances a conception of the subject as emerging in language, meaning that in Lacanian terms, to be is to be a "being-in-language". We become conscious in language, and as a result all our experiences are mediated by its influence. As subjects we do not have access to reality due to the inability of language as a

symbolic system to accurately and completely represent reality. We continually desire and are continually cut off from unification with the real supposedly in existence but hidden behind the signifiers of the real in language. This means all representations of that real are infused with desire and cover over a lack. Such a conception of representation poses a problem for both Hebdige and Bolin since both are claiming the commodity form signifies a real. In Hebdige's case the real signified by the commodity form is the reality of capitalism's social structure: for Bolin it is the reality of changes in the form of identity and the intersubjective relationships of contemporary society.

A Lacanian reading of Hebdige and Bolin demands that we view their portrayals of subculture as graphic representations taking place in language. This means the desire of the author infuses the images of the other crafted by their texts. Desire, then, and not the accurate representation of differences in subjectivity becoming the central organizing principle of these studies. Such a recognition repositions the commodity form in these texts, with the commodity becoming less a signifier of the other's subjectivity and more the hidden kernel around which the author has organized his or her desire. Approaching Hebdige and Bolin's work from this perspective serves as a point of departure for the discussion of the commodity form's position in ethnographic research. After Lacan, no longer can commodities be viewed as essential signifiers of a particular history nor as signifiers whose consumption provides the means for the expression of difference. Rather, the commodity form must be viewed as a signifier whose meaning is representative of desire. This means the magical qualities of the commodity form do not come from something hidden within it as use-value, nor the

social relationships expressed by its form, but from its position in a network of signifiers arranged by desire.

This discussion of subjectivity and the location of the commodity form in ethnography breaks down into four sections. The first section involves a critical reading of Hebdige. Hebdige's understanding of subculture will be challenged by illustrating the moment desire prevents him from seeing his subjects. My reading relies on the work of Joan Copjec whose work describes the relationship between the subject and its representation in a visual field such as Hebdige's text, from the Lacanian perspective. Copjec's work allows one to see that Hebdige finds something more in the commodity form that causes him to miss, or pass over, subjectivity in his study of subculture. As a result, the conclusion that punk style does not represent the expression of subjectivities resistant to the ideology of society's dominant is wrong.

The second section builds on the first, examining the construction and expression of gender and sex as it is challenged by the "transgender" community. In this chapter I engage Bolin's work as I did Hebdige's, showing how the conclusion that cross-dressing produces liberated subjects is inaccurate. I will show that rather than resisting our western binary conceptions of gender, Bolin's articulation of cross dressing produces subjects whose actions reify the categories she seeks to transcend. In this section the work of Susan Willis will be used to describe how Bolin's understanding of the relationship between the commodity form, ideology, and the subject is inadequate for her described task.

The third section delves into Lacanian psycho-analytic theory. I will show how Lacan's description of the psycho-analytic symptom and the process through which psycho-analytic procedure commences provides for an alternative reading of the practice of cross-dressing. This discussion leads to an understanding of gender as a sign and not as an object around which subjectivity is organized. This enables the practice of cross-dressing to be understood as significant because of its infusion with pleasure, not political importance. Removing the political element from our understanding of cross-dressing places the significance of the act on the subject who emerges as cross-dressed and not on the implications of their expressions.

The final section locates the above discussion in the larger debates revolving around the politics of representation in anthropology. I will illustrate how Lacan's conception of the subject provides a theoretical perspective that enables the recent crisis of representation in the social sciences to possibly be circumvented. This section will end with a description of what a Lacanian ethnography might look like. In this description the theoretical consideration necessary for conducting ethnographic research in contemporary society will be addressed.

Due to the reliance on semiotics and Lacanian psycho-analytic theory the vocabulary of this study tends to be obscure. It is helpful to know that when I use the terms "sign", "signifier", and "signified", I am using them as they were defined in the work on semiology by Ferdinand de Saussure. In this usage "signified" is used to describe the actual object being represented by a symbol, known as the "signifier". The "sign" is the conceptual unit formed by the association of these two terms. In

Saussure's own words the sign is defined as follows: "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses."(Saussure1959:149) Since this is not a linguistic study, but one that relies on the insights of linguistics for the analysis of cultural forms, the signs I am dealing with unite a concept and a visual image such as a commodity with the body.

The vocabulary of Lacanian psycho-analytic theory is too difficult to clarify in advance. The best I can do is define and describe the meaning of Lacan's terms as I work with them in the body of this paper. Although obscure and seemingly impenetrable the work of Lacan provides an alternative position that enables the practices of subculture to be understood in a different and positive light that captures the dynamics of the social processes that bring the spectacular and flamboyant displays of subculture into existence.

Chapter Two: Viewing the Prison House Walls

Dick Hebdige begins Subcultures: the Meaning of Style with a discussion of Jean Genet the notorious French outlaw, homosexual, and artist. Hebdige draws a graphic description of how common everyday items are imbued with meaning from Genet's work, The Thief's Journal. Or, in Hebdige's own words, a description of how things are made to "mean and mean again as 'style' in subculture".(Hebdige1979:3) The passage from Genet referred to by Hebdige involves the discovery of a tube of Vaseline by the Spanish Police during a raid on Genet's flat. As Hebdige states, "This 'dirty, wretched object', proclaimed his [Genet's] homosexuality to the world."(Hebdige1979:1) The importance of this tube of Vaseline for both Genet and Hebdige is its capability to act as a sign, a sign that carrying two different meanings. At one level Genet's tube of Vaseline serves as an object signifying his illegal sexuality; an object whose possession opens him to the derision and moral outrages of a society that bars homosexuality. On a different level it serves as a sign of resistance and strength for its owner for, after being subjected to the "hostile innuendo" of the police during his arrest, the Vaseline took on a life of its own. In the possession of the police the Vaseline served as a trace - as a constant reminder of an illicit world of unknown pleasures and secret identities slipping through the grasp of authority. So when Genet states, "I would indeed rather have shed blood than repudiate that silly

object”(Genet in Hebdige1979:3), he is referring to the power of the object to act as a sign. Genet further reveals the power of the sign in the following passage.

I was sure that this puny and most humble object would hold its own against them; by its mere presence it would be able to exasperate all the police in the world; it would draw upon itself contempt, hatred, white and dumb rages. (Genet in Hebdige1979:2)

This may seem a strange place to begin a discussion of subcultures but the experience of Genet deriving power and emotional sustenance from his tube of Vaseline while lying imprisoned for crimes against “nature” and “morality” describes the meaning and experience of subculture for Hebdige. The image of the prison, of the prisoner, of the everyday item, and of the ability of a sign to challenge the laws of those who define it lies at the heart of Hebdige’s study. For, in the end Hebdige finds the constructions of subcultures, although spectacular and flamboyant in their expressions of resistance and refusal, to be nothing more than, “The darker side of sets of regulations, just so much graffiti on a prison wall.”(Hebdige1979:3) For Hebdige subcultures signal difference, identities of refusal standing in opposition to the ‘straight’ world; but in the end those who challenge the “natural” laws and codes of “decency” lie imprisoned by the reality from which they seek to challenge and free themselves. To decipher why this might be involves unpacking Hebdige’s text, revealing his work to be just as much about ideology as it is about identity and just as much about commodities as it is about subjectivity. This project begins with a question, asking: What is the cause of Hebdige’s conclusion that subcultural expressions are nothing more than the subordinate, ““Make(ing) something out of what is made of them””(Sartre in Hebdige1979:139) And the answer to the question lies in

Barthes' conception of semiotics and Althusser's understanding of ideology, the launching point of Hebdige's analysis of subcultures.

In Subcultures, Hebdige develops a complex argument geared towards understanding identity, the subversive potential of subcultures, and the expression of difference through an analysis of style in youth subculture. Hebdige develops his argument in light of Roland Barthes' work in semiotics outlining the presence of ideology in everyday cultural occurrences. What is interesting about Barthes work is his lack of concern for discerning the good from the bad in mass cultural forms. In Mythologies, the work from which Hebdige draws his understanding of subcultures, Barthes devotes himself to explaining how the occurrences of everyday life in a class bound society are made to seem "perfectly natural". A prime example of Barthes concern might be our response to professional wrestling on television. When we turn on the television we hardly think twice about huge men dressed as super heroes performing a choreographed piece of violence.¹ Rather we take a bemused note, ignore the cultural messages and themes expressed by the performance, and, maybe, turn the channel. This response for Barthes signals the ability of ideology to hide its operations within and behind the form of everyday cultural occurrences. Rather than causing immediate concern and reflection upon the origins and meaning of cultural forms the televised wrestling match denies discussion of its origins, marking the most insidious

¹ The form of wrestling matches was of interest to Barthes due to their comic book depiction of our cultural conceptions of good and evil. According to Barthes, in a professional wrestling match, the forces of good and evil duke it, revealing the necessity of specific cultural values to triumph over alternatives. So in choosing the professional wrestling as an example, I am not only illustrating Barthes work, but drawing from it as well.

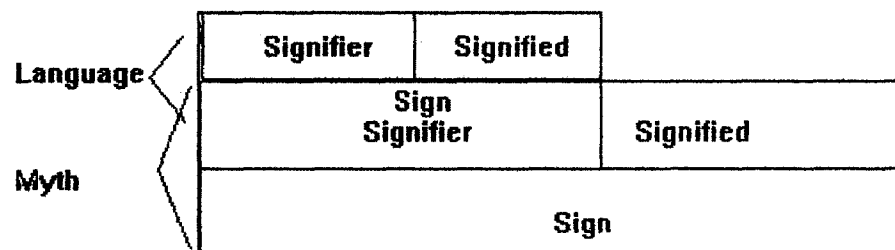
aspect of ideology, the capacity to make the obvious practices and interests of a dominant group appear “perfectly natural” and normal.

For Barthes the apparent normalcy of everyday life is dependent upon mythologies, or stories understood as true and beyond questioning. We understand cultural occurrences, such as contact with the world of professional wrestling, as perfectly natural due to a mythology that explains certain cultural forms and behaviors as “given”. Men dressed as super heroes throwing each other around in mock displays of violence are explained in common sensical terms, as a natural propensity for violence in males or as entertainment “needs” being met by the laws of supply and demand. What these explanations miss is the cultural messages expressed by the form such entertainments take. Only upon reflection do we realize that televised wrestling matches speak to us in a moralizing tone, defining the perseverance of “good” cultural values over evil.²

When the appearance of a specific conglomeration of signs, such as professional wrestling matches, are understood as being “perfectly natural”, or when behaviors and practices are performed without question, a mythology is in place. Mythologies are given currency by cultural forms that reify the message and the reality of those whose practices society has appropriated as the norm. “Mythology” carries out the work of ideology by disseminating a seamless picture of “natural” social relation over our everyday experience. In other words, the specific conventions and social practices of a dominant group are objectified in cultural forms manufactured to present the specifics

² For an in depth analysis of televised wrestling see Barthes 1957.

of social interaction within an alienated social order as the generalized experience of all humanity.(see Horkheimer:1968) The result is the fabrication of complex semiological systems whose messages tell us exactly how normal the peculiar is. Mass cultural forms such as film, fashion, and cuisine are part of this ‘second order semiological system’ expressing the ‘artificial nature’ of social relations in a rhetoric of common sense -- a rhetoric that hides the historicity and meanings of the rituals performed in contemporary society.



(Figure 1. Barthes Understanding of Mythology)

The example Hebdige uses to illustrate Barthes concern over our “manufactured sense” is Barthes analysis of a photograph taken of a French soldier saluting the flag. The picture appeared on the cover of a French magazine, called Paris-Match, and expresses the multiple layers of significance that overlay all apparently normal cultural form. By following Barthes “reading” of the photograph the capacity of semiotics to reveal the hidden ideological messages contained within the “perfectly natural” occurrence of a soldier saluting the flag is disclosed. For Barthes the meaning of the photograph is readily apparent in the image; the picture in question depicts a man showing respect for his country, the military, and French nationalism. The second order of meaning signified by the same image is, “that France is a great empire, that all

her sons, without any color discrimination, (the pictured soldier is black) faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.”(Barthes1957:116)

In Barthes secondary reading we see the ideological underpinnings informing our everyday experience exposed. We see the photograph as expressing a blatantly political message overlain by a systematically organized set of rules and codes that bring the political message into discourse, but in such a way that “forbids talking” about the origins and meaning of the image’s content. The secondary “connotated” meaning of the image is not readily apparent because a mythology hiding the historical origins of the image is in place. As a result, the image serves the political purpose of establishing the reality of the dominant as the status quo. We do not question the historical reasons for the content or the appearance of the image, rather common sense says: the army is racially mixed, people in the army salute, the person in the picture is a soldier, so of course he salutes the flag. This process of “reading” the representations of everyday experience, developed by Barthes, shows “how all the apparently spontaneous forms and rituals of contemporary societies are subject to a systematic distortion, liable at any moment to be de-historicized, ‘naturalized’, converted into myth.”(Hebdige1979:9) It then becomes the semiotician’s task to unravel the common ideological core hidden behind all cultural forms and it is this desire that guides Hebdige’s analysis of subculture.

Hebdige is able to peer beneath 'mythology' at the hidden codes and conventions of such secondary semiologic systems as Rastafarian or Punk style due to Barthes' conception of the sign. The particulars of Barthes' conceptualization of the sign are important to our understanding of Hebdige's work since they not only bring Hebdige to his topic, but graphically define the subjects of his analysis. In fact, it is safe to say, the image of subculture painted by Hebdige's analysis is symptomatic of Barthes' articulation of the sign. In order to fully understand the cause of Hebdige's analysis, Barthes conception of the sign must be unpacked. And the process of unpacking the contents of the sign begins with a dozen roses.

The example Barthes uses to describe the constituent parts of a sign is a bunch of roses. As Barthes states:

Take a bunch of roses: I use it to signify my passion. Do we have here, then, only a signifier and a signified, the roses and my passion? Not even that: to put it accurately, there are here only 'passionified' roses. But on the plane of analysis, we do have three terms; for those roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existing before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign. It is as true to say that on the plane of experience I cannot confuse the rose from the message they carry, as to say that on the plane of analysis I cannot confuse the roses as signifier and the roses as sign: the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is a meaning. (Barthes 1957:113)

What is immediately apparent is that Barthes' sign is made of three constituent parts.

"There is the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the two terms." (Barthes:113;1957) The signified is the material object, in our case identity, the signifier is the visual representation of that object, and the sign is the meaning associated with the two. Or to return to Genet, the signifier is the tube of Vaseline, the signified: Genet's homosexuality, and the sign: knowledge of the illicit world of criminality and pleasure existing beyond the grasp of authority. The most

important aspect of Barthes' semiotics is how he sees the sign connecting the signifier with the signified, for it is here that ideology takes hold and dictates knowledge in the form of mythology.

To describe the relationship between the signifier, signified and the sign, Barthes uses the work of Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure whose work emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the sign. For Saussure, as well as Barthes, there is no necessary connection between the signifier and the signified. The connection between these two constituent parts is one of social convention and not of essence. The semiological system in which the signifier "Tree" is made to stand in for the material object associated with that signifier is one of convention and supersedes the control of any one individual. One learns a semiologic system such as language, one does not invent it as he or she go. Barthes states that, "The signified is the concept, the signifier is the acoustic image (which is mental) and the relationship between concept and image is the sign."(Barthes:113;1957)

Although Saussure's original articulation of the sign was developed as a methodology for linguistic analysis, Barthes extends Saussure's idea of semiologic systems to include all systems of formal logic; hence the potential of semiotics as a tool for cultural analysis. Rather than dealing strictly with language Barthes deals with discourse, or the study of "ideas-in-form"; Barthes seeks knowledge of the form in which ideas are presented and re-presented in different cultural instances. Re-presentation is the realm of mythology and is of particular importance since in this

secondary realm, not only are things made to “mean and mean again”, but disparate objects are made to signify and signify again the same thing, a unified historical reality.

The nature of the mythical signification can in fact be well conveyed by one particular simile: it is neither more nor less arbitrary than an ideograph. Myth is a pure ideographic system where the forms are still motivated by the concept which they represent while not yet, by a long way, covering the sum of its possibilities for representation. (Barthes 1957:127)

At this point we can return to Hebdige and begin describing how Barthes' work acts as a determinant in Hebdige's understanding of subculture. What is immediately apparent is that Barthes' work informed the very location of Hebdige's analysis. Hebdige's work concentrates on subcultural style, or the form in which identity is presented. Hebdige hopes to glean knowledge of the interaction between society's dominant and subordinate groups by analyzing the sartorial displays of subculture. This is possible due to the capacity of sartorial displays to act as an ideographic representation of social life. Hebdige illustrates this point by referring again to Genet: “For, just as the conflict between Genet's ‘unnatural’ sexuality and the policemen's ‘legitimate’ outrage can be encapsulated in a single object, so the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture - in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning.” (Hebdige 1979:2) Literally in the clothing of subculture Hebdige finds the tensions between the dominant and subordinate groups to be ‘writ large’ in the language of a Barthian second order semiological system, in which the chimerical objects used to express difference - “a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle” - are found to express identity. But it is an impotent identity. In the end Hebdige finds Punk

style to signify difference, but the sign fails to break free from the universalizing tendencies of mythology. Rather, Punk style remains a surface phenomenon signifying, and signifying again, difference, but a difference continually falling short of the “self imposed exile” sought by subculture members. Mythology continually captures and recaptures the motivated efforts of subcultural members who, according to Hebdige are trying to break free from the universalizing discourse of society’s dominant.

