

The Subject of the Subject

**Philosophical background to a critical reconsideration of the
problems in studying non-Western media**

Position Paper to the Workshop on

The Subject of the Subject in Media Studies

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Why worry about the subject in media studies? Why not just get on with our substantive analyses instead of wasting time on philosophical nit picking? The short answer is that ignoring assumptions we make about the subject reiterates Eurocentric forms of closure and hegemony. Reifying an imaginary non-Western subject, of course, does just the same.

The issue of the subject turns up under all sorts of labels. These include the issue of personal or cultural identity, and the whole problem of identification. This ranges from the unconscious processes imputed in film theory to how viewers more or less deliberately engage with characters, whether by implication-extrication (Fiske 1989) or by degrees of sympathy (recognition, alignment, allegiance, Smith 1995: 81-86). More generally, the media presuppose a theory of pleasure, sometimes dangerous (Mulvey 1992) of participation; as well as theories of production and consumption (which shows how bourgeois analyses are). Media studies depends upon projection (note the pun) accounts of producers veering between international conspiracy and cock-up theories, while readers or viewers are imagined as anything from instantiations of the liberal dream to passive complicit dupes.

How media work, and so the debates about advertising, violence, media imperialism, all make massive – and usually incommensurable – assumptions about the subject. Less obvious, and more serious, are other issues. These include the nature of the ‘text’, and so the intention behind production – or should it be, following Baudrillard, ‘seduction’ (1990)? Texts presuppose authorial subjects (or projects, following Heidegger). They need interpreting, so giving rise to the entire paraphernalia of readings, codes, dialectics (the hermeneutic circle) and the expert who understands the meanings to be uncovered. The subject becomes constitutive of production and consumption as ways of articulating analytical objects out of the complex of social action.

Once we ask as well how have humans been imagined, treated and divided historically and culturally into subjects or objects of different kinds (cf. Foucault 1982), the issues become so complex that the urge to simplify radically becomes irresistible. The best known is the theorizing of the subject in film studies. If we can produce an account of how all subjects think, imagine, feel, we can locate producers, production, readers/viewers and reception within it. This was achieved by invoking a hyper-academicized psychoanalysis, stripped of any sense of history, culture or practice. The result inevitably was further to elevate the knowing subject of the expert over the objects of inquiry -- film theory objectified viewers as subjects imprisoned in themselves. The counter-arguments that stress subjects as historically constituted, runs into different difficulties. Either they slide into constructivism, by reducing humans to the products (traces) of historical processes, which runs into loony relativism or sheer incoherence (translation becomes impossible; how can you tell what is a human? Or they treat the subject as partly beyond knowability, heterogeneous and transformative, and indeed changing under inquiry (Collingwood 1946: 84-85). I prefer this last, with all its restrictions.¹ You will note that this entire argument works without reference to

¹ Such a study of mind involves two renunciations. First, it renounces with Locke all ‘science of substance’. It does not ask what mind is; it asks only what mind does... Secondly, it renounces all

the issue of subjectivity, which emerges as an addendum to the being of the subject. Reversing the argument – treating the subject as ancillary to the lifework of becoming – makes the media central because they cease to be nebulous processes, but become powers of ‘mediating between one reality and another’ (Baudrillard 1983a: 102) or, as I would prefer to put it, practices of transforming agents, patients and the world.

Interpretation

Conventionally understanding and knowledge rest upon the presupposition that there are human subjects who do the understanding and knowing. The great philosophical questions (What can I know? What ought I do? What may I hope?) according to Kant relate to the final question, the *raison d’être* of the human sciences, ‘What is man?’ (Buber 1992: 30-31). Humans however are both who – or what – does the knowing or understanding and the object of such study. The result arguably is a vicious circle (Foucault 1970; cf. Habermas 1987).

