

What is the process of the alienation of the subject into the chains of the signifier, according to Lacan? He speaks of three "registers" of subjectivity:

## the REAL, the IMAGINARY, and the SYMBOLIC.

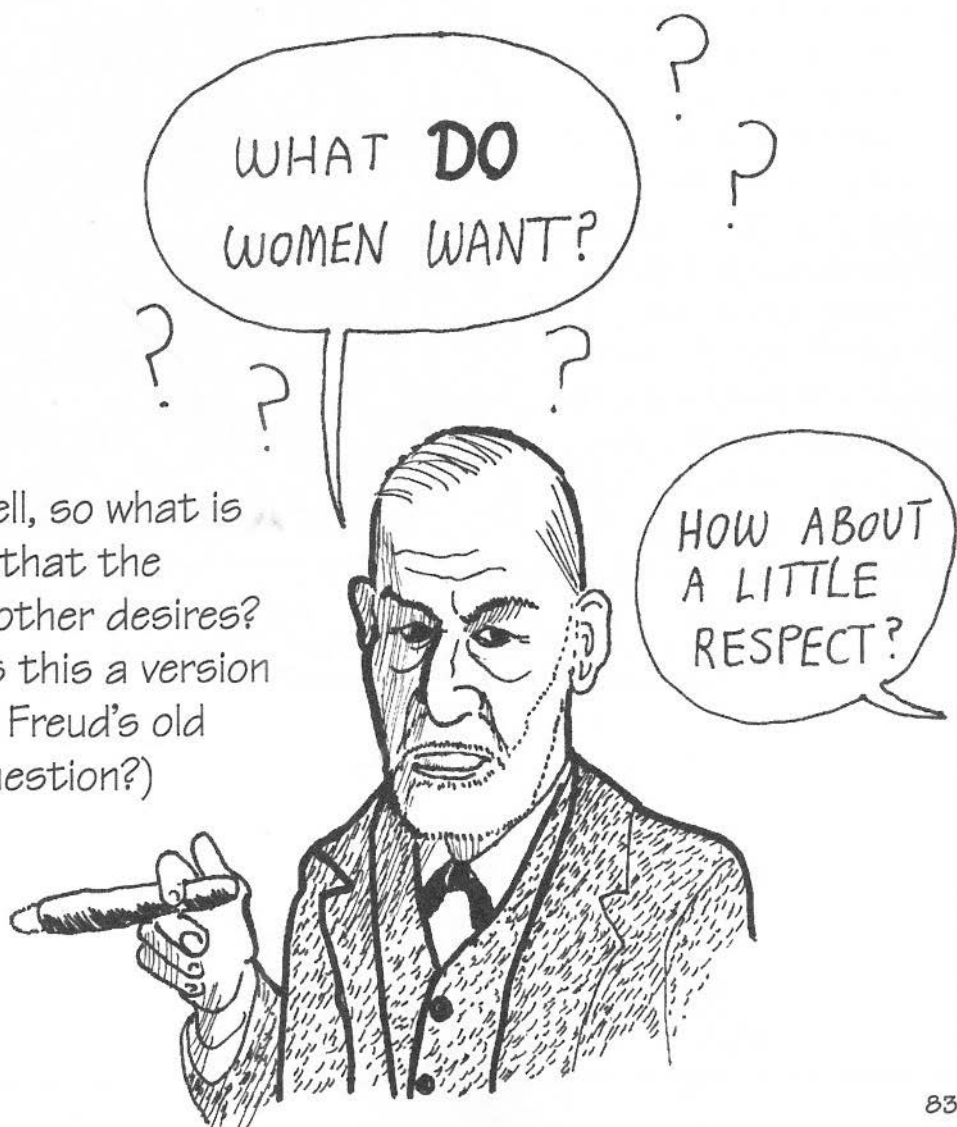


Very little can be said about the REAL. It is the primordial experience of whatever is prior to any attempt to represent it in any system of symbols. It is something like Immanuel Kant's unknowable THING-IN-ITSELF, except that Lacan seems to stress the experience of the thing rather than the way the thing is prior to experience. But once we acquire a language, giving us a system of signs in which to re-present "the real," "the real" is lost to us forever.

Still, we do not enter into language and the SYMBOLIC all at once. We pass into "the IMAGINARY" (and in some ways "the imaginary" coexists with "the symbolic" forever after). The Imaginary register is not just the realm of images or of fantasy, though it is definitely associated with illusion. It is roughly equivalent to everyday experience, but the illusion is that of treating the Symbolic (whose function is to order everyday experience) as if it were real and natural.