Perhaps the clearest example of subculture’s impotence is seen in Hebdige’s description of Punk style as “white ethnicity”. In the following passage Hebdige contrasts the development of reggae and urban black style with that of Punk. The conclusion drawn by Hebdige is that Punk style does not express a positive alternative identity resistant to the historical reality of the dominant. Rather, the signifiers activated by the Punks form a sign expressing the subculture’s “true colors” as “lifers in solitary despite the fierce tattoos.”(Hebdige1979:66) This argument is based on Barthes’ conceptualization of the sign and its relation to ideology. For, as Hebdige makes clear, the location in which the Punks sought to ground their alternative identity had no historic precedent. Punks sought to ground their identity in the land of commodities and this land was already claimed by the mythology of the dominant.

Whereas urban black youth could place themselves through reggae ‘beyond the pale’ in an imagined elsewhere (Africa, or the West Indies) the punks were tied to present time. They were bound to Britain which had no foreseeable future. But this difference could be magically elided. By a simple sleight of hand, the co-ordinates of time and place could be dissolved, transcended, converted into signs. Thus it was that the punks turned towards the world a dead white face which was there and yet not ‘there’. Like the myths of Roland Barthes, these ‘murdered victims’ -emptied and inert - also had an alibi, an elsewhere, literally ‘made up’ out of Vaseline and cosmetics, hair dye and mascara. But paradoxically, in the case of the punks, this ‘elsewhere’ was also a nowhere - a twilight zone - a zone constituted out of negativity. Like Andre’ Breton’s Dada, punk might seem to ‘open all the doors’ but these doors ‘gave onto a circular corridor’. They reflected in a heightened form a perceived condition: a condition of unmitigated exile, voluntarily assumed. But whereas exile had a specific meaning, implied (albeit magical) solution in

the context of Rastafarianism and Negro history, when applied metaphorically to British white youth it could only delineate a hopeless condition. (Hebdige 1979:65)³

The signs of identity used by Punks are commodities and commodities, for Hebdige, are always already tied into a secondary semiologic system that serves as a tool of normalization for the dominant. And, in Hebdige's mind, a historical and geographic origin can not be based upon a cultural form that is already de-historicized and whose appearance "forbids talking" about its origins. So by using a commodity as a signifier of identity one is not challenging the status quo but reifying the social reality from which emancipation is sought. It is in this way that subcultures are "just so much graffiti on a prison wall".(Hebdige 1979:3)

It is important to investigate this relationship between identity, ideology, and the commodity form since it is the nature of this relationship that allows Hebdige to unlock the message of subcultural style. It might even be said that this time-worn tripartite is the hinge on which all of Hebdige's text hangs. In this case it is useful to push the analogy of a door swinging on a hinge. A door swinging open describes discovery, providing a description of gaining access to hidden worlds, while also describing concealment, acting as a barricade as well. Hebdige's conception of the commodity form and its relationship to ideology opens a door that appears to provide a satisfactory explanation of subculture but, upon close reflection, the door Hebdige opens conceals

³ An interesting side note to this passage concerns the treatment of race by Hebdige. For Hebdige, due to the racial element informing the development of reggae, black urban subcultures express a positive identity complete with geographical and historical underpinnings, but Britain "white" punks do not. The trace of race that signals viable alterity exists in the skin and not on the surface of a second order semiological system. Although a Rastafarian in London may have no personal contact with the African continent or the West Indies, the trace of that history is in their skin.

as much as it reveals. Hebdige's door acts as much as a barricade as it does an entryway, concealing the subjects of study as it reveals the desire of Hebdige as a subject. With this said it is important to investigate the hinge, the mechanism upon which Hebdige's text depends, emphasizing the moment the door swings open just enough to peer into the inner sanctum of a room but remains closed enough to conceal the subject hiding behind the door that lies ajar. This discussion begins with Hebdige's conception of ideology and its relationship to the sign.

The definition of ideology used by Hebdige is a filtered version of Marx's definition established in The German Ideology. Stemming from an originary division of labor, ideology emphasizes the historical development of a false consciousness paralleling the bourgeoisie's rise to power. This "false consciousness" hides the true economic and social structure of capitalism (i.e. one person's profit is another's unpaid labor) behind the materialized ideals of bourgeois social life. Implied within this definition is the existence of an objective and true set of social relations, a whole society absent of alienation where humans can live out their species being. Hebdige's definition is a filtered version of the original because his work is informed by later scholars, such as Althusser and Stuart Hall, who have bent Marx's original conception of ideology to fit the needs of understanding contemporary capitalist culture. Hall and Althusser's adjustments revolve around the relationship between power and the formation of consciousness. Both authors push the influence of ideology behind the conscious subject, locating its operation in the unconscious. In doing so the conspiratorial aspect of culture was removed from the equation that describes such

contemporary cultural forms as the structure of the modern family and political institutions. With Hall's and Althusser's adjustments to Marx's original definition, no longer are the production and reproduction of specific social structures seen as motivated efforts initiated by individuals whose best interest is served by the dissemination of a specific message. Rather, ideology is seen as the embodiment of form and structure. The relationship between ideology, the formation of consciousness, and contemporary cultural forms is made clear by Althusser's statement:

Ideology has very little to do with 'consciousness'...It is profoundly unconscious...Ideology is indeed a system of representation, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with 'consciousness': they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their 'consciousness'. They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them. (Althusser in Hebdige1979:12)

What is important to recognize in this definition is the ubiquity of ideology. For the above scholars where there is meaning, there too is ideology. Signification is grounded in an ideological apparatus that connects the sign to the signified. This translates into an understanding of culture as a repository of ideology with structure being the embodiment of domination. If ideology is to be understood as a structural component of everyday life, as existent in the "perceived-accepted-suffered" objects of culture, then cultural forms as well as their contents must be understood as being saturated in ideology. Or, more simply, ideology can be understood as the "Semantic rules and codes which are not directly apprehended in experience."(Hebdige1979:13) After we have discarded the notion of a "false consciousness" this new conceptualization of ideology retains Marx's original idea of a "true" and "whole" set

of social relations hidden from view by the consciousness of the dominant. An objective set of “real” social relations is always present and serving as the goal or object of the “cultural studies” undertaken by these authors. Perhaps the clearest example of the notion of an objective world of social relations hidden from view is seen in Stuart Hall’s statement concerning the transparency of ideology which reads, “You cannot learn, through common sense, how things are: you can only discover where they fit into the existing scheme of things.”(Hall in Hebdige1979:11) It is the “how things are” out on the streets for the youth of Britain that Hebdige seeks through his analysis of subculture, only rather than discovering “how things are”, he discovers where things fit into the structure of class. In the end Hebdige reveals the content hidden by the form but not the secret of the form itself. He does not reveal the secret of experiencing class but rather reveals the hidden contents of ideology.

An analogy drawn from the work of Freud helps describe how Hebdige’s efforts to produce a formal analysis of subcultures ends in a content analysis of ideology, with subculture being part of the overall contents of our class bound society. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud describes the theoretical considerations necessary to avoid being fooled into believing that the hidden contents of a dream have any use in the analytic procedure. Rather, as Freud makes apparent, the secret to be revealed is in the form itself. “The theoretical intelligence of the form of dreams does not consist in penetrating the manifest content to its ‘hidden kernel’ of truth, the latent dream-thoughts; it consists in answering the question: why have the latent dream-thoughts assumed such a form, why were they transposed into the form of a

dream?"(Zizek1989:11) The importance of moving away from a contents analysis of form, understood by Freud, is described by Zizek as follows:

Herein, then lies the basic misunderstanding: if we seek the 'secret of the dream' in the latent content hidden by the manifest text, we are doomed to disappointment: all we find is some entirely 'normal' - albeit usually unpleasant - thought, the nature of which is mostly non-sexual and definitely not 'unconscious'. This 'normal', conscious/preconscious thought is not drawn towards the unconscious, repressed simply because of its 'disagreeable' character for the conscious, but because it achieves a kind of 'short circuit' between it and another desire which is already repressed, located in the unconscious, a desire which has nothing whatsoever to do with the 'latent dream-thought. It is this unconscious/sexual desire which cannot be reduced to a 'normal train of thought' because it is, from the very beginning, constitutively repressed (Freud's *Urverdrangung*) - because it has no 'original in the 'normal' language of everyday communication, I the syntax of the conscious/preconscious; its only place is in the mechanism of the 'primary process'. (Zizek1989:13)

What Hebdige has done is to reveal the form ideology has taken in contemporary society: class, penetrated one aspect of its manifest content (subculture) and revealed the 'hidden kernel', that is the commodity form acting as a sign of the ideological structure that produced it and its meaning. In other words, Hebdige concentrates on the form of ideology, poses the correct questions, but fails to gain an understanding of why class has taken the form it has in subculture. Hebdige has produced a text revealing the contents of class while failing to explain "the way things are" for those who manifest class. Class is posited as a pre-existing category ordering the enunciations of those who speak with commodities. Hebdige's dilemma is caused by his conception of ideology which continually causes him to look for the "true" social relations hidden behind the markers of identity, thus falling prey to a "fascination" with the contents of ideology and missing the message expressed by its form, class, has taken. And perhaps this explains the necessity of Hebdige's apologetic disclaimer at the end of his book:

Thus, while Genet embodies our object most clearly, in the end Barthes is closest to us. He understands the problems of the reader - 'the mythologist' who can no longer be one with the 'myth consumers'....The cord has been cut: we are cast in a marginal role. We

are in society but not inside it, producing analyses of popular culture which are themselves anything but popular. We are condemned to a 'theoretical sociality' 'in camera' to the text - caught between the object and our reading. The study of subcultural style which seemed at the outset to draw us back towards the real world, to reunite us with 'the people', ends by merely confirming the distance between the reader and the 'text', between everyday life and the 'mythologist' whom it surrounds, fascinates and finally excludes. It would seem that we are still, like Barthes 'condemned for some time yet to speak excessively about reality'. (Hebdige 1979:140)

Upon first reading, Hebdige's apology seems justified and clear. It seems obvious he would want to apologize to his both his readers and those from whom the study draws for the short-comings of his text. After all, as he points out, the book does succumb "to a kind of romanticism", straying from "the legitimate concerns of sociologists". It also seems obvious that he might offer apologies to those to whom he turned for knowledge since he failed to produce a text in which they might recognize themselves. But upon closer examination it becomes apparent that there is something more going on in Hebdige's apology, a something more that anticipates in advance a certain lack covered over by his text. With this said let's look at the apology closely; for contained within Hebdige's final sentimental sentences lies the "something more" that causes knowledge of 'how things are' in subculture to slip from Hebdige's grasp. As it turns out this humble apology is crucial to the text. It contains the essence of Althusser's definition of ideology, providing the moment in which we can begin to speak of subjectivity. Because within the final statements of the book we can see Hebdige's true relationship to the subjects of his study. In his apology Hebdige reveals not only an unfulfilled desire but also the defining characteristics of his conception of subculture - a conception that allows subjectivity to evade him.

In order to understand how subjectivity evades Hebdige's reading of style we need to return to Althusser's and Barthes' understanding of ideology as its effects are crystallized as a sign in Hebdige's text. And that moment is when Hebdige states, "We are condemned to a 'theoretical sociality' 'in camera' to the text - caught between the object and our reading." (Hebdige 1979:140) In this statement, unbeknownst to Hebdige, he reveals the truth pertaining to his relationship to subculture and a lack in his understanding of the subject that is covered over by the text. Even more relevant, this statement comes as an apology.

When Hebdige makes the above claim he is describing the predicament of the student of subculture. According to Hebdige, the researcher is condemned to a position of marginality because their knowledge prevents them from "taking the apparent for granted". In other words, the researcher is denied fulfillment of the desire to live in the world of his subjects - a world in which the structural component of domination inherent to a class bound society has been resolved - due to the hidden kernel of truth, known by the researcher, to reside in all mass cultural forms. The researcher is prevented from experiencing the "magical solution" to the constraints of ideology lived by Punks, Skinheads, and Rastafarians due to knowledge of mythology. Rather, Hebdige feels a sense of condemnation to a life in "uneasy cerebral relation to the bric-a-brac of life", with "the mundane forms and rituals whose function it is to make us feel at home" (Hebdige 1979:139) having the opposite effect. For the mythologist 'myth-consumption' signals anxiety and fear, revealing the worst nightmare of the properly Marxist semiotician, the 'arbitrary nature' of everyday experience. The

mythologist is cast into a marginal role to “straight” society as well as subculture due to his or her knowledge of mythology and the operation of ideology in all cultural forms. As Hebdige states, the marginality of the intellectual seems like a perfect place from which to approach other fringe peoples, secure in our assurance of a common experience between intellectual and outlaw, knowledge of a world where everything has significance, where everything reveals our position outside society. Semiotician, Punks, and Genet: aliens in their own society, living a “self-imposed exile” where the truths pertaining to the codes of society are continually revealed and subverted; we are liberated, but not free. Aside from expressing a romantic sentimentality of the social critic as a castigated and tortured soul, Hebdige, as an intellectual, gladly recognizes himself reflected in this text, while the actual subjects of the study do not. Why might this be, and why is this cause for apology? The answer to this question is difficult since it involves a return to ideology and its effects on determining the subjects of this study.

In order to understand why subculture, as presented here, does not reflect back as a self-identical image we need to turn to the work of Joan Copjec whose work explains the shortcomings of Althusser’s conception of ideology in terms of the Lacanian definition of the subject. Her book is a critique of the contemporary efforts, such as Foucault’s and Althusser’s, to historicize the emergence of the modern subject. Since she is a Lacanian scholar her vocabulary is extremely obscure, so please bear with me.

Copjec begins her critique of Althusser by calling into question the “I” which is articulated as being situated “in camera” to the subject of study. According to Copjec this position can be described as a process in which the “I” of the subject is rendered

visible by “the instrument through which...[the] I [is] photo-graphed.”(Copjec1994:31)⁴

What this statement means is that for Althusser, and Hebdige as well, “The gaze [of the author] determines the complete visibility of the “I” (Copjec1994:32), and the theoretical apparatus, or ‘the camera’, used to view the subject determines our perceptions of that “I”. So when Hebdige states that he is “in camera” to the object of his study, he is saying that his theoretical apparatus is literally mapping the “I” he is viewing. He is exposing and defining the desires and intentions of his subject as it emerges through his analysis. Hebdige is telling the truth about subjects revealed by the gaze of his theoretical apparatus, that is, subjects who do not recognize themselves in that gaze. When given the nature of this relationship it becomes immediately apparent why Hebdige feels the need to apologize. While Hebdige’s own theorizing may place him in a marginal position to society, preventing him the fulfillment of certain desires, his analysis objectifies his subjects in a gaze that reveals all except the constructed position of the researcher’s gaze. What is at stake here is the relationship between the self and the “other”, the self as mythologist, and the “other” as object of the gaze, an object that is made visible through the gaze of the self.

Hebdige seeks solace in the object that fails to recognize itself reflected in his study. For Hebdige this mis-recognition equals the preservation of a safe haven in which the “imaginary” solutions of subculture can continue without being “killed by the kindness” of social scientists. However if the subject does not recognize itself in

⁴ Although this statement concerning the relationship between the I and the “camera” was originally made by Lacan, Copjec is using this statement in her text to expose the erroneous assumptions pertaining to subjectivity in Althusser’s conception of ideology.

its image as it is represented in Hebdige's text, the gaze assumes to be representing the object of study as it actually is, as it has been constructed historically. Mis-recognition by the subject operates at the level of ideology to produce 'the camera', and to imply an error on the subject's part but not on the theoretical apparatus of the researcher.

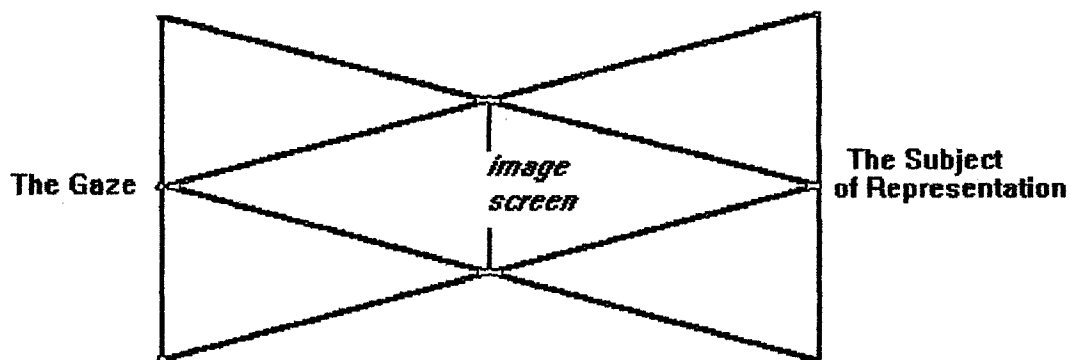
Copjec describes this process as the subject's failure to properly recognize its true relation to the visible world.(Copjec1994:32). As Copjec states its this process of installing the subject in a position of misrecognition "operates without the hint of failure."(Copjec1994:32)

The subject unerringly assumes the position the perspectival construction bids it to take. Erased from the process of construction, the negative force of error emerges later as a charge directed at the subject. But from where does it come? Film theory has described only the construction of this position of misrecognition. Though it implies that there is another actual, nonpunctiform, position, film theory has never been able to describe the construction of this position.(Copjec1994:33)

Hebdige raises a charge against the subjects of subculture because he perceives a failure on their part to provide the desired freedom sought by the researcher. The freedom Hebdige desires is characterized by the unification of the researcher with "the people". Such a union would signal the end the end of his alienation as an intellectual. There is a fundamental problem with Hebdige's conception of the subject. The subject does not misrecognize itself in his gaze, a gaze which objectifies the subject. Rather, it reveals the subject has actually evaded his gaze, and misrecognition is being leveled as a charge against the subject of subculture. Hebdige is saying "silly punk, you just can't see the truth of your own actions." The Lacanian reading of this mis-recognition sees the subject viewing his or her representation, asking: "who me?" and replying no. The subject has deceived Hebdige, revealing the flaw in his conception of the subjects he is

studying as they slip out from underneath his gaze. Hebdige covers over this flawed conception of the subject with the excessive meaning of the commodity form.

