

## Subjectivity and Interpretation

"Who is more stupid of the two? Nietzsche or Descartes?" - this pastiche question asked by Sarah Kofman (1991: 193) perversely epitomizes the clash of polarities in the longlasting debate on subjectivity, which seems now to have reached a plateau of resolution. Inspired by Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>, endorsed by the themes originated in the writings of Freud and Heidegger, current critical discourse stages a successful attack on what is emblematically called the Cartesian subject: the subject constituted in the *Cogito ergo sum*, where *sum* renders a being anterior to the reality perceived and thought by it, a reified individual, an origin and sole source of its own conscious action, complete in its unity and coherence. That attack, however, leaves out certain niches of uncertainty, certain lacunae of doubt, particularly with regard to questions of determinism, of an implied nuclear persona, and of the subject's (dis-)continuity. After drawing a general panorama of the current critique of subjectivity (1.1-3), I formulate those doubts in greater detail (2.1-3), and - via a discussion of interpretation as both an epistemological and ontological category (3.1-2) - attempt a delineation of the subject as *necessarily* self-reflexive and self-interpretive (4.1-2). Even though my standpoint is situated within recent critical discourse, the theoretical perspective and the framework of the argument - particularly in its positive parts - is that of the Peircean triadic semiotics.

The implications of triadic theory for the concept of the subject have been elaborated in a number of recent publications, including extensive discussions by Colapietro and Singer (Colapietro 1989, Singer 1984, Mouio 1984, Michaels 1980, Sullivan 1982; Fairbanks 1976). The great merit of those publications, particularly with regard to Peirce scholarship, is their predominantly explicatory and exegetical character, and their involvement in the debates concentrating on the development and the place of the concept of subjectivity within the edifice of Peirce's system, as well as its congruity with that system or its parts. What matters for the purpose of this discussion, however, is not so much the conceptual consistency and the intricacies of the mapping of subjectivity *within* Peirce's work, but rather the inspirational value and the relevance of triadic semiotics for the current issues in the theory of subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Or rather by a particular reading of Nietzsche; cf. Corngold 1985: 95-96.

## 1. The Critique of the Subject

### 1.1 The Cartesian Subject

In its contemporary form - as embraced by the so-called humanist position - the Cartesian subject designates the individual who is "the agent of all social phenomena and productions, including knowledge" (Marshall 1992: 87). Construed in the image of God or "tied to the co-articulation of three themes - Mathesis<sup>2</sup>, mechanism, modern reason and the subject-of-reason" (Venn 1984: 133) - the humanist man enjoys a causal relation to society and culture.<sup>3</sup> The sovereign creator, engineer, and exploiter of the outside, this subject is governed within by the principles of unity and integrity. Such foundations guarantee its solid identity - essential, autonomous and independent from external determinations - which in turn validates both the external observation and the *cogito* itself, constitutive of knowledge and of the capacity to attain truth. A creative user and deployer of signifiatory tools, the subject remains with them in a dichotomous relation of logical and axiological anteriority and paramouncy: while constituting its own consciousness independently of pre-existing languages and signification systems, he *has* them at his disposal and uses them to render manifest the internal workings of that consciousness. An opposite of the Heideggerian man, this subject can only *speak* language, but cannot ever *be spoken* by it.

In cultural and literary theory and criticism, the autonomous and unitary subject finds its double reflection on both extremes of the model of communication: on the one hand, in the imperial author as the owner and dispatcher of meaning to be sought for and, on the other hand, in the objective reader capable of retrieving that meaning from the encoded message, and of appropriating it as an object of consummation and consumption. This couple appears in various versions and with changing emphases in diverse critical discourses, from philological, positivist, romantic, Leavisite, to its cryptic variant in the structuralist Jakobsonian model. Likewise, some tendencies in more traditional hermeneutics rely on this kind of rational or experiential communion between selves, as their basic assumption and condition. Literature itself - as well as other narrative or quasi-narrative arts - embodies and perpetuates the fictional version of the Cartesian subject in its

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<sup>2</sup> As in Foucault 1970.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between nature and culture - apart from reiterating the more basic dyad of the sensible and the intelligible - reflects also the distinction between the divine and the human causality: a sweet and legitimate, albeit camouflaged blasphemy.

celebration of a well constructed, coherent and consistent character, a self whose dynamics is composed around rationally conceived motivation and development. The critical paradigm of character study within this tradition builds on such key terms as: integrity, development, consistency, motivation, depth, internal conflict, etc.

This is not to say that literature did not question or deconstruct the Cartesian protagonist. In the fiction contesting canonical structures, the ontological doubt is reflected in the fragmentary and evanescent nature of what traditionally used to be a well-defined character: "[...] instead of characters we seem to have fragmentary 'instants of subjectivity' none of which seem ever to develop into a more stable Self. [...] The unity of the ego-centred individual self, in terms of character, has been replaced with a notion either of constant deferral of that self, or of a notion of corporate identity of a number of subjects, coinciding in one area of discourse" (Docherty 1983: XIV-XV; 265). Numerous examples of this kind of dispersal or dissolution of individual selves may be found in the works of Beckett, Kafka, Joyce, Kosinsky, Musil, and others. In literary criticism, the transition from the subject as origin of experience and meaning to the dissolution of that subject is well exemplified by the two theoretical phases in the development of the French New Novel. As David Carroll points out, in the first stage of the movement, Robbe-Grillet, its leading theorist and practitioner, attacks continuity, the Real, Human Nature, and Sense, but he does so "*in the name* of the individual subject - and in particular, in the name of the 'random, unstructured workings of a subject's consciousness." (Carroll 1978: 697; *emph. mine*). Even though scrutinized in a new and unorthodox way the subject remains in the centre. At a later stage, however, the New Novel moves away from Robbe-Grillet's original pronouncements and finds the subject to be a principal obstacle (Carroll 1978: 697). Rather than being - as in its first phase - the expression of the subject's consciousness it becomes the genre of "antirepresentation" which abolishes the concepts of the subject and consciousness as constituting elements of fiction (cf. Carroll 1982: 10).

Those mentioned here and many other literary subversions reflect and parallel a more consistent critique of subjectivity which evolved in the discourse of philosophy and critical theory. I will survey that critique now to set our central question in a broader theoretical context.

## 1.2 Proto-critiques

The proto-critique of the essentialist and ego-centered concept of subjectivity involves primarily the three names already invoked: Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger.<sup>4</sup> The most radical and visionary, although the least systematically argued, is Nietzsche's deconstruction - in some fragments of his work - of the concept of substantiality and causality: of the fiction of the doer added to the act of doing, construed as a result of the oppression and "seduction of language" and grammar:

The 'subject' ist not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is. (Nietzsche 1968: 267)

The subject is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the "similarity" of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity (--which ought rather to be denied--). (Nietzsche 1968: 269)

These well known quotations originate the motif developed later in both the linguistic and the "archaeological" critique of subjectivity. Like in the Wittgensteinian negative examination of solipsism and of the possibility of the private language, the "I" is denied a status of more than an "illusion" or fantasy (Wittgenstein 1958: 69).

