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Between the Subject and the Social: Signifying Images of Desire and Ideological Subjectivities

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Desire and the Subject

I worship the power of these lovely two,
With that adoring love known to so few,
'Tis indeed a miracle, one must feel,
That two such heavenly creatures are real.
(*Heavenly Creatures*, 1984)

For a subject desire has the important function of metaphorically structuring and motivating ideas and experiences. Because for Lacan desire is always unconscious, it is not easy to recognise or articulate. Desire and its recognition are intimately and constitutively bound within the confines of the symbolic, those areas of life which are carved up by language and which regulate desire. Although language is necessary towards making sense of desire it is insufficient given that desire refuses specificity to any act, object or other

subject. Thus desire can be demonstrated only through symptomatic metonymy and metaphors. Words become both barriers to and vehicles for the subject to make sense of him/herself as a subject of desire. The act and indeed the art of sense making through language is what motivates the subject most of all. Sense making entails not only possessing language but also having enough of it to utilise. Žižek approaches such sense making within the Lacanian Real - the domain, he argues, where film is ontologically located (in Fiennes, 2006). The designation of the social is inscribed by its relation to the unconscious. At this juncture desire can be understood by approaching language with unique spontaneity which is not bound within the delusions of romantic self expression and which is beyond the concept of the ego.

Through an intersection of Žižek's troubling ideology with film, this paper focuses on how demonstrations of desire might be recognised, articulated and (re)configured for the contemporary social subject. By this I mean, how the psychic and the social might conflate so as to reveal existing or maybe new anxieties and symptoms based on past nostalgia crucial to understanding subjective experiences in the present.

Žižek's critical return to ideology provides a challenge to the current post-ideological climate of opinion. He asserts that any enunciation, declaration or act is deeply embedded within an ideological concealment. The function of such concealment is powerful when engaging with the moral subject and with the guilt which is consequent to its engagement of unreasonable desires. The act itself and the concealment of it both work because the social is, for Žižek, the site of the big Other. Ideological construct symbolise and inform the gaze from which the subject views him/herself. Conversely an absence of declaration or the refraining from an act is also within ideological bounds. And it is at this point that Žižek alerts us not to be fooled by a non declaration in the guise of resistance to ideology, since passivity is not necessarily a transgressive act. Rather it is the feigning of resistance within another ideological misrecognition which reveals subjective disavowal, because subjective enjoyment of ideology and its failings are somewhat permissible, even if this appears as unconventional and hostile (Butler, 2005: 4; Žižek, 2010). For Žižek such appearance is how ideology can structure how the unconscious might be revealed in everyday objects:

> [T]he act of communication is an act itself, since the meaning of each act of communication is also to reflexively assert that it is an act of communication. This is the first thing to bear in mind about the way the unconscious operates: it is not hidden in the wheelbarrow [which is used to mobilise objects] it is the wheelbarrow"[1] (Žižek, 2006: 21).

Žižek conceptualises ideology as a reflexive subjective declaration, in which "[e]ven the most down-to-earth objects and activities always contain such a declarative dimension, which constitutes the ideology of everyday life" (2006: 16). To illustrate this point, Žižek draws upon different functions and styles of toilets. How a country literally deals with shit – an amusing

albeit pragmatic metaphor for the so-called but unavoidable unpleasantness the subject produces - can provide an intriguing counterpoint for an ideological disposition (2006: 17):

> In a traditional German toilet, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush water is up front, so that shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of any illness; in the typical French toilet the hole is far to the back, so that shit may disappear as soon as possible, finally; the American toilet presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two oppose poles – the toilet basin is full of water, so that shit floats in it, visible, but not to be inspected.

Such an engagement with how toilets are designed and function also offer an insight into the structure of the subject. Žižek furthers his ontology of ideology by claiming that we are not only bound within ideology, but are perverse subjects of it. In the domain of fantasy, we as subjects try to occupy the space of the big Other in an effort to maintain the captivity of the big Other, a position asserted by Lacan (1977: 185):

> Strictly speaking, perversion is an inverted effect of the phantasy. It is the subject who determines himself as an object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity ... It is in so far as the subject makes himself the object of another will that the sado-masochistic drive not only closes up, but constitutes itself... the sadist himself occupies the place of the object, but without knowing it, to the benefit of another, for whose jouissance he exercises his action as sadistic pervert.[2]

When recounting the split subject as pervert, Žižek draws on Lacan's definition of perversion. Discourses around violence and vulnerability are ideologically constructed and constitute an imaginary social bond from which the split subject simultaneously engages and disengages. Proponents of neoliberalist ideology framed notions of innovation, independence and competition as individualised and naturalised (Ward, 2012: 3). The perverse subject of neoliberalism imagines subjectivities based on notions of freedom, individualism and expression as Treanor asserts (2005: unpaginated):

> We are here for the market, and you should compete. Neo-liberals tend to believe that humans exist for the market, and not the other way around: certainly in the sense that it is good to participate in the market, and that those who do not participate have failed in some way. In personal ethics, the general neoliberal vision is that every human being is an entrepreneur managing their own life, and should act as such. Moral philosophers call this a virtue ethic, where human beings compare their actions to the way an ideal type would act - in this case the ideal entrepreneur. Individuals who choose their friends, hobbies, sports, and partners, to maximise their status with future employers, are ethically neoliberal.

The concept of neoliberalism provides a descriptive metaphor for a type of laissez-faire market economy from which materialism and neo-individualist ideals are promoted. Nevertheless it is the coercive market and social forces which provide a type of unreflexive enjoyment or jouissance for the subject. Where neoliberalism's pragmatism fails is that its

answers to philosophical quandaries are not succinct and manifest as 'not enough' for the subject. There has to be more, thus the imaginary status of ideology, neoliberal or otherwise, is important for both its sustainment and for the recognition of its limitations.