Lacan takes into consideration the deceptive capacity of the subject who refuses to ignore the constructed nature of the “I” that exists “in camera” to itself. By explaining the Lacanian conception of the relationship between self and other we can see how Hebdige missed the subject. Rather than sparing the subject the subject spared him, thus positing an entirely new meaning to the apologetic ending of the text. In order to explain Lacan’s conception of the relationship between the self and other we need to refer to that famous diagram of the two interpenetrating triangles.



(Figure 2. *Diagram of the Lacanian Gaze*)

In the diagram, Lacan overlays two triangles in such a manner that the base lines are parallel, with the apex of each separate triangle intersecting the mid-point of the opposite triangles base-line. These two points at the apex of each triangle represent the origin of the gaze as it is experienced by the subject of representation as well as the author. At the mid point, where the vertical members of the two triangles intersect,

Lacan has drawn a short line parallel to the base lines. This short center line represents what Lacan calls the 'image screen', and is crucial to our understanding of the gaze, and the misrecognition of the subject represented by that gaze.

In the Althusser/Hebdige model only one of these triangles is taken into consideration. Thus, the subject revealed by Hebdige's gaze is directly correlated to the laws of optics in which the picture taken by "the camera" actually does reveal all, producing what Copjec calls a "centered and transcendent subject." In this way the self misrecognition in its reflected image is a matter of ideology. The self does not recognize its own image because ideology has warped the image of what the self looks like to that self. This implies an actual position from which the constructed nature of the self can be viewed absent of the refracting effects of ideology. For Lacan, on the other hand, this misrecognition expresses a more profound internal dialectic in which the subject mistakenly believes that a space exists beyond what is revealed by the gaze. It is Lacan's inclusion of the second triangle in which the subject of representation looks back at the gaze that illustrates this point.

The second triangle diagrams the subject's mistaken belief that there is something behind the space set out by the first. [The graphic depiction of Althusser and Hebdige's gaze] It is this mistaken belief (this misrecognition) that causes the subject to disbelieve even those representations shaped according to the scientific laws of optics. The Lacanian subject, who may doubt the accuracy of even its most 'scientific representations,' is submitted to a superegoic law that is radically different from the optic laws to which the film theoretical subject is submitted. (Copjec 1994:33)

The superegoic law to which Copjec refers is The Law of Signification, those originary laws of language that establish the subject as a desiring being. For our discussion of subculture, when Hebdige claims the misrecognition of the subject to be a

product of ideology, an imaginary space in which the subject believes it is transcending the laws of society, he is mistaken. Rather, the subject's misrecognition of its "self" is a loop-hole in the symbolic that continually allows the subject to imagine a position outside and beyond the imaginary in which it exists as a transcendent subject. Thus the subject is never trapped in the imaginary because the imaginary always invites one to imagine a position outside the perspective of the gaze establishing the representation. This always present alternative position within the imaginary allows the subject to continually evade the gaze, calling into question Hebdige's claim that Punk style is nothing more than "graffiti on prisons walls." The prison walls which Hebdige sees constructing the very being of his subjects are, for the Punks, nothing more than an illusion, a graphic effect. They are not some terrible structure that can only be escaped from in the imaginary. Or as Copjec explains,

Where the film-theoretical positions [of Althusser and Hebdige] always tends to trap the subject in representation, to conceive of language as constructing the prison walls of the subject's being, Lacan argues that the subject sees these walls as *trompe l'oeil*, and as being constructed by something beyond them. For beyond everything that is displayed to the subject, the question is asked, 'What is being concealed from me? What in this graphic space does not show, does not stop not writing itself.(Copjec1994:34)

From this discussion an alternative conception of the subject is offered by Lacan, one which illustrates a radical authenticity to subculture missed in Hebdige's text. How does Lacan offer authenticity where Hebdige found a surface expression of style? Lacan's conception of the subject is beyond signification; it is a lack in the symbolic system impossible to signify. To return our own gaze to the diagram described above, we must also include the notion of the screen. For Lacan the idea of a screen upon which the representation of the gaze is projected in a graphic presentation accounts for

the subject's misrecognition of itself in representation. In this case, Hebdige's text acts as the screen upon which the image of subculture captured by the theoretical camera is represented. When confronted by this image, rather than seeing itself the subject sees an image, an image from which it can immediately escape due to the possibility of always imagining a different perspective from the one caught in the camera. At the moment the subject intuits that something is missing from its image as it is represented on the screen, and in Hebdige's text, Lacan's attention is captured. Lacan looks for that which is not revealed, for that which is invisible in the graphic field, thus locating the emergence of the subject in its representation as an impossibility. The subject is always present in its absence, in the "unrealizable ideal" of the symbolic system to signify reality. Copjec describes this strange contradiction as follows:

One would expect to find at the point of the [Lacanian] gaze a signified, but here the signifier is absent - and so is the subject. The subject, in short, cannot be located or locate itself at the point of the gaze, since this point marks its very annihilation. At the moment the gaze is discerned, the image, the entire visual field, takes on a terrifying alterity. It loses its 'belong-to-me aspect' and suddenly assumes the function of a screen.(Copjec1994:35)

So rather than seeing one's self represented by a theoretical apparatus seeking to reveal one's subjectivity, one sees a picture of oneself obviously taken from a particular perspective that is not one's own. Just as one never really believes the voice one hears on the answering machine is the voice with which one speaks, or that their image presented to them in a snap shot is what they actually look like, the subject never believes its representation is its own. So if one is to look for the subject one does not look for a signifier, one looks for an absence covered over by signification.

This conception of the subject has a profound impact for our understanding of subculture. If the signifiers of difference do not signify a subject occupying an identity category then what are they doing? What is difference, and what is identity if we cannot ground the signifier to an essential entity such as a body? The answer to these question lies in the field of representation, because for Lacan, that is all there is; there is nothing beyond the visual field of signifiers.

Lacan argues that beyond the signifying network, beyond the visual field, there is, in fact nothing at all. The veil of representation actually conceals nothing; there is nothing behind representation...Lacan locates the cause of being in the inform: the unformed (that which has no signified, no significant shape in the visual field) and the inquiry (the question posed to representation's presumed reticence). The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore, wants to see. The gaze, the object-cause of desire, is the object-cause of the subject of desire in the field of the visible. (Copjec1994:35)

Lacan's conception of the subject allows us to see identity in exactly the ways Hebdige prevents. From the Lacanian perspective identity is nothing more than a stylistic arrangement in a visual field of desire. This visual field is not penetrable by a gaze, "Not filled with knowledge or recognition; it is clouded and turned back on itself, absorbed in its own enjoyment." (Copjec1994:36) In this new light Hebdige's apology takes on a new significance. Rather than apologizing to his subjects out of a sense of guilt for exposing them, Hebdige is apologizing, as he should, for his failure to allow the subject to speak and thus reject his representation. When given the message these subjects would have carried it is all too clear why Hebdige could not allow their voices into his text. If Hebdige had listened to these subjects he would have to locating himself in their gaze, and to do that would involve risking his own unified position as a subject in his text. He would have to admit that he to was being gazed upon by subjects

with the ability to dismantle the component parts of his identity. This is a risk he could not take, for to do so would be to admit his own dissolution.

Chapter Three: Reification or Relief?

Another approach to the analysis of identity that involves the commodity form is seen in the work of Ann Bolin. In 'Transcending and Transgendering: Male-to-female Transsexuals, Dichotomy and Diversity', an article from Gilbert Herdt's edited volume Third Sex, Third Gender, Bolin analyzes the practices of cross-dressers and transsexuals. The intent is to evaluate the implications of these practices for our understanding of gender. According to Bolin the identities expressed by cross-dressers "destablize" our gender categories, potentially opening a space for the development of subjectivity free from the constraints of what she calls the "western gender paradigm." This paradigm manifests an ideology that explains social roles in terms of biological sex. Within this ideology the behavior associated with masculinity and femininity is understood as being perfectly natural because it follows from our body's physical characteristics. Those who possess a female anatomy express the feminine gender role because gendered behavior is assumed to be linked to anatomy. This results in the assumption that one's gender follows from his or her sex. Our identity categories reflect this cultural truth with femininity and masculinity being recognized as the expression of our body's biological make-up.

Integral to this paradigm is a binary conception of gender. We assume there are only two genders following from two biological sexes. Bolin articulates the practices

of the transgender community (the self-describing phrase used by cross-dressers and others who express gender variation) as subverting this ideology, as breaking down the associative links upon which the paradigm is based. The practice of cross-dressing “unsettles” the ideological link between gender and sex by juxtaposing the signifiers of one gender with the anatomical features of the other sex. The effect is the graphic depiction of the mutual independence of these two characteristics of identity. When gender is freed from sex the identity categories (such as male and female) are unsettled. The categories are shown to rest upon culturally constructed presumptions rather than essential characteristics of the physical body. According to Bolin this subversion calls for the recognition of a third and possibly more gender categories since the identity being expressed by the transgender(ist) does not correspond to his or her sex. Breaking the link between identity and the physical characteristics of the body forces the re-definition of our gender categories and the recognition that gender is a construct independent of sex. This allows gender to be based on properties other than those associated with the biological body, opening the possibility of articulating the existence of a third gender category corresponding to the identities expressed by the transgender community. Describing these identities as a third gender “opens a new cultural space” in which a transgendered identity can develop, freeing the subject from the constraints of a binary gender paradigm. This removes the transgender(ist) from the margins of society, providing liberation for those whose identity cannot be reduced to the binary term of the gender paradigm.

In Bolin's account she does not see the practices of the transgender community challenging gender as a defining characteristic of being. The transgender community is described as requiring a reconsideration of what constitutes gender by calling into question the contents and form of our gender categories. Transgendered identities leave gender as a signified object intact while challenging our paradigmatic understanding of gender as binary. It is my hypothesis that this conclusion is problematic. I plan to show that cross-dressing has nothing to do with liberation, and that a subversion of ideology does not take place in the practices of the transgender community. Rather, as articulated by Bolin the practices of the transgender community reify the western binary gender paradigm. Consequently, Bolin's reading of the transgender community must be understood as portraying the cross-dressed subject as a prisoner trapped within the social categories she/he seeks to transcend. I claim the practices of the transgender community need to be read in a different light. In doing so an understanding of cross-dressing can be developed that approaches the practice from outside the political framework established by Bolin. Approaching the practice of cross-dressing from outside the identity politics of Bolin reconfigures our understanding of the subject who cross-dresses. It is my goal to develop an understanding of the transgender community's practices that does not portray their expressions of subjectivity as being motivated by a political agenda, nor as a reification, but as a practice organized by an economy of enjoyment.

In order to understand how Bolin's study misses its mark, producing a portrait of the subject as trapped, as opposed to liberated, we need to look at the relationship

posited between the signifiers of gender and ideology. This project returns to the place of the commodity in the construction of identity because the signifiers of gender, in this case, are commodities. Reading Bolin's work in conjunction with Hebdige's provides a contrasting view of the commodity's role in the construction of identity since her understanding of subculture is exactly opposite to that of Hebdige's. For Bolin the social actor can subvert the dominant social structure by rearranging the signifiers of his or her identity. In Hebdige's terms this amounts to the transgender community making the signifier 'signify and signify again as something different'(Hebdige1979:3): a third gender. This indicates a radically different understanding of identity since it posits the agency of the subject as providing the means to subvert the dominant social order. Bolin sees the subject as defining their own identity through the establishment of the meaning of the signifiers used to express their identity.

For Bolin, the subject of subculture does exactly what Hebdige said it couldn't. The gestures of cross-dressers do signal "a refusal and resistance to society's dominant"; with their actions not just "ending in style"(Hebdige1979:3), as Hebdige would have us believe. As articulated by Bolin the practices of the transgender community amount to much more than "the expression of the darker side of sets of regulations"(Hebdige1979:3). For Bolin their stylistic arrangements actually provide an alternative to current social relationships by graphically depicting a different set of principles upon which social organization can be based. Whereas for Hebdige these arrangements amount to nothing but "just so much graffiti on a prison wall".(Hebdige1979:3) To follow this metaphor, Bolin describes the transgender

community as having jumped the prison walls by “magically appropriating” the “humble objects” of the dominant. Putting these objects to their own use, the transgender community transforms the meaning of these objects as well as their identity into structures that are marching as well as dancing in the street. And the “humble objects” of the dominant, such as articles of clothing or images of the ideal somatic form, in which Hebdige found nothing more than the signifiers of continued domination are providing the tools for resistance. In order to understand how Bolin was able to draw these conclusions we need to examine the structure of her argument. By carefully recounting Bolin’s steps we can explore the assumptions and conceptions that provide the back-bone of her argument, exposing the moment in which Bolin’s understanding of the subject is infused with something more that enables it to almost magically transcend social domination. This will lead back to the place of the commodity form in the construction of identity, since in Bolin’s argument, the commodity provides the key to the transgender community’s ability to subvert the dominant gender paradigm.

The first step in Bolin’s argument calls for expanding our identity categories to include the possibility of “supernumerary” genders. According to Bolin we need to include the possibility of more than two genders if we are to theorize intersubjective relationships outside the “Euro-American” gender paradigm. This argument is based on the subversive potential of constructing identities that confirm the independence of sex from gender. Such an identity is illustrated by Karen, one of Bolin’s informants, who states:

To use the more common terminology, I would say I am transgendered. I cross-dress but not for sexual display or attraction. There is a feeling that is feminine, pretty and desirable. Yet, I don't change as a 'person'. My gestures and walk are compatible with a feminine appearance, but not exaggerated, my voice unchanged. I don't consider myself a different person, just another visage or aspect of the same person...At times I prefer feminine gestures and expressions, but more often masculine responses. When societal binarism insists I choose one pole or the other, I choose masculine. I have been raised as a male, my sexual anatomy is male, etc. Nonetheless, I insist that I am 'ambigenderal.' I claim all gender space, if you will, and exist within this spectrum at different points at different times. (Bolin1994:465)

Karen's identity signals subversion because it challenges the ideology that necessitates a link between sex and gender. She has re-arranged the signifiers of sex and gender to construct an identity that, strictly speaking, is neither male nor female. Karen has the anatomy of a biological male but elects a social persona based on context. Her chosen persona does not necessarily follow her anatomical sex yet at times it does, expressing a fluidity to gender. Karen expresses her chosen persona by assembling the signifiers of the feminine gender and arranging them in such a way that she becomes socially female. She is able to re-define and hence change her social identity by assembling and arranging such signifiers of gender as articles of clothing, gestures, hairstyles, and expressions into a form that emulates femininity.

In the process of assembling the signifiers of femininity and juxtaposing them with the signifiers of the opposite sex both sets of signifiers gain new meanings, challenging the assumption that the signifiers of gender, such as hairstyle, behavior, or clothing, correspond with sexual identity. The objects signifying gender are shown to represent something different when known to be arranged by choice. Gender becomes performative with the collection of signifiers that operate as props reflecting the demands of social convention as opposed to an essential quality of the body. The actor

consciously manipulates the signifiers of gender to re-assign their meanings. By re-assigning the meaning of the signifier the signified object, gender is re-defined as well. In this case one's gender is shown to exist along a continuum, as a matter of degree along a fluid scale as opposed to the concrete terms of the western gender paradigm.

Re-arranging the signifiers of gender in such a way that their meaning is re-assigned expresses identities that cannot be assimilated into the existing categories of our gender paradigm, producing ambiguous identities. We speak of such identities as ambiguous because what is being expressed is neither male nor female, it is something else, something is not recognized in our gender categories. The collection of signifiers assembled by Karen are unintelligible, they deny our ideological understanding that gender is binary. Rather, they express a continuum that allows Karen to claim all gender space. Karen's "choice" in social role unsettles the dominant gender paradigm, forcing a reconceptualization of our gender categories. For Bolin Karen's choice in gender role is subversive because it demonstrates the independence of gender from sex, calling into question the capabilities of a binary paradigm to explain social identity and role in terms of biological sex.

For Bolin this "unsettling" of the gender paradigm is the first step towards the development of new identity categories that do not depend on an alignment between sex and gender. The construction of new identities is possible at this point in time because as Karen illustrates the paradigmatic understanding of gender as being linked to sex has been broken. Since this link is broken it is now possible to conceptualize a third gender category that removes the constraints on subjectivity imposed by an

ideology that grounds gender in sex. This allows for theorizing intersubjective social relationships absent of the limitations exacted by a binary conception of gender. The recognition of a third possibility leads to liberation for those who “fall between the cracks” of the western binary gender paradigm by providing an identity category corresponding to their experience as subjects. Having a social category to describe such an identity enables the development of alternative subjectivities to those currently recognized by our binary gender system. Recognition signals liberation since those whose presence was previously denied are given the opportunity to develop free from the constraints of an ideology that continually erases their presence. Bolin sees the transgender community as being engaged in the process of defining themselves as a viable alternative to our identity categories based on sex. Bolin refers to this as a project of “cultur-ing”; claiming it exemplifies the creating of “new forms, and seeing new relationships in social forms as identities.”(Bolin1994:477) The result is the emergence and development of new identities where formerly there were none.