There have been various ways, if not to address the vicious circle, at least to tiptoe round it elegantly. Understanding and interpretation directly raise the issue of the subject. Ricoeur attempted to finesse the problem by distinguishing (following Dilthey) interpreting inscribed signs (*Auslegung*) from *Verstehen* (understanding, comprehension). Because the latter ‘relies on the recognition of what a foreign subject means or intends on the basis of all kinds of signs in which psychic life expresses itself’ (1981: 197), the subject is constitutive of understanding. That is, what I know of you depends fundamentally on me. Attempts to displace the problem of the subject onto the problem of the text, does not, as Foucault noted, get round the problem that ‘one does not interpret what there is in the signified, but one interprets, fundamentally, who has posed the interpretation’ (1990: 66). More radically, following Heidegger, you can argue that ‘what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a project’ (Ricoeur 1981: 202). This line of argument leads to the anti-subjectism of (post)structuralism. Clifford Geertz neatly sums up the alternative.

Accounts of other peoples’ subjectivities can be built up without recourse to pretensions to more-than-normal capacities for ego-effacement and fellow feeling (1983: 70).

Problematically, this neither requires speaking the language nor being there. We are caught in the superiority of the Euro-American knowing subject.

attempt to discover what mind always and everywhere does, and asks only what mind has done on certain definite occasions (1942: 61)... You can have your cake and eat it too by holding that mind is "pure act", so that the question what mind is resolves itself without residue into the question what mind does; but whether this is defensible I shall not ask (Collingwood 1942: 61).

Intersubjectivity

What then is the problem of the knowing subject? Dilthey puts it succinctly.

Mutual understanding assures us of what individuals have in common... A basic experience...permeates the whole conception of the mind-constructed world; through it consciousness of a unitary self and a similarity with others, identity of human nature and individuality are linked. This is the presupposition for understanding (1976: 186).

Understanding presupposes consciousnesses be identical (or alike in all relevant respects), that the self be both unitary and similar to others (a vague formulation), that humans have an identical nature as individuals and lastly that all these are linked. The argument is circular. The mutuality of understanding confirms the presuppositions. There is nothing in 'the mind-constructed world' which is alien to, or beyond the grasp of, understanding.

How do we escape the circularity of intersubjectivity? What do the various noted authors on the subject say? The vital passage in Schutz reads as follows:

We must...leave unsolved the notoriously difficult problems which surround the constitution of the Thou within the subjectivity of private experience. We are not going to be asking, therefore, how the Thou is constituted in an Ego, whether the concept 'human being' presupposes a transcendental ego in which the transcendental alter ego is already constituted, or how universally valid intersubjective knowledge is possible... The object we shall be studying, therefore, is the human being who is looking at the world from within the natural attitude (1967: 98; cf. Bakhtin 1986: 167-68).

Schutz recognizes the important questions and cheerily bypasses them in favour of presuming a natural attitude, in other words exnomination.

The theologian and anthropologist Martin Buber offers a subtler analysis in terms of relationality. They are: I-It and I-Thou. The former establishes experience, the latter relations. In other words, if the subject-object dichotomy were correct, then all meaning would issue from men, and all meaning for myself would issue from myself (Descombes 1980: 72, citing Merleau-Ponty 1973: 269).

Appreciation of another person is relational, in the world and dialogic in a strong sense.

The chief presupposition for the rise of genuine dialogue is that each should regard his partner as the very one he is. I become aware of him, aware that he is different, essentially different from myself, in the definite, unique way which is peculiar to him, and I accept whom I thus see (Buber [1965 1992: 73).

Bakhtin put it better still.

To be means to be for another, and through the other for oneself. A person has no sovereign internal territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary: looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another (1984: 267).

Humanity, or our recognition of others, is something we achieve, not are born into. It is always partial, incomplete, historically changing. It is always mediated. It is this, not salivating over cinema, television or the net, which makes media important to the subject, and the subject to media.²

Depressingly as late as the 1980s Habermas was still peddling a formal version of intersubjectivity.

In communicative action we today proceed from those formal presuppositions of intersubjectivity that are necessary if we are to be able to refer to something in the one objective world... Validity claims...presuppose a world that is identical for all possible observers, or a world intersubjectively shared by members, and they do so in an abstract form freed of all specific content (1984: 50).