> Stephen Frosh eloquently states, "behind every action is a wish, behind every thought an unreasonable desire" (2002: p. 17). This glimmer of unreasonableness is seductive and possesses a logic of its own. Its composition is synchronous with fantasy and the temporality of language. Žižek (2002, p. 47) insists that it is fantasy which teaches us how to desire. Implicit in this claim is a return to a psychopathology of everyday life and that everyday objects, experiences and relations have an ontology to be pondered and explored.

Žižek surrounds himself with numerous examples of popular culture, people and artefacts: Hollywood films, political and religious figures, seeming social misfits and intellectual elite. For him such people and their actions reveal the ideological underpinnings which serve to obscure and distract people from identifying that which subsumes them. Desire for Žižek is not natural and "one is taught to desire" (in Fiennes, 2006). He embraces an ontological decisiveness of desire which he maintains ought to be interrogated by the subject. For Lacan, the experience of human desire is linked to non-satisfaction, which implies that one desires that which is unattainable or absent. To keep desire alive, one needs to prevent its fulfilment and/or to keep the unreasonableness of desire at bay. Nevertheless, this contradiction as a logic of desire is an important one for the motivation of the subject to cultivate what Copjec (1994) terms, literacy in desire. Only with distance and in the search for these objects, people and experiences which offer the promise of satisfaction, can desire be linked closely to various social phenomena, which include the experience of love, the cultivation of memories and participation in consumption. Žižek qualifies the film projector as providing a critical lens through which to observe and interrogate the pleasures and horrors of our social and subjective experiences. Film not only has the functions of reflecting and legitimising social life, but also of capturing how signifying structures of desire are constituted and reproduced through the cinematic lens (Diken & Laustsen, 2008). For Žižek, to track and even disrupt the zeitgeist is to follow the movie camera. It provides an apparatus for viewers to be reflexive detectives, or subjects-supposed-to-know and pay close and critical attention to the world they inhabit. The function of the detective (or an analyst of the social) for Žižek is to uncover the truth as posited by the 'murderer' (Parker, 2004: 71). The murder is a metaphor for any social transgression or, assumingly worse, any act of social obedience. The detective's job is to look at the appearance of things and situations to uncover details and thus highlight meaning, or more poignantly, meaninglessness. Žižek explores this problem of looking deeper without being blinded by what one is looking at (1992: 51):

> What we must do is translate objects back into words, replace things by words designating them. In a rebus, things literally stand for their names, for their signifiers.

The function of subject-supposed-to-know is important and necessary to conjure the symptom. However what is it that one is necessarily supposed-to-know? Žižek maintains it is "the true meaning of our act, the meaning visible in the very falseness of the appearance" (1992: p. 57). Part of this can lie in the seemingly insignificant or unquestioned details of everyday life where desire is ever present but unable to be clearly recognised. This kind of realisation assumes that the notion of desire is far more complicated and subversive than just merely keeping objects, people or experiences at a distance in order to ensure its survival. For Lacan desire is dependent on the propositions that one does not attain what one wants, that one does not even know what it is that is desired in the first place, that one does not recognise oneself as a desiring being because one is a split subject, or put more succinctly, one is a subject of a signifier. Žižek (1992) seizes on this conceptualisation and reconfigures it with an ideological twist: a subject that enters the dimension of desire rejects an ethical stance and accepts her or his fate. The unconscious, that which structures desire, is in tension with the ideological determinants which inform how one ought to desire.

As Žižek continually asserts, the viewer is taught *how to* desire (in Fiennes, 2006) through experiencing the many impressions of desire film can offer. The ongoing speculation of desire can for the subject manifest as an on-going state of non-satisfaction; that is, the structures which constitute the promise of desire remain unfulfilled and are either terminated or remain in a constant state of crisis (Kristeva, 1995). Thus the process of anticipating desire maintains the postponement of its' fulfilment. As Žižek (in Fiennes, 2006) suggests, "it is not whether our desires are satisfied or not", it is that our desires manifest as an anticipation of discovering what they actually might be. Thus understood desire is experienced tacitly as ongoing embodied and social phenomena.

Lacanian psychoanalysis brings subjective desire via the *objet a* - that is, the cause of our desires - into existence through the field of language and the function of speech. The demonstration of desire is through what is known as the symptom. Ian Parker (2004: 69) in his critical discussion on Žižek's ontology provides a concise conceptualisation of the symptom as what is in place for the subject when something is not working. The function of the symptom is that it provides such a productive and successful disguise from discomfort that the problem which necessitates the symptom in the first place seems to disappear

for the subject. Consequently the subject learns to enjoy their symptom. The injunction to enjoy and even love one's symptom, Žižek passionately declares is more than merely over-identification with the symptom. Rather, Žižek insists that in risking interrogation of the beloved symptom, one can truly confront and problematise the need for subjective difference and the function of fantasy (Parker, 2004; Žižek, 2006). The function of fantasy here is twofold – colloquially, of staging a scene for the subject as well as forming desire via the objet *a*, which is often in dramatic conflict with conscious imaginings. For Žižek, the objet *a* is the object of ideology and "holds the subject in place in fantasy" (in Parker, 2004: 86). Not only does this juncture establish an ideological link with Lacanian psychoanalysis, but also captures what could be considered the limit of the clinic through an insertion with the social.