The analogy of the closet, in which prior to “coming out” an identity is present but denied, is a fitting description of Bolin’s understanding of the emergence of transgendered identity. For Bolin, before the break-down of the gender paradigm, transgendered identities existed but could not be described as legitimate expressions of subjectivity. Prior to the described “cultur-ing” project those who are now considered transgendered either hid their subjectivity in the closet or were considered to be afflicted with a pathological disorder. This is made clear by Bolin who states:

Ten years ago male-to-female transsexualism supported the binary gender schema by dividing gender-dysphoric individuals into men and women where transvestites were considered sick or pathological men and transsexuals were women on whom nature had erred. In contrast, the recently emerging transgendered identity offers an account of

gender as a social product by giving one the option of living as a woman or a blend without surgical reassignment. The possible permutations within transgenderism are innumerable and lay bare the point that gender is not biology but is socially produced. (Bolin1994:482)

This example shows how subject positions, such as those of the transgender community, can be present but denied visibility by an ideological system. Once the influence of ideology is removed what was once regarded as a gender “disorder” is reconfigured as the expression of a legitimate identity. Describing the subjectivity of the transgender community as the expression of a third gender category transforms what was once actively erased, or ostracized from society into a valid identity.

The second step in Bolin’s argument exposes the mechanics of the ideology that links sex to gender. She historicizes its development, making it clear that such categories as masculine or feminine are not universal. We see this effort in Bolin’s claim that the idea of “two genders founded on two biological sexes” only began to predominate during the eighteenth century. The emphasis Bolin places on the historicity of gender and its accompanying categories is further illuminated by her statement that reads: “Perhaps the task of the twenty-first-century scholar will be to deconstruct the social history of a tri-gender paradigm whose awakenings began in the 1990s.”(Bolin1994:485) The effect of historicizing our understanding of gender as a binary system is to show that such categories as male or female are neither universal nor timeless. Rather, these categories are descriptive terms for a historically and culturally specific social organizations. Incorporating this knowledge into our understanding of identity brings the inherent instability of gender as a paradigm, no matter how many categories are recognized, to the forefront of our awareness.

Although she does not go so far as to say gender should be done away with altogether as a concept for understanding social organization, Bolin does continually trouble gender and its accompanying categories as they exist within the Euro-American binary paradigm. The effect is to destabilize the categories while retaining gender as an object around which subjectivity is organized universally. This is illustrated by her expectation that her “tri-gender” paradigm will be deconstructed in the future. For Bolin gender categories can always be taken apart to expose and undo the ideological matrix informing the category’s meaning yet are needed to understand social organization cross-culturally. Bolin refers to the process as a “deconstruction”¹ since the transgendered identity illuminates the necessary conditions demanded by ideology for the construction of a meaningful gender identity. We can speak of ideology as necessitating a link between sex and gender because, as was illustrated above by Karen, when sex and gender are not aligned we are faced with a conundrum. When the conditions necessitated by ideology for inclusion within a social category such as gender are not met, we do not know what to call that person.

The mandated link between sex and gender is seen in conceptions of reproduction. Common-sensically the reproduction of society is dependent on the reproduction of individuals, and the reproduction of individuals involves the sexual

¹ It is important to note that I am using the term “deconstruction” as it is employed by Bolin, and not in the strict definition of the term as it has been established by Derrida. The importance of making this distinction is to avoid a lengthy discussion of Bolin’s use of the term. It is my belief that if one were to return to Derrida’s texts, the context in which Bolin employs this term could be exposed as erroneous. The “logos” and the dependence of western metaphysics upon it, the exposure of which is the job of deconstruction, is not congruent with the term ideology as it is used in Bolin’s text. An exploration of the implications of conflating the dependency of western metaphysics on logocentrism and the importance of ideology in defining common conceptions of gender could be another paper.

coupling of a man and a woman. Yet, to be a “man” or to be a “woman” is more than a matter of anatomy. To be a man, or to be a woman, involves behavior: one needs to be masculine or feminine as well as possess the proper anatomical features. An essential component of being masculine or feminine involves the erotic attraction to the opposite sex. Without this heterosexual attraction one is not recognized as truly being a man or a woman. This establishes the reproduction of heterosexuality as an integral part of our understanding of physical reproduction. Our understanding of physical reproduction not only reproduces the species but the behaviors associated with heterosexuality. The individuals we reproduce socially follow the formulaic association between heterosexuality and reproduction, with gender roles stemming from heterosexual reproduction. This conflation indicates the presence of ideology because we consider it perfectly natural that individuals are sexually attracted to the opposite sex, and when they are not there is confusion. The mandatory link between heterosexuality and gender in the categories male and female is described by Bolin as follows:

In the western paradigm, gender operates as ‘the central organizing principle’ of sexuality and sexual orientation exists only in relationship to gender and physiology. ‘Males’ are expected to be men: tough, strong behavior is not enough unless they are also attracted to women as sexual partners. Thus heterosexuality is a major component of ‘normal’ gender expression. (Bolin 1994:485)

To illustrate how the transgender community “deconstructs” the dominant gender paradigm Bolin draws from individuals whose identities push the gender paradigm beyond its limits. Examples include a the male-to-female transvestite who claims a lesbian sexual orientation, and a female-to-male transsexual who considers herself

lesbian. The ambiguity of such an identity stems from their failure to follow the formulaic association expected by ideology. These individuals remain unassimilable in the gender paradigm, providing an example of how ideology mandates a connection between specific signified attributes for the production of a legitimate identity.

We can see this “deconstruction” in action by examining the case of Jane, a late-thirtyish transgender(ist). Jane’s identity “deconstructs” our gender categories because in Jane’s identity we can see the conditions ideology demands for inclusion in a gender category.

Jane lives as a woman with “her” wife Mary. They were married when Jane was John, and over the course of time John has become feminized with hormones, electrolysis and hairstyle. Although this has caused problems in the marriage, Mary has continued to try and accept these changes. John is still able to engage in intercourse, as the hormones have not yet interfered with the capacity for erection, although this will eventually happen. This case illustrates how Western gender terminology, which is so reliant on biological insignia, becomes incoherent when the genitalism of the gender paradigm is revoked...Mary regards herself as heterosexual in orientation, although she defines sexual intimacy with her spouse Jane as somewhere between lesbian and heterosexual. (Bolin 1994:484)

Jane “deconstructs” the western gender paradigm by pointing out the ideologically necessary link between the biological body, sexual practice, and behavior for the production of a meaningful identity. In deferring from the standard relationship between these three terms she illuminates the dependence of our gender categories on their connection.

For Bolin, Jane illustrates the process through which ideology brings an object into view. Ideology provides a descriptive category corresponding to that object, instituting the cultural significance of that object as it is described. Bolin’s conception of ideology can be likened to a lens that focuses one’s eye, establishing that which is relevant by providing a signifier to describe that object. The lens brings gender into

view, establishing, among other things, the behaviors associated with heterosexual eroticism as one of its signifiers. These signifiers are then placed in a descriptive framework in which the relationship between the object and its signifiers becomes seamless. In this case ideology infuses such signifiers as the genitalia, body shape, dress, and hairstyle with significance by linking them to the object gender in descriptive categories representative of that object. The lens of ideology illuminates the essence of the object as being aligned with the essence of the social category describing the object. The signifiers assembled by the transgender(ist), such as homosexual eroticism, the development of breasts on a male body, or the stylistic display of androgyny express ambiguity since these signifiers do not correlate with the social categories representing the object, gender. Since there is no category to correspond with these signifiers, the subjectivity of those who express themselves with these signifiers is relegated to the nether regions of scientific speculation and obscurity.

The effect of ideology is seen in the classification given to gender variants in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or DSM-III-R for short) - the diagnostic hand-book for mental illness used by the medical community. Tracy, a self identified transvestite, describes how ideology operates to relegate those whose identity does not correspond with the established social categories to the margins of society. Tracy's words also provide a graphic description of the changes in our understanding of gender brought about by the gradual erosion of the ideology that links the specific social categories with the body.

There[in the DSM-III-R] we are listed as transvestic fetishists, right there with the sado-masochists, ..child molesters and...aggressive butt-rubbers. We are summarily dismissed as deviants rather than variants in Western society. The alternative is to be transsexual or gender dysphoric - i.e., gender identity disorder of adolescence and adulthood, non-

transsexual type. Now is that a mouthful? An obvious exaggerated attempt to force people into a category. George Orwell would be delighted. (in Bolin1994:473)

Tracy's description of our changing understanding of gender also exemplifies the definition of ideology being put forward by Bolin. As can be seen, ideology for Bolin is not invisible or unconscious, as it is for Hebdige. Ideology is profoundly visible and profoundly conscious. We can see this in the fact that Tracy is aware of "Western thoughts exaggerated attempt to force people into a category". Ideology is not infusing the space between the signifier and the object. The meaning of the signifier is found in the category describing the object, and not by its position in relation to other signifiers. To use Barthes' terms, Bolin does not find a second order semiological system infusing the signifier with meaning. For Bolin the signifiers of gender always signify gender, but in the case of the transgender community the gender that is signified does not correspond with the categories "male" and "female" as they are socially constructed in western society. The category describing the object is where ideology works its magic, creating a seamless web of significance between the categories of a socially constructed reality and the material world. Bolin's conception of the relationship between the signifier and ideology is important to my reading of her work since it determines the image of the subject as it is represented in her text.

The position Bolin would like to press home is that identity categories, such as sex and gender, are historical constructs describing the symbolic expression of a specific social organization. These categories seem eternal because ideology operates to naturalize the social relationships they describe through the universalist terms of

biology. It is important to question Bolin's conception of ideology by asking what the signifiers of our identity categories are. This question brings Bolin's conception of the subject to the forefront, since there is something about the signifier and the process of assembling signifiers to express identity that allows Bolin to read the practices of the transgender community as liberatory. The investigation of this relationship moves the discussion away from a description of Bolin's work and towards a critical reading of her text because she finds something more in the signifiers of gender than the expression of identity. This "something more" is the focus of my inquiry and serves as a point of departure for an alternate reading of the transgender community's practices - a reading that views gender not as an object but as a sign.

The "something more" Bolin finds in the signifiers of gender is the logic of the commodity form. Bolin finds the signifiers of gender to possess a use-value that provides the means to unravel ideology. We can see the logic of the commodity form entering into Bolin's understanding of the signifiers of gender in her description of the position anthropological and historical knowledge of gender occupy in the transgender community. It is Bolin's understanding that the transgender community relies on anthropology's conception of cultural relativism and historical reconstructions of the past to legitimize their own experience as subjects in contemporary American society. The quintessential example of this is seen in the explanation of the role played by the Berdache in the transgender community. According to Bolin the Berdache tradition is used as a model for the development of a transgendered identity. As Bolin states, the Berdache tradition is used by the transgender and gay community as a source of identity

as well as pride, providing a cultural instance of a legitimate third gender that is recognized both historically and culturally. In this third category the transgender community supposedly sees biological males living as social females, complete with recognized status and rank. As described by Bolin, for the transgender community the identity of the Berdache represents a historical and cultural example in which our society's gender paradigm is shown to be lacking in descriptive capabilities for those individuals who are neither male nor female, but something else. Those who are something else are given a societal space within the Berdache category, which can be understood as a cultural instance of a third gender. In this example we see Bolin viewing anthropological knowledge as providing the raw material to be used for the construction of a legitimate third gender category.

This is indicative of "something more" entering into Bolin's understanding of cross-dressing because no longer are the transgender community's actions understood as representative of social processes. Once the transgender community is understood as using anthropological knowledge for the construction of identity, they become actors making informed choices for the attainment of a specific end. The transgender(ist) is no longer manipulating the contents of our gender categories, they are consuming signifiers for the attainment of a use-value. In this case the use-value of anthropological knowledge is its ability to aid in the dismantling of the western binary gender paradigm by providing the means to see through ideology.

The complexity of this logic is depicted by Bolin's statement that reads:

It is not surprising that the cross-cultural record and anthropology's relativism have been included in the social construction of gender variant identities by the organizational gatekeepers of the gender community.... Anthropological as well as historical data are reinterpreted as part of the roots and developing empowerment of the transgendered

community. Interestingly what seems to be happening is an integration and valuing of the anthropological concept of relativism, that is, the recognition that culture is an important component in the construction of gender ideologies, identities and statuses.... By using the Berdache as a model, the transgender community and homosexual community become active participants in reshaping their culture and in finding affiliation where division existed(Bolin1994:475)

What is important to recognize is the relationship posited by Bolin between the signifier, the subject, and ideology. In the above passage we can glean how Bolin's particular conception of the signifier and of its capacity to signify identity defines a particular conception of the subject. The subject is agential, capable of seeing culture as a determinant in the formation of ideology, and to strategize accordingly in the construction of new identity categories. The subject is not blinded by ideology to the true implications of their use of commodified signifiers as Hebdiged understands the punks to be. The subject is a consumer of the lexicon of signifiers representing gender in his or her cultural surroundings. The act of consumption is guided by the usefulness of specific signifiers for the construction of a new identity. The legitimacy of this construction comes from the further consumption of the promised use-values of anthropological and historical knowledge. The consumption of anthropology and history provides historical and cultural instances that can serve as precedence for the inclusion of non-binary sexual identity in society's categories. Legitimacy does not come from the trace of a real or historically "true" set of social relations contained in the signifiers of identity. It comes from having an outside authority such as an anthropologist or historian recognize your actions as operating in excess of the western gender paradigm. The anthropologist's authority comes from his or her role as

producers of knowledge, making them expert on the knowledge consumed since they produced it.

By positing knowledge of genders history as useful Bolin automatically enters into the logic of the commodity form. This logic depicts the subject as an agential consumer of relativism for the purpose of seeing through the dominant gender paradigm. The use-value of relativism is the capacity to dismantle the ideology of the western binary gender paradigm by providing a perspective that lets it be seen as one arrangement among many. The particular ideology of the western gender paradigm can then be dismantled through the further consumption of gender signifiers. Once this logic is in place the signifiers of gender, such as dress, hairstyle, or behavior, can be exploited for their use-value to dismantle gender as a binary system. This logic explains the role given to the commodity form itself, as a material object acting as a signifier, in the emergence of transgendered identities by Bolin.

In order to understand the role of the commodity form in the emergence of transgendered identities we need to return to Bolin's description of how the transgender community has been able to emerge at this point in time as a legitimate identity. And according to Bolin this has been the direct result of changes in our conceptions of femininity in the late twentieth century. As she states: "Conventional femininity in the late twentieth century is in a process of re-definition socially, economically and especially important, somatically."(Bolin1994:478). This leads to an overall redefinition of the ideal feminine form. Bolin posits changes in the ideal feminine body form as stemming from "a world wide movement towards health and fitness"

which has replaced the “very thin silhouette ideal of the 1960s” with the empowered physique of the female athlete. This “revised feminine body ideal” establishes “toned muscles and taut physiques”(Bolin1994:478) as a definitional characteristic of femininity, resulting in the undermining of the assumption that a particular body form equates with a particular gender. Today muscularity is no longer viewed as a trait reserved for men. “Women body builders, long-distance runners, and mountain climbers, create new embodiments of femininity that defy the traditional soma of woman as soft and curvaceous.”(Bolin1994:478) The development of these new forms breaks the bio-centric ideology that necessitates a link between particular body shapes and gender. With this break comes the possibility of “a social woman with a penis”(Bolin:1994:479) since the mandate that gender follow sex has been gradually eroded away by changing conceptions of the ideal feminine body form.

As Bolin sees it the commodity form is responsible for these changes in the image of the body forms associated with our gender categories. Literally, changes in the look of masculinity and femininity can be traced to its representation in the mass media since advertisements and fashion magazines reflect the ideal shape of a masculine or feminine body as it is configured socially. This “ideal shape” becomes the embodiment of gender since, by association, to be masculine or feminine is to possess the body representative of these categories. For Bolin changes in the image of the ideal body shape of masculinity or femininity are crucial to the emergence of transgendered identity since these changes can either facilitate or establishes a formidable barrier to those who wish to live socially as the opposite gender. And in the late twentieth--

century changes in the image of the ideal feminine body form have facilitated those who wish to live socially as female but possess the anatomy of a male. This is made clear by Kathy, “a petit middle-aged cross-dresser”, who states:

The women I have always found attractive and try to emulate are assertive, self-sufficient, and emotionally and physically strong. This body type and personality type have become increasingly accepted. The image I portray is essentially that of an alert, athletic, highly trained female body builder. Acceptance by society of this type of woman has benefited me greatly. Ten years ago, there were no female body types such as mine thought to be attractive. Cory Everson, Florence Griffith Joyner, and others have broken new ground.(in Bolin1994:479)

As Kathy’s statement indicates, recent changes in the ideal form of the feminine body have facilitated the development of transgendered identities by providing a form biological males can easily emulate. Biological males can now more easily “pass” as social females because the ideal body type of femininity has become more man-like. For Bolin the recent emergence of the transgender community can be directly attributed to these changes affecting the ideal feminine soma as it is represented in commodity forms. Quite literally, in the late twentieth century, changes in the definition of the ideal form of femininity have enabled biological men to more easily occupy that form. Ease of emulation has resulted in an increased number of men choosing to live socially as women without altering their bodies surgically or hormonally. The increased occupation of the feminine form by biological males has produced a situation where our conventional gender categories are challenged by identities that do not conform to the socially established parameters. The result is the break down of the western gender paradigm since a biological male who lives socially as a female expresses an identity that confirms the independence of sex from gender.

