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i'm in love! i'm a believer!:

structures of belief in jonathan glazer's **birth**

TRANSPARENCY & TRANSUBSTANTIATION: RECUPERATING THE VULGARITY OF THE INHERENT TRANSGRESSION

In one sequence from Jonathan Glazer's film *Birth* (2004), the enraged and exasperated fiancé of protagonist Anna suddenly attacks a young boy who, contrary to all rational logic, has declared himself to be the reincarnation of Anna's deceased husband. The sudden and ethereal appearance of the boy, Sean – who shares the dead husband's name – intrudes upon the scheduled (re)marriage of Anna to her fiancé Joseph, who becomes increasingly intolerant of Anna's supernatural and transgressive fixation on the 10-year-old Sean. The aforementioned sequence takes place during a musical salon performance celebrating Anna and Joseph's engagement; having interrupted the performance to strike out at Sean, Joseph rants nonsensically to his shocked guests, "[Sean] doesn't have any clue of how to make something happen. He's living in a land where he's pretending to be something instead of doing the job, and that's the real problem." Does this accusation, in all its ambivalence and absurdity, not precisely express the standard attitude towards belief: the infinite delay of the unpleasant, traumatic truth (God does not exist, nobody truly loves me, Sean is not a supernatural reincarnation but rather a manipulative/deluded little boy) in favour of a vaguely ridiculous and indeed properly 'unbelievable' disavowal which keeps us from 'doing the job' and 'making something happen'?

Before continuing with this particular interrogation of belief, it is necessary to first address the peculiar improbability of such a reading in relation to *Birth* as a text. This film is an exemplary artifact of what theorist Slavoj Žižek identifies as (the post-political liberal incarnation of) our current, permissive society which, in its eagerness to promote tolerance, politically demurs from judgement and reinscribes so-called 'transgressive behaviour' (sexual perversion and openness, cultural subversiveness, and so on) as normal, accepted, and healthy/therapeutic. Given that these formerly censored personal, sexual, and cultural elements currently enjoy some amount of psychic and social forbearance, the proper aim of psychoanalysis in postmodernity involves the analytical recuperation of the repressed or altogether vitiated libidinal matrix of 'normalcy', superficiality, and cultural vulgarity which must now be suppressed in order for the subject to appear appropriately enlightened and unashamed/secure; in revivifying this lost censure, or effectively 'returning the return of the repressed' to its foundation in obscene rituals and rules, psychoanalysis acknowledges that,

everything is turned back to front. Public order is no longer maintained by hierarchy, repression and strict regulation, and therefore is no longer subverted by liberating acts of transgression. Instead, we have social relations among free and equal individuals... [such that] the rigidly codified, authoritarian master/slave relationship becomes transgressive (Žižek 1999 par. 13).

To avoid a problematic misunderstanding: the point here is not that transgression *itself* has become completely integrated in our permissive society and is now sublimated and gentrified to the point of nonexistence, but rather that transgression merely occupies a different place – has reversed modalities, as it were – and has inverted to codify the 'backwards', sexually repressed/repressive Right which refuses to accept or celebrate difference and self-expression.

Accordingly, such attitudes are not only reflected in their historically-situated artworks and cultural artifacts, but in the anticipated and expected *interpretations* of such contemporary texts. This cultural logic emphasizes that the first, basic reading is perpetually inadequate and lacking, classified as vulgar and elementary in lieu of the evolution of secondary and tertiary readings which equate complexity and innovation with a particular variety of readerly transgressiveness. Apropos of the 'false' view/assumption that transgression is a thing of the past, *Birth's* controversial subject matter initially identifies it as a cultural object of permissiveness *par excellence*; in its open display of both taboo intimations of pedophilia and their transparent interpretive ramifications (Anna as the textbook hysteric, themes of doubling and delusion, failed attempts at mourning and their articulation in trauma, and so on), the film engenders – both narratively and analytically – what may be termed a formulaic transgressiveness. This is reflected in critic Greg Smith's assertion that *Birth* "tries so hard to be complicated that it... is ultimately meaningless" (88), and is therefore guilty of essentially vacating its 'first step' – its vulgar, basal reading that is too basic/elementary to account for analytically titillating, perverse permutations. Equally exemplary of this attitude is the enlightened postmodern cynicism which interprets the titles of two Krzysztof Kieslowski films (1988's *A Short Film About Love* and *A Short Film About Killing*) as ironically limited or comically subversive, but which neglects the 'other' truth of the titles apropos of their apparent simplicity: amongst other things, these films are indeed *about* love and killing. Consequently, the project of recuperating this primary reading is distinctly and ironically 'unnatural'; given that the primary

reading is so readily perceived as the foundation from which increasingly abstract secondary accretions emerge, it therefore becomes difficult to conceive of the originary or base interpretation as anything more (or less) meaningful than a site which engenders signification, or a surface upon which some analytical or ideological project is mapped.

