

(Dis)articulating the Subject

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This cluster brings together a selection of the papers presented at the 'Limits and Extensions of the Subject in Contemporary Iberian Culture / Límits i extensions del subjecte en la cultura ibèrica contemporània' conference, linked to the research project 'Nous subjectes en la creació catalana contemporània' ['New subjects in contemporary Catalan creation'] (FFI2015-65110-P). The conference took place in July 2017 at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, thanks to the support from Professor Dominic Keown, member of the project research team, and the involvement of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Cambridge and the Department of Catalan Philology and General Linguistics at the University of the Balearic Islands. The event heard twenty-four presentations and two conversations with artists: video artist Matilde Obradors showed the film *Exili* and performer Marcel·lí Antúnez staged 'Whale Island: a systematurgic process'.¹

This presentation includes a brief review of the monographic contents preceded by two satellite notes: the first on types of creativity located on the fringes of anthropocentrism and the second on criticism of the latter.

1. Taking Apart

Let us first consider a series of both artistic and non-artistic creations that question the centrality of the human subject. From the 1970s onwards, the Basque performer Esther Ferrer created a series of “Autorretratos aleatorios” [Random self-portraits] comprising photographs that had been cut out and assembled on a set of mobile rods; these could be moved (pushed/pulled) until the artist's face was randomly distorted. Joan Casellas has photographed Carles Hac Mor posing as a seat for a chair in a piece called “La cadira com seu (al·legoria de l'ou com balla)” [The chair which seats (an allegory of the dancing egg)]. One of Bartomeu Cabot's video pieces shows the face of a young man becoming a living stage for the frenetic movement of a throng of silkworms. The British photographer Nick Veasey produces portraits through radiography and reveals that even everyday objects (a car, a shirt, a telephone, a pipe...) have a skeleton. The performer Marcel·lí Antúnez builds exoskeletons that enable the public to control his movements. The algorithms controlling the sexbot Samantha mean the android refuses to copulate if she 'perceives' she is being mistreated and continue the debate surrounding the possibility of exerting violence against the inanimate — a large selection of films have also played a role in this debate, such as Luis García Berlanga's *Grandeur nature* from the early 1970s about the relationship between a dentist and a life-size sex doll. In the 1950s, the French-German Dadaist Jean/Hans Arp fashioned a small bronze cast entitled “Man seen by a flower” that turned a complacent landscape tradition — where humans always own and are the source of the gaze — on its head.

All these creations share a similar conceit: constructing the image of a human subject that is conditioned by chance, the object, the animal, intelligent silicone, ionising radiation or a flower to be used as a pedestal, a bed, a sex toy, a sculpture

¹ The programme and visual documentation from the conference can be found at: <http://licetc.uib.cat/nous-subjectes-en-la-creacio-catalana-contemporania-espais-denunciacio-i-espais-de-recepcio-en-les-poetiques-liminars/>

model or an organic wrapper for a set of bones and prostheses. These images are a symptom of the dislocation of the traditional concept of the human as an *ordered* body, superior to animals, plants and inert objects. This new subject would seem to have ceased to be the centre of gravity in the world. It is the viewer's finger that transforms me; the chair that sits on top of me; the silkworm crossing the orography of my face; the titanium hip that helps me walk; the robot that tells me how I should touch; the plant that observes me; the x-ray machine that sees me from the inside. Or, in the vein of Jacques Derrida's famous article, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", it is the cat that spies on me, undressed, and makes me feel vulnerable in my nakedness.

Representations that question the centrality of the human as a measure of everything else illuminate the epistemological posture of post-anthropocentrism. Nonetheless, let us be under no illusions, we are *still* referring to unmistakably human mental reflections and games: Cabot's works, Arp's flower, Veasey's empty dresses, Caselles & Hac Mor's chair that seats, Ferrer's deformed features, Antúnez's membranes and the plastic *sex dolls* are creations controlled by men and women. When I refer to the loss of human centrality, I do not mean an apocalyptic evisceration but rather a change in emphasis in how we perceive it/ourselves.