Bolin sees the subversive potential of this act lying in its ability to subvert the social order by deactivating gender as a principle for social organization. Jason Cromwell makes this clear when he states: “To acknowledge the validity of ‘men with vaginas’ and (‘women with penises’) would be to admit that men as well as women could resist and thus, subvert the social order, by approximating the ‘other’ but never fully becoming the ‘other’.”(Cromwell in Bolin1994:485) The importance of changing conceptions of the ideal feminine or masculine body shape for the emergence of “men with vaginas” is made clear by Bolin who states:

The androgynous-appearing soma of some women athletes combines symbols of masculinity and femininity on a physical level...It may be assumed that the relaxing of bodily gender rules and the undermining of the biological paradigm since the 1960s [because of the increased popularity of such activities as body-building, mountain climbing, and long distance running among women] has undoubtedly contributed to the trend toward a transgendered community and the creation of nonsurgical transsexuals. Such transformations of the female body erode constructs of behaviors and bodies as natural by creating the possibility for a social woman with a penis.(Bolin1994:479)

In this example the commodity form is acting as a catalyst, providing the means for the transgendered individual to emerge from the margins of society. In the commodity form Bolin finds the signifiers defining the look of gender as well as the objects providing the means for attaining that look and inclusion in the category. We see this in the emulation of the ideal body form of femininity by men who wish to live socially as women as well as in the assemblage of commodities whose use as accessories completes the transformation from being male to socially female. Once these signifiers are assembled the binary gender paradigm automatically unravels from within.

The problem with finding revolutionary potential in “the new images of the ideal feminine body form” disseminated in the mass media is that these images are infused with ideological significance. These images are part of what Theodore Adorno has labeled “the culture industry” and have been shown to define the experience of occupying such categories as male and female.(see Adorno:1991) Adorno has shown that these images not only work to define who is included in such social categories but to define the meaning of being included in such categories as well. Bolin is prevented from seeing this because she is blind to the logic of the commodity form. She doesn’t see the social relationships expressed by the commodity as being indicative of a separate logic. The commodity does not have a fetishistic nature for Bolin. Its meaning is established in a democratic process and does not express a larger set of social relationships than those expressed in the contents of its form. Is it possible that an anatomical male embodying the ideal form of femininity does not represent the unraveling of the gender paradigm but the opposite, its reification? In order to understand how this might be we need to turn to the work of Susan Willis, who outlines the problem of dissociating the evolution of body forms and their accompanying images from ideological systems that define the meaning of the such categories as “masculinity” and “femininity”. Upon reading Willis, it becomes apparent that Bolin’s “deconstruction” of gender fails due to a misrecognition of the relationship between the commodity and ideology. As a result, Bolin fails to recognize the body as a site of reification and the possibility that body forms can become commodified. This misrecognition results in her failure to realize that the practices of the transgender

community actually perpetuates the very ideological structures from which Bolin claims they are liberated.

Bolin's failure can be attributed to her seduction by the logic of the commodity form, becoming fascinated by the form's content, ignoring the logic that gives form to this content. Remaining immersed in the logic of the form's content prevents her from seeing the images she envisions as providing the means for the emergence and development of transgendered identities as images produced to enhance consumption and to normalize a particular social organization that continually defines gender as an attribute of the physical body. This failure can be seen in Bolin's statement that reads:

The growing transgender community has also been influenced by changes and challenges to embodiments of femininity. Conventional femininity in the late twentieth century is in a process of redefinition socially, economically and, especially important to this essay, somatically....A world-wide movement toward health and fitness has resulted in a revised feminine body ideal that includes toned muscles and taut physiques. Women body builders' stout muscles, previously relegated as a trait reserved for men, have begun to undermine bio-centric ideologies and equations of muscularity and manliness. (Bolin 1994:478)

By positing these changes in the shape of the ideal feminine soma as the result of social revisions in the definition of femininity Bolin is saying the evolution of the ideal feminine body form is a democratic process and not mediated or influenced by power.

In 'Work(ing) Out', from A Primer for Daily Life, Susan Willis develops an argument explaining the evolution of female body forms in terms of expanding capitalist markets. Willis describes the specific development of health clubs and the "fitness craze" as an advanced form of commodification in which the body, its parts, and its shape are transformed into commodities to be sold back to the person as an idealized package. This package is marketed as reflecting the look of a "contemporary

woman” and while expressing an empowered image of women, actually works to continue the domination of women by men. Part of this continued domination involves determining the qualities and characteristics of femininity. For Willis the quintessential example of this is the development of the Nautilus machine and the Nautilus work out. The importance of the Nautilus machine lies in its design. According to Willis the machine isolates the individual person as well as specific muscle groups. As it isolates the individual, the machine “tones to perfection” the specific muscle groups whose enhancement is recognized as indicating an ideal form of gender. Quite literally the Nautilus workout is designed to produce a specific body shape and form while simultaneously producing a particular relationship between the self and machine:

When asked to describe the nautilus, most people express similar feelings of being assimilated into the machine. Rather than the direct expenditure of effort out of your body, along a wire over a pulley to lift a weight, the nautilus incorporates your body into its function. The woman inside the nautilus machine is the object produced by the machine even while she is at the same time the producer producing herself as product of the machine. (Willis1991:75)

What is important to take from Willis’s statement is the combined production of the body as a commodified entity and the relationship of the self to that entity as it is mediated by the Nautilus machine. As Willis points out it is a particular form of the body that is being sold, and it is a particular relationship between the self and that body that is being fostered by the “fitness craze”. This relationship translates the want for a physically fit body into the objectification of the individual by the machine producing that body. In the Nautilus work-out not only is a specific body form being produced by the Nautilus machine, but a particular relationship between the consumer and the

producer is being cultivated as well. The subject is objectified not only by the machine but by the ideology of the producer working to establish the body shape produced by their machine as the ideal shape of femininity. The relationship between working out, producing the ideal body, and ideology becomes particularly insidious when given the association between being fit and being in tune with the body's "natural" order. The product the consumer wishes to consume is the image of the body disseminated by the machine's producer, an image manufactured to sell athletic equipment. In producing that body form the individual is transformed into an object of the machine, an object whose contours are mediated not only by the machine itself, but by the same ideological apparatus that defines the specific characteristics of gender as the possession of a particular body form.

So when Willis states: "The workout focuses women's positive desires for strength, agility, and the physical affirmation of self and transforms these into competition over style and rivalry for a particular body look and performance"(Willis1991:70), it becomes apparent that the image of the "ideal" shape of femininity is more complicated than Bolin originally thought. The form of gender reflected in the "ideal" shape of the body is part and parcel of the same social process that marks specific individuals as gendered then defines a particular look to coincide with that gender. This look is grounded in the body by establishing the ultimate example of gender as the possession of a particular body shape. This connection between body shape and gender serves to reinforce the associative link between gender and biological sex by giving currency to the idea that the ultimate signifier of gender is

the body. The idea that gender and its accompanying categories might be nothing more than descriptive terms for specific arrangements of signifiers is undermined. The look of gender is shown to be the look of the body, enforcing the associative link between the biological body and identity.

What is important to recognize in Willis's argument is her effort to problematize the form of gender while retaining the liberatory aspects of that form's contents. A crucial element of Willis's argument is the potential "working out" offers for women as a liberatory mechanism. Willis refers to this as the "implicit utopian dimension" inherent to all mass cultural forms, and is referring to the unintended subversive potential of women working out together. The unintended outcome of the commodification of women's bodies is the development of women's communities outside and separate from the household. Going to the gym and working out with a collectively with other women allows the opportunity for camaraderie and consciousness raising while engaging in the production of physically powerful bodies. But again the point has to be driven home that this is only a potential held within the form. And the realization of this potential is continually denied by the mediating influence of consumer capitalism and its accompanying ideology. We can see this paradoxical situation in Willis's description of community based exercise programs.

Community sponsored exercise programs do not sever their participants from their lives with families and friends. Rather the exercise class creates an opportunity for women to develop themselves in community with other women. Such opportunities are absolutely negated when exercise is channeled by the media into private living-rooms. The private spa, then, offers escape from job or domestic space, but it severely limits the opportunities for conversation and community. This is because a woman who participates in aerobics at a spa is made to see herself as an isolated individual. The atmosphere of the spa promotes an aura of body rivalry. Mirrors are everywhere. Women compare but do not share themselves with others. They see themselves as bodies. they scrutinize their lines and curves and they check out who is wearing the hottest leotard. (Willis1991:70)

Can we say that Bolin has misconstrued the utopian dimensions of commodification, recognizing the positive potential of new images of the ideal feminine body but is denying the mediating influence of ideology?

After reading Willis it becomes apparent that Bolin has confused content with form. The form of gender is not troubled by men emulating the ideal feminine body. Instead, the ideal, as an object to be emulated for the expression of femininity, is reified. The body is made into an object whose form acts as a signifier for the expression of femininity. The bodily form of gender, even when occupied by a biological male, is not troubled, but objectified. The social processes that establish a particular body shape as a definitional characteristic of femininity are not troubled by biological men occupying the form. Rather, when a man occupies that form, the form, as an indicator of femininity, is depicted as the norm. If a man who wants to live as a social woman attains this by emulating the ideal shape of femininity then that shape is given currency as an essence of femininity. Femininity becomes associated with a particular body shape and possession of that body shape an example of the hyper-feminine.

We can see how this occurs in the words of one of Bolin's informants who made the following statement in reference to the expected behavioral and sartorial etiquette to be upheld at a cross-dresser's convention.

We are going to enforce our dress and behavior policies....Evidently there are a few uninformed who think hotels allow real women dressed as hookers to troll the lobby....please (for all our sakes) use the same taste in attire you would want your sister, mother, or your dad, (if he's one of us) to use. People in [----] have very definite ideas about what a lady should look like....help us convince them we are no different from the average woman in style of dress.(unknown in Bolin1994:474)

Bolin's articulation of cross-dressing does not produce liberated subjects. Rather, Bolin's subjects are reproducing the already reified topological features of gender as defined by the dominant ideology. A "deconstruction" has not taken place, and is not the goal of the transgender community. Bolin has illustrated how the dominant form of femininity can include within its contents a social actor with a penis; or in the case of masculinity, social males with vaginas. The practices of the transgender community, whether these be surgical and hormonal alterations of the body or sartorial displays, leave the dominant gender paradigm intact. And the words of Pat, one of Bolin's informants illustrate this when s/he states:

I currently maintain a full-time androgynous persona, eliciting as many maam's as I do sir responses. My goal is to be free to present myself full female all the time, while still expressing a healthy degree of androgyny. Living as a woman gives me a much fuller range of expression than as a man. In time, I may feel more comfortable confronting the world with the unabashed ambiguity of total androgyny. (in Bolin 1994:465)

The part of the above statement I wish to draw attention to is the perceived necessity of confronting the world as either female or male, and the uncomfortable feeling elicited by total androgyny. The discomfort of both those confronted by and those confronting the world with androgyny illustrates how masculinity and femininity remain "active" even in the transgender community's practices. Might it not be true that in a world in which gender is truly deactivated, the androgyn -- as the embodiment of all genders -- represents the liberated subject? After all, for the androgyn all gender roles are situational and not the embodiment of an ideal that associates surface signifiers with an essential quality hidden somewhere in the soma. The fact that the

transgender(ists) are striving to “present” themselves as “full time female” (or full time male) illustrates the remaining importance of gender for the expression of the self even after it has been dissociated from biological sex. This remaining desire for a gendered identity signals that “something more” is going on than the “deactivation” of gender in the transgender community’s practices. It is this “something more” that Bolin cannot account for with her agential conception of the subject consciously consuming the signifiers of gender in order to subvert the dominant gender paradigm. The next chapter will develop an approach that can account for this “something more” infusing the practice of cross-dressing for the transgender(ist). This will be done by delving into the psycho-analytic world of Jaques Lacan.

Chapter Four: Something More

The work of Jaques Lacan provides a theoretical perspective that accounts for the “something more” infusing the practices of the transgender community. The presence of this “something more” missed by Bolin’s articulation of cross-dressing can be accounted for and described by taking into account Lacan’s conception of the subject. Approaching the transgender community from a Lacanian perspective necessitates an alternative reading of the transgender community’s practices because for Lacan gender is not an object that is signified but a sign acquiring meaning from desire. This alternative reading moves away from analyzing cross-dressing in political terms and approaches the practice as the expression of desire. This shift locates the importance of the act in its meaning for the subject and not in the implications of the act for the dominant cultural constructions of gender. This allows the practices of the transgender community to be viewed not as a “deconstruction” or a reification, but as the expression of one’s subjectivity. If gender can be articulated as a sign, then the importance of gender as a site for social analysis can be understood as an effect of signification and not because it reflects an essential quality that organizes subjectivity. This repositions gender as a process emerging with the subject, moving beyond the presumption that gender exists as an ontological entity residing in us all.

Fortunately, in her article Bolin provides a large number of actual statements made by her informants. These statements provide the material to re-interpret the practices of the transgender community as being indicative of “something more” than a strategic move in the politics of identity. With this said let’s turn to the work of Lacan, beginning with an explanation of his elusive statement that describes the end of the psychoanalytic process as the moment the analysand “becomes their sinthome”¹. Explaining this process begins a discussion of Lacan’s understanding of the subject; from here the discussion will expand to include the subject’s relationship to reality and the implications of Lacan’s thought for Bolin’s analysis of gender.

In order to understand how the end of the psychoanalytic procedure is signaled by the moment the patient “identifies with their sinthome,” the complex relationship between the symptom, reality, and the subject must be explained since Lacan bestows a radically ontological status on the symptom in his work. In order to describe the Lacanian symptom I will be relying on the work of Slavoj Žižek, who, when ‘looking awry’² at the body of Lacan’s work, describes the symptom as a “fissure” or an “asymmetry” designating a moment in which the subject has stumbled or fallen when

¹ The term “sinthome” is used by Lacan to designate a “psychotic kernel that can neither be interpreted (as symptom) nor “traversed” as fantasy.”(Žižek1991:137) What is important to recognize in his usage of this term is that it is neither symptom nor fantasy, but a fundamental illogical foundation upon which all of existence is based. Žižek describes the formulation of the term as “A neologism containing a set of associations (synthetic-artificial man, synthesis between symptom and fantasy, Saint Thomas, the saint...)(Lacan 1988). Symptom as sinthome is a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment: it is a signifier as a bearer of jouis-sense, enjoyment-in-sense.”(Žižek1989:75)

² ‘Looking Awry’ is the title of one of Žižek’s books. He uses this phrase several times to describe how it is sometimes easier to approach Lacanian theory from anywhere except head on. In this particular work of Žižek approaches Lacanian theory through the films of Alfred Hitchcock. I have taken Žižek’s phrase to describe a similar process in which I will not be looking directly head-on at Lacan’s work; instead I will bring Lacanian thought into light through other people’s explanations of his work.

confronted by the “Real”³. Metaphorically speaking this stumble causes a scratch or a bruise in the subject’s psychic development. The pain of being psychically scratched is so great that it cannot be remembered, resulting in an imperfection in the body of knowledge pertaining to the subject’s self. The symptom develops over the scratch both to cover over this lack in ones self-knowledge as well as to shield the subject from re-experiencing the original traumatic event through its remembrance. As understood by Lacan the subject covers over this trauma with a pleasurable thought, making the symptom a sight of enjoyment. Lacan speaks of the symptom as a site of enjoyment because the initial pain of the wound is replaced by a pleasurable sensation, making desire a component of the symptom. We come to desire the symptom for the pleasure it provides. In this way the subject desires to return to the originary site of the trauma to derive the pleasurable sensation of the symptom. Due to the pleasurable sensation of returning to the symptom the symptom persists, providing an organizing principle in our existence.

The example Zizek uses to describe the connection between the symptom and enjoyment is a slip of the tongue. A slip of the tongue “causes discomfort and displeasure when it occurs, but we embrace its interpretation with pleasure; we explain gladly to others the meaning of our slips; their ‘intersubjective recognition’ is usually a source of intellectual satisfaction.”(Zizek1989:74) Lacan’s formulation of the symptom as an ontological entity stems from the pleasurable sensation of its return.

³ I have capitalized and placed this term in quotation marks to bring attention to the fact that I am referring to Lacan’s notion of the Real. A term used to describe that which exists beyond the scope of language to describe or approximate. A world from which the subject is irretrievably separated from upon entry into language thus establishing subjectivity as a lack, and thus desire as a fundamental condition of the subject.

The subject gladly corrects him or herself in the case of slips of the tongue, explaining what they actually meant with joy. So when Lacan states that the symptom is “penetrated with enjoyment” he is referring to the psychic process of returning to an original traumatic moment to confer meaning on that unassimilable moment of pain through explanation. The subject returns to the point of trauma in the pleasure of interpretation as opposed to re-experiencing the terror of the initial moment.

The symptom, as a slip of the tongue, although causing displeasure at the moment it occurs immediately becomes a site of pleasure once it has been explained. The explanation invites interpretation, moving us away from a description of the original encounter that actually demands explanation. We return to the trauma by way of its symptom, its explanation. This covers over the initial trauma of the experience with a surplus explanation that invites interpretation. Interpreting the symptom does not delve into the true cause of the slip it involves an exploration of the explanation. This protects the subject from having to explain the originary cause of the slip, a process that involves re-experiencing the unassimilable encounter with the terrifying pleasures of the “Real” through remembrance.