Metaphors, which demonstrate the symptom, provide what Lacan terms as *point de capiton*[3]; these reflect the social and cultural reference co-ordinates that give desire its conceptual and symbolic meanings. These anchoring points have the function of holding together signifiers and concepts (Parker 2004: 70) within the domain of the symbolic meaning. Such reference points though identifiable to some extent are illusive, fantasmatic and mythical. In the context of such signifying moments, subjects are caught between the Real of their desires and the struggle to articulate the metaphors of desire set against specific *point de capiton* from which ideological enunciations take place*,* such as turbulent social landscapes of advancing technologies, economic uncertainty, subjective and cultural trauma, the cultivation of memories, the disillusionment of nostalgia and the contemporary condition of being a subject.

In order to examine desire as a social phenomenon using film as a reflexive tool with which to derive social knowledge, I facilitated five focus groups[4] where participants viewed and discussed *Heavenly Creatures* (1994). *Heavenly Creatures* offers an interpretation of an actual incident of matricide in Christchurch in 1954 by depicting two of the protagonists' violent and symbolic struggles with their desire to resist the dominant conservative New Zealand cultural milieu. All research participants live in New Zealand and many of them were raising families and working during what can be considered "the golden age of capitalism" in the 1970's (Ward, 2012: 1).

In focus groups the intersection of film and the social fosters talk that explores metaphors of desires as being contingent on complex and disordered social and ideological systems. Film acts as a construction and projection of desire and is reflected in how participants relate to the film to unfold their own understandings of desire. The role of fantasy is crucial and participant's speech is very much on the side of the Imaginary – a recounting of desire as what was, and still is in part, longed for[5]. It is revealed in discussions that the signification of the maternal as subject-supposed-to-know and the depiction of the paternal as incompetent are privileged, as participants facilitate a critical and reflective exploration of the multiple meanings and negotiation of such metaphors of desire throughout their lifetimes.

Film and Ideology: Casting the Shadow of the Real

Heavenly Creatures can be considered a feminist horror film set in predominately conservative 1950's New Zealand. Director Peter Jackson constructed the film, "so that viewers could get into the murderer's minds; could experience their feelings and share their fantasies" (in Watson, 1994: 15). The film tracks the fantasmatic structure of the murderer's shared fantasy world which leads to them murdering one of their mothers whom they perceived as threatened by their friendship and wanting to keep them apart. They murdered her by repeatedly hitting her on the head with a brick in a stocking.

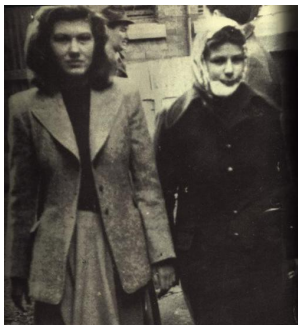
Generally speaking New Zealand films reveal much about dislocation and alienation within New Zealand society. Vast isolated space depicted in many New Zealand films provide metaphors of barren beauty, where horror and unease are sensed but just out of grasp.1950's New Zealand has been described as conservative, conformist or more poignantly "suffocatingly dull" (in Neill, 1995). New Zealanders of this time were mindful of their isolation; thus adventures, exploration and the promise of freedom were considered to occur outside the decency which underpinned the pervasive conservativism of the time. *Heavenly Creatures* reveals a foreboding unease around what it meant to be a New Zealander during this time. The big Other - the romantic 1950's nostalgia redolent of English and European cultural artefacts which found their way to New Zealand people - in many ways offered a seductive sense of difference. This is the most successful aspect of *Heavenly Creatures*. The film eloquently exposes that which Žižek posits as the big Other, "the field of etiquette, social rules and manners" (1992: 71) as simultaneously idyllic and horrific sites for sense making and the construction of fantasy. The illusions the teenage murderers - Juliet and Pauline - co-construct do not mask the realities of the social milieu of Christchurch, rather their steadfast upholding of their fantasmatic Fourth World – where elevated classes are revered and ruthless, and there is a distinct lack of social mobility – reveals the regulations and structures of social realities they both exist within and simultaneously resist. The Fourth World – a fantasy world staged by fanciful colloquial desires of becoming famous and revered in Hollywood and signified by the obsessive characterisations of saints in shared diaries - could not *exist* as such without their resistance to the ideological conditions of the time. And furthermore the murder of the mother - Honora Parker - would have no ontological status without their demonstrating the tension between fantasy and reality. The Fourth World relied on role playing to exist, as did their daily life in Christchurch. Žižek (1992: 74) unpacks the tension between the social ideological mandate and subjective appearances:

> By 'pretending to be something' by 'acting as if we were something' we assume a certain place in the intersubjective symbolic network and it is this external place that

defines our true position. If we remain convinced, deep within ourselves that ‘we are not really that’, if we preserve an intimate distance towards ‘the social role we play’, we doubly deceive ourselves. The final deception is that social appearance is deceitful, for in the social-symbolic reality things are ultimately precisely what they pretend to be.

During the 1950’s, New Zealand’s most successful and popular artefacts was cinema and the film industry. *Heavenly Creatures* depicts the fascination New Zealander’s of the time had with film, as a way of escaping the mundane day to day existence and to experience alternative cultures, ideas and landscapes.

The longing to be somewhere else features heavily in the film, transforming the girls’ perceptions of themselves and of the society in which they live into possibilities of something else more exotic and seductive. To isolated New Zealanders the rest of the world appeared tantalising and irresistible. This global presence frames much of the important rhetoric of film during the 1950’s in that it provides a way to imagine and experiment with a disinvestment in parochial ideologies of the time.