This tendency to obfuscate – and, by extension, evacuate – the most elementary readings with their secondary accretions is precisely why I propose a fundamentally regressive approach to Glazer’s *Birth*. Although the ‘vulgarity’ of such an approach does not aim at analytical essentialism (i.e., it does not propose a disclosure of the text’s ‘hidden secret’ through the revelation of its ultimate meaning), its baseness and naïveté nonetheless manifests in an (attempted) recrudescence of the text’s inherent transgressions.¹ However, if a given text is completely open and accessible, both as a subversive cultural artifact and as an ironically transparent object for analysis, how are we to properly access the ‘inherent’ aspect of the inherent transgression? One analytical feature of the inherent transgression involves the assertion that an apparently unassailable prohibition will nonetheless transubstantiate across a text, narratively and stylistically ‘infecting’ it as a necessary byproduct of censorship (consider the delight of the spectator who discovers the excessive sexual proclivities of the apparently gentrified films produced under the Hayes Production Code). However, this understanding of the inherent transgression as a reactionary and rebellious opposition to prohibition/repression/censorship is both incomplete and incorrect; the crucial point not to be missed in this formulation of transubstantiation is the fact that it does not threaten the “system of symbolic domination” (Žižek 2000a 7), but rather supplements it. As Žižek asserts, these perverse byproducts function as the “unacknowledged, obscene support” (*Ibid*) of the Public Symbolic Law, whereby prohibition (apropos of Foucault) exists as a positive “codification and regulation that generate[s] the very excess whose direct depiction it hindered” (*Ibid* 6). Simply stated, nothing properly exists ‘outside’ of the Public Symbolic Law, and nothing escapes assimilation into the domain of the Big Other; even rebellion against this domain is preinscribed (i.e., inherent) as a necessary condition of the Big Other and ideological integration itself.

This popular hypothesis of the inherent transgression and the textual transubstantiation of explicitly forbidden material is certainly unambiguous when applied to texts which are themselves ‘openly repressed’, especially if such prohibition is the result of a governing bureaucratic body (the Hayes Production Code) or a set of repressive sociocultural mandates (the Victorian era). However, if transgression under our current regime of tolerance no longer indexes the outbursts of “subversive motifs repressed by the predominant patriarchal ideology” (*Ibid* 8), then what specific repressed content erupts or transubstantiates in a film such as *Birth* which – as mentioned previously – conceals neither its perverse

¹ Žižek characterizes the ‘inherent transgression’ as a point of ideological inscription or identification which is dependent on its transgression (for example, the unwritten rule dictating that an individual can never properly ‘belong’ to a community until he has broken some of its rules). Far from undermining, exposing, or challenging symbolic authority, such transgression ironically (i.e., inherently) upholds symbolic dominion.



textual tendencies nor its interpretive/analytical adjuncts? Here, it is possible to argue that not only the continued manufacture of such openly transgressive artworks, but also the obligation to interpret them in new and innovative ways, has descended into cultural malaise and dullness. One need only evoke the weariness and boredom with which we currently greet ultraviolent films or ‘shocking’ pornography as cultural objects of analysis, to substantiate Žižek’s comment on the contemporary deadlock of art and sexuality:

Is there anything more dull, opportunistic, and sterile than to succumb to the superego injunction of incessantly inventing new artistic transgressions and provocations (the performance artist masturbating on stage or masochistically cutting himself, the sculptor displaying decaying animal corpses or human excrement), or to the parallel injunction to engage in more and more ‘daring’ forms of sexuality... (2004 par. 6).

Shall we simply read everything in a perpetually perverse inversion, contending that the hidden secret of a transgressive text is the fundamental propriety and conservatism that (apparently) lies at its heart? Although such a reversal is a viable and distinctly Lacanian-Hegelian option,² let us briefly consider another Žižekian articulation of the inherent transgression as the notion that “the very emergence of a certain ‘value’ which serves as the point of ideological identification relies on its transgression, on some mode of taking a *distance* towards it” (1998 3: emphasis mine). It is precisely this invocation of critical distanciation – that is, of *recognition*, or the ability to identify the symbolic point of ideological inscription *as such* – which renders accessible the recuperation of the transparent postmodern text’s ideological controversy or ‘true obscenity.’ As such, it is my contention that a return to the debased, elementary, and properly vulgar ‘first step’ of interpretation is the only means of maintaining the gap between prohibition and codified appearance (the ‘inherence’ of the inherent transgression) which the

² For example, in response to the contemporary postmodern deadlock of art and insubordination, Žižek links cultural and artistic transgressiveness to the demands of the market economy, which must integrate provocation and subversiveness into its establishment logic. Consequently, artistic shock value is subsumed under the rubric of the cultural-economic apparatus, which, “in order to reproduce itself in competitive market conditions, has not only to tolerate but directly to provoke stronger and stronger shocking effects and products” ([The Fragile Absolute: or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?](#) London: Verso, 2000b. 25).

enlightened and radicalized attitude of postmodernity so desperately attempts to close. Alternately, psychoanalysis provides an adequate means of deconstructing the rudimentary/anticipated surface-operations of narrative and interpretive 'conventions', as well as their analogical consequences. Slavoj Zizek posits that,

we can locate the need for psychoanalysis at a very precise point: what we are not aware of is not some deeply repressed secret content but *the essential character of the appearance itself*. Appearances *do* matter... (2000a 6).

Simply stated, the necessary *distance* required by transgression in postmodernity can only be procured through the reader's ironic *proximity* to the cultural object, such that its most superficial characteristics gain a renewed presence as unnatural, improbable, and ultimately transgressive textual supplements.

(MAKE-)BELIEVE UNTIL YOU (REALLY) BELIEVE!

It is into this analytically unnatural or libidinal matrix of superficiality, appearance, and vulgar transgressiveness that I wish to re-introduce the consideration of belief and its structuring principles in *Birth*. It seems unnecessary to state that *Birth* is a film 'about' belief just as it seems equally glib to declare that *any* film is 'about' a combination of universal signifiers (love, death, rebirth, and so on), as if such an assertion were a dazzling new epigram. However, the means by which belief manifests in a film so readily open to psychoanalytic interpretation (or, as some critics have remarked, prescriptively created for such interpretation) nonetheless remains worthy of exploration; not only is the film subjected to analysis under a philosophical abstraction (belief) which is often circumvented in favour of readings predicated on specific symptoms, but belief itself in this context must be interrogated relative to its cultural mutability.