Freud's impact may be seen on a double plane. In the more obvious sense, the laying bare of the realm of the subconscious had effected a divided subject whose fundamental principle was no longer that of logocentric rationality and accessibility of self-knowledge, but of repression and the universalized mediative mechanisms of displacement and condensation, of the semiotic principles of metaphor and metonymy. The conscious emerges now not as the ultimate signified but as only one among many signifiers. The more profound sense in which Freud's psychoanalysis displaces the subject, however, is what Paul Ricoeur identifies as the separation of two "moments", which before Freud, were confused: the moment of apodicticity (I think-I am) and the moment of adequation ("I am *such as* I perceive myself"; Ricoeur 1974: 241). Psychoanalysis, writes Ricoeur, "drives a wedge between the apodicticity of the absolute positing of existence and the adequation of the judgement bearing on the *being-such*." (1974: 242) Existential certainty parallels the doubt of self-knowledge: "I am, but what am I who am? ... *What* I am is just

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<sup>4</sup> For critiques of various aspects of those proto-critiques, see Cadava et al. 1991, *passim*.

as problematical as *that* I am is apodictic." (Ricoeur 1974: 242) The certainty of the Sein is now forever contaminated with the aporias of the So-sein.

Heidegger's uninhibitedly anthropocentric ontology paradoxically - or perhaps most logically - relies on the destruction of the dichotomy of man and world, and of the ensuing epistemic dichotomy of subject and object; man's being does not consist in substantial existence confronting the objectivity of the other: the Dasein is nothing without its projection into and of the world. In contradistinction to any bracketing of objectivity by an epistemological, cognizing subject, and to the necessity of a transcendental reaching out to that objectivity, for Heidegger man is never - not even at a minutest initial moment - "worldless": in its dwelling with entities, even in its "'Being-outside' alongside the object, Dasein is still 'inside'" (Heidegger 1967: 69). Dasein and the world mutually condition each other. By placing itself into the realm of openness, Dasein calls entities forth into their unhiddenness: here "nothing less happens than the breakthrough by the entity called man into the whole of entities in such a way that in and through this breakthrough entities are broken up into what they are and how they are" (from Heidegger's lecture quoted after Biemel 1978: 123). At the same time Dasein shares nothing of the existential substantiality of the Cartesian subject: its existence consists in its selfprojecting into possibilities, in "the projection forward of a subject into the condition of future subjectivity"; construed thus in the postmodern key, "Dasein is a series of fleeting and deferred instantiations of future subjectivity" (Docherty 1983: 229-230).

This annihilation of dichotomies is reiterated in the relation between the being of man and language: a homage to the paramountcy of language and to its inherent and existentially crucial poeitality, which counterbalances the Nietzschean critique of subjectivity via the depiction of the divine tyranny of grammar. Language - the forgotten poem forever demanding memory - is neither expression, nor activity of man or a representation of the real, but an "abode for the being of man" (Heidegger 1971: 192): "the human," writes Heidegger, "is indeed in its nature given to speech - it is linguistic [i.e.,] having taken place of the speaking of language." (1971: 207-208) It is language that speaks; "[m]an speaks only as he responds to language" (1971: 210), only insofar as he listens. "It is language that first brings man about, brings him into existence." (1971: 192)

### 1.3 Current Theory

The three overlapping themes of the early modern critiques of the subject: the linguistic, the social, and the semiotic, continue in their variously intertwined and dispersed manner throughout both the original and the epigonic discourse of current theory. Having subverted the very concept of subjectivity those critiques have made clear the fact, confirmed by the recent critical discourse, that a return to the Cartesian idea of the subject is no longer possible.

My aim here is not so much to discuss individual theories in detail but rather to look at those conditions of impossibility, at the most significant impulses which contributed to the emergence and formulation of the problem, and amalgamated into that layer of discourse within academia which is now called "the critique of the subject." The effects of that critique are in fact less radical than the subversion of the subject in the protocritiques might seem to foreshadow. Despite various eschatological pronouncements and questions (e.g., "*who comes after...?*") in the title of a recent anthology<sup>5</sup> rather than speaking of the death of *the* subject we should be speaking of the death of *a* subject, of a certain concept of subjectivity delineated above as "Cartesian". This decease is accompanied by the birth of its substitute; rather than *Requiem in pace* the motto is: The subject is dead, long live the subject. Even though that new construct shares few of the properties of its predecessor and may appear only as an anthropomorphic function or position, and even though it is "divided from itself," it still plays an important role both in the conceptual hierarchies of its critics, and in the general field of theory, where it performs key political and ideological tasks. Derrida's voice (if that word is proper here) may very well be considered the *vox* of academic *populi*: "[...] the 'subject', without having been 'liquidated', has been reinterpreted, displaced, decentered, re-inscribed" (1991: 98). "The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it." (Derrida 1978: 271). Two operations are involved in the process of the reinscription of the subject: its *disappropriation* and *disidentification*.

The reinterpreted and resituated subject which emerges from the purifying scrutiny of contemporary critique is not its own any longer: deprived of essence it becomes an effect of relations to its Exterior. Disappropriation leaves no part of the subject unaffected: neither its origin nor its subsequent qualitative constitution. No longer an entity - now rather a relation - the new subject is ontologically and epistemo-

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<sup>5</sup> Cadava et al. 1991.

logically heteronomous, dependent both in its being and in its cognitive capacity on a pre-existent and paramount Domain of Exteriority.

The inception of subjectivity occurs with the moment of the internalization of the Exterior: another paradox in the series of hypothesized dichotomies and polarities that eventually annihilate themselves. Unlike that of the Cartesian *cogito*, the *origin* of the subject is not in itself, but in the Domain. Whether the subject of psychoanalysis, of ideology, of textuality, of language, or of power - and in the discourse of the current critique these are by no means mutually exclusive - it is *constituted* within and by the Domain of the Exterior and *determined* by it (even though it needs *itself* as a catalyst: we shall return to this question in section 2.1). That Domain takes on various forms, each carrying an imprint of the intelligible, the semantic, the meaningful, or at least - as in the case of Derrida - a trace of those impositions, not less meaningful than the meaningful itself.

For Benveniste, that Domain is constituted by language, outside of which there is no possibility of subjectivity: "the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language" (1971: 226); or more exactly this basis is in the inherent indeterminacy of its most anthropocentric pronoun, of *the* pronoun: "It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality which is that of *being*" (Benveniste 1971: 224). To become a subject is to be able to say "I", to have the *word* "I" at one's disposal.

