RESONANCES OF DESIRE
THE REFLEXIVE PRODUCTION OF THE SUBJECT IN THE MEDIUM OF OBJECTS

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1. INTRODUCTION: RISE AND FALL OF THE SUBJECT

The subject is currently in weak condition. It seems that the impressive career of the subject has come to an end. One of the starting points of this career had been in Florence. The famous cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt states that the veil that – according to him – dampened human consciousness during the middle ages was lifted in Renaissance Italy: »Man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such«, he writes (1892: p. 129). And one of the cores of this »coming of age« of the modern subject was Florence, which was not only a node in international trade and finance but an important centre of science, arts and politics which is symbolized by such famous figures as Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Niccolò Machiavelli and Galileo Galilei (just to name a few).

In the field of metaphysics, however, it was the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) who found(ed) the basis of modern philosophy in the self-recognition of the subject. Ironically, the Cartesian »cogito ergo sum« was exactly meant to provide a reliable fundament for *»objective« knowledge* – which was a most desired »good« in the world of the Baroque era which was shattered by war and uncertainty even in the field of ultimate »truth« (i.e. »god« and »catholic« believe). And – again more than 100 years later – it was the privilege of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) to formulate the motto of »Enlightenment« which – also as a historical movement – believed in the subject and its rationality as the source of progress: »Have the courage to make use your own intellect« (2006 [1784], p. 18).

However, the rationality of the »enlightened« subject was at the same time the source of its decentering. Freud (1917) pointed out three major affronts to the modern subject: The first was the Copernican revolution that revealed that the earth is not the centre of our universe. Then, Charles Darwin proofed that mankind is not the crown of creation but simply the – imperfect – product of an evolution process. Freud himself had shown that »the ego is not master in its own house«. But the most radical dismissal is found in poststructuralist discourse: Poststructuralism degraded the subject to a »crease in the outside« – as Gilles Deleuze (2006 [1986]: p. 264) paraphrased Foucault's concept of the subject. Being a mere »effect and object of power« (Foucault 1977 [1975]: p. 192) there is only one (not really »convenient«) escape for the subject – and that is: to sustain itself via (self-disciplinary) self-technologies (Foucault 1988[1982]).

2. THE TAKE-OVER BY THE OBJECTS: SCIENTIFIC »OBJECTOPHILIA«

The »emptiness« that was created by the deconstruction of the subject was, however, soon filled with new »material«. The »linguistic turn« (Bergmann 1960 and Rorty 1967) provoked a »material turn« (Hicks 2010). The resulting new interest for the »objects« also in social and cultural sciences is not limited to the material conditions (of production), as it was the case with Marxist materialism, but – in some approaches – goes as far as assuming an »authorship« of objects (see Callon 1991). We might call this new object orientation a scientific »objectophilia« – and the scientific variant of object love is probably not less interesting and »questionable« as the sexual practice that is usually associated with this term. Let us thus first briefly look at this »real life« phenomenon in order to learn about the general problematic of the corresponding object-subjectivation, respectively the denial of a subject-object-difference, from an extreme if not »bizarre« example. (I do not mean this to be understood in a moral sense, by the way!) On the main internet platform for objectophiles, which are believed to represent only a very small number of individuals, we get to know: »Just as mainstream are attracted to certain types of people, physical/intellectual, objectùm-sexuals develop strong feelings towards objects possessing, in particular, certain geometry/function.« (Eiffel 2015) At the same time it is stressed that objectophilia is usually not a mere sexual obsession nor a kind of fetishism but an emotional and reciprocal love relationship: »Indeed, there are cases of love being one-sided as with any orientation, but in general we do feel love in return.« (Ebd.) Joachim, for example, is in love with a steam locomotive. And he, again, makes clear: »I live an emotional, bodily, mutual love relationship to objects«. (Quoted from Müller 2006 [own translation])
Seemingly, the strong desire of objectophiles »pushes« their objects of love in direction to themselves. Objectophilic desire thus not only blurs the border between objects and subjects, but the beloved things/objects become indeed – personified – subjects (in their imagination). And in a certain way this cannot be denied. But it is not because things/objects are able to love, have feelings or bear an own will or motivation. (Rather we would have to question such an assertion even for the »mighty« subject). It is because we, the subjects, *are* the objects – as we create them by our distinctions and projections. Without the subject there is no object. At the latest, this has to be clear since Kant's *»Critique of Pure Reason«* from 1781 where he outlined that the subject is a (transcendental) condition for the recognition of any object – even if the object is the subject itself (see the chapter on the »Paralogisms of Pure Reason«). But let us return to scientific objectophilia. I will concentrate here on two of its main mani-festations: actor-network-theory (ANT), which emerged in the context of science and technology studies, the a relatively new trend in philosophy which, however, has attracted the interest of both cultural practice and science: object-oriented ontology (OOO). The most prominent ANT-theorist is Bruno Latour who also contributed the most exaggerated formulation. He started as a quite »conventional« laboratory constructivist who would observe the construction of scientific (arti)facts in the context of its creation: the laboratory. However, he soon abandoned (social) constructivism in favour of a more »materialist« approach that would assume that (human)

action is embedded in actor networks that are constituted by both human and non-human actors resp. »actants« (as Latour prefers to call them).