The Parker Hulme case had a significant impact on Christchurch and wider New Zealand society. It was shocking that two teenage girls murdered one of their mothers for the unrealistic reason of escaping to Hollywood to become film stars. Such a radical act for a seemingly selfish and flippant longing only fuelled unsubstantiated gossip of lesbianism, paganism, lust and evil. Peter Graham (2011: 1), author of *So Brilliantly Clever* (a chronology of the Parker Hulme case) recounts his memories of being a child in Christchurch in the year of the murder:

> ... I was seven years old. I don't remember hearing about the murder or the trial... It would seem my parents hid the news of the vicious killing from my sister and me: such protection of young minds was normal in those days. Matricide by teenage girls was then an exceedingly rare crime, as it is still. The killing of Honora Parker, not to mention the talk of a lesbian relationship between the girls, would have made deeply distressing reading for parents everywhere.

During the discussion groups Graham's sentiment was echoed by those research participants who were children at the time of the Parker Hume case in 1954. What became apparent was that Christchurch during this time offered a moderate degree of social mobility as described by Watson (1994:16):

> The class structure in New Zealand is not as clear cut as it is in Europe... In New Zealand the aristocracy is not conspicuous and the working class aspires to, and may attain, many of the privileges of the middle class. However there are class distinctions that citizens of New Zealand can recognise, even if foreign audiences might miss them, and it is to Christchurch that one would look for the most obvious manifestation.

Heavenly Creatures depicts the much revered authority figure, such as the girl's fathers, Professor Hulme and Mr Rieper as incompetent, somewhat misguided and absorbed within early neoliberal and protestant continuum – hard work, obedience and focus will inevitably pay off - partly in response to their class consciousness. Reflectively and sympathetically the film also locates the same authority figures as trapped within a time and place from which they longed to be differentiated. This troubled reflection of precarious subjectivities is what

makes *Heavenly Creatures* so unique and confrontational around framing the subject of desire. These men are living uneasily, incongruously, vicariously and somewhat innocently, though acutely aware of their authoritative and patriarchal positions. For Professor Hulme it is the pressure to appear omniscient in the face of scathing scepticism and for Mr Rieper, it is the confrontation of the undoing of the family structure he upholds and cherishes. In viewing such loss of the dominant gaze of the patriarch, participants are confronted with a fundamental question of the desire-lack game – can others recognise the *real* object of my desire?

Žižek maintains that people live in an ideological matrix of symbolic authority – a sort of false consciousness in that the subject "knows very well what he is doing, but he is nonetheless doing it" (1998: 1000). This entails the functioning of the self in society and spectre of ideology within a wider moral order. The state of subjective disavowal is not a contemporary phenomenon and nor is it necessarily misguided or delusional. It provides a somewhat 'cynical' protective space from which the subject can knowingly follow their illusions (Parker, 2004: 89). Such disavowal maintains the moral subject as central to the political and ideological systems of the time. It also allows a certain subjective malleability and retreat from which belief and ideals can be morally enunciated, though not entirely followed through. A cynical disposition highlighting a loss of faith is an important cultural diagnosis: in contemporary times this critical consciousness extends to the neoliberal gaze in which every aspect of society, including the production of knowledge and ideas can be measured against discourses of *investment*. Given that ideological systems belie the perception of unity for a subject, it seems that there is space for the subject to reflect and resist such ideological values, even if disillusionment entails abject despair. More specifically to *Heavenly Creatures* it is only the threat of death – not only the death of the subject but of potential subjectivity – which paradoxically offers potential freedom for the subject. For Juliet and Pauline, that which is forbidden and would solve the isolation is just out of grasp. The "suffocating dullness" of being a subject in 1950's New Zealand is punctuated by flashes of what it could be like to attain subjective freedom and transformation. The murdered mother, whom they perceive as ought to know their plight, does little in their eyes to facilitate their transformation into more unified subjects – which for them is to remain together.

Che Voi?: The Desiring Subject

What is meant by the 'subject'? Žižek (in Pluth, 2007: 85) understands the subject as situated within two modalities: on the one hand he describes it as "a kernel of being", however he also maintains the subject must be structured by fantasy with respect to how it consciously thinks of itself. So Žižek is using the term both in a traditional Lacanian way – the subject is one that is structured by language (that is, without language, there is no subject) and also by using it to refer to fantasy as harbouring the *truth* of the subject. The function of fantasy here is complex and challenging to articulate given that the subject is confronted with differences between identities (that is, the images a conscious individual has of his/herself) and their unconscious desires. In this way the subject is compelled to be disruptive, irreducible, inconsistent and desiring.

The locality of desire for the Lacanian subject is a contentious and precarious position because for desire to be recognised as such, it simultaneously engages lack and trauma, from which the *objet a* is conceptualised. Pleasure seeking and identity are constructed and constrained around traumatic encounters, which engage both the subjective and social domains. The complex social process of *becoming* a subject (that is, a subject of language) reveals how psycho subjective encounters are structured as ideological. How one positions both oneself and one's desires are always in relation to that which one seeks to realise through language. In this way, words inevitably fail, despite the subject's struggle for articulation and refusal to be silent.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis the mother is the first experience of lack. The child wants the mother to desire only them, posing the rhetorical question, *'Che voi?*' – a question directed to the Other; what do you want from me? (Lacan, 1977) More pertinently the motivation for this question transposes to, *how can I be the desire for You*? Or, *what do you desire*? At this juncture desire can be understood as something that can both free one from and harness one to the determination to the Other. The Other has the function of signifying desires for the subject which make visible the possibility for a subject to be recognised linguistically, and biologically as having a sense of place, of belonging and of representation. Lacan theorises desire as *what does the Other want?*, which is a question specifically directed at the Other.