Yet language is inherently tragic. The *possibility* that it gives contains in itself the necessity of oppression. For Lacan, as for Benveniste, the subject is also the effect of language; it is born simultaneously with the entrance into the symbolic order, the "locus of [its] signifying cause" (1966: 841). But the entrance into the Symbolic Order - the field of signifying and regulating systems dominated and mediated by language - is at the same time an entrance into the "field of the Other," governed by the laws and rules which are not subject's own, but are nevertheless the condition for its being: heteronomy is thus inscribed into ontology. Once having been constituted, the subject remains forever dependent on the signifier, or in other words, on the Domain of Exteriority: "[...] the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindness, in their end and in their fate" (Lacan 1972: 60). As Kaja Silverman has put it, "the subject [...] is sub-ordinated to a symbolic order which will henceforth entirely determine its

identity and desires. It will from this point onward participate in the discourse of the Other, and regard itself from the space of the Other." (1983: 172)

The same fall into the bondage of heteronomy - though only mediated through language rather than directly dependent on it - occurs in all classical versions of the contemporary critique of the subject relying on the Domain of the Exterior. For Althusser, the constitution of the subject as well as the beginning of its imaginary relation to reality occurs through "interpellation" or "hailing", possible only in the realm of Ideology (Althusser 1971). Permeating all social practices, the almost theologically omnipresent *power* is the source of subjectivity in the writings of Michel Foucault: it is "one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals". (Foucault 1980: 98). Yet even without insistence on either the ideologically determined forces or on the imprint of the unconscious letter, the origin of the subject cannot be seen as a moment preceding textuality. As Jacques Derrida puts it, the "movement of *différance* is not something that happens to a transcendental subject. It is what produces it." (1973: 86). In this sense Derrida's view is the most universal and the least limited by master tropes. The origin of subjectivity is inscribed in the movement of textuality, in the "system of *différance*": "Nothing - no present and in-*different* being - thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity - like objectivity - is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*." (1981: 28)

The origin of subjectivity then inevitably brings about the loss of the possibility of autonomy that neither could nor ever has been achieved. Even if a living subject believes or pretends to be autonomous, such a behaviour remains forever a simulacrum governed by the grammar of "as if" (Althusser 1971; cf. Hirst & Woolley 1982: 134). Not only do signifying practices now replace subject as origin, but also all instances of the subject's subsequent interior *parole* - in the broadest semiotic sense of *any* expression - are conditioned and determined by the *langue* of Exteriority: the Symbolic order, the Other, Ideology, Text, all of which pre-exist the subject, and all of which are realized in various semiotic systems, but ultimately manifest themselves in language. The subject now is no more than a function of semiosis, or discourse.

Deprived thus of autonomy, the subject becomes the battleground - or the playground - of the effects of signifying practices: linguistic, symbolic, ideological, or social. This syncretism is reflected in the popular discourse of the academia, where various influences and impulses merge to yield its synthetic and heteronomous image. For example, the feminist critique of the "phallic" self, simultaneously utilizes Lacan, Althusser, Saussure, and Foucault in the three lines of text quoted below:

[...] the Other is the locus of the *constitution* of the subject or the structure that *produces* the subject. [...] the Other is the *differential* structure of language and of *social relations* that constitute the subject in the first place and in which it (the subject) must take up its *place*. (Moi 1985: 101; emph. mine)

Similar echoes of the same voices reverberate in fragments from Belsey's popular *Critical Practice*:

'Identity', subjectivity is thus a matrix of subject positions, which may be inconsistent or even in contradiction with one another. Subjectivity, then, is linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced across the range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates. [...] The subject is constructed in language and in discourse and, since the symbolic order in its discursive use is closely related to ideology, in ideology. (1980: 61)

The greatest emphasis - and equally syncretic - on the discursively determinist nature of the constructed subject comes from ideologically and socially committed analyses; it is ideology "that produces" the subject as the place where a specific meaning is realized in signification", thus creating an intelligibility "which in a capitalist society tends to serve the interest of one class." (Coward & Ellis 1977: 68). This emphasis is understandable, given the implied reasoning rooted in the grand narrative of those discourses, and their more or less pronounced Marxist tinge: not only explaining, but changing the world and society will consequently lead to the change in individual subjects and will create new types of subjectivity. Likewise - translated from class into gender terms - the deconstruction of the subject in feminist studies is motivated by an ideological purpose which is to question and ultimately overthrow the patriarchal world structure:

The traditional humanism [...] is in effect part of patriarchal ideology. At its centre is the seamlessly unified self - either individual or collective - which is commonly called "Man". As Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous would argue, this integrated self is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of the self-contained, powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity. In this humanist ideology the self is the *sole author* of history and of the literary text: the humanist creator is potent,

phallic and male - God in the relation to his world, the author in relation to his text. [...] The text is reduced to a passive, 'feminine' reflection of an unproblematically 'given', 'masculine' world or self. (Moi 1985: 8)

Concurrently with the subjection to the originating and determining power of the Domain of the Exterior occurs the deprivation of the subject of its identity. This *disidentification* takes place simultaneously along several paths, and involves three differentiable factors: the division within the subject, its movement among sites which are not its own, and its discontinuity.

The first unavoidable moment of disidentification occurs paradoxically at the instant of an apparent self-definition of the subject as person: as I.

*I* can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone. It has no value except [...] in the act of speaking in which it is uttered. There is thus a combined double instance in this process: the instance of *I* as referent and the instance of discourse containing *I* as the referee. The definition can now be stated precisely as: *I* is "the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*." (Benveniste 1971: 218)

The recognition of the dichotomy between the speaking subject (*sujet d'enunciation*, referent) and its discursive representative - the subject of speech (*sujet d'annoncé*, referee), without whom the speaking (thinking, writing) subject cannot exist as "I", forever deprives the individual of his/her own identity that would not at the same time be the identity inscribed in the symbolicity of the Other. Yet the dichotomy goes deeper than consciousness, and leaves no realm - however inaccessible - from under its influence. The split within the subject originated by Freud is now translated - in Lacan's work - into linguistic categories; the unconscious is no longer construed in somatic terms, but as an effect of the gap between the subject of speech and the speaking subject. In Jameson's words: "The discontinuity [...] between the *annoncé* and the subject of enunciation [...] corresponds to the coming into being of the Unconscious itself, as that reality of the subject which has been alienated and repressed through the very process by which, in receiving a name, it is transformed into a representation itself." (1977: 363)

Apart from being necessarily involved in this kind of paradigmatic relation of the signified to the signifier dependent on systems of representation, the subject is also forced into syntagmatic movements determined by relations of power or systems of social positioning. In Foucault's earlier writings, the subject is "not the speaking

consciousness, not the author of the formulation, but a position that may be filled in certain conditions by various individuals" (1974: 115). For example, the positions of the subject of medical discourse are defined" by the situation that it is possible for him to occupy in relation to the various domains or groups of objects: according to a certain grid of explicit or implicit interrogations, he is the questioning subject and, according to a certain programme of information, he is the listening subject, according to a table of characteristic features, he is the seeing subject, and according to a descriptive type, the observing subject." (Foucault 1974: 52). Generalized, *mutatis mutandis*, on other levels and realms of the social structure that principle generates a "nomadic subject" (Fiske 1989) wandering among social positions available to it, without ever taking up "the synthetic activity of a consciousness identical with itself, dumb and anterior to all speech." (Foucault 1974: 54-55). In other words, this essence-less subject becomes what an empirical psychologist calls the "Protean Man": by analogy to Proteus in Greek mythology, who "was able to change his shape with relative ease from wild boar to lion to dragon to fire to flood. What he found difficult, and would not do unless seized and chained, was to commit himself to a single form, a form most his own, and carry out his function of prophecy." (Lifton 1969: 44)