To return to the original analogy of the symptom as a contusion, the symptom covers over the original traumatic event with a surplus of tissue, concealing the original wound but marking it forever. We can speak of the symptom as an imperfection or scar that covers over the initial wound but continually draws attention back to the site of that wound. This excess “tissue” of the symptom prevents the subject from ever forgetting the originary trauma. The site is marked but not assimilated into the

subject's knowledge of its self. The fact that the scar of the symptom bears the trace of the originary traumatic event, an event that resists signification, means that the subject continually returns to the symptom in the psycho-analytic process. Through psychoanalysis the analysand returns to the symptom as opposed to integrating the actual trauma into the symbolic. This marks the point around which the subject has organized his or her enjoyment. It is the transmutation of the subject's understanding of their symptom from a surplus explanation to an "isolated kernel of their enjoyment"(Zizek:1991) that represents the transformation of the symptom into *sinthome*, marking the end of the psychoanalytic process for Lacan. Zizek refers to this as follows:

(The real is) that which resists symbolization: the traumatic point which is always missed but none the less always returns, although we try, to integrate it into the symbolic order. In the perspective of the last stages of Lacanian teaching, it is precisely the symptom which is conceived as such a real kernel of enjoyment, which persists as a surplus and returns through all attempts to domesticate it, to gentrify it, to dissolve it by means of explication, of putting-into-words its meaning (Zizek1989:69)

The symptom as *sinthome* has a radically ontological status, providing the only point around which subjectivity can be organized. Zizek makes this clear when he states: "Symptom, conceived as *sinthome*, is literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject."(Zizek1989:75) What is important to recognize is the relationship between the symptom and existence. For, as Zizek makes clear, the symptom as that which shields and separates us from the "Real" takes on the very character of that "Real" from which it shields us. The symptom becomes an unassimilable signifier, a hidden kernel of truth upon which we organize enjoyment and hence existence. The symptom, when

articulated as a site of enjoyment, resists symbolization since its explication would entail the breakdown of the symbolic order. Articulating the symptom forces the subject to re-experience the terrifying encounter with the real through its articulation. To explain the symptom is to explain the single kernel of truth upon which the subject has organized their enjoyment, and hence their existence. Such an act would mean succession to the death drive and the dissolution of the subject.

Symptom is the way we - the subjects - avoid madness, the way we choose something (the symptom-formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe) through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the world.(Zizek1989:75)

The psycho-analytic process comes to an end when the subject “identifies with their symptom” because that is the moment the patient recognizes the foundation of their being and the fundamental impossibility of understanding their subjectivity through its explanation. Identification with the symptom provides the subject with knowledge of the point around which all their enjoyment revolves, establishing a consistency to their being in the form of complete knowledge of their self but not of their subjectivity. “The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being.”(Zizek1989:75). And the phrase Lacan uses to describe this point around which the subject organizes their being-in-the-world is referred to as the “object petit ‘a’”.

By discussing Lacan’s conception of the “object petit a” we return to gender and to the practices of the transgender community because this term describes the form of

the relationship between the subject and the object cause of its desire⁴. This translates into the articulation of the relationship between the transgender(ist) as a subject, and the attainment of his or her desired ends, the social identity of the gender category opposite their sex. In other words Lacan's concept allows us to look at the object that is being signified by the transgender community as a sign while keeping in mind the inability of the subject to attain that object by means of its signifiers. Through Lacan's articulation of the symptom and of "the object petit a", we can begin to speak of the sartorial and surgical manipulation of the signifiers of gender and sex as the expression of a desire - a desire stemming from a lack in the symbolic system. As in the case of the symptom this lack is covered over by an excess of signifiers that continually fall short of describing and hence attaining the object they describe. Viewing gender as this excess of signification covering over a lack calls for a re-reading of Bolin's argument since the object Bolin claims to be represented by the transgender community, a third gender, might be more appropriately understood as an effect of signification that takes the form of a third gender retro-actively. Such a re-reading looks at cross-dressing as being organized by an economy of enjoyment and not a political agenda. Incorporating enjoyment into our understanding of cross-dressing enables the persistence of masculine and feminine expressions in the transgender community to be explained. What is desired by the transgender community is not the deactivation of gender but the enjoyment of living as a member of the gender opposite to one's sex. This repositions

⁴ "Object cause of desire" is the Lacanian term used to describe the literal object we desire, and not the signifier of that object. It is important to note that the attainment of the object cause of desire is an impossibility for Lacan. Lacan believes we are separated from this object by the symbolic network of language. All we can know of this object is our desire for its signifier, which always occupies a relational position to other signifiers and has not relationship to the object itself.

the place of the commodity in our understanding of the transgender community, locating its meaning as the expression of desire and not in its use-value.

But for now let's begin with a description of Lacan's term for the point around which one's being-in-the-world is organized, "the object petit 'a'". I will begin with its definition as it is described by Jacques-Alain Miller, editor of Lacan's book The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis. According to Miller:

The 'a' in question stands for 'autre' (other), the concept having been developed out of the Freudian 'object' and Lacan's own exploitation of 'otherness'. The 'petit a' (small a) differentiates the object from (while relating it to) the 'Autre' of 'Grand Autre' (the capitalized 'Other'). However, Lacan refuses to comment on either term here, leaving the reader to develop an appreciation of the concept in the course of their use. Furthermore, Lacan insists that 'object petit a' should remain untranslated, thus acquiring, as it were, the status of an algebraic sign. (Miller in Lacan)

After reading the above statement the impossibility of understanding the 'a' without understanding Lacan's conception of the relationship between the subject and object is obvious. In Lacanian thought, the relationship between the subject and the object is always characterized by a lack due to the inability of any signifying system to ever accurately describe reality. This means the signifier can never provide the means for attaining the material object it represents. This inherent lack endemic to all symbolic systems establishes desire as a component part of the subject. The subject upon entry into the symbolic order of language is separated from the objects that cause and hence can fulfill its desire. We can understand this lack in the symbolic network as bringing the subject into being by establishing desire as the organizing principle around which subjectivity develops. Because of this lack the subject emerges as a desiring being - a being that can only experience objects as they are symbolized yet is acted

upon and influenced by actual material objects. The thing, or object in and of itself remains unknown and unattainable with the capacity for conscious thought being an effect of entry into the same network of signifiers naming the objects of the material world. We are denied access to that which is promised by the sign because we are part and parcel of the symbolic system that describes the world in which we live. The signifier seems to promise access to the object it describes but this is an impossibility because it is part of an over all imperfect system. The signifier always falls short of its promise. Desire can never be satiated. We may attain the signifiers of what we desire but never the object which would put an end to desire itself.

Zizek describes Lacan's understanding of the relationship between the subject and the object through the myth of the Tortoise and the Hare. In this description the Hare is to be understood as representative of language as a symbolic system with the tortoise representing the material objects of the real world. The Hare, although much faster than the Tortoise, can never attain the Tortoise. The Hare may overtake the Tortoise, leaving him behind but he can never succeed in catching him. If the Hare were to catch the Tortoise desire would be fulfilled and the game would end. Instead the Hare and the Tortoise are locked in a scheme in which the Hare is always "too fast or too slow" and thereby prevented from attaining the Tortoise, which would end the game. "The paradox stages the relation of the subject to the object-cause [the material thing existing in the world] of its desire, which can never be attained. The object-cause is always missed; all we can do is encircle it."(Zizek1992:4) What happens is a displacement. We displace our desire for the object-cause onto the symbol or name for

the object-cause of desire. The symbol, or name, for our desire stands in for the actual object-cause thus becoming “the object petit a”.

As a result of desire “the object petit a” is always a surplus. It is continually asked to fill a hole, or that which is lacking, in the symbolic network. It is this over-determined quality of “the object petit a” that explains Lacan’s desire to leave the phrase untranslated. For in leaving “the object petit a” untranslated the phrase retains the form of an algebraic symbol. Untranslated ‘the object petit a’ illustrates the meaninglessness of the phrase itself. So just as ‘the object petit a’ is always standing in as a replacement for the actual object-cause of desire, the phrase, in its untranslated form, has no meaning absent of the referent to which it is linked in description. Only by remaining untranslated is the unique relationship between the subject, desire, and desire’s object-cause retained as it is described. So when Žižek describes ‘a’ as, “An empty form filled out by everyone’s fantasy.”(Žižek1991:134), “the object petit a” can be understood as the sign that stands in for that which cannot be signified.

It is the capacity of Lacanian thought and of his notion of the ‘a’ that poses interesting questions to Bolin and her conception of gender. “The object a” as both a psychological formation and an algebraic sign describes what we are looking at when we see gender in the symbolic constructions of the transgender community. In other words, gender does not exist prior to its construction in the symbolic statements made by subjects. The primacy of gender as a site of cultural organization must be understood as an effect of the symbolic system in which subjects express themselves and not as the result of an ideology with historical origins. The dangers of confusing

the effects of signification with universalist assumptions is illustrated by Joan Copjec who states”

It is important not to confuse the object ‘a’ with some poetical or essentialist notion of the subject. This object does not proceed the statement but is instead its retroactive effect, the surplus that overruns what is said and that ‘always comes back to the same place’, always designates the same thing - again, retroactively - no matter how self contradictory the statements that produce it.(Copjec:143)

Bolin has confused the contradictory nature of the statements made by the transgender(ists) as expressing the poetical notion liberation. Yes, the transgender community does juxtapose the signifiers of one gender with those of the opposite sex but this does not equal expressing a new, liberated identity. Instead this act expresses the same gender categories over and over again. In Bolin’s case the object, gender, is assumed to be an essential characteristic of the subject when in fact the assemblage of signifiers representing gender need to be understood as a surplus covering over a lack in the symbolic system. In this way we can understand gender as ‘the object petit a’ since it “names the void of that unattainable surplus”(Zizek1991:134) By understanding gender as an ‘object petit a’, as an embellished object standing in for that which cannot be signified, we can articulate the practices of the transgender community as an ‘identification with their sinthome’. Such an understanding describes how the transgender community has organized their being around an essential kernel of enjoyment, illustrating the illusory nature of subjectivity and how Lacan’s formulation

of the subject operates to reposition the commodity in studies, such as Bolin's, dealing with identity.

In order to understand how the transgender community's practices can be understood as an 'identification with their sinthome' we need to turn to the statements in Bolin's text in which the subjects actually describe their own identity. What becomes apparent is an awareness on the part of the transgender community of the impossibility of the signifiers of gender to express their subjectivity. The most telling example of this is seen in the words of Joan, a thirty nine year old biological male, who describes him/herself as follows.

I'm a transsexual. I'm different from many in that I do not, at this time at least, feel a need to fade into society and hide my past. Rather I have come out to all around me, family, friends and co-workers...I'm not yet living as a woman full time, but I am just starting a part-time job where I'll be doing a job as Joan. On my regular job (three days a week), I'm still Jerry. I don't really believe that I'm a "woman trapped in a man's body." I'm not sure what I am, only that making this transition is more important to me than anything else in my life.(Bolin1994:464)

For Bolin this statement illustrates the increased flexibility of the newly emerging gender paradigm. It solidifies her claim that it is now possible for a biological male to exist as a third gender, removing the need to surgically transform one's body to live socially as a female. From the Lacanian perspective, one that calls into question the capacity of the subject to attain the desired object, what becomes immediately apparent is the recognition on Joan's part of the lack inherent to the signifying system. Joan is perfectly well aware of the fact that what she/he is cannot be described. In light of this the importance of Joan's statement shifts from her expression of the wish to live socially as a female to the fact that Joan doesn't know what she is while continuing to

desire being identified as feminine. For Joan the signifiers of gender are more important than the object. Joan is not interested in attaining the object femininity promised by the arrangement of signifiers she has assembled. She knows assembling the signifiers of femininity does not equal becoming a different gender. Instead femininity has become an embellished object of desire for Joan.

In Joan's uncertainty we can see the awareness that even though he/she may attain the sign of the desired object, i.e. living as a woman socially, Joan is well aware that the sign is not the actual thing he/she desires. And living as the sign of that object is not the same as being that object. Yet it is also important to recognize the continued longing for the object-cause of Joan's desire. This continued longing for the object-cause of desire depicted by Joan's drive to make the transition from living as a male to living as a female shows Joan's love for the surplus of embellished signifiers covering the hole in the signifying system. What Joan has articulated is the classic conception of 'the object petit a', a love for and fascination with the material signifiers of that which cannot be signified.

The fact that "this transition [from male to female] is more important to [Joan] than anything else in life" signals the moment in which Joan has "become her symptom". Even in light of the known impossibility of attaining the object-cause of desire, the feminine gender⁶, Joan's desire for the signifiers bearing the trace of this unattainable "Real" persists. Joan has organized her being-in-the-world around the surplus of signifiers representing femininity even in light of the known impossibility of

⁶ An interesting side note is that it doesn't have to be understood as the feminine gender that Joan is desiring. It can be understood as simply "gender" that is desired and femininity is the form this desire has taken due to its position in the symbolic network as an impossibility.

attaining their promise. Joan has replaced the desire for the “Real” promised by the signs with the reality of the signifier. To explain away this desire through its assimilation into the symbolic would be to dissolve the kernel of enjoyment around which Joan has organized her existence. Cross-dressing, at least for Joan, is an act penetrated with enjoyment, and cannot be viewed as stemming from the political agendas of an agential subject.

A Lacanian understanding of cross-dressing repositions the role of the commodity form in the practice of cross-dressing. It is removed from its central location as a catalyst enabling the emergence of new identities and placed within a grammatical structure organized by desire. From the Lacanian perspective gender becomes a property of the commodity form as opposed to an object represented by the commodity. The commodity form, whose qualities are established by its relationship to other signifiers, defines the object gender by encircling a lack in the symbolic system. This excess of signification established by this lack becomes the object gender with the promise of an actual quality upon which to organize subjectivity becoming a phantasmic quality of the commodity form and its location in a symbolic sequence.

Chapter Five: Whose Crisis is Being Represented?

“Twentieth-century social and cultural anthropology has promised its still largely Western readership enlightenment on two fronts. The one has been the salvaging of distinct cultural forms of life from a process of apparent global Westernization....The other promise of anthropology, one less fully distinguished and attended to than the first, has been to serve as a form of cultural critique for ourselves. In using portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, anthropology disrupts common sense and makes us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions.”(Marcus1986:1)

In the above passage George Marcus describes the reason anthropology is done.

Marcus’s statement begins his book, Anthropology as Cultural Critique, a work exploring the contemporary debate surrounding the epistemological problems associated with representing different social organizations in writing. For Marcus this debate hinges on a crisis of representation stemming from developments in the fields of philosophy and literary criticism which call into question the capability to accurately describe social reality. Questions of this sort strike deep at the heart of anthropology since ethnography is based on the assumption that different social realities can be described in writing. It is assumed ethnographic descriptions are factual representations, and if not a close facsimile to the social reality in which the anthropologist conducted his or her field-work.

The crisis stems from questions pertaining to the possibility of attaining an objective position from which to view social reality. The empiricism formerly relied upon by the social sciences for the positivistic study of society has been shown to be an

impossibility, reflecting more the desires of the researcher and the concerns of the field than the dynamics of the actual encounter. The portrayal of empiricism in written accounts of field work is now viewed as politically suspect due to the altered image of the encounter necessitated by its portrayal in objective terms. The conventions of the field demanding empirical descriptions are now considered to objectify those whose lives are represented by the text. This crisis has been understood as one of representation since what is at question is the capacity of symbolic systems such as language or film to produce accurate images of the subjects they seek to depict. These mediums are now known to depend on culturally specific symbolic systems for the production of meaning and are not seen as value neutral forms of communication. Elevating questions of description to the level of theoretical reflection brings to the center of discussion the effect discursive practices have on determining the image produced. We now see the stylistic formalities of ethnography and the structure of language as determining the image of the subject described.

In the effort to address these questions of representation anthropologists have incorporated literary theory and interpretive philosophy into their understanding and analysis of the social world. The incorporation of these two fields has had a profound impact on the practice of writing ethnography, drastically changing both the form and content of the genre. For the most part ethnography is no longer considered to be guided by empiricism. Empiricism in ethnography is now recognized as being a stylistic formality demanded by the writing practices of the field and as a tool for establishing the authority of the author rather than a methodology that ensures the

accuracy of field accounts. Contemporary ethnography is now directed by the writing styles of the humanities and by the concerns of interpretive philosophy rather than the empiricism of its heritage. This trend can be seen in the work of Bolin and Hebdige, whose ethnographic accounts engage literary theory and hermeneutic philosophy in their portrayals of subjectivity. Both author's work can be described as experimental since their incorporation of hermeneutics is guided by the effort to overcome the crisis of representation by developing approaches to ethnography that circumvent the problems associated with representing social reality. And in keeping with the tradition of anthropology, these authors have produced studies that are critical of contemporary societal practices. These texts can be read as responses to the political concerns of representation, with the separate texts serving as examples in which different techniques of interpretation and presentation have been used to avoid objectifying the subjects represented in ethnography. It is the intent of this chapter to show how these texts falter, coming up short of their goal and to describe a possible alternative offered by Lacanian psycho-analytic theory.

The spirit of experimentation guiding these studies can be seen in the vocabulary and structure of Bolin's argument. Bolin describes the practices of the transgender community as "deconstructing" the dominant gender paradigm, invoking the vocabulary and reading techniques of contemporary literary theory. The use of deconstruction as a framework guiding ethnographic studies is indicative of new approaches in field work because it represents a reconfiguration of the relationship between the anthropologist and the subject of study. Bolin approaches her subjects as

one approaches a text. She assumes the actions of the transgender community are ordered and structured like a language. These actions and practices are assumed to be symbolic of larger cultural logics that organize everyday life just as grammar orders speech utterances. Due to this arrangement Bolin is able to read the practices of the transgender community as one reads a text. And in this case Bolin considers her reading to illuminate how the practices of the transgender community “deconstruct” the ideological system constructing our gender categories. Articulating the transgender community’s practices as a text which “deconstructs” gender defines Bolin’s position in relation to her subjects. In positioning herself as a reader she is locating herself as a detached observer separated from the lives of those she studies.

In order to understand how Bolin’s position as a “reader” of the transgender community’s text defines her relationship to the subjects of her study we need to return to the example she provides of her affinities to the transgender community as an anthropologist. In the following example it can be seen how her identity as an anthropologist is situated in relation to the subjects in her study.