Desire, then, can be considered akin to a kind of subjective freedom, albeit freedom at a cost in that desire galvanises one's subjection to the Other (Pluth, 2007: 63). This is because desire comes about from realising that the location for the Other is unstable – that is, the Other does not return our desire to be desired by it. In this way desire is ambiguous – the subject seeks recognition, but at the same time resists it in order to maintain individuation from the Other. The Other, always the Phallus, manifests as metaphors and metonymises in many objectified guises and status. These Symbolic objects simultaneously occupy the void of desire and motivate it through the object's ultimate recognition of eventual unsatisfaction. It is at this juncture where the Symbolic and Imaginary are interrelated.

What results from the realisation that one is separated from the object of desire is a mobilising force within one's lifespan. The struggle for recognition for the most true life choices, the most enlightened and beautiful consciousness is an illusion which structures desire. The subject fully engages with the object of its desire, attempting to occupy the space of a contentless, though constitutive void (Copjec, 1994). The experience of desire is nonetheless intensely social; shaped and understood as sets of complex encounters between the subject and the social, from which desire can be recognised and potentially articulated within the order of fantasy. According to Žižek (2006: 9) the role of understanding fantasy as ideologically structured is crucial in both constituting and understanding subjective desire. Fantasy makes desire possible, and both mediate and structure this process via empirical objects. Lacan writes that "fantasy is the support of desire" (1977: 185). One can conceive ideas of reality as being structured around mediation between what is articulated from both internal experience and external influence. This process of mediation is fully fixed in neither the social nor the subjective domains, making an exploration of desire transcend any one concept of reality. Thus fantasy has the important function of preparing the subject for desire (Pluth, 2007: 8).

Confrontations with Possible Subjectivities: The Real of Desire

One of the most enduring features of *Heavenly Creatures* is that it does not close desire down. The opening and closing scenes of the film resonate with abject loss, the unknowable horror from which desire appears most potent. During participant discussions the maternal gaze is signified as an idealised, though misguided image. Participants symbolically and metaphorically mobilise images the film projects to discuss intimate feelings, emotions, un-fulfilment and experiences of wanting and belonging. They highlight examples of subversive and overt forms of resistance to social repressions and patriarchal orders they have felt subjected to, as well as attempting to negotiate positions of power. Though the film depicts the horrific conclusion whereby Juliet and Pauline reach no subjective solace in their crime, participants experience the film as transformative. Engendered by the traumatic Real, the film serves as a symbolic intervention which dispenses with notions of subjective wholeness and integration, exposing a gap in which participants consciously connect the Symbolic and the Imaginary. The struggle of recognising and articulating desire enables participants to identify with the maternal gaze as both a subjective and political instrument. The object of the m(O)ther represents social and ideological structures of desire which are in tension with subjective autonomy. Honora Parker, the murdered mother is an image of devoted domesticity, though it is revealed that she gave ground to her sexual desires when she had an affair with Mr Rieper (Pauline's father) who was at the time married to another woman. The price for this act, though fifteen years prior, is melancholia – her unnameable sadness precipitated by the loss of her daughter through the inability to connect with her - and ultimately death.

The original desire, that of the m(O)ther, functions as a vehicle by which metaphors of desire evoke the cause of one's desire, the *objet a*. During the film participants immerse themselves in 'active spectatorship' (Lebeau, 1995: 38) whereby they consciously perceive the screen as a mirror for attempting to recognise and articulate desire. The gaze of the maternal provides an ideological construction of and for the subjects as they identify how desire and subjectivities are represented for them. By depicting the murder of the m(O)ther

this film reproduces trauma and desire simultaneously as ideological investments. The dimension of negotiating subjective autonomy in restrictive contexts is a theme in the film which participants identify with. Participants articulate their anxiety when identifying with both the potential and failure of the maternal gaze within the film and as they reflect on their lived experiences.

Here a participant attempts to locate herself at the point of her own gaze as she describes her past anxiety of desiring to be a mother in the shadow of pervasive social messages that she might be too old to do so:

> I remember really wanting children.. and I was quite old before I had one. I just remember, just knowing, that I wanted to have children in my life... I can remember when [her husband] and I were first together and I suppose we were trying to get pregnant. And I remember thinking that I wouldn't be able to because I was 35.. maybe I couldn't have a child. And I can remember listening to a program about.. on the radio.. about children and pregnancy and giving birth and so on and just becoming very very distressed. But shortly after that I found out I was pregnant, so it changed.. it [the distress] passed. But just this feeling that I so wanted to have a baby and maybe I couldn't. Everything that came in was reminding me of that.. it wasn't there.. it wasn't happening. I found that very hard to handle. Thanks goodness I didn't have to live the rest of my life like that. I don't know how I would have been if I hadn't children.. I've no idea.. .

One male participant who was a child growing up in Christchurch during the 1950's described being placed in the role of the love object for his mother at a young age, the gaze being instigated by his father – an experience the participant describes as being extremely oppressive:

> Participant 1: With my father leaving home, he wanted me to become a substitute for him..
> Participant 2: To your mother?
> Participant 1: Yes.
> Participant 2: So that's why you felt very.. tied to your mother's apron strings? You were the man of the house?
> Participant 1: Yes. I was encouraged to call my mother 'dear' or 'darling' as he did.

Another participant, a mother of two young children exemplifies her anxiety at identifying the potential failure of the maternal gaze which she consciously embodies:

> It's very hard. It [the film] just reminded me actually with Pauline's [one of the murderers] mother [the murdered mother], you know when she was, she was crying. She was so, you know... unhappy. She obviously felt so unhappy that her daughter was so unhappy. And that she was unable to give her what she wanted. That is really poignant. I feel that all the time with my girls!