This forced syntagmatic mobility involves also another important theme, and the third crucial factor in the disidentification of the subject: "the discontinuity of the planes from which he speaks" and, in effect, the discontinuity of the subject itself (Foucault 1974: 54-55). On the one hand, that discontinuity partly results from and accompanies the split within the subject and its "protean" or "nomadic" character. For Foucault, obviously, its source is in discourse which "[...] is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined." (1974: 55) On the other hand, the discontinuity results from the construal of subjectivity in temporal terms, as a forever ruptured process: "not a phenomenon but a process of production which presupposes a permanent dialectic (position and destruction) of the identity" (Kristeva 1985: 212). That dialectic of destruction and renovation is already ingrained in the dialectic between the subject of enunciation and of *énoncé*: subjectivity consists in perpetual termination and commencement, constitution and reconstitution. Yet, in the "critique of the subject" - despite various differences between its exponents - constitution and reconstitution never accord to yield a positive result. For the social or ideological stance, "the process of the speaking subject [...] coincides with the movements of rupture, of

renovation, of revolution" (Coward & Ellis 1977: 146), and in effect, in discontinuity. For Derrida and Lacan (again all dissimilarities notwithstanding), the subject is always late for the meeting with itself: it "slides in the chain of signifiers," (Lacan 1975: 48, in Heath 1981: 70), and - as an effect of *différance* - it "is not present, nor above all present to itself, [...] the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral." (Derrida 1981: 29)

## 2. Lacunae of Doubt

While certainly convincing in its overthrow of the Cartesian self, the critique of the subject, as a general body of discourse, gives rise to several objections, each of different methodological force. In their order from the strongest to the mildest, those objections are directed against: (1) an implicit hypostization of a nuclear persona, creating a selfcontradictory duality, (2) the postulate of discontinuity as an attribute of subjectivity, and (3) an overemphasis on determinism in the construction of the subject, resulting in the lack of theoretical space for questions of ethics.

### 2.1 A Concealed Hypostasis

The concealed dichotomy operative behind the constitution of the non-Cartesian "constructed" subject is that between the always already existent individual and the constituting exterior: the origin and the existence of the individual is determined by the field of discourse, and yet the individual must *first* enter that field. Contrary to the claims that there is no pre-given entity beyond discursive production, some kind of anteriority always seems to be implied: an *ersatz* of the essentialist "I", still plastic, unformed, unmolded and embryonic, but already there. The critiques silently relying on that presence situate themselves thus *simultaneously* within two contradictory discourses: the one which condemns and annihilates the concept of the anterior humanist self, and at the same time - through an undercurrent of reference to the concept of a pre-existent individual - within the discourse under critique.

In other words - to refer to the familiar material -, whenever one speaks of subject positions there emerges a requirement for something to occupy those positions; whenever one speaks of identification, or counteridentification, or disidentification (Pêcheux 1982), two terms impose themselves: the model and the agent that will identify or counteridentify itself. Similarly, the "concrete individual" who will be inter-

pellated by ideology calls for some sort of status pre-existing that ideology, as does the being capable of "reading" iconic signs in order to differentiate itself from its other in the "mirror stage." Likewise, the "speaking subject" inevitably has to be capable of identifying with - and thus preceding - the subject of speech. None of those anteriorities is a substantial entity perhaps, but still each emerges as an agency capable of defining its "space" in the "place" of the other, to extend de Certeau's metaphor (1984).

Examples abound in the relevant literature: "My objective [...] has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, *human beings* are made *subjects*" (Foucault 1982: 784); "all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constituting *concrete individuals as subjects* (Althusser 1971: 159); "ideology has the role of constituting *concrete individuals as subjects*" (Belsey 1980: 62); etc. (all emphases mine). Some instances of the split between the subject and the individual reflect an obvious conceptual schizophrenia. In *Feminist Practice*, for example, passages struggling *against* humanist discourses which "presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what she is" (Weedon 1987: 32), occur side by side with passages positing another kind of individual, not only appropriately heartless and essence-less, but also untheorized, and dangerously substantial. Such "[I]ndividuals are both the *site* and *subjects* of discursive struggle for their identity." (Weedon 1987: 97) The duality persists: the individuals are "never in a state of innocence when faced by a choice of conflicting subject positions" and "of necessity commit themselves to specific subject positions and embrace quite contradictory modes of subjectivity at different moments." (1987: 97) Likewise, when Berger and Luckman state that "[i]dentity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society" (1984: 195) they in fact formulate the implicit basis for the "determinist" position and for the theories of "constructed" subjectivity. Since, however, an individual must *ex definitione* - through a tautology of the most fundamental kind - have an identity, the impending question of *what* is that individual *before* it enters the dialectical relation and what is its origin before the first positioning, first interpellation, puts into doubt the validity of the relation's originary power.

The positing of the individual amounts to creating a camouflaged duality of self and subject. Within the paradigm of current critical theory (and also from the semiotic perspective advocated here) selfhood and subjectivity must remain inseparable, and neither can be anterior or postulated as anterior: they are simultaneous. To

imply that *apart* from the subject, there is a self (an individual, a human being) would mean a return to the Cartesian anteriority of the *cogito* or to the Husserlian meaning-intending ego, only now cloaked by the veil of "constructed" subjectivity. If the distinction between selfhood and subjectivity were to be maintained, it can only be maintained as a historical and not a logical or synchronic distinction. The polarization of self and subject is only acceptable on the diachronic axis: as a theoretical movement from a substantial entity to a being construed as becoming, as a process inseparable from signification. Otherwise - synchronically - the self is always already a subject. As Thomas Docherty notes in his analysis of the changes in character construction in literature, in the course of history "[...] we replace the notion of the self with that of the subject, a subjectivity which always eludes objectification." (1983: 85) That "movement from self to subject" - whether in literature, in philosophy, or in ideology - is a historical, diachronic process: "The unity of the ego-centred individual self, in terms of character, has been replaced with a notion either of constant deferral of that self, or of a notion of corporate identity of a number of subjects, coinciding in one area of discourse" (Docherty 1983: 265). In the context of the critique of subjectivity, "self" can only be a "reifying" and "synthetizing" metaphor for multifaceted "subject", perhaps a reflection of the essentialist nostalgia, but cannot be legitimately used as a foundational hypostasis.

Once implicitly postulated, the validity of the underlying dichotomy (individual-subject) has to be simultaneously annihilated in order to maintain the non-originary and heteronomous nature of the constructed subject. The dichotomy, even though prerequisite, pretends to be non-existent. Kaja Silverman, writing within the framework of the same paradigm, accurately notes the contradictory connotations of its two terms:

The term "subject" designates a quite different semantic and ideological space from that indicated by the more familiar term "individual." The second of these terms dates back from the Renaissance, and it still bears the traces of the dominant philosophical systems of that time--systems which afforded to consciousness the very highest premium. The concept of subjectivity [...] marks a radical departure from this philosophical tradition. [...] Together the terms "individual" and "man" posit an entity that is both autonomous and stable, [...] a human essence that remains untouched by historical or cultural circumstances (Silverman 1983: 126).