At both the transgender community conferences I attended, symposia were organized that included historical and cross-cultural aspects of cross-dressing. At the National Transgender Annual Meetings, I was invited as an anthropologist to present cross-cultural evidence of cross-dressing. Members of the audience were most interested in two topics: the kinds of data that identified the Berdache as a high-status position and the question of how Berdache are conceptualized as a third or alternative gender mitigating against clinical typologies. (Bolin1994:476)

In this statement we see Bolin identifying herself as a subject, with the “I” representing the anthropologist invited to conventions as an authority on gender and cross cultural evidence of cross-dressing. Bolin assumes the evidence she presents is

being used by the transgender community as the raw material for the construction of identity. As was shown earlier, this assumption pertaining to the use-value of anthropological knowledge depicts the transgender(ist) as an agential subject. What was not previously addressed is the effect of this assumption for Bolin's own subjectivity. Bolin, as the producer of the knowledge consumed by the transgender community, is also assumed to be an agential subject. It is assumed that she as the producer of this knowledge is an authority whose status enables her to see the truth about the transgender community's practices. Bolin's role as a producer of knowledge makes her transcendent. Bolin, as a subject, remains a unified being who enters into her own text as an authority, as one whose position is never risked by its encounter with an "other". The "I" who speaks at transgender conventions is a stable entity whose gaze defines the subjects of her study by bringing them into view as a third gender category. The problem with this arrangement, one directly attributable to the theoretical position from which she speaks, is its production of self identical subjects. This is seen in both her assumption that the "I" through which she enters her own text represents her as a subject, just as the "you" that she is writing about identifies with the image of the transgender community she presents in her text. For Bolin, both she and the transgendered subject are self identical with their representation in her text, establishing a uniformity between subjects where none might exist.

The problems with producing a text in which the subjects are assumed to recognize themselves in their own image is similar to the problem found with Hebdige's text, one in which he described the subject's mis-recognition of their image

as a failure on the part of his text. But as was discussed earlier, the problem with his text is not that the subjects fail to recognize themselves in their own image, but in the reason he posits for this phenomenon. He attributes the failure of his text to produce a self same image of the punks as the work of ideology. According to Hebdige, ideology operates to veil the true social relationships being expressed in the practices of subculture. In a sense Hebdige believes subjects are duped into believing they are not the carrier of the truth he claims they are. But, an alternative interpretation of this phenomenon is to attribute this failure of recognition to a fundamental characteristic of the subject, the capacity to continually deny the validity of their image as it is produced by a gaze. Both the production of self-identical subjects and subjects that deny the validity of their own image due to ideology, “trap” the subject in representation. Trapping the subject in representation denies the subject the capacity to question its own image. The result is the mis-representation of the subject through the ascription of a positive function to the gaze. The gaze of Hebdige and the gaze of Bolin are assumed to function positively, to bring the subject into being. Literally the gaze is assumed to make the subject visible. Such an assertion results in the conflation of effect and realization, with ideology being recognized as that which produces reality as opposed to falsifying it in a veil of representation.(Copjec1994) This posits the authority to define the subjectivity of the other in the gaze of the author who describes that other. The alternative is to embrace the psychoanalytic conception of the subject as an entity that continually evades representation and thereby questions the authority of the author’s gaze.

As articulated in psycho-analysis the subject is understood as never being present in its representation. Representation is always viewed as an effect, as a secondary process of subjectivity mediated by language. The subject itself cannot be found in its articulation. The experience of the subject is condensed and disfigured as it is translated into language due to the inability of signifying systems such as language to accurately represent reality. This shifts the search for the subject from the contents of its articulations to the form taken by these articulations. In psycho-analysis the emphasis is placed on the form of subjectivity as it is brought into being by a speaking subject. This makes all representations of subjectivity questionable, and the authority of an author who describes the subject dubious at best since not even the subject is an authority on its own representation. Calling into question all representations of subjectivity gives the subject the freedom to question its own image as it is represented by another subject. Žižek refers to this phenomenon as the capacity of the subject to always pose a question to its own image. Allowing the subject this capacity in representation avoids trapping the subject in the gaze of the author. According to Žižek the subject continually asks, “che vuoi? (who me?)” when confronted by its own image, questioning the authority of the gaze in whose light it is being represented. We can see this process taking place in Hebdige’s work when he describes the shortcoming of his text. Hebdige states:

It is highly unlikely that the members of any of the subcultures described in this book would recognize themselves reflected here. They are still less likely to welcome any efforts on our part to understand them... We should hardly be surprised to find our ‘sympathetic’ readings of subordinate culture are regarded by the members of a subculture with just as much indifference and contempt as the hostile labels imposed by the courts and the press. In this respect, to get the point is to miss the point. (Hebdige 1979: 139)

According to Hebdige the fact that his text is likely to be viewed with derision and scorn signals his text's failure to bridge the gap between language, experience, and reality since the subjects do not recognize themselves in their image as it has been portrayed in the text. In Hebdige's work this failure of recognition operates as evidence for the truth of Hebdige's reading of subculture. According to Hebdige his theoretical apparatus has produced such an exact representation of the subject of subculture that he or she cannot recognize themselves. Ideology prevents such recognition. The subjects of subculture are trapped by ideology. But Hebdige as a transcendent subject is not. He can see through ideology and into the true meaning of subculture. He "gets the point", he knows what subculture means, but this meaning cannot be assimilated into subculture because to do so would be to dissolve it. Subculture must deny that Hebdige has caught its image. As was shown earlier in this reading of subculture the authority to determine the meaning of subculture resides squarely in the gaze of Hebdige.

The psycho-analytic interpretation of the subjects failure to recognize themselves in the text removes Hebdige from the position of authority and also questions the capacity of the subject to be an authority on its own representation. The psycho-analytic reading does not claim that subculture is blind to the true meaning of its acts, as Hebdige claims, but acknowledges the capacity of the subject to see its image in the text - an image that reflects the perspective of a gaze. Psycho-analysis then takes into consideration the subject's capacity to deny the authority of that gaze, giving the subject the autonomy to formulate itself absent of the terms mandated by an "other's"

gaze. This is different from saying members of subculture are fully aware of the meaning of their actions. It simply gives the subject the freedom to evade its entrapment in the gaze of an “other”.

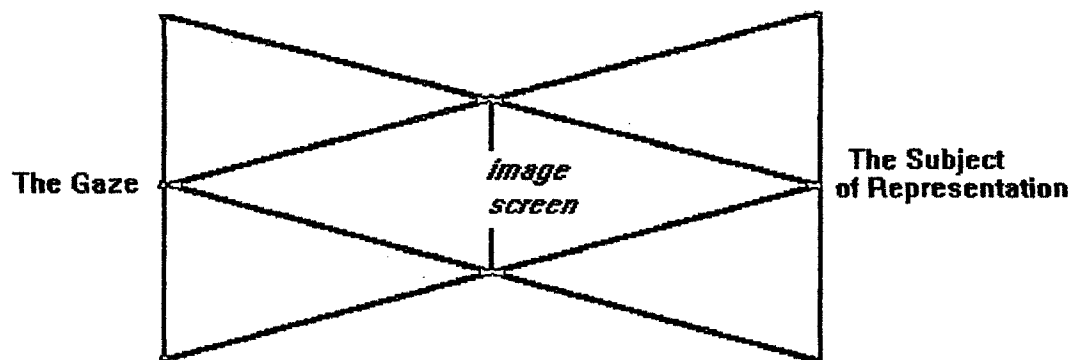
From the psycho-analytic perspective it is obvious that the image of subculture painted in Hebdige’s text would be viewed with derision. It operates in the same fashion as the labels from the courts and the press do, as an imposition that continually subordinates subculture to the authority of an outside gaze. The fact that this image is held in contempt comes from the subject escaping the authority of that gaze. If the subject had not escaped these images would not be held in contempt or derision but in the love of narcissism. The images and labels provided by Hebdige’s text would illustrate that the subject of subculture had achieved its desired ends, the construction of difference. And the contempt of society would be justified since that would be the intention of their actions. To come to this conclusion would be to take the message of subculture at face value and would assume that subjects operate with complete knowledge of their actions. Recognizing the subject’s capacity to question their appearance in another’s gaze exposes desire and the operation of the gaze by illustrating how representation comes from a demand being placed on the subject. Incorporating the capacity of the subject to ask “che vuoi” into our understanding of the subject reconfigures our understanding of textual representations by revealing the effect of desire in description. When such studies as those of Hebdige and Bolin are shown to be infused with desire the image painted of the subject takes the form of a demand. The punks see their image in Hebdige’s text, they look at it and ask “che vuoi?” [Who

Me?], then respond with: ‘You’re telling me that, but what do you want with it, what are you aiming at?’(Zizek19989:111) By exposing the desire behind this representation, this question denies the authority of Hebdige’s gaze to represent them in any light.

For Lacan this demand posed to the subject by an author locates desire, illuminating how the author demands something from the subject which the subject cannot provide. The question “che vuoi” asks the author, “what do you really want, what are you aiming at through this demand?”(Zizek1989:111) So when Hebdige or Bolin produce texts in which the subjects either recognize themselves, as in the case of Bolin, or fail to recognize themselves, as with Hebdige, we need to ask questions concerning the desire of the author. By asking why they presented the subjects of their study in such a fashion we can understand where we might find the subject being represented in the text. Finding where the subject resides in these representations enables questions to be explored concerning the political implications of representation. And just as Hebdige’s mis-representation of subculture has been argued to be problematic we need to view Bolin’s presentation of self-same subjects as equally questionable. It will be shown that building an argument around the assumption that the image produced by your text will be self identical to the subject traps the subject in the same way as the claim that ideology prevents the subject from recognizing themselves in the image of the text. Both deny the subject the capacity to ask che vuoi?, and thereby miss the subject whose representation is sought. As was seen with Hebdige, the demand that subjects be self same also locates the author’s desire with the

production of self same images equaling a demand to present the subject in a certain light. And in Bolin's case, the light in which she presents her subjects is one in which she remains a stable fixture, an "I" that is unchallenged and unified.

How does Bolin's production of self identical subjects expose desire and in so doing the failure of the text to accurately portray subjectivity? Returning to the work of Joan Copjec and her analysis of the "Orthopsychic Subject" provides the answer. As will be seen what is at stake is more than the portrayal of subjectivity, but the position of the author in ethnographic accounts. In order to show how the position of the author is at stake in representations of subjectivity we need to refer again to Lacan's diagram of the two interpenetrating triangles. This diagram describes the relationship between 'the gaze' and 'the subject of representation', illustrating how Lacan's understanding of the gaze takes into account both the perspective of the author who does the representing as well as the subject that is being represented.



(Figure 2. *Diagram of the Lacanian gaze*)

As the diagram illustrates, for Lacan, both positions are equally constructed by the gaze emanating from the other. And, as we can see in the diagram Bolin has failed to take

into account the effect of her gaze in constructing both the subjects she is representing as well as the “I” representing herself, two positions constructed by the gaze of an always present third position.⁷ The failure to consider her position as an “I” in language as being a position constructed by the same gaze that illuminates the transgender community as constructed subjects, perpetuates the image of the anthropologist as a unified “Renaissance subject”. It assumes the anthropologist possesses transcendent capabilities that allow alterity to be described as a construction while denying the constructed nature of their own position. The Lacanian alternative emphasizes the primacy of the gaze as a determinant in the subjectivity of both the being who identifies with the “I” of language and those who are described by that “I”. Perhaps the phrase which describes Bolin’s mistake most accurately, and one which illustrates the primacy of the gaze in Lacan’s thought is: “The gaze is that which ‘determines’ the I in the visible; it is ‘the instrument through which...[the] I [is] photographed.’”(Copjec1994:31)

From the Lacanian perspective the “I” of language with which Bolin identifies needs to be viewed as a construction of an outside gaze. For Lacan, the “I” of language with which Bolin is identifying herself is the representation of a constructed position whose qualities Bolin has co-opted as her own, making the transcendent position she assumes as a producer of knowledge a quality of her subjectivity. The “Renaissance perspective” of this “I” does not exist in the subject who identifies with it. Rather, the “Renaissance perspective” claimed by Bolin is a promise of the signifying system, an

⁷ The third position constructing both of these positions would be represented in the diagram by the eye of the reader who is viewing the diagram. Lacan refers to this eye as the eye of the “grand Other”.

effect of signification due to the position of the signifier, “I”, in language. In Bolin’s case she has taken over the attributes of the “I”, assuming that she, Ann Bolin the subject, is self identical to the “I” of language. This conflation between the “I” representing the gaze and the subject, ‘Ann Bolin’, denies a fundamental characteristic of signification, the impossibility of accurately signifying the subject. When Bolin assumes the position of the “I” representative of the speaking subject in language, she presumes that “I” to be a self identical image of herself as a speaking subject. She is locating herself at the point of the gaze. And as Copjec points out, “The subject, in short, cannot be located or locate itself at the point of the gaze, since this point marks, on the contrary, its very annihilation.”(Copjec1994:35) To occupy the point of the gaze is to occupy the position of the hysteric, with the subject assuming the mandated position of language as their own as opposed to a position necessarily occupied for communication. The subject cannot be located at the point of the gaze because it is an unoccupiable point, one that figures as an unrealizable ideal of a subject that is not split upon entry into language. To occupy the point of the gaze denies the primacy of the system of signification and assumes that there is something behind the field of signifiers that can be obtained or captured by that field of signifiers. Lacan refers to Bolin’s position as “being trapped in the imaginary” and is representative of her failure to recognize the deceptive quality of the subject who continually asks ‘che vuoi?’.

Lacan understands Bolin’s position as hysterical because by identifying with the “I” of language, the “I” of the gaze, Bolin is occupying an imaginary point, the point to which the transgendered subject addresses their ‘che vuoi’ question. Occupying this

point represents a split between demand and desire. When Bolin speaks as an authority on gender and its construction cross-culturally she in turn is being interrogated by the subjects to whom she is turning for knowledge. By occupying this point, and representing herself as that point in her text, Bolin's demand for knowledge is split from her desire: an unknown variable illuminated by the transgendered subject's question 'che vuoi?' question. In other words, Bolin is telling the transgender community something about themselves and in turn is being confronted by a question that returns from the audience, a question that asks, "You're telling me this, but what do you want with it, what are you aiming at?"(Zizek1989:111) This question reveals Bolin's desire, an unknown variable prior to the emergence of "che vuoi" question, illuminating how her demand for knowledge placed to the transgendered subject is misdirected. Bolin is actually asking that her demand be refuted because her demand for knowledge is not what she actually wants. Bolin wants her desire fulfilled and not knowledge from the subjects of her study. This is the position of the hysteric because Bolin is demanding one thing but wanting another. She believes her desire can be fulfilled by demanding knowledge from the transgender community while in fact no amount of knowledge will ever fulfill her desire. She is misplacing her desire to be a unified being onto the knowledge of gender the transgender community appears to be able to supply.

From the Lacanian perspective Bolin's identification with the "I" of language represents an identification with "the master", or "the name of the father", since identification with the "I" of language represents becoming the subject mandated by

the gaze. Identifying with this point gives Bolin a “symbolic mandate” to interrogate the transgender community. Zizek describes this situation as follows:

The subject is always fastened, pinned to a signifier which represents him [sic] for the other, and through this pinning he [sic] is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations.”(Zizek1989:113)

In Bolin’s case the signifier to which she has pinned herself as a subject is the authoritative “I” representative of a “Renaissance” perspective in language. The place in the symbolic network to which this association fastens Bolin is the position of the master or teacher - a master or teacher who views the transgendered subject from the imaginary point of the gaze. The problem with constructing an ethnographic account from this position is that it serves to reify the authority of the gaze while appearing to deconstruct the position of the other. Bolin’s incorporation of literary theory and interpretive philosophy into her ethnographic portrayal results in the establishment of a new Master - a master who retains the authority of the “I” over that of the other.

The alternative, posed by Lacan, is to recognize the radically textual quality of being, to embrace the idea that being is to be a being-of-language. Embracing the Lacanian claim leads to the dissolution of the hysteria associated with building an ethnography around the point of the gaze by incorporating the impossibility of identifying with the “I” of language into representation. Recognizing that the subject cannot fulfill the symbolic mandate is to recognize that there is nothing beyond the signifying network. Once this is achieved, the assumption that there exists an ‘object in subject’ such as gender that resists interpretation is done away with. This alternative position is described by Copjec when she states:

Lacan argues that beyond the signifying network, beyond the visual field, there is, in fact, nothing at all. The veil of representation actually conceals nothing; there is nothing behind representation. Yet the fact that representation seems to hide, to put an arbored screen of signifiers in front of something hidden beneath, is not treated by a simple error the subject can undo; nor is this deceptiveness of language treated as something that undoes the subject, deconstructs its entity by menacing its boundaries. Rather, language's opacity is taken as the very cause of the subject's being, that is, its desire, or want-to-be. (Copjec1994:35)

We can now answer the question as to why Bolin desired to represent the subjects of her study as she did. She represented the transgendered subject as agential because she desires to be a unified entity that is not cut off from "The Real" by language.

If the occupation of the position of the hysteric produces ethnography that searches for and finds a new authority in the "I" of the "Master" or "Grand Other", what about Hebdige? Hebdige's text, in spite of its short-comings, actually ends by producing a convincing portrayal of subculture, providing a potential avenue for future representations of alterity. The irony is that where Lacan would find strength in Hebdige's approach, Hebdige himself finds weakness. In order to understand how Hebdige's work illuminates a potential direction for future ethnographic research we need to go back and investigate the faults Hebdige finds in his text, because herein lies the Lacanian answer to the crisis of representation.