In criticism and culture, belief has always occupied the place of a philosophical abstraction; accordingly, it can only be properly clarified when affiliated with a discipline which, through the specificity of its analysis (Christian belief, the concept of belief in psychoanalysis, the cultural value of belief in anthropology, and so on), imposes a measure of ritualistic construction onto an otherwise evanescent conceit. Consequently, the philosophical investigation of belief often entails a lengthy justification for articulating it as the function of a particular discipline. In much contemporary scholarship, this methodological preoccupation often evinces an inability - or at least a reticence - to distinguish between belief as an ongoing progression of indoctrination (the arduous process by which one comes to identify as a 'believer') and the life of belief or *Weltanschauung* (the particular perspective of belief through which the subject makes sense of the world around him). The legitimacy of this distinction is a central theological concern, given that its circularity (my desire to 'become' a believer always-already identifies me as one) may indeed constitute the very essence of what it means to believe.

We find an expression of this fundamental structuring conflict in the writings of St. Augustine, who (apropos of Plato's Paradox of Inquiry) examines the motivation to (learn to) love a god which one does not know. At the outset of his Confessions, Augustine, addressing God,

articulates the contradiction inherent in this isochronal motivation:

... for who can call on Thee, not knowing Thee? for he that knoweth Thee not, may call on Thee as other than Thou art. Or, is it rather, that we call on Thee that we may know Thee? but how shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? or how shall they believe without a preacher? and they that seek the Lord shall praise Him: for they that seek shall find Him, and they that find shall praise Him (I.I.I. 1997 11).

Additionally, he provides us with a more succinct expression of this paradox in Book 8 of On the Trinity, asserting that, "Unless we love [God] now, we shall never see Him. But who loves that which he does not know? For something can be known and not loved; but what I am asking is whether something can be loved that is not known" (8.4.6. 2002 10)? However, what bearing does this theological conundrum have on the dominion of the Public Symbolic Law? Lacan identifies the specifically *symbolic necessity* of belief's cyclical impasse as the "order which is constitutive of the subject" (1988a 29) in his reading of Pascal's Christian injunction: "'Tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m'aurais trouvé [You would not be looking for me if you had not already found me]' simply confirms the same truth [of the authority of the symbolic order] in different words" (2005 85). This irreconcilably extra-autonomous characteristic of belief as somehow exterior to the subject's free self-assertion is precisely why Gilles Deleuze situates the act of belief as a practical application of *habit*; as such, the outcome (belief) is less dependent on the subject's critical judgment than on the symbolically inevitable realization/satisfaction of expectation. He contends that, "We are habits, nothing but habits - the habit of saying 'I.' Perhaps there is no more striking answer to the problem of the self" (1991 x). As previously mentioned, albeit in the context of transgression, the universality of the Public Symbolic Law not only retroactively 'manipulates' our actions to conform to its smooth regulation, but likewise impedes upon our most intimate attempts at autonomy and choice, such that habitual belief - even in its most 'removed' theological and philosophical context - is an antecedent of the Lacanian unconscious. Pascal is here particularly illustrative of how the 'habit' of belief is less contingent on the subject's autonomy as judgmental and discriminating than on the retroactively significant 'connection' of an empirically meaningless symbolic circuit:

For we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind... Proofs only convince the mind: habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most *believed*. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it (172).

As per the inevitable assimilation of every action and counter-action into the domain of the Big Other, belief itself in psychoanalysis (as both sequential indoctrination and definitive *Weltanschauung*) is ideologically preinscribed as the search for something that we have always-already found, which is precisely why Deleuze's coupling of (intimate) belief with (impersonal) habit can be regarded as a psychoanalytic truism. Essentially, belief indexes a willingness, however unconscious, to participate in the structuring semblance of the symbolic network and, hence, become a subject.

My rather succinct delineation of belief's paradoxical identity (as that which is most intimate in the subject yet which concerns his free self-assertion less than he will ever know) is not intended to be dismissive; rather, the placement of this paradox as somewhat exterior to my argument is intended to remind the reader that the fundamental aporia of belief³ is rooted in the symbolic. Given that discussions of belief necessarily stray into the "to-ing and fro-ing" (Deleuze 1989 247) between the false or empty pretense of enacting belief in its absence, and the emancipated outcome ('I'm a believer!'), it is recommended that the reader always recall the unconscious symbolic mandate which functions as the kernel of belief. Conversely, the possibility of *overvaluing* this kernel and exploiting it as a curative, universalized response to all subsequent interrogations of belief (the defeatist attitude of 'all roads lead to the Big Other, so why bother?') is detrimental and should be avoided. Certainly we may always return to the extra-autonomous nature of belief as an anticipated readerly truism,⁴ but this by no means negates alternate avenues which explore belief beyond or independent of its status as a habituated symbolic construction.

To facilitate a more extensive examination of belief, I have designated three interdependent modalities of belief which – for the purposes of clarity – can nonetheless be interpreted as distinct. Positioning belief as a series of interrelated questions addressed to the Other, I identify these modalities or registers as *direct*, *transposed*, and *assumed* belief, and focus particularly on the register of assumed belief in relation to Glazer's *Birth*.