Despite declarations, then, made in current critical theory, that the subject's production is rooted in signifiatory practices, that agent which *takes* a subject position - or *enters* the symbolic order, or *internalizes* signification - is not founded in the

theory of signification and remains outside it like a "dangerous supplement". The principal charge then is that the discourse on subjectivity relies on a concealed dichotomy involving as one of its terms the entity which it is eventually supposed to produce and determine. A weaker version of that indictment would be to say that even if such a *nuclear self* or *persona* is not postulated *verbatim*, it is simply methodologically not eliminated.

## 2.2 Untheorized Discontinuity

As I have indicated earlier (1.3), recent theory offers the concept of subjectivity as a discontinuous process. It is able to account for what happens at the linguistic, discursive, or ideological moments of the production of the subject, but it does not account for what happens in the gaps, in the discontinuities. What do the gaps consist of? What links the fabrication of the various identities and positions? Such questions prompt further ones: what kind of ontological status can be ascribed to the subject in the gaps? Into what kind of nonexistence does it fall? And, again, is there not a tacit implication of a nuclear persona or self alternately active and silenced in its nomadic transitions?

My counterproposal - at this stage put forward only as a hypothesis and theoretically validated further on (4.2) - is that the concept of the subject as process does not necessarily implicate discontinuities, ruptures, and destructions caused by the perpetually renewed activity of speech or discursive practice. On the contrary, the concept of subject as a semiotic process presupposes an inferential, enthymematic, latent, but traceable continuity, without at the same time postulating substantiality, essentialism, or simple unbroken linearity.

## 2.3 Determinism

The subject emerging from the current critique is a determinist subject: the obvious consequence of the belief in its absolute dependence on the totalizing constitutive power of the Domain of Exteriority. Literal depictions of the subject as a fabrication, a product, or a construct recur in the prevalently determinist tendencies in the recent discourse, echoing some of the masters' voices:

Subjects are fabricated and positioned in social relations [...]. (Henriques et al. 1984: 98)

Any discourse which aims to speak of the subject must at the same time speak of the social, and it must do so *not* in terms of a complementarity but on the basis of the fabrication of subjects in and for signifying material practices. (Venn 1984:151)

The formation of the self, then, must also be understood in relation to both the ongoing organismic development and the social process in which the natural and the human environment are mediated through the significant others [...] The same social processes that determine the completion of the organism produce the self in its particular, culturally relative form. (Berger and Luckmann 1984: 68)

Such a determinist stance leaves no room for ethical considerations and simplifies the question of subjectivity by reducing it to a bipolar and at the same time unidirectional relation. I am not saying that a theory of the subject should *include* an ethical aspect; what I am saying is that it should not *eliminate* its very possibility.

Similar doubts have already been voiced (e.g., Henriques 1984, Felski 1989, Fiske 1989) and a necessity of some sort of middle ground has been postulated. In her analysis of the conditions of female subjectivity Rita Felski, for example, following Giddens's structuration theory based on "the *duality of structure*, which relates to the *fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency*" (Giddens 1979: 69 in Felski 1989: 55) sees the necessity of avoiding "the twin pitfalls of determinism and voluntarism" (Felski 1989: 58), and argues that "any theory of social and discursive interaction must allow a certain minimum of critical reflexivity on the part of human agents" (1989: 67). That moment of reflexivity is particularly important in terms of Giddens's analysis of self-identity: "Self-identity [...] is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. [...] Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his own biography*." (Giddens 1991: 52-53) Yet, pertinent as those analyses are, they only recognize and postulate the potential of the subject for "self-reflexivity" rather than give it a theoretical foundation.

Generally speaking, even if there is an awareness among the more liberal critics that the subject is as much constituted as constituting (Marshall 1992: 82), it is only

the first "constituted" part that has been elaborated from a variety of angles in the current critique, while the latter - the (self-) "constituting" aspect - remains largely untheorized.

Declarations denouncing outright determinism and calling for a wider margin for the subject's active participation in its own construction remain contingent rather than integral to theories. In reality, the question is not so much of allowing the subject a "minimum of reflexivity," as of a theoretical justification of the *necessity* of such reflexivity.

The epistemological question of self-knowledge can be answered only in conjunction with an ontological analysis of subjectivity. As Jean-Luc Nancy says, "Before the subject of a predication (let us say: before the *subject-of*) there is [...] the Being of the subject, or the subject without "of," the subject-being, existence. [...] existence is the essence of the subject to the extent that it *is*, prior to any predication." (Nancy 1991: 6) It is exactly this pre-predicative aspect that remains untheorized in "constructionist" theories, which results, as I have indicated, in a hypostization of a nuclear self, in unaccounted discontinuities, and in an overemphasis on determinism. As I will show further, it is possible - without postulating a pre-given individual - to speak in a theoretically justified way about the concept of the subject which not only is dependent on signification, but is itself an active participant in semiosis. First, however, for the sake of the argument, I will have to examine the significance of *intèrpretation* for the question of subjectivity.

### **3. Interpretation as an epistemological and ontological category**

#### **3.1 Interpretation as a mode of knowing**

The prevalent and generally accepted way of looking at interpretation is to regard it as part of the apparatus of cognition. In this sense - as an *epistemological* concept-interpretation is considered as one of two kinds, or stages, of the cognitive process: it is seen as a higher faculty, presupposing some sort of a more basic cognitive activity as its precondition. This approach has its roots in romantic hermeneutics, in the distinction between understanding and interpretation, and its origin may be linked with the names of Chladenius, Droysen and Dilthey. What is implied in the distinction - even if its two terms become closely interwoven, or are construed as

"the outer and inner word" (Schleiermacher) - is some sort of an underlying, basic dichotomy: a dichotomy between the romantic immediacy of insight on the one hand, and the mediation it requires via the interpreting word on the other hand. Whether construed in the vein of more traditional hermeneutics as "the dialectic between explanation and understanding", or rather, as preferred by Ricoeur, as "a particular case of understanding" (Ricoeur 1974: 73), this concept of interpretation always presupposes its unequal double.

The clearest, although perhaps intellectually not the most exciting example of this kind of dichotomy is the distinction between *understanding* and *interpretation* rigidly maintained by Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), where the former (understanding) is focused on the "original meaning", i.e., the stable, "determinate" component of the text, while the latter (interpretation) on a processing of that meaning: "Just as understanding is a *construction* of meaning, so interpretation is an *explanation* of meaning" (1967: 136); "the exclusive object of interpretation is understanding" (1967: 146); "Understanding is silent, interpretation extremely garrulous" (1967: 135). Behind this differentiation there is a philosophically more significant assumption, namely that there is one kind of meaning which is original, stable, and unalterable, and another kind of meaning which is contextually changeable, indeterminate, and may depend on the interpreter. This duality is reflected in Hirsch's distinction between *meaning* and *significance*: the "original" and univocal meaning on the one hand, and the contextual and relational significance on the other: "[...] the change of textual meaning could be explained by saying that the meaning of the text remained the same, while significance of that meaning has shifted. [...] The significance of textual meaning has no foundation unless meaning itself is unchanging."<sup>6</sup> (1967: 213-214)

Hirsch's example typifies interpretation as an operation different from and based upon understanding: an operation of a second, higher order. What is at stake here is a *dichotomous distinction which involves chronological priority*, a hierarchy of complexity, different faculties required from the subject, and different criteria of stability. The view of interpretation as the *appropriation* of understanding - but with crucial ontological implications - underlies Heidegger's concept of Dasein's existential projection. The traditional hermeneutical duality is maintained, but is closer to collapsing into a single bi-aspectual process:

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<sup>6</sup> For Hirsch, interpretation is a "commentary about meaning", which is determinate, on its way to "judgment" about the significance which is "boundless."