According to Hebdige, his text is a failure because it cannot bridge the gap between "language, experience, and reality"(Hebdige1979:10) This is the root of his text's shortcomings, ending in his need to apologize both to his reader as well as to the objects of his study. But what is in this gap? Is it really about, as Hebdige claims, the hope that the seam between reality and experience could be located and pried open through a semiotic analysis? That the "gulf between the alienated intellectual and the

‘real’ world could be rendered meaningful and miraculously, at the same time, be made to disappear.”(Hebdige1979:10)? Or is this the expression of a desire? A desire which cannot possibly be fulfilled due to the situatedness of the subject as a “being in language”? In order to answer these questions we need to return to Hebdige’s text, re-reading his work while keeping in mind the effect of desire in determining the image of subculture painted by Hebdige. This involves a discussion of methodology, since it is the method employed by Hebdige that contains the seeds of promise for circumventing the crisis of representation.

As it turns out Hebdige’s text is less about subculture than it is about developing an approach to studying culture. Hebdige’s study of subculture is a study that explores the strengths and weaknesses of viewing and interpreting culture in the terms established by literary theory. In his text, Hebdige develops an understanding of subculture based upon what is known about reading texts. As with Bolin, Hebdige reads cultural practices as the symbolic representation of underlying social relations as they are expressed in everyday events. Only, unlike Bolin, Hebdige focuses strictly on the stylistic expressions of his subjects. Hebdige looks for the truth pertaining to the social relationships of capitalism as they are expressed in the stylistic ensembles of subculture. He is not looking for something that exists inside his subjects but something expressed by the form of their stylistic displays. Where Bolin saw the stylistic ensembles of the transgender community expressing an essential quality of being, Hebdige sees the expression of specific historical social relationships. Hebdige never attempts to dive beneath the surface expressions of style. For Hebdige semiotics

provides the framework guiding this encounter by providing a view of social relations as a symbolic system. Through semiotics social relations can be viewed as a structured representation of the whole culture. The intent of this project is two fold. One, it hopes to develop a moral philosophy in which the practices of daily life are problematized and shown to be part of larger exercises of power on the part of society's dominant. And second: it hopes to isolate mechanisms of domination, illuminating the internal relationships between domination and the practices of everyday life for the purpose of facilitating change. The intent is to re-position our understanding of societal practices in order to incite social change.

This approach, as with Bolin's, insists culture is a text organized and structured like a language. The network of symbols representing social relations are ordered by a grammatical structure whose form contains a message separate from but integral to its content. This means social processes can be understood in the same fashion as a literary work. One can read to develop an understanding of society's intricacies and interconnections just as one reads to understand a literary work. Only, whereas Bolin incorporates Derridean philosophy, whether accurately or inaccurately, imbuing cultural formations with deconstructive capacities, Hebdige remains committed to a conception of the real that allows for a moral philosophy of society. This distinction can be seen in the employment of Marxist semiotics and in its application to the analysis of class through the surface expressions of subculture in Hebdige's study. Hebdige makes this clear when he states:

Barthes' notion of culture extends beyond the library, the opera-house and the theater to encompass the whole of everyday life. But this everyday life is for Barthes overlaid with a significance which is at once more insidious and more systematically organized. Starting from the premise that 'myth is a type of speech', Barthes set out in *Mythologies* to

examine the normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (i.e. those in power) are rendered universal and 'given' for the whole of society.(Hebdige1979:9)

The strength of this "Cultural Studies" project is the emphasis placed on form as opposed to content. The surface signifiers of social interactions are read to reveal the symbolic logic's ordering societal practices. Interestingly, while Hebdige champions studying the formal properties of culture as opposed to the analysis of culture's contents, he is left empty by it. He is left disappointed and desiring the unification of language, experience, and reality. This disappointment felt by Hebdige provides the key to analyzing desire in Hebdige's text since it illuminates the moment Hebdige's desire is not fulfilled. We can see Hebdige's lack of fulfillment in his apology to the academic community and to the objects of his study for producing a text that fails to bridge the gap between reality and experience. It may seem that returning to Hebdige's apology is redundant and that this ground has already been covered, but I am returning from a different theoretical perspective. This new perspective sheds a different light on the ground already traveled. We can see this in Hebdige's statement that reads:

The study of subcultural style which seemed at the outset to draw us back towards the real world, to reunite us with 'the people', ends by merely confirming the distance between the reader and the 'text', between everyday life and the 'mythologist' whom it surrounds, fascinates and finally excludes. It would seem that we are still, like Barthes, 'condemned for some time yet to speak excessively about reality'.(Hebdige1979:140)

Hebdige views the failure of his text as hinging upon the necessity of prying open the "invisible seam between language, experience and reality"(Hebdige1979:10). For Hebdige anything less than making this "gulf" disappear by "rendering it meaningful"

constitutes a failure. The question that immediately springs to mind is: what constitutes a successful text for Hebdige? What conditions need to be met for Hebdige to be “happy” with his text? In short the development of a theoretical position that unifies language, experience and reality. The development of such a theoretical position in Lacanian terms would constitute locating the author at the point of the gaze. Only by occupying the originary point of the gaze would the theoretical apparatus situating the intellectual “in camera” to the text dissolve, creating a bridge over the gap between language and reality. Once this gap has been bridged the intellectual, as reader of social texts, can be situated in the text itself, rendering the images produced through reflection self identical to the real world of experience. This is the same desire as Bolin’s, and as was described before, represents the split desire of the hysteric.

We can understand Hebdige as occupying the position of the hysteric, just as Bolin does, by tracing his desire to identify with the “I” of the symbolic network; or in strict Lacanian terms, the “I” of the gaze of the Other. Hebdige is demanding from the subject of subculture the fulfillment of his desire for unification with ‘the people’. Yet, when confronted with the ‘che vuoi’ question from the subject - illustrated by the deference of the subcultural subject to their image as it is presented back in the text - Hebdige is shown to desire something else. Hebdige is shown to desire identification with the point of the gaze that views both subculture and the intellectual. Hebdige seeks a union with the “I” of the symbolic network separating him as a subject from the real social relationships hidden behind the signifier. Such a union would result in the attainment of the “Renaissance” perspective promised by the symbolic network of

language, resulting in the attainment of the position of a punctiform being. This condition represents a split between desire and demand because Hebdige is demanding unification with 'the people' but desiring unification with the "I" of language. And as was shown earlier in the discussion of Bolin, unification with this point would amount to the dissolution of the subject since to become that transcendent being would end desire.

Hebdige views his failure in terms of a short-coming on the part of semiotics as a theoretical matrix to pry open the 'invisible seam' separating reality from experience. Hebdige's sense of failure can be understood as a mistaken conceptualization of the gaze. Hebdige is mistakenly looking for confirmation of his existence in the gaze of the Other, asking that gaze to render his position as a subject meaningful. As a consequence the gaze is ascribed with the positive function of giving meaning to the signified. Ascribing a positive function to the gaze reduces the subject to a realization of that gaze and attributes the power to bring the subject into being to the big Other. Copjec refers to this phenomena as locating the 'gaze in front' of the image, a process that associates the emergence of the subject with its signification. This traps the subject in representation by positing a semblance between the subject and its signifier that denies the subject the possibility of imagining a position outside the gaze. Hebdige feels condemned because, by conceptualizing the gaze as fulfilling a positive function, he and the subjects represented in his text are trapped in their own image as it is presented to them by the gaze. Literally, as Hebdige conceptualizes the relationship between the gaze and the subject, the language in which he must represent the subjects

of subculture locks him in a position that denies access to the object of his desire. The problem does not lie in the inability of Hebdige to obtain the object of his desire, but in the assumption that there exists something beyond the signifier. That there is a real sociality out there to be obtained behind the signifier that is not theoretical. The failure Hebdige associates with his text has nothing to do with semiotics and all to do with his conception of the gaze. For if the gaze did not serve the positive function of recognition then the subject could be articulated as a phenomena of language and Hebdige's text would be a success.

Lacan offers an alternative explanation to this perceived failure, providing an alternative conception of the relationship between the subject and the gaze. By explaining the Lacanian conception of the gaze and its relationship to the subject, not only can the crisis of representation referred to above to be addressed but the question of the commodity form and its potential to act as a signifier of identity can be returned to as well. Once the gaze is repositioned in relation to the subject and its signifier we will see that the crisis of representation has less to do with the capacity to represent social reality and more to do with the willingness of anthropologists (and other social scientists) to sacrifice his or her position in the text - a position aligned with the gaze of the big Other. Once the position of the anthropologist is removed from the originary point of the gaze the radical potential of a Lacanian anthropology can be realized with the textual quality of existence being brought to the forefront in ethnography. Placing the textual quality of being at the center of ethnographic accounts enables the

development of a truly post-structuralist ethnography in which culture is recognized as an effect of signification with difference amounting to a matter of style.

In Lacan's understanding, the gaze cannot be turned to for affirmation of any sort because it does not see you. As is apparent from Lacan's diagram of the two interpenetrating triangles, the Lacanian gaze is located "behind the image"(Copjec1994) What this means is that the "I" of the gaze with which Hebdige and Bolin would like to identify is always cut off from the subject. It is an unoccupiable point that cannot be signified. Copjec makes this clear when she states:

In Lacan, the gaze is located 'behind' the image, as that which fails to appear in it and thus as that which makes all its meanings suspect...Lacan does not ask you to think of the gaze as belonging to an Other who cares about what or where you are, who pries, keeps tabs on your whereabouts, and takes note of all your steps and missteps. When you encounter the gaze of the Other, you meet not a seeing eye but a blind one. The gaze is not clear or penetrating, not filled with knowledge or recognition; it is clouded over and turned back on itself, absorbed in its own enjoyment. The horrible truth is that the gaze does not see you.(Copjec1994:36)

By locating the gaze behind the image Lacan sets up the visual field as always expressing a lack. This lack is endemic to all signifying networks that represent reality. The gaze is understood as always falling short of its promise for the clear and complete illumination of an object. Incorporating lack into our understanding of the graphic space of the gaze allows the subject to glean the possibility of a different perspective from which the same space might be viewed. An awareness of this lack on the part of the subject prevents the subject from ever being trapped by the gaze. It allows the subject to ask: "What is being concealed from me? What in this graphic space does not show, does not stop writing itself?"(Copjec1994:34) It is at this point in which something appears to be missing from representation that Lacan locates the point of the

gaze. In the gaze described by Lacan, not only is the origin of the gaze recognized as an unoccupiable point since it is marked by an absence, but the impossibility of the gaze to illuminate the “Real” is also acknowledged. The “Real” of the gaze is shown to be an illusory construct of the gaze itself, something to which access is denied to the subject.

The importance of the question: What is being concealed from me?, and the articulation of the gaze as originating in absence, can be understood by returning to Hebdige. In Hebdige’s case recognizing the gaze as an unoccupiable point marked by absence allows the perceived failure of semiotics to prey open the seam between language and reality to be overcome. Rather than perceiving the seam to be invisible - the position demanded by a conception of the gaze as fulfilling a positive function - the very invisibility of the seam can be understood as marking the originary point of the gaze. Such a recognition illustrates the impossibility of occupying the point of the gaze since there is no point to be occupied. The invisibility of the seam marks the absence of a signified, as Copjec describes it, and hence the impossible real promised by the signifier. In other words the real world of “the people” to which Hebdige desires entry is an illusory construct of the signifier. The gulf Hebdige perceives as separating the intellectual from that the “Real” world is nothing more than Hebdige, as a subject, asking: “What is being concealed from me” in this graphic space? By recognizing this gulf as an absence, as a lack in the visual field of the gaze, the hysterical desire to peer beneath the veneer of signification, a capacity promised by the “I” of the gaze, is resolved with the truth of cultural forms being shown to reside in its surface topology.

Concentrating on the surface topological features of such cultural forms as gender and subculture allows these forms to be seen as “traps for the gaze”(Copjec). It is important to recognize the double meaning associated with this phrase. We can say that subculture and gender “trap the gaze”, meaning they attract the gaze by seeming to provide an instance in which representation seems to ‘generate its own beyond’.(Copjec) This usage posits the signifiers representing gender and subculture as providing access to an impossible world in which the gulf separating the signifier from the real is dissolved, allowing a glimpse beneath the signifier at the signified. This can be referred to as a trap because the collection of signifiers representing gender or subculture transfix the gaze, holding it in the joy of interpretation. The gaze is prevented from moving on, or recognizing what it is looking at as being nothing but a topological feature of the signification system. The second meaning associated with the word “traps” describes gender and subculture as providing a moment in which the gaze is caught off guard, as it were, and revealed as an absence. The graphic representation of gender and subculture as it is painted by the gaze, provides an instance in which one is induced to imagine “a gaze outside the field of representation.”(Copjec) This is a trap since the gaze is caught in its own action, revealing that gender and subculture are effect as opposed to features of subjectivity. Recognizing gender and subculture as traps allows us to move beyond an understanding of their representation as being indicative either of a real set of social relations or of an essential quality that orders subjectivity underlying the surface signifiers and towards a

description that embraces the radical implications of viewing social constructs as the representation of a lack in the symbolic network.

Viewing gender and subculture as the expression of a lack necessitates that the “I” of the gaze be envisioned as expressing a lack as well. Just as gender and subculture are radically visual domains where knowledge of the subject cannot be found, the “I” that views subculture must also be recognized as a place in the graphic space that covers over a lack. The “I” cannot be viewed as a place to locate an unencumbered view of the world. The “I” should be recognized as a signifier standing in relation to other signifiers in the graphic space of the gaze. This allows knowledge of the subject whose expressions formulate gender and subculture, and the “I” that views these formations, to be approached on their own terms and not those of the Big Other in whose visual space they appear. Failing to recognize the “I” as the expression of a lack produces a visual field in which the gaze functions positively and a positively functioning gaze has a determining effect on the subject it illuminates.(Copjec), thereby introducing a political concern into the process of representation.

The Lacanian view locates the subject in the very lack covered over by its signifier, circumventing the need to develop a political discourse surrounding the subject’s representation. The political concern shifts to the effect of symbolic networks in which subjects appear. This enables us to recognize that the subject will always appear distorted in its representation and it is the job of the researcher to describe how the experience of the subject becomes distorted, but not the subject. Our descriptions cannot concentrate on the subject because the subject cannot be described.

Ethnology's task is to describe the signifying system that covers over the subject and makes subjectivity visible and not the appearance of the subject as it is distorted and condensed by systems of signification. In this way the subject will always appear as a lack and not as the result of a gaze. The reason the subject is to be found in this lack is because this lack in the visual field, in the symbolic network itself, founds the subject. The subject is established as a being of desire by this lack, by the inability of the symbolic network to signify reality. Copjec clarifies this when she states:

Lacan locates the cause of being in the informe: the unformed (that which has no signified, no significant shape in the visual field) and the inquiry (the question posed to representations presumed reticence). The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore wants to see. (Copjec1994:35)

Literally, the subject as a being of desire is founded on a lack in the signifying network and not as the realization of a gaze. The subject can never be located in its representation. The critical reader will quickly realize the suspect implications of Lacan's understanding of representation. After all if the subject is not to be found in its representation than what is to stop us from producing misanthropic ethnography? It seems that Lacan relativizes the visual field to the point where any representation, no matter how vulgar, is valid since the subject doesn't reside in its representation anyway. The Lacanian response might be to say that a racist or misogynist ethnography is just as valid as an ethnography that attempts to be non-racist, they are both equally mis-guided by the desire to capture the subject in the gaze of the Big Other. The analysis of a racist ethnography would reveal this desire and the affect of representation which is the goal in the first place.

This calls into question who benefits from a politics centering on representation. In Lacanian terms the subject is understood as that which is always being written out of the visual field of the signifier, as that which is absent in its representation. A politics centered on the moral and philosophical implications of representing the subject in a certain light demands the luxury of a transcendent “I” occupying the visual field not afforded to the anthropologist. Anthropology then, should be recognized as a radically descriptive field with the objective to describe the visual space in which the subject experiences itself. Recognizing ethnography as a graphic art in which the visual space of different subjectivities are described repositions the representations created by the ethnographer, moving them from fictitious accounts that bring the subject into being, to depictions of alternative graphic spaces in which subjectivity expresses itself. This brings attention to the fact that the ‘ethnos’ of ethnography is nothing more than a surface phenomena of the signifier. The study of culture then is the study of style, with semiotics providing the interpretive strategy that leads to knowledge of the effect of a signifying system on subjectivity. And since as Copjec states, signifiers are material, ‘opaque’ as opposed to translucent, and refer only to other signifiers rather than directly to a signified(Copjec1994:34), anthropology must take to heart the Lacanian phrase stating, “Style is the man himself”.

Positioning anthropology as a study in style, or the study of the formal properties of signifiers as they are arranged by subjects, produces a truly post-structuralist anthropology in which the authority of the author as the purveyor of meaning is removed. The anthropologist is taken out of the position of authority because to write

ethnography is to celebrate the multiple viewpoints from which all graphic spaces can be seen. This automatically removes the authority of the gaze associated with the viewpoint of the author. The “I” of the author’s gaze is defined by its relationship to other signifiers and not as an authority on the contents of a graphic space. Recognizing that there is no authority whose reading of a graphic space can define the meaning of its content shows how Hebdige started us down the road towards a Lacanian anthropology but foundered on the shores of an impossible real promised by the signifier. Hebdige fell into a trap placed by the gaze that promised knowledge of the world beyond the signifier, a world in which he could identify with the “I” of the gaze and have the gulf separating reality from experience disappear. Hebdige fell for this trap due to his desire to become a unified subject by occupying the point of the gaze. In Hebdige’s case the trap laid by the gaze was the commodity form, a signifier that when viewed as a fetish promises entry into the impossible world of the “Real”, but when viewed as an opaque signifier that gains meaning in relation to other signifiers and the desire of a subject promises nothing more than knowledge of its surface and of the gaze that inscribes it with something more.

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