There are at least two major currents driving this change. Firstly, the technological revolution that has provided a naturalness to the cyborg's mechanical-sentimental hybridism, and dramatically altered the notion of presence. On the one hand, the cybernetic replicas of humans absorb our attributes, habits and contradictions. On the other, internet enables us to exist in ways that no longer match the *hic et nunc* — we are here but at once on the other side of the world —, and social networks offer the past on a plate in the shape of memories, given life as a platonic reminiscence, whilst allowing us to schedule future events. Presence is no longer identified by a tangible physical appearance, but rather by the digital imprint we leave behind. Secondly, philosophies on the concept of normality have also contributed to this paradigm shift: from Foucault to Judith Butler, to Deleuze and Guattari's bodies without organs, and to Marta Segarra's pierced bodies. We have learnt that identifying the desire to transform the body with insanity arises from control and repression exercised by power. We have learnt that non-therapeutic implants, piercings or gender re-assignment have nothing to do with illness, but rather with identity and desire.

Agency is no longer just the capacity to affect the other, the external, the social. It has also become interiorised within the frontiers of the body.

And in terms of texts? The traces of this change are not exclusively thematic (e.g. textual representations of an entire set of investments in the hierarchy between the human and non-human) but rather operate at discourse level (writings that pretend to be authorless, mechanical writings, faceless voices, etc.). When in 2017 the Chinese publisher Cheers Publishing released *The Sunlight that Lost the Glass Window*, a collection of 139 poems written by a robot poet (the Microsoft Little Ice software), it was merely *continuing* along a pathway: confirming the decay of the transcendent metaphysical subject.

2. Matter and Subject

In his 2006 essay, *Los años salvajes de la teoría*, Manuel Asensi entitled a section looking at the references to materiality in authors from the *Tel Quel* magazine, "La materia y el sujeto en *Tel Quel*" [Matter and Subject in *Tel Quel*]. I would like to highlight two of his ideas. The first, which Asensi attributes to Phillippe Sollers, is that being materialist does not mean converting the material into a point of reference

but rather maintaining a constant dialectic stance without a final destination. The second is that this dialectic approach leads alternatively to the declaration of the death of the subject or the confirmation of its re-emergence. The notion of the death of the subject — a subject that Blanchot removes from writing, Benveniste transforms into a pronoun, Lacan converts into a signifier and Barthes identifies with the text—has been thoroughly examined. Christa Bürger and Peter Bürger have compiled a detailed analysis in their *Das Verschwinden des Subjekts*, which intends to be a history of subjectivity from Montaigne to Blanchot, with some reflective interjections on feminine subjectivity. In turn, the theorising of the resurgence of the subject in the 1970s went more unnoticed or has been linked to theorists who appeared after poststructuralism. However, there is indeed a parallelism that Julia Kristeva calls 'subject in process' — a subject solidly linked to the body but not reducible to a static identity, travelling between the semiotic and the symbolic.

After the golden age of *Tel Quel*, from the 1980s onwards the rehabilitation of the subject has been a constant. In the specific area of literary studies, where the question of subjectivity is closely linked to the analysis of authorship, the figure of the author has regained a privileged place. Some curiously similar titled works have looked at this, such as Seán Burke's *The Death and Return of the Author*, William Irwing's *The Death and Resurrection of the Author* and Eugen Simion's *The Return of the Author*.

Politico-cultural criticism (from postcolonial literary theory to queer philosophy, to difference feminism) renews focus on a subject who attempts to access, with greater or lesser success, positions of enunciation which discourse had previously closed off. Spivak questions the impossible fit of the voice of the subaltern in power discourses; Cixous proposes the practice of writing the body; Irigaray analyses Freud's abduction of femininity and Butler links gender to empirical, tangible and transformable behaviour more than to frozen forms of desire in a life photograph.