CHE VUOI?: THREE REGISTERS OF BELIEF, OR, TAKE MY BELIEF... PLEASE

Pascal's famous and controversial advice to those who struggle with their faith is to simply kneel down and pray, whereupon belief will appear or 'come by itself' over time. Although we can locate this statement as the median between the mantra of recovering alcoholics ('fake it till you make it!') and well-intentioned nagging ('practice makes perfect'), it also functions as the ideal expression of the conflict between habitual indoctrination and identificatory *Weltanschauung*, where the subject must distinguish between the practice of "regulated repetition and [the material] which produces a subject acting in full consciousness according to his belief" (Butler 23). Pascal's statement has also undergone lengthy analysis by Slavoj Žižek, who considers it an exemplary illustration of the subject's need to both displace and infinitely postpone the unbearable burden of belief. Following Louis Althusser's assertion that the suggestion to 'kneel down and believe' articulates a reification of belief as "the institutionally reproduced condition of ideology" (Butler 9), Žižek approaches this Pascalian/Althusserian ritual as a self-

referential and causal release from the belief one only assumes one does not have. The enigma of the subject's (in)ability to perceive this liminal identity of believer/non-believer is classified by Žižek as the temporal or causal contingency which motivates the subject to kneel in the first place; here, we again encounter the problematic equivalence of habit and identity, indoctrination and *Weltanschauung*. If one kneels and performs the 'empty' rituals of belief with the intention of eventually acquiring belief, then the rituals are not empty at all, but spiritually and ideologically portentous – for this so-called believer-to-be, laying the groundwork for, or constructing the scene of belief already heralds its timely and mediated arrival. However, is this cycle of motivation and outcome not also a cynical ideological illusion which grants the subject a sense of *false* autonomy? Ultimately, he can reassure himself with the knowledge that his performance of ritualistic exercise is supplemented by an always-already actualized desire to believe, and can therefore ignore the possibility that his very *consent* to kneel and pray is as ritualistically and ideologically predetermined as the kneeling itself.

Expressing this self-referential causality as, "Kneel down and you will believe that you knelt down because you believed!" (Žižek 2005 par. 6), Žižek bypasses the condemnation of manipulative ideological state apparatuses and focuses instead on the familiar psychic *function* of what I have termed the register of 'transposed belief': that is, of allowing a ritual to believe on behalf of – or in place of – the subject himself. Whether 'kneeling down and praying' in anticipation of belief is authentically autonomous or not, the subject's ability to displace or transfer his belief onto another nonetheless alleviates the traumatic over-proximity of belief and grants him a "breathing space of a minimal distance towards it" (*Ibid*). Here, one can extend this use-value of ritual to include its relief from the specifically *analytical* symptoms of spiritual authenticity, such that the subject who transposes his belief (onto another) not only gains a comfortable distance from the object of belief (God, the possibility of reincarnation, a lover's fidelity – anything that demands belief), but also from the absurdity of exercising belief ('I am already a believer because I endeavor to become one through ritual, but this belief is not authentic because it is preordained by the symbolic order or some ISA...'). The ritual of prayer, which is performed "'on faith' that sense will arrive in and by the articulation itself" (Butler 21), here occupies the place of the intervening Other, the so-called 'subject supposed to believe' who takes up the traumatic burden of direct belief for the subject – much in the same way that a Greek Chorus 'directs' an audience through a staged drama by laughing, mourning, and commenting on their behalf. Lacan summarizes the dynamic between the Greek Chorus and the audience as follows:

When you go to the theatre in the evening, you are preoccupied by the affairs of the day, by the pen that you lost, by the check that you will have to sign the next day. You shouldn't give yourselves too much credit. Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you... It is just sufficiently silly; it is also not without firmness; it is more or less human. Therefore, you don't have to worry; even if you don't feel anything, the Chorus will feel in your stead (1992 252).

³ Žižek provides us with a concise summation of this aporia when he asserts that, "At some point, Alcoholics Anonymous meet Pascal: 'Fake it until you make it'", or, (make-)believe until you (really) believe ("With or Without Passion: What's Wrong with Fundamentalism? – Part I." [Lacan.com](http://www.lacan.com/zizpassion.html). <http://www.lacan.com/zizpassion.html>, 2005 par. 6).

⁴ Similar to how all psychoanalytically interpretive efforts seem to recrudescence a limited number of Lacanian proverbs: 'our desire is always the desire of the Other', 'love is giving something one doesn't have to someone who doesn't want it', 'a letter always arrives at its destination', '*les non-dupes errant*', etc.



This inversion of Pascal's formula, which accounts for the rather unexpected possibility that one wants nothing more than to be *free* of belief (or at least have the option of disseminating it), illustrates precisely how the subject can simultaneously identify as a 'true believer' while unburdening himself of belief's oppressive weight:

'You believe too much, too directly? You find your belief too oppressing in its raw immediacy? Then kneel down, act as if you believe, and *you will get rid of your belief* – you will no longer have to believe yourself, your belief will already ex-sist objectified in your act of praying' (Zizek 2005 par. 6).