The projecting of the understanding has its own possibility--that of developing itself [*sich auszubilden*]. This development of understanding we call "interpretation" [*Auslegung*]. In it the understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it. In interpretation understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. Such interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former. Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working out of possibilities of understanding. (1967: 189-90)

In interpreting we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by interpretation. (1967: 191-192)

The involvement of Dasein with the world *through* understanding, and consequently, through interpretation, extends the scope of those categories beyond the realm of cognition to include questions of being, and unveils their existential significance for the projection of the world, and thus for Dasein's own existence. The function of interpretation in Heidegger's system draws our attention to its *ontological import*, which I hope to bring out more clearly in the semiotic context through the discussion of the structure of the sign (3.2).

A radical approach to interpretation as an epistemological notion - radical both in its acceptance of the relativism or fallibilism of truth, and in its emphasis on the inevitably mediative character of cognition - annihilates the distinction between understanding and interpretation, which now become two terms for the same phenomenon, only emphasizing (or, conversely, hiding) its different aspects. If we construe the world textually, all understanding is already an interpretation; there is no fixed set of entities which require a preparatory phase of comprehension in order for interpretation to be possible: any comprehension is in itself an interpreting act. Of the original versions of this view, the most seductive perhaps is entailed in the textualist aspect of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's textualism manifests itself not only in his concept of the relation of signifier to the signified as inherently metaphorical, of truth as always a metaphor - always involving interpretation - but also, and primarily, in his view of the *world* as text. For Nietzsche, as A. Nehamas observes, "no text seems to be meaningful independently of all interpretation, no interpretation, it seems, can discover a meaning that exists antecedently; instead, every interpretation actually creates the meaning it attributes to its text." (1985: 62) Interpretation is "the introduction of a new meaning - not 'explanation'" (Nehamas 1985: 91).

Yet the strongest and methodologically best founded justification of the inevitability of interpretation in any cognitive process emerges from within the framework of triadic semiotics originated by Charles S. Peirce. Within that framework any kind of perception is always already an interpretation - comprehension or understanding without the involvement of the interpretive faculty are impossible. This is not to say that Peirce himself makes statements on the relation of understanding and interpretation; to my knowledge, he never discusses this dichotomy, nor does he approach any specific problems from its perspective. Yet the notion interpretation as integral to cognition is entailed in the very concept of the triadic sign - the sign whose meaning is an *interpretant* (see 3.2 below) - and in the assumption that there is no thought apart from signs, no entity that could be directly given to our knowledge without mediation. This pan-interpretive approach is not limited only to linguistic texts, but encompasses all kinds of perception of signs.<sup>7</sup> Even perception of an iconic sign involves interpretive procedures: a mere "seeing" a picture of something, a duck or a rabbit, a young woman, or a mother-in-law involves inferential or interpretive activity.

### 3.2 Interpretation as a mode of being

But the semiotic standpoint involves not only the view of interpretation as cognition. Closely related to it - as we have already anticipated - is the view of interpretation as an *ontological category*. Like the former, the latter dimension of interpretation inevitably ensues from the structure of the triadic sign. We have to recall briefly the basic characteristics of that structure.

According to Peirce, the sign involves a mutually dependent coexistence of three necessary correlates:

1. the representamen, or the sign-vehicle;
2. the (immediate) object, which is a semiotic projection of the external or represented reality (i.e., of the dynamical object); and

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<sup>7</sup> The view that interestingly might find corroboration in certain tenets of Gestalt psychology stripped of their psychologism and reformulated from a semiotic perspective.

3. the interpretant - the element which belongs to the realm of thought, mediation, cognition or, in other words, to the realm of Thirdness. This third correlate of the sign - the interpretant - is the meaning of the sign. The interpretant not only explains the sign to which it belongs as its absolutely indispensable element; it not only is the meaning of the sign, but is itself a sign in its own right, and as such it has its own interpretant, which being a sign, has its own interpretant, "the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on, *ad infinitum*." (CP 2.303)<sup>8</sup> Representation or semiosis, in this view, is "the capability of the endless translation of sign into sign." (CP 2.153)

From the perspective of triadic semiotics, then, no sign can exist in isolation. This is also true of the dyadic sign, the Saussurean unity of *signifiant/signifié*. However, if for Saussure and the tradition following him the sign depends on other signs in a negative way and is defined by the difference from those other signs, for Peirce the sign's dependence on the semiotic *universum* is positive. While the concept of difference is still implicit in the idea of mediation (or Thirdness in general), the emphasis in the triad is on the fact that the sign exists because it is interpreted in and through other signs: "Whatever is capable of being represented is itself of a representative nature. The idea of representation involves infinity, since a representation is not really such unless it be interpreted in another representation." (CP 8.268)

The mode of existence of the sign then does not involve the actuality of use as its essential property, but consists in the sign's being interpreted in other signs: "No sign," according to Peirce, "can function as such except so far as it is interpreted in another sign. [...] What I mean is that when there is a sign there will be an interpretation in another sign." (CP 8.225, note). Because interpretability is an ontological necessity and because each sign must therefore have its interpretant which itself is a sign and has the same ontological requirements, there is no limit to the process. When considered as a phenomenon *independent of individual mental acts*, semiosis must be seen as infinitely encompassing the whole realm of signification.

The immediate existential rooting of the sign, then, is in its interpretant(s): the sign exists not because it is actually used, understood, interpreted by someone at a given moment, but because it translates itself into another sign: multiplied by infinity that sentence summarizes the ontology of the sign and the sign universe. Interpretation - construed as an "activity of signs" (Buczynska 1978) - is no longer only

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<sup>8</sup> In all quotations from the *Collected Papers* (abbreviated CP), the first number in brackets customarily refers to volume, the second to paragraph.

an epistemological, but also, and primarily, an ontological notion: signs exist in and through interpretation. The relevance of this fact to human subjectivity is crucial.

#### 4. Subjectivity and Semiosis

##### 4.1 The Subject as Sign

To appreciate fully the importance of the ontological aspect of interpretation for the question of subjectivity it is necessary to see the subject itself as a semiotic concept. This semiotic nature of the subject is recognized in the current critique, where it is considered as text, or intertext, or in other words as a complex sign (as, for example, in Roland Barthes's well known quasi-aphorism: the "I is not an innocent subject" but "a plurality of text"; Barthes 1974: 10). For Lacan, "man speaks but it is only that the symbol has made him man" (Lacan 1966: 689): the subject is the effect of the signifier, a result of the structure of difference. In certain respects, the Lacanian formula of signification seems to be even more radical than Peirce's, for whom the external object to some extent does determine the sign (at least to its presentation). In Lacan, the infinite regress combines with the Saussurean absence of referentiality: "the unity of signification [...] proves never to be resolved into a pure indication of the real, but always refers back to another signification" (1977: 126). The semiotic nature of the subject consists thus not only in the fact that the subject is the effect of the signifier, but also that it is of necessity involved in the continual sliding behind that signifier. Similarly for Kristeva, "the subject never *is*. The *subject* is only the *signifying process* and it appears only has a *signifying practice*" (Kristeva 1984: 215).