Moreover, the problematisation of the limits of the concept of humanity that different disciplines and methodologies (such as the theories of emotions, the theories of the post-human subject, and animal studies) have put forward in relation to literary studies has once again undermined the strength of the subject, albeit from an unexpected corner: in a questioning of anthropocentrism. In this sense, Rosi Braidotti proposes nomadic thinking as a method to enable the formation of the subject to be freed from normative perspectives: this attempts to provide an open, inter-relational, trans-species (in the sense of removing differences between different species of living beings) and multi-sexual reference framework. We are now entering the post-humanist era which is *not* the end of the human but rather the end of anthropocentrism, and which can be expressed in assorted ways. Tamar Sharon summarises these forms of expression as four approaches: liberal post-humanism (enthused by anthropotechnologies); dystopian (sceptical to changes from technological intervention); radical (taking advantage of technological potential to break away from an obsolete vision of the human/non-human frontier), and methodological (observing the omnipresence of non-human forms of behaviour to question the exceptionality of human beings).

It would seem appropriate here to turn our attention to literary texts. Although we can trace an historically sequential pathway of emergences and submersions to the subject-author — romantic or rationalist exaltation of the individual subject, its rupture in psychoanalysis, the reconstruction proposed by feminism — it is clear that these appearances and disappearances of the subject co-exist in creative texts. Is it not the case that 'faint authors', i.e. authors who *become* language, co-exist with 'strong' ones, i.e. those who *use* language as a tool of (self)representation? Valéry, Mallarmé, Carles Hac Mor or Susan Howe tend to become invisible, to disappear into the fabric of the

text. Meanwhile, Houllebecq, Rodoreda, Miquel Bauçà, Gloria Fuertes, Blai Bonet or Maria Sevilla present themselves as alpha voices full of domineering instinct. And this has nothing to do with autobiographical writing or social visibility but rather positions of discourse. Yet neither exactly about style. Could this distinction between hidden and displayed subjectivities have a taxonomical value when interpreting — and, especially, when comparing — the writing of these authors?

The idea of 'matter and subject' does not thus refer to a dichotomy of irreconcilable terms but rather to a deep interconnectivity, seen in Kristeva's subject-in-process and amplified in Braidotti's nomadic subject. The materiality of the subject is, on the one hand, shown in the dialectic process avoiding its definition in a petrified, immovable way and, on the other, in the importance of the historical, social and technological conditions that shape it.

3. Limits and Extensions

The subject can broadly be identified with the genesis of desires, feelings, thoughts and actions. This genesis is always shaped by cultural, moral, socioeconomic, psychic and biological discourses. In a narrower sense, various schools of thought associate the subject with more specific elements: psychoanalysis emphasises the notions of pulsation, identification and desire, whilst cultural studies are particularly interested in the subject's (dis)connection with power. The basis for the conference 'Limits and Extensions of the Subject in Contemporary Iberian Culture / Límits i extensions del subjecte en la cultura ibèrica contemporània' was the recognition of diversity in fields of study — psychology, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies — that have looked into this notion.

In line with this diversity, the call for papers for the conference proposed thematic areas including concepts such as emotion, intimacy, extimacy, subjectivation, the exploration of the frontier between humans and non-humans, and the representation of the individual-collective relationship. In one way or another, these areas are represented in the works collected herein. Some topics covered at the conference and which, for several reasons, have been excluded from the collection include pragmatic imaginations of the subject, the life of objects and the representation of the migrant subject.

The works of Eva Bru-Domínguez and Elisenda Marcer look at the question of animality from very different standpoints: the former from the body and movement, and the latter from human alteration. In this vein, Bru-Domínguez analyses the performance of *Memòries d'una puça* [Memories from a Fly] by choreographer Sol Picó hand-in-hand with the concepts of *becoming insect* (Rosi Braidotti) and understanding parasites as interstitial beings between bodies and disciplines (Michel Serres). Bru-Domínguez uses these reference points to analyse the dismembering of social, political and economic bodies. In turn, Marcer reads the states of alienation in Miquel de Palol's poetry collection *Salamó* as examples of an expanded conscience through sex and hallucinogenic drug use, which transcends the limits of what the human is, to approach what Anat Pick defines as the semantic shift that articulates animality.