If the strategy to avoid direct belief involves the transposition of one's belief onto anything or anyone that/who can temporarily occupy the place of the Big Other (symbolic ritual or, as I will address later, another subject), then how can we properly identify *direct* belief as distinctive? Is it possible to disjoint painful and solitary (*direct*) belief from its therapeutic, mediating (transposed) obverse, or can they only exist in a duplicate continuum? One means of approaching this question appears in a sequence from Edward Dmytryk's 1955 filmed adaptation of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*; in this sequence, the tortured Sarah Miles, caught between her passionate, earthly love for Maurice Bendrix and her apparently divine love for a bargaining god, poses an exasperated question to God: "Don't you want my belief?" Does this assertive question not serve as the rejoinder *par excellence* to the well-known Lacanian enigma of '*che vuoi?*', the desire of the Other, wherein the subject ceaselessly inquires of the Other, 'What do you want from me?' Having effectively 'given' all she assumes God could possibly want (the sacrifice of pleasurable infidelity, devotion to her husband, adherence to Catholic doctrine), does Sarah's frustration and desperation not conceal a partial truth of precisely *what* 'the Other wants from her' – that is, her belief? However, Sarah's belief is evidently not an easy conquest, even for God; unlike her lover, who is demoted to a mere function of Sarah's spiritual transaction with God, her belief here is articulated as her most precious and closely-guarded *agalma* – that which is 'in her more than herself.' Not only does she conceal the intimacy and shameful sincerity of her belief from both Maurice and her husband Henry, but she also evidently regards it as the most valuable (and therefore paradoxically negotiable) unit of currency in a

theological wager with an entity that definitively embodies the spirit of the Big Other. The crucial point not to be missed in this encounter is the fact that Sarah's belief is very clearly articulated as *belonging to her*, although she is not empowered by her ownership (one's ownership of belief is evidently not synonymous with its mastery); rather, the solitude of 'my' belief is expressed as a conduit for frustration and despair, and plainly codes the question as a demand: 'Take my belief because I can no longer bear it alone!' We again encounter the aporia of the subject who can only properly doubt or reject that which he already believes; Sarah's 'question', therefore, aims not only at the performative pretenses of staged belief, but also at an intimate *direct belief* which nonetheless remains meaningless, inaccessible, and traumatic until it is mediated by or transposed onto the symbolic order. In this respect, one can never 'properly' believe (in the sense that he cannot tolerate or even survive his belief) until he rids himself of his belief, gives it up, or gives it away...

AM I THE SUBJECT SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE?: BETWEEN DIRECT & TRANSPOSED BELIEF

Thus far, I have primarily taken up the strategy adopted by the subject who endeavours to therapeutically (albeit perversely) 'cure' himself of an uncomfortable proximity to his belief. Although the necessary symbolic codification of belief is a recurrent concern in psychoanalysis, it nonetheless strikes one as overly curative and conclusive: should you find your belief unbearably oppressive, simply rid yourself of it by integrating it into the symbolic order. Zizek identifies this as the solution to "the conservative platitude according to which every honest man has a profound need to believe in something"; the appropriate response, apropos of transposed belief, is that "every honest man has a profound need to find another subject who would believe in his place" (1997 42). However, if this were truly the case, belief would be both universally accessible and impossibly blissful, the corollary naturally being that nothing would ever be truly 'worthy' of our belief. As a partial response to my own accusation, I should here mention that the process of transposing one's belief onto an Other is both arduous and vaguely objectionable, given that belief is never an immediate realization but rather an ongoing exercise with no fixed destination. Indeed, the trajectory between direct and transposed belief is not uninterrupted, although the register of belief that problematically exists between them is often neglected. This register, which I have identified as assumed belief, cannot be comprehended outside the context of direct and transposed belief, from which it emerges and around which it circulates (hence the necessity of presenting it within a matrix of interdependent 'beliefs' and not merely as a hermetically-sealed outcome).

Assuming that the believing subject does eventually transfer his belief on to an Other, the belief does not 'evaporate' or fully assume the modality of transposed, extra-subjective belief – its location is specific, and it is therefore necessary for us to question to whom this belief is transposed. The immediate objection to such an interrogation is that the identity of this subject is irrelevant, given that the subject supposed to believe need only "stand-in for the Big Other" (*Ibid*). As Zizek emphasizes, this mutable and naïve 'subject' may be inhuman (a ritual), a faceless collective ('the bureaucracy', 'the people'), or simply nonexistent, since "to produce his effects in reality,

it is enough that he is presumed by others to exist. In a definite, closed multitude of subjects, each person can play this role for all the others" (1989 186). We tend to conceive of the subject who temporarily occupies this place of the Big Other as entirely cipherous and therefore immune to the potentially harmful effects of believing on behalf of another. After all, even the subject supposed to believe is free to equally displace his belief onto someone who will believe for him, and so on. To sympathetically humanize this subject seems unnecessary, given his/her status as a temporary placeholder for the Big Other (which never inspires sympathy precisely because it *regulates* cultural codes and appropriate responses as a positive condition of its existence). However, this understanding of the subject supposed to believe as an infinitely inaccessible Other often obfuscates our consideration of the obverse possibility – the prospect that *we* are someone's 'subject supposed to believe', that *we* are effectively being duped by someone else's belief.