There is a risk that in the everyday course of life that that which holds up symbolic meanings, identifications and specificity produced by the big Other, can erupt or disintegrate. This transformation, Žižek (1992: 77) goes to suggest "has nothing to do with irrational spontaneity: it is the big Other that produces the change". Recognising this occurrence a subject's status to the *objet a* shifts as Žižek (1992: 75) suggests:

> As long as the subject is attached to this feature, we are faced with a charismatic, fascinating, sublime figure; as soon as this attachment is broken the figure is deflated.

The recognition that one always carries a blind spot designates an anxious and reflexive assertion. A subject is structured by this blind spot and the displacement of the love object. What is desired is a new perspective, another space whereby the subject can see their own blind spot. Žižek terms this the parallax view: "I myself am included into the picture constituted by me" (2006: 243). The maternal desire is such that one wants to grasp the whole reality, with the specificity that the image of the m(O)ther embodied by the self is directly in the picture. Integral to the parallax view is the necessary supplement of materialism, objects which account for the subject being enunciated. Žižek (2006: 243-244) states that the contours of subjective experience "only exist – its presence can only be discerned – when the landscape is viewed by a certain perspective". The image of the m(O)ther for the embodied mother is hard to pin down, it eludes the subjective experience of *being* a mother, the desire for ideological difference from which experience is expected to extend beyond appearances. This fantasy identification of desire moving beyond an object and towards a transcendence of symbolic reality reflects a specific social condition of the authority of the m(O)ther as a presumably stable response to ideological repression – one ought to always rely on the mother for a more plausible self direction and construction. The failure of this ideological image is a devastating loss for both the embodied mother and the child. More so as what is revealed through a confrontation with this loss is that the embodied mother is also a split subject.

Negotiating Proximity: Alienated and Disavowed Subjectivities

Participants reconfigure their understanding of desire within a collective social Other which constitutes and reinforces not only potential neoliberal subjectivities, but also a somewhat fraught belief in these which could be tantamount to ideological conviction. The socially discursive conditions which fetishise independence, self sufficiency, and moral surveillance spar with a recognition that these are far from ideal and serve to reinforce subjective lack.

The perverse subject is highly reflexive (Sharpe & Boucher, 2010: 156) and as such does not engage in hystericisation. Rather, the cynical disposition which structures perversion provides an elasticity by which the subject can test the limits of discourse of the symbolic authority. The act of negotiating subjectivities can be considered a perverse one as it is deeply complicit in the ideological substance of the time. Moreover the conditions of modern society foster a more generalised perversion. Such is the case that we are all perverse as a result of the social and political conditions in which we exist. Participants in this research were both in the position of the hysteric by being encouraged to speak freely and also in the position of the pervert by being urged to interpret, reflect and be analysts of both the social and subjects of ideology.

Nearly sixty years on from the murder, viewing participants' of *Heavenly Creatures* articulate signifiers of desire as embodied within the cultural gaze of the m(O)ther. In this context spoken recognition of the m(O)ther can be considered a complex trans-subjective encounter which is neither fully articulated nor separated from ideologies of neoliberal moral and individual autonomies. When attempting to articulate desire one becomes entangled with the figure of the m(O)ther as well as with the possibility of remaining separated from it.

Many participants and indeed others with whom I have spoken about my research have experienced a sense of alienation as portrayed in *Heavenly Creatures*. One participant states:

> I think at a certain time in your life... perhaps when you're a child or a young person, you begin to have... maybe it's the first stirrings of soul, when you feel that there is something that you definitely don't like or things perhaps in your family or where you are, you suddenly have yearnings for something different. Or it might be the parents of some friends. Umm.. but you see parts perhaps in other families.. that 'something' that you would like. I can remember the mothers of some of my friends calling them darling and they would... And I never had that. I would think how lovely that was. So it was the first stirrings of things... things that you would love to have. And that is good because you are beginning to learn what you want and what's important to you.

Participants go on to describe alienation resulting from fragmented social conditions as portrayed in *Heavenly Creatures*. When reflecting upon notions of intimacy and friendship in this film, participants are both unsettled and reassured by the evolution of Pauline and Juliet's relationship and their shared fantasies. The function of alienation as promising

freedom is not lost on participants. The murder of the mother enlists participants' sympathies understood as both utterly devastating and misguided. However the murder signifies a type of subjective justice and a relentless need to preserve the uniqueness of the cherished friendship and choices, values and subjectivities it affords. After all it seems that Pauline and Juliet represent the big Other for each other – and who wants to be separated from any, even an illusionary experience of subjective wholeness? However as the bond between the girls intensifies the intrusive and increasingly anxious m(O)ther is developing more volume than the friendship. Thus the moral mother has to be silenced – after all what is socially permissible is for the girls inadequate and therefore not desirable.


It is obvious that neither Juliet nor Pauline enjoyed existing in 1950's Christchurch. For reasons that differ for each of them, it doesn't feel like home, so much so that their Fourth World becomes a fantasy space which is nurtured and cherished which offers the glimpse of subjective difference within a context of increasing alienation. This alienation as portrayed in the film is not lost on participants, with one stating:

> My life's pretty lonely. Like, almost intensively so. And no one knows that really. Because people think I am around people all the time. And I am. But it doesn't plug any kind of gap... as I said, I am Catholic, so that is problematic for me, or became problematic during my teenage years, apart from the fact they are complicated years anyway...
>
> Christchurch is a pretty conservative place to be brought up. And the way we express desire as a city is related to the sort of behaviour we are expected to portray... you know... in the workplace, the malls... the way we drink... There's a real repressed nature about the way we are organised. And it is because we are so English as well!