The contributions from Marta Pérez Carbonell and Irene Zurrón can be seen as complementary, since they look at what could be termed 'fragmented subjects' and 'multiple subjects'. Pérez-Carbonell considers two highly different novels that construct a fragmented subject whether as part of the plot (the personality disorder of the protagonist in Juan José Millás' *Desde la sombra*) or as a form of discourse (the techniques and narrative voices in Isaac Rosa's *La habitación oscura*). Although they

seem opposing works, both texts present fracture as a disconnection between the internal and external world. In turn, Zurrón analyses desire and suicide in Maria-Mercè Marçal's novel *La passió segons Renée Vivien*: desire and death bring the human closer to 'to what is alien' and this attraction to alterity means the novel dispenses with the unitary, rational and universal subject to construct one that is fluid and born out of a conglomerate of discourses: a multiple subject.

If Maria-Mercè Marçal's Renée Vivien is the emblem of an attempt at liberation linked to gender, then Antoni Maestre-Brotons' work on the cinema of Cesc Gay looks into the changes in representing masculinity. Maestre-Brotons notes that Gay's oeuvre iconifies the clash between orthodox masculinity and one that is inclusive, beyond sexism, patriarchy, gender separation and homophobia. By using psychoanalysis, the doctrine of the affections and the theory of hapticity, the author analyses the melodramatic hero of Gay's film *Fiction*, who is immersed in a melancholy born of the fear in exploring new types of identity and desire.

The importance of affectivity is also evident in the other articles in this collection: Ibon Egaña and Irene Mira consider the social dimension, whilst Montserrat Roser and Manuel Mula investigate new forms of intimacy. Egaña examines how recent literary research into trauma has helped reshape how we consider the notion of the subject and focusses particularly on the articulation of gendered subjects and how they relate to the community. Based on a reading of three narrative works (by Uxue Apaolaza, Agurtzane Juanena and Eider Rodríguez) that tackle political violence in recent decades in the Basque Country, the author takes into account the semiotic value of mother-daughter communication, the testimonial nature of trauma writing, and the constraints and freedoms that gender offers. In turn, Irene Mira looks at the literary functions of pain in the poetry Vicent Andrés Estellés produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The author, however, does not reduce pain to a topic or leitmotiv but rather sees it as the marker of an aesthetic change leading Estellés' poetry to a reservoir of collective conscience for the poetic self: Estellés' discursive journey thus travel from the I to the we, and from the internal to the external.

The distinction between the internal and external is problematised in Montserrat Roser's contribution, where the author applies an adaptation of Lacan's extimacy — understood as the space where the intimate and the external become a tandem and, at the same time, a form of 'public' intimacy — to Ferran Torrent's novel *Living l'Havana*. Under the guise of a seemingly trivial plot (the sexual adventures of two Valencian peasants in Havana), Torrent's novel reflects on the commercialisation of intimacy. Private and public cease to be a duality to become a new type of agency that we could term 'exposed intimacy' which has, itself, become one of the most emblematic symbols of contemporary society. Finally, Manel Mula describes a bridge between personal experience and the economic and affective spheres of capitalism by exploring the definition of identity and the creation of affective ties on *online dating* platforms. Alongside constructing the façade of easy access to love, there are cracks that enable one's own identity to be legitimised (e.g. by curating the information that users *decide to share*). Nevertheless, by identifying happiness with heteronormative intimacy, online platforms often reproduce inequalities from the physical world: they reduce the polymorphic nature of desire to fit into stable identifications and stereotypical autobiographical patterns.