This is essentially the situation which transpires in Glazer's *Birth*, embodied in the relationship between Anna (who endlessly mourns the loss of her husband) and Sean (who satisfies Anna's resistance to closure by announcing himself as the reincarnation of the deceased husband). Crucial to my analysis is the fact that *Birth* presents the spectator with *two* believers and two distinct manifestations/modalities of belief, generally contingent on the spectator's (eventual) realization that one of these modalities is facilitated by its status as a lie. Like the spectator, Anna 'lives out' the majority of the film's diegesis suspicious of, but gradually succumbing to, the possibility that Sean is a legitimately supernatural entity (her husband's soul in the body of a ten-year-old boy). Conversely, Sean is overcome by a naïve and childish logic which dictates that he *can* be Anna's former husband simply because he loves her as a husband does, but must nonetheless premeditatedly engineer the illusion of authenticity for Anna's benefit. One means of properly understanding the problematic economy of dual belief(s) in *Birth* (a quandary that may be partially attributed to its extreme, often disorienting textual transparency) is to effectively begin where the film's narrative concludes: Sean discovers that his predecessor had been unfaithful to Anna, and indeed had "never really loved her", which impels him to confess his deception. Having convinced Anna that he is truly the reincarnation of her dead husband, he admits to her, "I'm not Sean, [your husband] – because I love you." Anna, traumatized, begs her fiancé Joseph's forgiveness and marries him as originally planned; Sean, now apparently recovering from his matrimonial delusions through therapy but otherwise again behaving like a 'normal' ten-year-old boy, writes Anna a mollifying letter, which is read over shots of Anna hysterically crying and running across the beach at her wedding.

When confronted with the plea, 'You have to believe me!', as Anna is by Sean's insistence, one is immediately assigned (or, to risk an ideologically-loaded term, 'hailed') as the subject supposed to believe. One is here certainly free to decide whether or not any personal investment in this belief is worthwhile, but the role or responsibility is nonetheless explicitly arraigned; similarly, while Anna's belief is in many ways an inevitable wish fulfillment – since her inability to holistically mourn the death of her husband renders her defenseless against *any* belief, however improbable – she is nevertheless unable to reject her

appointment as Sean's surrogate believer. "You can believe what you want – everyone can believe what they want. I'm Sean, [your husband]," he asserts, effectively binding her to a tacit agreement: she must at least *attempt* to believe, even if this attempt ultimately leads to her rejection of his claim. Although himself a 'believer' of this sentiment, Sean's comparatively mature and vaguely callous strategy of belief is entirely dependent on everyone he endeavors to convince: simply stated, as long as Anna and her family continue to believe that Sean is Anna's husband, Sean's delusion will remain unchallenged and psychically sanctioned. In this respect, the naïvely imitative quality of Sean's belief (his route appropriation of another identity) accommodates its wide dissemination across a variety of 'subjects supposed to believe.'

However, does the transposition of belief onto an assortment of others, and particularly Anna, accurately describe both the economy and the limitations of Sean's belief? One should here recall the traumatic realization that inspires Sean's eventual confession ("I'm not Sean – because I love you"). How are we to interpret this statement? If we choose to differentiate between sublimation and idealization, a reading which accounts for the dynamics of courtly love initially appears exemplary; indeed, it is only after Sean learns the 'truth' about Anna – that she is undesirable and that her husband despised her – that their relationship can properly occupy a healthy and conventional place in the symbolic order (Sean returns to school, writes Anna polite and emotionally neutral letters, and sees a therapist, while Anna marries her long-suffering and age-appropriate fiancé). The crucial distinction, however, between Sean's traumatically disrupted idealization of Anna and the sudden overproximity of the formerly cold and inaccessible Lady in courtly love, is the fact that Anna never directly agitates or ruptures Sean's fantasy. The Lady (Anna), as she exists in the present, remains unchanged; she does not "step down from her pedestal" (Žižek 2001 41) and transform into a reprehensible entity for Sean, but is merely abandoned. Conversely, it was Anna's husband who found her repulsive, and Sean's refusal to appropriate this opinion prevents him from perpetuating the husband's persona. Indeed, so dependent is Sean's belief on the information gleaned from the husband's love letters (which Sean only assumed were addressed to Anna), that this impersonal belief can easily be reversed, and therefore redeemed. In transposing his belief onto both the physically and emotionally present Anna, and the entirely absent husband, Sean successfully circumvents an absolute and intractable loss when he admits his lie and abandons Anna. Should his transposed belief have suddenly collapsed (as it does when he discovers the husband's infidelity), he is sanctioned in reclaiming that belief from the 'other' absent entity and radicalizing it as the assertion of his will (i.e., 'I left Anna, I willed it thus'). This attitude towards belief is, as Žižek emphasizes, the "good news of Christianity" – the opportunity to traverse the fantasy, "to undo [the] founding decision, to start one's life all over again, from the zero point – in short, to change Eternity itself (what we 'always-already are')" (2001b 148). Consequently, Sean's recovery following the miscarriage of his transposed belief constitutes less a *reconstruction* of the (ruined) self than a *reconstitution* of the (changing/maturing/healing) self.

EVERY FUNDAMENTALIST SAYS I LOVE YOU: OR, I CAN'T BELIEVE (IN) YOU UNLESS I GIVE YOU UP

Despite the ironic autonomy of Sean's transposed belief, his penultimate gesture of 'freeing' Anna from her obligations as the subject supposed to believe "because [he] loves [her]", must be clarified in the context of assumed belief and its vicissitudes. Primarily, why is Sean's (transposed) belief redeemable as an act of will while Anna's (assumed) belief leaves her irreparably traumatized? Although I have briefly addressed the ineluctable quality of assumed belief, wherein the very injunction to 'believe me' implicitly guarantees the subject's participation in belief exclusive of his will, I have yet to elucidate the precise nature of investment in assumed belief. At this point, I should like to proffer the hypothesis that assumed belief is essentially synonymous with fundamentalism⁵, although far more insidious given that the 'intent' to believe in assumed belief is initiated and impelled by someone other than the subject.