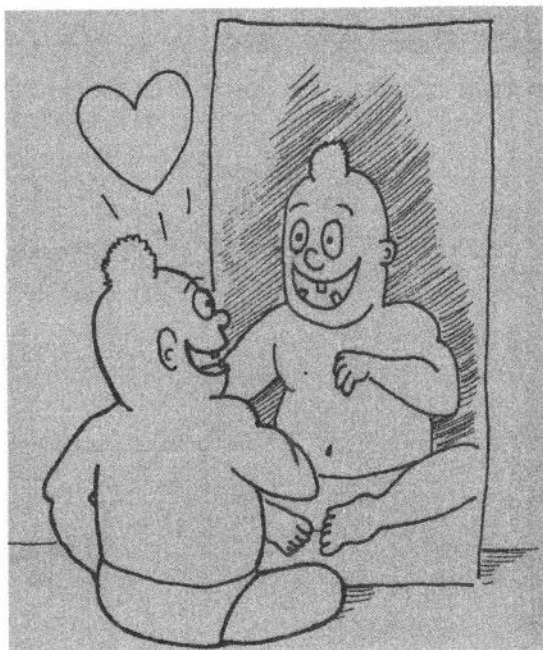
Desire inhabits the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Throughout, the Lacanian slogan, DESIRE IS THE DESIRE OF THE OTHER, is valid. The infant desires the mother, and desires to be desired by her, and desires what she desires. It wants to complete her and fill her lack.

Well, so what is it that the mother desires? (Is this a version of Freud's old question?)



Lacan tells us that the mother desires "the phallus" (not to be confused with the penis—the phallus is rather the SIGN of distinction between the sexes and at the same time of wholeness and the power wholeness would bestow). Therefore the infant desires the phallus and desires to be the phallus. As we saw, this comes down to desiring a perfect (but impossible) union with the mother. But the father, or rather his law (the Law of the Father is a SIGNIFIER, not a person) prevents this. Enter "the Oedipus." But we are moving too fast.

Before the child can enter into the Imaginary and the Symbolic, it must first be able to distinguish between itself and the Other. The moment of this recognition is what Lacan calls THE MIRROR STAGE. Here, between six and eighteen months, the child identifies itself in terms of the image it sees of itself in a mirror. There are, of course, cultures without mirrors, but the stage exists there too. Says Lacan:



THE CHILD WHO STRIKES ANOTHER  
SAYS THAT HE HAS BEEN STRUCK;  
THE CHILD WHO SEES ANOTHER  
FALL CRIES

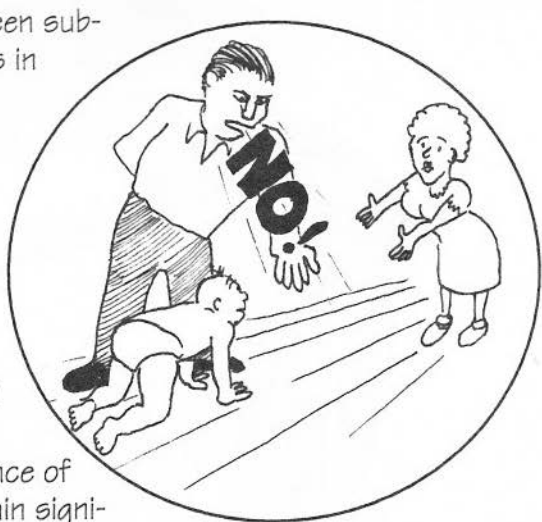


This inability to distinguish between subject and object, self and image, is in most respects corrected by the acquisition of language or the entry into "the SYMBOLIC."

Lacan's "symbolic" encompasses language but is more than language. It is the whole set of signs, linguistic and otherwise, that comprises the institutional life of human culture. Entering

that world requires the acceptance of systematic prohibition whose main signifier is what Lacan calls THE-NAME-OF-THE-

FATHER (which in French allows the pun, the-No-of-the-Father/the-Name-of-the-Father [*le-non-du-pere/le-nom-du-pere*]). This, then, is the "Oedipal drama," for, as we saw, the main prohibition must be that of the infant's union with its mother.



(Remember, Freud had used the term "Oedipus complex" to designate what for him was a biological propensity— though it only became biological at the moment of the "primordial patricide," when in some Lamarckian way it became incorporated into the human genetic structure—for the child to be erotically attracted to the parent of the opposite sex and hostile to the parent of the same sex. The mythical Oedipus had, after all, killed his father and married his mother.)

Lacan says:

IT IS IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER  
THAT WE MUST RECOGNIZE THE  
SUPPORT OF THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION  
WHICH, FROM THE DAWN OF HISTORY,  
HAS IDENTIFIED HIS PERSON  
WITH THE FIGURE OF THE LAW.



If we add to this Lacan's Saussurean radicalism..



...we see that this SIGNIFIER generates a whole symbolic world of prohibition, repression, alienation and impossible desire, for the sign has "murdered the thing," as one Lacanian has said. It must also be said that this "murder" has produced everything that is great in human culture.

### **A FINAL ASIDE: Lacan's replacement of biology with linguistics**

(e.g., his replacement of "the penis" with "the phallus," and his replacement of "the Primal Father" with "the-Name-of-the-Father") has made psychoanalysis a possible science for feminists, having lifted the onerous burden of Freud's "anatomy is destiny," but feminist philosophers and theorists are divided on the result. The critics say that we are liberated from a sexist biologism, but we are still constrained within an equally constrictive and unchanging patriarchal Symbolic Order—that of the Law of the Father.