Formally, this is problematic. First 'truth cannot be defined or tested by agreement with "the world"; for not only do truths differ for different worlds but the nature of agreement between a version and a world apart from it is notoriously nebulous' (Goodman 1978: 17). We are offered pure content-free thought: that is thought about thought without an object. The world being identical to all observers (note the familiar visualism) excludes the possibility of learning, change.

It is also what anthropologists do when they are content to lay out categories of 'the person', like so many prize trophies. This exemplifies Heidegger's apophantical method, the contemplation of words abstracted from practices, with no consideration of the critical practices of the people concerned, nor even if they have any.

The subject at last

Oddly Raymond Williams misses the conventional origin of argument about the subject.

Subjectum translates the Greek *hupokeimenon* "that which lies under," "the substratum"; a term which in refers in Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics* to that of which all other entities are predicated but which is itself not predicated of anything else. In a classical context, then, the subject is the subject of predication...[and has a function analogous to matter (*hylē*...that persists through the changes that form (*morphē*) imposes upon it (Critchley 1996: 13).

² Levinas produces a similar-looking argument for the need to consider the self, or the Same, in terms of others (*Autrui*), rather than the reverse. Identity is an openness to the world which emerges in relationship to another. However, on my reading, his metaphysical other (1969: 33-40) is detached from mind as engagement with the world and with others.

Problems arise when academics treat such accounts as timeless truths, instead of inquiring into the historical and social circumstances of their use.

In most Western European languages, words for 'the subject' have accreted a wide fan of connotations. From the Latin come the ideas of being under the dominion of a sovereign, of substance and matter worked upon (see Williams 1983). The contrast of 'subject' with 'object' (with their reversal of meanings in English, Critchley 1996: 13) provide a further set, together with the history of their derivatives, the couple 'objective' and 'subjective'. We also speak of logical, grammatical and ethical subjects, for instance. The connotations give references to the subject a seeming luminous – I might say numinous – richness and colour that it is conveniently difficult to obviate.

What though is the philosophical, or metaphysical, subject? For Descartes, it was a *res cogitans*, a thinking thing or substance. For Kant, it was the subject as 'the ground of thought', that is 'whatever it is that thinks in its capacity as thinking' and so as 'autonomously determining', or self-constituting, and through its rationality it dominates those objects which it determines (Guzzoni 1996: 202, 203). Finally, following Hegel, it is 'that which is capable of maintaining within itself its own contradiction' (Nancy 1991: 6). The knowing subject of the human sciences had received the final jolt of lightning sufficient to jerk it into spasmodic existence in the Gothic castle of German Idealism.

We now know that such an account was possible only within the circle of educated, civilized Europeans of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Does the 'postmodern' subject reflect the late twentieth century? Did it produce it? (Or is the question caught on an old dichotomy of subject versus world?) These are

the grand and prophetic gestures of Foucault when he spoke of the erasure of man like a figure drawn in sand at the edge of the sea, of Lacan's decentering of the subject in his reading of Freud, of Althusser's account of the transformation of individuals into subjects (subjectivity conceived as subjection) through the interpellation of ideology, of Derrida's inscription of the subject within language and the formulation of language as difference of which the subject is an effect, of Deleuze's account of the subject as a desiring machine or a body without organs (Critchley 1996: 25).

What is less often remarked upon is how monstrous this subject is (reminiscent of Harold Bloom's narrative God in the Old Testament). Logically it is incapable of doing anything in or, it would seem, even thinking about, the world. However, as what constitutes and dominates all around it, the subject, peculiarly known to and identified with its philosophical authors, comes to command the known world and determine the conditions of its knowability, and of knowability itself. Experientially – following Klein's reduction of Freud's subject to anxiety over loss (epitomized in the mother's breast) – it becomes a generalized, and minimalist, strategy, the imagination of a simulated body lacking in orifices, living as a surface or skin without hidden depths, a being focused about intensities of eating in an entirely quantitative, codeless and quantityless world (Deleuze 1990: 88).