Much like love, fundamentalism should be opposed to desire in the sense that the former does not actively seek its subject (of belief) - rather, this subject is perpetually and unassailably present. While desire is sustained by the radical separation "by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected" (Lacan 1988b 111), or is infinitely "caught in the logic of 'this is not that'" (Zizek 2001b 90), fundamentalist belief rejects this desirous cycle and aims directly at the object. Concurrently, while the desiring subject is always obliged to actively refuse that which is offered (Lacan expresses this refusal as the subject's cry of "'That's not it'") (Lacan 1988b 111), fundamentalism's logic revolves around the both the transcendent expression, 'That's it!' and - more perversely - the assertion that 'it' has never been otherwise. Characterized by "the violent return of the immediate belief - [fundamentalists] 'really believe it'" (Zizek 2005 par. 8), the fundamentalist's irreconcilable identification with his belief lacks the necessary aporia which sustains the distance between habitual indoctrination and *Weltanschauung*. Beyond the mere *overproximity* and oppressive weight of belief as evinced by Sarah Miles' experience of direct belief in *The End of the Affair*, the fundamentalist obliterates any distance between his identity and his belief, instead integrating the fantasy into his everyday life as a positive condition of his existence. Indeed, one would not be incorrect in assuming that the fundamentalist *does not believe at all*; given his direct identification with the fantasy, the mediating security of belief is rendered unnecessary, and the ceremonial activity of 'believing' gives way to pure *Weltanschauung*.⁶ This is

⁵ Although I certainly concede to the reality that fundamentalism is associated with reactionary and anti-democratic attitudes involving the militant reassertion of "non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities" (Mouffe 6), this paper does not aim to address the specific ramifications of fundamentalism; rather, my project here involves an interrogation of the development of the fundamentalist attitude *qua* belief (Chantal Mouffe. "Introduction: for an Agnostic Pluralism." *The Return of the Political*. Ed. Chantal Mouffe. London: Verso, 1993. 1-8).

⁶ An ideal example of the fundamentalist attitude and specifically its impenetrable discourse of 'this has always been so' has recently materialized in the media. In September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Iyllands-Posten* published a series of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, some of them racist and inflammatory. The publication of the cartoons sparked outrage in Muslim



precisely why Sean does not fetishistically 'stand-in' for Anna's deceased husband, and also why Anna does not consider the experience adulterous or disrespectful to her husband's memory: in Anna's understanding of the situation, her husband is not dead at all, but reincarnated in the body of a ten-year-old boy. Indeed, if one attempted to formulate the experience as a category of fetishistic disavowal, one would be obliged to strip the irrational belief of its minimal distance to the object: in the fundamentalist variant of assumed belief, Octave Mannoni's epithet would simply be reimagined as, 'I know very well, but all the same...'

In a sequence following Sean's admission to Anna, Anna confronts her fiancé Joseph in a boardroom and begs his forgiveness. The sequence itself functions as an interesting rejoinder to those whose interpretation of Anna's belief stands in marked contrast to the analysis presented here. All things considered, is it not possible to assert that Anna is *fully aware* of her delusion and desperation, and yet willingly assumes the attitude of a believer simply because the alternative is excessively distressing? While I oppose the validity of this observation for its exclusion of the interdependent registers of Sean and

communities, not only because of objection to the openly racist representations, but because the Quran explicitly forbids all representations of the Prophet Mohammad (favourable or not). As demonstrations and threats of violence increase, the appropriately liberal response to this outrage is, of course, confusion as to why everyone can't get along, and the extension of an invitation to the offended to equally mock Western beliefs and gods. The radically moderate Left, which is prepared to tolerate everything *but* passion, here conceives of belief as little more than a pastiche of normalized mysticism(s), which allows us to "make fun of our beliefs, while continuing to practice them, that is, to rely on them as the underlying structure of our daily practices" (Zizek 2003 280). As such, the now standard objection to Arab and Islamic indignation over the incident ("they should not take the cartoons so seriously - after all, Christ is a media pariah *par excellence!*") quite simply misses the point of fundamentalism, which permits no cultural (i.e., ironic or distancing) intervention into the field of belief. Since this belief is immediate and inseparable from the self-conception of the fundamentalist, the ironic distance espoused by politically correct liberal multiculturalists is precisely the danger that must be quashed in the context of fundamentalist belief.

Anna's respective beliefs, Anna's apology to Joseph substantiates the posthumous humiliation she experiences for her role in the fantasy. "I just wanted to let you know that it's not my fault," Anna says. "Everything that happened – none of it is my fault." Is there anything more shameful than the confrontation with one's belief that reveals it to be false, and – specifically in the fundamentalist attitude – discovering that one has been the dupe of one's own fantasy (Žižek 2005 par. 8)? Anna's defensive apology to Joseph involves an automatic (and ultimately failed) self-absolution which makes great mention of the upcoming wedding ("I want to marry you, just as we planned"), but which never submits to the validity of her belief. It likewise proves worthwhile to here read Joseph in contrast to Sean; while Sean increasingly acquires all the necessary characteristics to identify him as *the* Sean, lacking even the minimal fetishistic distance of possibility or likeness, Joseph is explicitly coded as a functional replacement for Anna's deceased husband. Glazer explores this relationship through Joseph's subtle and insidious ostracism from Anna's family circle, his appearance as an intruding orphan in their exclusionist affairs, and his representation as vulgar and ineffectual – vaguely predatory in his pathetic desperation, despite his patience and kindness. One here recalls the standard Mozartean/Shakespearean narrative reversal of conjuring a mutually advantageous union *vis-à-vis* a mere rendezvous:

We will have to admit that the rendezvous, our rendezvous with love, takes place not once, but an indefinite number of times and that it is never 'love' that is at the rendezvous, or unique and universal love (Catholic love), or nomadic and multiple loves, but another presence or another movement of love... It is another who is at the rendezvous, but it is love itself that is revealed thereby – and betrayed (Nancy 93-94).