Later on, this concept lead him to a fundamental critique of modernity. In fact, for Latour »We Have Never Been Modern« (1993 [1991]) as the movement of modernity so far relies on confounding distinctions, such as the (dichotomous) distinctions between nature/society and subject/object. These distinctions drive modernity into crisis since the reality of hybrids (like genetically modified organisms) renders the dichotomies of modernity useless. For Latour, the necessary consequence is that the current asymmetry, which he assumes and which according to him privileges subjects in favour of objects, has to be abandoned. He thus even calls for a political representation of »nature« in a »parliament of things« (see also Latour 2004 [1999]). If we were to take Latour serious and deny the adequacy of the distinction between society and nature, subjects and objects, the questions arises why we should represent something that is neither existent nor »productive« as a concept. It is very clear that Latour himself is relying very much on the same distinctions that he questions. This does, however, not stop Graham Harman to consider Latour as the (»metaphysical«) »*Prince of Networks*« (2009). Harman himself is the »founder« of object-oriented ontology and builds his concept on a fundamental misreading of Heideggers »*Time and Being*«. This is why it is preferable to outline the basic idea of object-oriented ontology – which, in fact, is quite simple – in the words of his »companion« Levy Bryant (2011) who states: »The claim that all objects equally exist [which is the basic claim of OOO] is the claim that no object can be treated as constructed by another object.« (p. 19) This does not mean that humans are excluded from examination but that, in the context of OOO, there is only one form of existence: that of objects (see ibid.: p. 20). A (perceiving) subject is not needed, any object exists »in-itself«.

But what then, one may ask, is an object »in-itself«? If the world of equal objects is not to be just a noisy, borderless, indistinct place, distinction is needed – and distinction is by no means »natural« (unless you are Aristotelian or racist). Without subject there is no (»meaningful«) object. So why did ANT and OOO eliminate the subject as a meaningful concept? I only have a, more or less, psychological answer to it. The (de)constructivism of the »linguistic turn« eliminated all possibilities of certainty. The material turn and its interest in »objectivity« seems to restore an (illusionary) certainty (by the self-reference of objects). And that is not the only a similarity to (Luhmannian) systems theory. The exclusion and denial of the subject allows to avoid the unpredictability and stubbornness of the subjects, who, I admit it, are really difficult to deal with, be it in theory or in practice.

3. THE OBJECT AS AN AESTHETIC MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE OF DESIRE

So how is it possible to rethink the relation between subject and object beyond the battered playground of idealism and give it a »material base« without eliminating the subject and without denying the »constructivity« of perception (i.e. to have a kind of dialectical synthesis of both

positions)? Let us, for this task, have a closer look at the subject-object-relation and the process of perception:

It can hardly be denied that the objects of our perception are always »subjectivated« in a way: they emerge from the background of noise by our attention. They are *our* objects. Thus, in a way, George Berkeley was right when he stated »to be is to be perceived«. However, I would like to add that to be an object (and not just a meaningless »thing«) is to be desired. That means that the object is not arbitrary but *determined* by our desire. This is not to say that the object is unique. In fact, exchangeability is the condition of objectivity. Not only in grammar there is only one subject, but there might be many objects. But what makes the object an object, why is our attention attracted to something? The answer is: the materiality, the aesthetics of the objects create an appeal. The construction of the object(s) is therefore based on »materiality« and we cannot pick and shape the objects »freely«, but there are limits defined by this materiality. Just like a house is built with the construction material and we can build quite different buildings with the same material according to our imagination/plan, the existing material also puts limits to the realization of our imagination. That is a very important aspect. Not so much in that it points us to the limits of realization but that it means that the relation between subject and object(s) is not one-sided: The subject creates the objects but the objects (and what they »offer«) also reflexively shape and produce the subject which is, indeed, also material. This not only refers to the corporeality of the subject and its mind (see also Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1991), but even can be understood in the sense of a »priority of the object« (Adorno 1990 [1966]): because of their (non-identical) »materiality« there is also a limit of subject-plasticity. Subjects are »harder« than discourse. At the same time, however, – and that is not in spite of but because of their materiality – subjects can be shaped, also by objects. In this sense, one may consider objects as reflexive media of subjectivity. And the message of these media is the desire of the subject. This, of course, is not a standard concept of media which are usually associated with modern mass media. But that was not always the case. The original meaning of the term is »the middle«, and, derived from that, »intermediary« – also in a material sense. According to Aristotle perception without a material medium is impossible, therefore, it was believed that space were filled with the hypothetical substance of »aether«. Modern mass media seem to have emancipated from such »aetherial« materiality. But also modern media (that are based on »wireless« transmission) need to materialize at some point (the »interface«) in order to get our attention. And it might be a very superficial understanding of media to suppose that »mediation« is just about transmitting the message of a sender to the receiver, as proposed by the standard model of communication (by Shannon and Weaver). Rather it is the receiver that is producing the message in reflexive exchange with the medium which works as an aesthetic resonator for the desires of the receiver resp. the subject. Such an understanding of the medium, however, needs different »model«, and I suggest have a look at the spiritualist medium which actually might serve us quite well for this task:

Margaret and Kate Fox were the most famous mediums of the 19th century, and their story as spiritualist mediums started in March 1848 when the two juvenile sisters reported of rappings

that they heard and which, as they said, originated from the sprit of a murderer burried in the basement of their family home (located at Hydesville in the state of New York). The story spread at immense speed and from now on the sisters not only heard but were able to understand the »rap code« of spirits wherever they went. This extraordinary ability made them become one of the first professional mediums and they held séances with all kinds of celebrities of the time. However, in 1888 the Fox sisters, who meanwhile were troubled by alcoholism and financial problems, confessed that all had been a big scam: »The rappings are simply the result of a perfect control on the muscles of the leg below the knee […] No one suspected us of any trick because we were such young children.« (Margaret Fox in *The New York World* from October 21st 1888, quoted according to Weisberg 2002: p. 243).

Does this confession mean that the spiritualist medium is useless as a general model for media? Not at all. To the contrary, this kind of »cheating« is probably a common feature of all media. And from the blueprint of this case we can try to extrapolate some more fundamental principles of mediation:

1) The medium has to be »sensible« (otherwise we cannot be »cheated«). It addresses that what we want to hear. It serves our desire.
2) If we do not believe in the existence of spirits it should be clear that there is no »objective« message but that it is in fact us who produce the message in interaction with the medium. This, however, is really telling us something: a message about what we desire.
3) But: we are only ready to hear and believe that message if the »spirits« materialize. Aesthetic activation is fundamental to any mediation process.
4) The séance, no matter how »produced« it is, might have a deep impact on the participants. This points to the possibility that media-objects may have an impact on the subject if they generate aesthetic resonances so that their message gets delivered.

The reflexive production of the subject in the medium of objects is – very briefly, since we might run out of time – illustrated in the following with an empirical example.

4. THE REFLEXIVE PRODUCTION OF THE SUBJECT THROUGH AESTHETIC RESONANCE: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE

In the larger context of our research on »Objects as Media of Reflexivity« we held an empirical workshop in Berlin with a local artist and the team of a consulting company. Our primary object of observation was – as our project title suggests – the possible impact of aesthetic work with objects on reflexive self-questioning. However, we could also find interesting examples for the reflexive production of the self through object media.

One part of the workshop was a kind of »game« where the participants had to jointly choose from three (all brand new) objects – a telephone, a kitchen alarm clock and an electric iron.

One had to be left untouched, one had to be disassembled and one had to be destroyed. The group decided for the telephone to be disassembled and for the iron to be destroyed. But first, they were asked to individually note on prepared pieces of paper what they associate with each object. The papers were collected, rolled up and pinned (grouped by object) on a board. Then, the group members were requested to start the destruction work. Especially two of them attracted our attention. One (young female) participant was showing a great eagerness to be first to hit on the iron with a hammer – and seemed enjoyed it a lot. The other (senior female) strictly refused to be involved in the destruction work. After they also completed the decomposition of the telephone they were invited to pick up their papers from board, unroll them and read out what they noted down in the beginning of the »game«. While most participants had expressed neutral or negative and distanced associations in regard of the flat iron, the one participant who had refused to take part in its destruction had revealed a very emotional and positive relationship to the iron which, in her eyes, even posses a »soul« – because its usage offers such a pleasant experience and »familiarity«.

This was a very special moment since it created astonishment but also interest by the other participants who wondered about the strong emotional touch that was expressed here. As was revealed by the interviews held some weeks later, the others had preciously had the impression that Marta (as we will call her here), who is an external freelance member of the work team, is rather »distanced«. This emotional stance towards the iron, as strange as it appeared to the others, brought her closer to the group which is also reflected by the fact that at the end of the event they all agreed on the familiar »du« – a practice that was already common in the group before but, so far, did not include Marta. The medium of the iron object, although no direct interaction had taken place, transmitted the message that a more emotional relationship had to be taken – and that message was delivered and changed the »subjectivity« of Marta in the group context who desired to be a more integral part of it and, probably, projected that emotion to the iron. Marta succeeded to fulfill this desire even though she excluded herself from the cooperative destruction work.

Of course, this example should have been interpreted a lot more in detail to really convince you (if you are not yet). But as time is short, let me in my concluding remark just stress again that in my view objects indeed work as media of subjectivation. Not only do the subjects create the objects, but the objects shape the subject through aesthetic experience and the way the subjects relate to the objects. If we are aware of that we can realize that objects have a most relevant message for us: the message of our desire(s). The object-media reflect and amplify our desire(s) – via aesthetic resonance – and thus make it (more) accessible to us. We could/should use this »reflexive« potential of the objects (which is directed towards the subject) also more actively and consciously in the context of interventions in organisational contexts, public space, or, exhibitions.

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