In highlighting desire as a predominant theme in *Heavenly Creatures*, I maintain that cinematic representations *teach* us how to desire, as Žižek asserts, and yet at the same time *tell* us that our desires will never be fulfilled, thus reproducing subjective ambivalence and anxiety, in this case, in response to the maternal gaze. This is a recurring theme in participants' discussions. To engage in any interrogation of human desire means subjects must attempt to cast their gaze towards themselves. This parallax view entails that the split subject is at risk of also becoming its own rival. At this point desire not only occupies a

general category in social life, but also is at tension with ideological demands. *Heavenly Creatures* tantalises viewers by exposing them to and playing with neoliberal ideals of self efficiency, achievement and sustainment, although at the same time resisting the containment of social order, rules and norms which support the practice of such ideals. Participants operate in a state of autonomous disavowal to the perception of the m(O)ther when they are confronted with a most trangressive act – the murder of a mother by her daughter. They are appalled yet relate to how Pauline and Juliet actively resist their lived realities against the messiness of developing into young intelligent women. In doing so, participants engage in a cinematic encounter which unravels multiple meanings of what desire might mean to them. What unfolds during discussions is a tension between the subject's desired formations for self-continuity and something that is unrepresentable and disassembles this self-continuity within the order of desire[6].

The Stocking as Signifier of Moral Femininity

The perverse signifier of the stocking which envelopes the murder weapon is a striking object of this film, as Jennifer Henderson goes on to elaborate (1997 :44).

> Hosiery is a privileged sign of feminine masquerade, of spectacular and erotically-suggestive femininity; in this film it is also simply female underwear, which belongs to a regime of modesty policed by Pauline's working class mother, Honora.

The object of the stocking signifies both the construction and contradiction of 1950's Christchurch femininity and moral order, which favoured the attainment of respectability and maintenance of existing class structures. As one participant who attended an exclusive girl's school in 1950's Christchurch stated:

> I was just thinking that era [1950's] compared with this era [2010]. It was the same when we went to school. We went to Rangi [exclusive girl's school in Christchurch]. It was very similar to how school was depicted in the film. Really, with all the singing in the school hall and the teachers sitting up on stage. It was exactly like that! It was very strict and narrow... Very traditional... it was very... it was almost... it was... it was horrible. Wasn't it? Really.

A more contemporary symptom – articulating the desire for the specificity of ideological difference – is a constant dilemma which can be asserted to reflect a neoliberal hysteria. Herein lies an enormous amount of ambivalence and anxiety for subjects as they vacillate between social conformity and contradiction – one ought to be depoliticised, though obscure and creative; one ought to emphasise independence, though abide by permitted social determinants; one ought to exercise moral coherence, though not be judgemental. And so it goes on. Negotiating constant subjective autonomies within and alongside social and moral mandates and in a context which is not completely transparent to the subject created tensions that are recognised and understood by participants. In the face of constantly changing social conditions subjects are engaged in an array of social contingencies in which they, like Juliet and Pauline, need to improvise and learn autonomy, solidarity and self creation.

As the *point de capiton* of trauma and autonomy, the stocking enveloping the murder weapon acts as a social policing metaphor. The cinematic gaze leading up to the murder is focussed on the stockinged legs and court shoes of Juliet, Pauline and the Mother, Honora as they walk incongruously through muddy Victoria Park against the soundtrack of Puccini's 'Intermezzo' from *Madam Butterfly*. Here we anticipate not only the horror of witnessing something unnameable or as Lacan identifies, "an unthinkable impossibility" (1975, p. 125) but in more symbolic terms, the ideological conditions which structure it: that which seeks to represent modesty, chastity and femininity also produces death; an unrepresentable process that is sacrificed in the hope of foregrounding desire as the fundamental fantasy. This encounter with the traumatic Real offers no illusions to the viewing subject. Rather it brutally confronts the subject with their very lack, their nothingness and the limitations of self consistency and materiality.

Until this point of confrontation with the abyss of desire, viewing participants of the film encountered a range of images which attempt to reveal a nucleus of subjectivity and which also entertain the more fundamental question of what it means to be human. The film casts a dark shadow on the structure of moral identities yet, at the same time, insists that one must subject oneself to personal fictions of love, sexual obsession and self illusion

within the confines of ideological structures and contingencies. Participants feel compelled to highlight such contradictions. On the one hand teenage girls in 1950's Christchurch were being groomed to reproduce the discursive conditions of the time. However there was an insidious culturally fragmented underbelly revealed post murder – Juliet Hulme's father was being fired from Canterbury College and was involved in a relationship whereby his wife's lover was living with them. Pauline's parents were not married and her father had children from a previous marriage which he did not acknowledge. Honara Parker is portrayed in the film as hardworking and devoted to her family and this is acknowledged by participants that the image of the murdered mother as hardworking and devoted to family is more representative of 1950's Christchurch, thus maintaining the illusion of moral, domestic and educational discipline. Yet there persists a longing for some kind of self transformation away from a repressive conservative context and towards a quest, for at times, abandoned novelty. Dissident utterances provide the subject with alternative ideological encounters pitched against the pervading moral conditions. As one participant who grew up in 1950's Christchurch states:

> I was a bit like that [referring to Juliet and Pauline], vivacious and carefree when I was younger – I'd never turn anything down.