If asking what the subject is proves too disturbing, what about shifting to how the subject is spoken about? Are there, however, 'essential predicates' which apply to all subjects? Despite their ostensible diversity, Derrida argued that

they are all ordered around being present (,tant-present), presence to self – which implies therefore a certain interpretation of temporality: identity to self, positionality, property, personality, ego, consciousness, will, intentionality, freedom, humanity, etc.' (1991: 109).

This reads rather like a list of absolute presuppositions: you have to accept, or else reject, them but cannot easily question them.

More usefully, we may ask how the subject represents itself. As Borch-Jacobsen notes

the subject of the moderns is first and foremost the subject of representation...the subject as representation and representation as subject...it is by representing itself, by posing itself...that the Cartesian ego establishes itself as the basis of all possible truth (1991: 64).

This is the subject of culture as we understand it these days, culture as the play of the self-representing subject.

Baudrillard, drawing heavily upon Foucault, is the chief executioner of this circularity. The central themes of the western philosophy of the subject included representation, choice, deliberation, knowledge and desire (1988: 214). However representation has a history. In Europe it ended with the represented image becoming its own pure simulacrum (1983b). And

the medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium...the effacement of terms and of distinct oppositions, and thus that of the medium and the real (1983a: 102-3).

And with that, on Baudrillard's account, went the subject.

After the subject?

It is less recourse to the subject to which its critics object, but to the idea of subjectivity, to an ahistorical, foundational subject as authority.

What we call the critique of subject is in fact the critique of the concept of the subject (or of the concept of subjectivity)... According to this critique, it is an illusion – an illusion ascribable to a 'metaphysics of subjectivity' – to believe that a lover is the subject of his desires, that a thinker is the subject of his thoughts, that a writer is the subject of his writing, that an agent is the subject of his action, and so on (Descombes 1991: 120-21)

Commonsensical as it may seem that, for instance, I must be agent of my actions, to assert so is neither straightforward nor without significant implications. (cf. Balinese example.) ‘There is an important difference between what we ordinarily understand by the word subject and the meaning this word has finally taken in philosophy’ (Descombes 1991: 123). In other words, scholars have invoked a metaphysical subject which differs from, if notionally still the ground of, subjects as grammatical, political or ethical.

According to Descombes,

the critique of the subject was not a critique of the philosophical subject, but rather a protest against the tendency to confuse subjectivity (defined by methods of doubt, of presupposition, of experience or postulation) with a person’s mental life... Under the name of subject, the "philosophies of consciousness" of the Cartesian tradition persist in seeking a being (whose ontological traits are those of the body), a being endowed with a temporal continuity (comparable to the physical continuity of a material thing), with an identity (analogous to personal identity) (1991: 125).

In other words the complaint was that the distinction had not been drawn radically enough. Mind is not just a ghost in the machine, a thinking substance: it resembles and sticks to the machine.

Now we come to the crunch. Critics of the subject ‘find that the word subject is dangerous: this word, because of its familiar non-philosophical use, appears to authorize the transfer of certain attributes of the person to that which thinks in the person. But the true (metaphysical) subject should be opposed to the human subject’, because otherwise there is no way to distinguish the contingent human traits from the philosophical thinking subject. So ‘the true thinking subject (or that – the "non-subject" – which thinks) must therefore be inhuman’ (Descombes 1991: 126), impersonal and ahistorical, transcendently self-determining and eternal, whether in its classical unitary, split Lacanian or self-supposing form. ‘Now "the critique of the subject" gives various philosophical reasons that tend to withdraw our right to seriously attribute an action to someone... They are in fact assigned, in the manner of a purely "performative" attribution, to people who will henceforth be held responsible’ (1991: 131).