And yet - in this kind of semiotic approach - the subject is never its own: it is always caught in a web of displacements and significatory substitutions, deprived of its autonomy, doomed always to search in vain for its identity in the discourse of the Other. The reason for this is that the very concept of *signifié* in the dyadic sign is a passive one: it lacks the dynamic element of interpretation. Rooted in the Saussurean tradition, the semiotic nature of subjectivity carries the stigma of passivity. This passivity of the subject with regard to the Domain of Exteriority characterizes the whole discourse of the current critique. Even though semiotically conceived, the human subject-object remains a product, an outside of active semiosis, either an inert signified determined by language and discourse without reciprocity or dia-

lectics, or a "position", a screen, a medium, or projector of higher forces: "a passage-way, a non-place, where there is a struggle between conflicting tendencies" (Kristeva 1984: 203).

Within the tradition of the semiology of the dyadic sign (or "semiological" ideology, as its variant), the semiotic nature of subjectivity cannot be seen in all its dimensions, and in particular its active aspect lacks sufficient space and ground for theorization. Contrary to that, as I intend to show, within triadic semiotics the participation of the subject in endless semioses has to be seen as an enabling rather than delimiting factor. The primary reason for this is that the subject - construed as sign - is inherently immersed in interpretation.

The basic lesson to be learnt from "[o]ur reading of Peirce as an explorer of signs holds the promise", as Colapietro remarks, "of acquiring a crucial form of literacy; namely, our ability to read ourselves as products, processes, and sources of semiosis" (1989; 47), or in other words to follow Peirce, in claiming that the subject is entirely a semiotic being. Of Peirce's numerous pronouncements on the semiotic nature of the human person, the most elegant and persuasive perhaps is the comparison between man and word in the fifth paragraph of "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" culminating in the conclusion that in principle there is no essential difference between the two. That passage has been discussed with much subtlety and within the broader context of Peirce's philosophy in recent literature (Colapietro 1989, Singer 1984). Rather than repeating its analysis here, it seems more productive at this point to follow Fairbank's suggestion (1976: 19) - legitimized now by evidence from recent inquiry - to *literally* understand Peirce's assertions that "the word or sign which the man uses is the man himself", that "my language is the sum total of myself," and most of all the simple but vital truth that "*man is a sign*". (CP 5.314, *emph. mine*)

Within the framework of the triadic semiotics, the concept of the *subject as sign* is a necessary consequence of two more basic and mutually related premises: first, that all cognition and all thought is in signs, and secondly, that there is no direct, unmediated cognition. The only accessible way to know oneself then is to know oneself as sign. Any act of individual cognition requires an interpretant: perception or understanding is possible only as interpretation. There is no noumenal content of the mind - the mind is the name for that space where the interpretant occurs; the mind *is* the interpretant. Now, because it ensues from the structure of the sign that

the interpretant is itself a sign, requiring interpretation, the subject entertaining the interpretant - or better, the subject emerging from the act of interpretation - must itself be a sign. As Peirce says: "the content of consciousness, the entire phenomenal manifestation of mind, is a sign resulting from inference" and consequently, "mind is a sign developing according to the laws of inference" (CP 5.313). The significance of that reasoning has been accurately recapitulated by W. B. Michaels:

If then, we can have in the first place no direct knowledge of the self, that is to say, if we can know it only as an inference or thought, and if, in the second place, all our thoughts are signs, it follows in the third place that we can only know the self as a sign. And if furthermore, we accept Peirce's principle "that the absolutely incognizable (unknowable) does not exist," then we must go on to say not merely that we can know the self as a sign, but that the self is a sign, or, as Peirce rather dramatically puts it, "the word or sign that a man uses *is* the man himself." (Michaels 1980: 194)

A more detailed analysis could show that this phenomenon goes beyond the realm of rationality, and - apart from the logical interpretant - that it also involves the emotional and the energetic ones, thus encompassing all aspects of the human being. Of course, the subject construed as sign must not be understood in a primitive, reductive way as sign vehicle, a kind of material signifier (as often the sign is construed in materialistic theories). As sign, the subject is a triadic semiotic process involving all three ontological modalities of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, and - *ex definitione* - inevitably involving interpretation.

#### 4.2 Homo Semioticus: the self-interpreting Subject

The primary consequence then of the subject's being a sign is its anchoring in interpretation: the existence, or rather the becoming of the subject is inextricably and in various ways linked with and dependent on both the epistemological and the ontological functions of interpretation. I will now examine those diverse dependencies and interdependencies, with separate emphases on three different aspects of subjectivity.

1. Looking from the outside, contextually, the subject is held in existence by semiotic systems and universes to which it relates, or - to use another register - by discursive practices and institutions. The subject functions within those discursive fields because it is interpreted within the whole complex system of affiliations, differences, and interrelationships. This is another way of saying that the subject is

socially constructed and offered a range of "subject positions". The ontological aspect of interpretation comes here to the fore, both in the actual and in the potential sense: actual in concrete and specific social acts and practises: potential - in the complex web of discursive relations in their perpetual becoming. It is this attribute of subjectivity that has been especially in the centre of attention of contemporary critique.

2. In a similar manner, but on a smaller scale, the subject exists in the actual interpretations of individual fellow-subjects. This ontological dependence extends beyond the span of our lives. Even in the trivially empirical sense, our being-becoming as subjects does not begin from within, not from a clearly identifiable moment of *auto*-biography, but from without and *before* our body - the so called site of our subjectivity (Kerby 1991) - actually comes into its material existence. Already before birth are we ensnared in a nebular web of interpretations from the outside: those of parents, neighbours, uncles, aunts, friends and enemies of the family, etc. It is only within both the perils and the security of this web that our own first interpretations of the world and of our self occur. Lacan's analyses - the real and the mirror phases in his historiography of subjectivity - show that initially those interpretations are probably indexical and iconic, with the symbolic gradually entering the stage (rather than abruptly, as Lacan suggests through the example of the *fort/da* game). As Peirce has demonstrated on many occasions, iconicity and indexicality are never free from a degree of symbolicity.

Naturally, our subjectivity does not cease instantly when we die: it remains as a fringedweller of the same discursive realms which are involved in our actual existence. This is not to say literally, of course, that either before the birth or after the death of the body, we are subjects in the rigid sense of the word; and yet we could not say that we are completely non-existent as subjects. Rather, what occurs is a process of sliding from "objectivity" to subjectivity and back, from being an object-subject through agent-subject to object-subject again: an indeterminate or undetermined string of semioses before, and a reified (and often purified) bundle of semiosis after - an entry in an encyclopedia, a letter re-read in solitude, or a memory in the minds of some still living agent-subjects.

3. Those are the social aspects of the subject's semiotic existence. In the last instance, however, the *actual* being of the subject is *rooted in its own interpretive activity*: It is here that both meanings of interpretation - the epistemological and

ontological one - come together and undergo a synthesis in the being-becoming of the subject. The subject is a *self-interpreting subject* in a very strong sense of that term: both with regard to its *existential* and its *qualitative* constitution. I will comment now on those collateral aspects of the subject's becoming.