At the same time there was evident a deep concern from mother participants regarding the wellbeing and happiness of their children which was in stark contrast to the authoritative domestic position. The dominant ideological construction of the maternal is a cultural figure which is difficult to shake, despite empathy with dissident counter figures, such as Pauline and Juliet. As the same participant goes on to state:

> I do think that being a mother, you are never quite free of the anxiety.....my desires are now for my children to be fulfilled in their lives and to be happy in their lives. And so my desire is not a personal one anymore. Really. And I love being in this world and I am hoping that.. and if I have a desire it would be that I am hanging around for quite some time yet I suppose! That would be my only real desire.

Desire is conceptualised as deeply embedded within a neoliberal ideological condition, though ironically free from social policing and emancipation. The conditions of being a neoliberal subject entail that subjects constantly reflect and reconfigure gendered norms and subjectivities. The moral neoliberal subject is constantly under scrutiny and counter subjectivities are tantalised in order to test the desire for ideological difference.

The significance of the stocking as part of the murder weapon ruptures the much cherished mother-daughter bond and disrupts the profoundly female experience of motherhood as romantic. When thus confronted, participants promptly reconfigure the social image of motherhood in their discussions of desire and surrender to a more contemporary and self producing identity mediated by neoliberal gendered traditions – a good mother is

self sufficient, nurturing, devoted, creative and so on. A good mother is not socially disruptive; rather she repudiates subjective autonomy for the sake of upholding the big Other - the social ideologies of the maternal which are suffused to craft her position.

The film concludes with the murder and forces participants to confront the relationship between desire and trauma as an ideological conundrum. The closing scene where viewers are forced to watch the brutal murder of the mother leaves the viewer with no liberation, no release, only anguish as what is lost and cannot be regained. Juliet and Pauline are separated for life and Pauline is left with no mother. For an ideology which promotes cohesive and unified subjectivity, the consequence of the murder is a neoliberal disaster because viewers are left wishing that the girls did not even attempt to give ground to their desires since good, obedient, moral subjects wouldn't dream of doing so. Victoria Grace (2012: 77) reminds us of Lacan's affecting imperative: "the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire" (1977: 319) as a subjective insistence to resist the moral super-ego:

> Rather than characterising the moral order as one that commands us to renounce the immediacy of our own pleasure for the sake of the wider good, Lacanian psychoanalysis on the contrary proposes an ethic, as moral order or law, as one resulting from our recoil from this cruel and sadistic superegoic injunction that will stop at nothing.

As depicted in *Heavenly Creatures* such subjective coherence to the superego injunction exposes a raw and conflicted underbelly which is undeniably ideological. The problem of the neoliberal subject is the compulsion to resist the moral order imposed on it, inevitably revealing an alienated and dislocated subject. Faced with this unmitigated horror the viewing subject desperately seeks to reunite themselves with fantasies to restore the moral order. Thus the split subject vacillates between pervert and hysteric contingent on the confrontation with the inevitable failing of ideology.


Conclusion

Heavenly Creatures is a beautiful and poignant film which troubles the rationalisation of the moral subject. Part of its success lies in its revelation of how ideology operates at the level of the unconscious. The viewer is entangled in multiple subjectivities, language and desire, to unpack the socio-symbolic space which contextualises a most horrific murder. Although many may choose to believe New Zealand is classless and free, it is an illusion. Freedom is a concept designated and trapped within inconsistent neoliberal beliefs which entail that behaviours and institutions need to be in accordance with them. In some ways the social conditions of Christchurch have not altered dramatically since 1954. As viewers are confronted with the ideological conformities exuded by the so-called quiet and successful middle class, there is the compulsion to partially resist (as did the girls) in order to locate a kind of freedom. This film does not conclude with any character attaining an ideologically, neoliberal or otherwise, unified self, and the facts of the court case which ensued are left for us to read as anecdotal ending credits, as this is not the Real of this story. Characters are portrayed as fragmented and broken and the process of decentring the subject away from traditional authorities merely strengthens the dominant social forms of the 1950's into the present day.

For the contemporary subject the coordinates of neoliberal regulation and self surveillance problematically presupposes the self as an agent of liberty, choice, effectiveness and self realisation. The continual and active process of disavowal simultaneously politicise and depoliticise subjectivities, revealing a possible, albeit horrific, alternative and sublime ideological condition. In particular neoliberal ideologies of the maternal, of creativity and of alienation are for the contemporary subject still constituted by the ill-fitting nostalgic baggage of old subjectivities. And it is within these ideological tensions which offer a glimpse of the Impossible Thing of desire.

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[1]Notes

Here Žižek alerts us of how ideology is enunciated through the most obvious everyday objects when recounting a story: "... a worker suspected of stealing: every evening, when he was leaving the factory, the wheelbarrow he was pushing in front of him was carefully inspected, but the guards could find nothing, it was also ways empty. At last they got the point: what the worker was stealing was wheelbarrows" (2006: 21).

[2] The spelling of phantasy and fantasy within the Lacanian domain appear interchangeable even when, as in most cases authors contextualise phantasy as the fundamental phantasy which has a relationship with the objet *a*.

[3] Also known as the *quilting point* or *anchoring point* where the signifiers and signified are knotted together (Lacan, SIII, 1955-56: 268; Evans, 1996: 149).

[4] The different focus groups consisted of – fathers of teenage daughters, people who were residing in Christchurch at the time of the murder in 1954, those involved in the creative industries and can offer an aesthetic account of the film, those interested in or involved in Buddhism, and young women aged between 18-25.

[5] The unconscious possess no temporal frame – there is no past or future tense.

[6] Participants were unnerved by the recognition of the trauma of their desires during the viewing of the film.