Simply stated, if the figure waiting for you at the conclusion of the narrative is not your 'true' love – the one for whom you have been pining since the outset – simply turn the situation to your advantage: feign love, and in feigning it, make it so. Does this arrangement differ in any significant way from the Pascalian logic of transposed belief in its suggestion to enact the pretenses of absolution in its absence ("Marry whomever will take you, and love will come by itself!)? The ultimate benefit of this situation is its governance by sentiment, cunning, and opportunism rather than belief-proper. In such situations, one is never truly obliged to believe, given that one love is as good as any other (hence the colloquial translation of Mozart's *Così fan Tutte* as "Everyone's doing it").

Nancy's distinction between the love which awaits us at the rendezvous and 'unique and universal (Catholic)' love can similarly be articulated in the context of belief. In the traditional Christian 'expression' of belief, Christ is desublimated and made humanly accessible to his followers not merely through banal corporeality (God at the level of man, vulnerable to earthly wounding and fallibility), but in the sense that some indistinguishable feature – a "pure appearance" or "imperceptible 'something'" – identifies him as different and divine (2001b 90). Žižek stresses that this difference "cannot ever be grounded in a substantial property" (*Ibid*), and is therefore exemplary of a divine desublimation wherein "transcendence is not abolished, but rendered *accessible* – it shines through in this very clumsy and miserable being

that I love" (*Ibid*). However, when we conceive of belief as an assumed quality – as an act of faith undertaken at the behest or demand of another – then the logic of fundamentalism (which states, 'Why properly believe when it *has always been so* – when what you believe has never given you any reason to doubt?') radically alters this Christian conception of desublimation. In Sean's appearance, the film does not express the exceptional difference that makes him worthy of Anna's/the spectator's belief as an 'imperceptible *something*', but rather as a palpable, awkward, and suffocatingly proximal *everything*. With the exception of their shared name as a *trait unaire*, the two Seans have nothing in common, and this discrepancy is of no concern to Anna once she is convinced of Sean's authenticity. In this context of desublimation, one should not confuse the reality of authentic and accessible love with idealization, given that sublimation itself entails a combination of the sublime and desublimation, wherein "the sublime dimension transpires through the utmost common details" (*Ibid* 2001b 41). Consequently, Anna does not de/sublimate (and, by extension, authenticate) Sean by looking 'past' the taboo veneer of a ten-year-old's body and effectively seeing her husband within. It is only after Sean admits his elaborate deception while seated in a bathtub that she is able to truly assess the situation in its unbearably commonplace absurdity: "I thought you were my husband. You're not my husband. You're just a little boy in my bathtub." In a case of genuine de/sublimation, this moment would herald the initiation of an authentic loving relationship. One should here recall Lacan's warning that we are free to de/sublimate as much as we like, provided that we are prepared to pay for this sublimation with a pound of flesh (1992 322). Sublimation is painful precisely because it generates a psychic *debt*.

By assigning Anna as his 'subject supposed to believe', Sean not only tacitly implicates her as a believer at all costs, but burdens her with the "inverted, true form" of her own fantasy of belief (Žižek 1992 13). As was previously mentioned, Anna is willingly deluded by the fantasy of Sean's reincarnation (as well as predisposed to believe as a defense against grief), but it is precisely the *inevitability* of her investment that allows Sean to both transpose his belief onto her and ensure that she will forever maintain this belief on his behalf (while he is free to mature and develop normally). This indicates the essential distinction between direct belief and fundamentalism: direct belief may be identified by the subject and designated as potentially harmful or oppressive, but must always necessarily be 'given away' or transferred onto a mediating 'subject supposed to believe' simply because the subject is unable to support this encumbrance alone. Conversely, assumed belief collapses all temporal and identificatory logic, such that the object of belief (Sean's reincarnation, God, and so on) becomes indistinguishable from the (intended) fundamentalist outcome, and eventually from the subject himself. Additionally, the subject who assumes belief on behalf of another risks falling victim to a preordained fantasy which he mistakenly identifies as his own; inasmuch as the subject has little authority over the direction of this assumed belief, he similarly can never *lose* his belief (since it is not his to lose), and belief forever and traumatically "walks with [him], sticks to [him], never lets [him] go" (Žižek 2001a 229).

In locating assumed belief and fundamentalism within a matrix of reciprocal registers of belief, I have sought to establish a model which not only accounts for the subject's transference of his belief onto another, but addresses the specific effect of the transposition onto the subject supposed to believe (who/which is often approached as a concept but not wholly as a 'believer'). In his R.S.I. Seminar XXII of 1974-75, Lacan declares that when a man loves, "[he] believes in a woman... A woman in the life of a man is something in which he believes" (quoted in Vinciguerra par. 5). Yet love is also, as Zizek stresses, "the *work of love*" – its constant undoing and uncoupling (2000b 128) – such that Sean's acknowledgment that he has lied because he loves Anna is only partially true. The 'other' truth behind the rephrasing of the statement, "I'm not Sean – because I love you", is, 'Because I love you, you can no longer believe (in) me.' Much in the same way that Lacan states that our only means of being guilty is by giving way to our desire (1992 321), the only way that one can truly love another is by absolving them of the burden of believing in that love.©

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