It was this problem, retrospectively at least, which Foucault seems to decided he was addressing, when he wrote that his objective had been

to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects...three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects. The first is the modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences [e.g. anthropology, then second...the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call ‘dividing practices’. The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others... Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the ‘good boys’. Finally, I have sought to study...the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject...how men have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of ‘sexuality’ (1982: 208; my parentheses. Note that object(ification) and subject(ification) are not antinomies here).

The shattered homunculus?

There is one argument that might prevent the subject disappearing into a history of practices. It is the Lacanian revision of the subject as inherently split. Lacan attempts 'to overcome the reified, reflective structure of the ego through the subject's acceptance of its position within the order of symbolic exchange' (Dews 1995: 24). The self emerges as an imaginary precipitate or, more subtly still, as 'nothing but the impossibility of its own signifying representation – the empty place opened up in the big Other by the failure of this representation' (Zizek 1989: 208). Note the parallels with Hegel's being which contains its own contradiction.

Where Lacan agrees with Descombes and the Samkhya philosophers is that 'the subject is never more than supposed.' As Fink, a Lacanian analyst, put it: the subject is

neither the individual nor what we might call the conscious subject (or the consciously thinking subject)... This self or ego is thus, as Eastern philosophy has been telling us for millenia, a construct, a mental object, and though Freud grants it the status of an agency (Instanz), in Lacan's version of psychoanalysis the ego is clearly not an active agent, the agent of interest being the unconscious (1995: 35-37).

As we are going to invite thinkers sympathetic to Lacan, it would be inappropriate to anticipate what they have to say. A few comments are in order though. Lacan's work centres around the themes of identity, representation (the Symbolic), fantasy (the Imaginary) and the deferral, displacement of, and impossibility of confronting, the real. The Symbolic is closely linked to language that is treated in ancient structuralist fashion as a system. If, following Volosinov, it is merely those utterances which have been made, we get a quite different vision of the unconscious (which famously 'is structured like a language', cf. Urwin 1984), which dissociates it as inherently linked to any sovereign consciousness or body. In less-than-skilful hands, the Lacanian subject veers on becoming a shattered homunculus desperately trying to glue the bits together again: the fairy tale of Humpty Dumpty. It is nostalgia for a notionally unitary source, and a unitary telos however necessarily unachievable – *au recherche du temps perdu*.

Other ideas about the subject

Descombes's argument had been reached many centuries earlier by Indian Samkhya philosophers, who had concluded that the subject could only exist as

a contentless, nonintentional presence incapable of performing any activity, it, therefore, cannot know or intuit itself... It is outside the realm of causality, outside space and time, completely inactive...the presupposition for all apparent discrimination or differentiation, neither an object nor a subject (in any conventional sense), verbally uncharacterizable, a pure witness whose only relation to primordial materiality is sheer presence, utterly isolated, completely indifferent...and potentially

present in the awareness of all intellects as not being that awareness (Larson 1987: 80-81).

Larson adds

It has been said that the intention of Hegelian philosophy is to show that, finally, substance is subject. The Samkhya conceptualization of the tripartite process appears to intend precisely the opposite. For Samkhya the apparent subject...is really substance (1987: 71).

Mind, as action in the world, cannot finally transcend its conditions of existence without ceasing to be material in whatever sense; while what is material is caught in unending process.

Samkhya philosophers anticipated Lacan. The material process is tripartite and consists of energy that is capable of spontaneous activity (rajas), rational ordering (sattva), and determinate formulation or objectification (tamas)... In other words, they are about constituting or creating something, bringing it about through causation or intention (Descombes's 'performative attribution'), and its resultant phenomenal appearance in the empirical world of experience or its objectification, which continue unceasingly. There no dichotomy between mind and body, subjective and objective; but objectification cannot be opposed to some more desirable state (subjectification). This endless process of constituting, bringing about and objectifying, the last leading to a new process of constituting is reminiscent of Peirce's triadic process of signification. These are therefore as much moments in the transformation of all instantiated being as distinct processes.

Where this leaves the subject of the subject in Asian and African media is a moot point.

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