#### A. The existential aspect.

The discursive practice interprets the subject mostly *synchronically*: it maintains its particular being and its particular position within the discursive field at any moment in time. If there is interpretation across time it is mainly fragmentary and discontinuous - in this sense Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan and others are right. The subject's own interpretive potential, on the other hand - its character as sign - maintains its being on the *diachronic axis* by relating to a continuity of always traceable relations, interpretants, semioses, and significations which contributed to the becoming of the subject and its constitution at any given moment. In their potentiality and continual process of agglomeration, the already existent interpretive relations generate further relations, thus accounting for what a humanist critic would call the complexity of the human being, but also accounting for what a post-modern or post-structuralist critic would call a lack of clear-cut boundaries, an openness etc., and what I would like to call the *textual nebulosity* of the subject.

Two important things must be noted here: first that - unlike most of the current discourse on subjectivity - rather than emphasizing discontinuities (cf. 2.2), this concept of the subject *is able to account theoretically for the continuity of the subject-sign*; and secondly, that it at the same time requires *no center, no substantial or essential agency which functions like a box for storing all those past acts of signification* (cf. 2.2). The continuity is relational: the inevitable semiotic continuity of a sign being interpreted by and within another sign, and that sign being interpreted within the next sign, and so on. Of course, all those *traceable* relations and semiotic chains are not held in being actually, but only *in abstracto* (or "potentially") pertain to the "now" of the subject-sign-interpretant. It is this attribute of the subject's becoming that we traditionally call the *identity* of the self, and it is also this aspect of semiosis that allows us to use the metaphorical expression "I am".

A reflection seems in place here concerning the so-called moment of "becoming a subject". Rather than positing, as Lacan does, a "mythical" hypothesis of the pre-linguistic development of the subject (Coward & Ellis 1977: 101), one may use

Peirce's trichotomy of the emotional/energetic/logical interpretants not only as stages in an instance of actual sign interpretation, but also as *chronological* stages in the development of the subject in his/her life-time. The trichotomy of interpretants would then translate itself into a series: (1) feeling of qualities (as the earliest interpretive manifestation of subjectivity) - (2) first unrationalized reactions (analogous to Kristeva's *chora*) - (3) rational inferences. Analyzed within the framework of a homogeneous theoretical apparatus, the human being is not a "human animal" suddenly changed by the magic of the mirror stage into a subject, but is always already an interpretant-sign involved in semiosis and interpretations of growing complexity (from "primitive" perceptions of qualities to linguistic and other symbolic significations).

The unconscious needs not be construed in terms of mythical and mystical hypostases. Just as we only *partially* read any other text or any other sign, so in a similar manner we read our self: our interpretation of ourselves as sign is only an *incomplete* realization of that sign. We do not have access to the whole network of actual and potential relations in which we exist as a sign participating in the larger semioses of the community, in the various vertical and horizontal configurations of the social structure. Even if we anticipate those various interpretations, and are aware of them (or rather of their occurrence), they are for us only indeterminate areas, empty lacunae of our existence. And yet, though unknown, those semioses do perform their ontological function with respect to our subjectivity. As subjects we are not only in process - we are also nebular texts without definite contours, linked with the outside universe by threads of semioses that gradually become invisible, unrecognizable. It is the *incompleteness* - that which is beyond our actual cognition, but determines it potentially - that is the unconscious: the social and semiotic net ensnaring the nebulum of our becoming.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Even our bodies are not fully circumscribed but are supplemented by the extensions of all those spaces that they help produce and configure, and also destroy: by the objects that temporarily attach to the body in those different spaces (the driver's steering wheel, a writer's chair or pen, or Napoleon's hat may serve as conspicuous examples). Those supplements and corporeal traces involve our bodies in a network of interpretations and add to their materiality another dimension of existence.

## B. The qualitative aspect.

As a self-interpreting sign, the subject determines its character: its qualitative constitution. Whether directed outside or upon itself, the subject's perception, comprehension and understanding are always interpretive acts. Of course, in the process of interpretation, the subject must relate to systems of interpretation, to discourses. In this sense, a partial social or discursive determination is unavoidable via those interpretive systems. On the other hand, because we are not speaking of unmediated absorption, but of interpretation (and self-interpretation), there is always a structurally *necessary* element of variability in the subject's interpretive endeavour. Semiosis never follows one pre-given, strictly determined option; it rather occurs within a range or spectrum of potentiality, with various and changeable degrees of determinacy.

By interpreting both the exterior and itself - and as a sign it cannot escape self-interpretation - the subject as much constitutes (or "constructs") itself as it is constituted (or "constructed") by discourses, it is as much offered "subject positions" as it co-creates those positions via appropriation and interpretation. Rather than merely a discursive construction effected *from the outside*, the self-interpreting subject becomes thus an "ethical sign" among whose primary interpretive obligations is hierarchization. The determinism frequently ascribed to the subject in contemporary critique (cf. 2.3) is untenable within the framework of this analysis; on the contrary, reflexivity and self-interpretation have to be recognized as theoretically necessary attributes of subjectivity. We have come via this rather long detour to the problem of the "aesthetics of existence," posed in the later writings of Michel Foucault (1982, 1986). Foucault, who for a long time considered the subject as a passive product of technologies of power, rather unexpectedly swerves to questions of "an art of existence dominated by self-preoccupation," of the "art of the self," of the "frailty of the individual," of "pure enjoyment of oneself" (Foucault 1986: 238). Before he speaks of "the arts of living," however, he appeals - less surprisingly and again in the context of power - to the *freedom* of the subject: "Power is exercised only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free [... i.e.,] faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized." (Foucault 1982: 794) The subject is granted freedom as an axiom and pre-condition for power to be exercised, but that freedom appears rather like a *deus ex machina*. The question of the aesthetics of existence - which turns out to be at the same time the question of the *ethics* of existence - never

receives an answer regarding its origin (or "conditions of possibility") either in Foucault's own work, or in the current discourse on subjectivity. That answer, as I have tried to show, inheres in the mode of being of the subject, which is interpretation; while constrained by the general structure of what might be called after Peirce the Quasi-Mind (cultural systems, general structures of cognition), the subject is both *forced* to and guaranteed the freedom of choice, of possibilities within the range of potential interpretive paths. Yet - let us stress again - even though given here an identity and a reflexive status, still no substance or essence is imposed on the being of such a "sign-subject": it remains a node of semiotic relations, and has its identity only as such a changing, alternating node exposed to constant restructuring and flux, but maintaining its hierarchical nature, even though the hierarchies involved may alternate and change continually, following further reflexive acts of self-interpretation.

The "separation of the 'deed' from the doer" - opposed by Nietzsche with such an insistence - finds its elementary manifestation in the divorce of interpretation from the existence of the subject. "[T]here is no being behind the doing, acting, becoming" (Nietzsche 1965: 178-179). The subject is a process, a "doing" itself. In its primary form, this doing is *interpretation* construed as both an epistemological and ontological category, as both *being-becoming* and *knowing-understanding*, or in other words, as the self-interpreting subject, or *homo semioticus*.

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