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"On the Vaporization and Centralization of the Self": The Notion of the Subject in Modern Western Discourse

Donato Loia

Any elaboration on the meaning of the term "subjectivity" cannot be detached from the problem that subjectivity poses for itself. The same might be said about other word-concepts such as "identity," "self," and "consciousness." In spite of their different meanings, these terms share statuses as battlefields of warring definitions and interpretations. Broadly speaking, critical theory and philosophy have approached subjectivity through two different perspectives. While one perspective has focused predominantly on subjectivity as autonomous, the other has seen the "subject" mostly as a consequence of a set of determinations, as a product of a number of "dispositifs."[1] The contraposition between an autonomous and a non-autonomous subjectivity can be aptly summarized with a notable motto from Charles Baudelaire's intimate diary *My Heart Laid Bare* (1897): "On the vaporization and centralization of the *Self* (*Moi*). Everything is there" (qtd. in Seigel 494). As this article will argue, critical contributions have narrowed down their perspectives to an overtly rigid contraposition between "vaporization" *or* "centralization," considering non-autonomy and autonomy of the subject as two mutually exclusive realms. In doing so, critical studies have often been neglectful to notice that vaporization *and* centralization are in a dialectical tension; both co-participate in the formation of the subject.

This paper argues that it is impossible to cleanly separate the category of the subject from a dimension simultaneously autonomous *and* non-autonomous. Any mutually exclusive contraposition would not pass any critical scrutiny. After starting with a brief introduction to the notion of the autonomous subject, this paper will then describe some crucial arguments that have validated the decentering of the subject-centered paradigm. Each section identifies the limits of both au-

[1]The expression "dispositifs" relates to Michel Foucault's theory. Simply put, a "dispositif" is a social apparatus that *makes* one see, think, act. Every "apparatus" or "dispositif" has an historical nature and, among other scopes, contributes to processes of subjectivization. For an introduction to the "dispositifs" see Foucault 1978 and Deleuze 1992.

tonomous and non-autonomous paradigms, illustrating these paradigms with visual case studies. Lastly, this paper offers a more sophisticated argument for initiating a conversation on the question of the subject beyond the strict contraposition of autonomy and non-autonomy.

In continental philosophy, the paradigm of the autonomy of subject is traditionally associated with René Descartes's (1596–1650) ideas in his *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641). Descartes famously subjected all human knowledge to rigorous skepticism, finally concluding that we can only be certain of our own existence through the act of a thinking "I." Descartes's "I" is fully-conscious, self-aware, self-knowable, and autonomous. As Kaja Silverman in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983) neatly summarizes, "[Descartes's *Discourse*] offers us a narrator who…speaks without simultaneously being spoken, who believes himself to exist outside of discourse" (Silverman 128). According to Descartes, "Mankind" is a transcendental entity non-culturally and non-historically specific. The "I," in particular, is a "thinking I" who forms reality starting from his or her own representations; the "I" is the site of personal identity and the unifying principle behind the experience (Silverman 128).

It is commonly accepted that a number of historical, social, and theoretical factors enabled the development of the Cartesian *cogito*. In the essay "The Questions of Cultural Identity" (1996), the cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls upon a number of key events to contextualize Descartes's autonomous subject: the rise of Humanism during the Renaissance which accorded the highest position to a fully stable and autonomous individual; the Reformation and Protestantism which set the individual conscience free from external forms of authority such as the Roman Catholic church; the rise of Modern Science which considered mankind capable of an autonomous investigation of the mysteries of a de-sacralized natural order; and, finally, the progressive development of Enlightenment, which trusted in human being's ability to completely detach him/herself from prejudices and traditions and rely on his or her own intellectual and rational abilities (Hall 602–603). As this historical summary demonstrates, the formation of the category of a sovereign and autonomous subject acquired its distinctive qualities through a timeframe that anticipates and goes well beyond Cartesian philosophy. More importantly, the idea of an "autonomous subject" is important as a trans-historical concept referring to any individual who is able to distinguish his or her own actions and beliefs from collective beliefs, authorities, and consolidated traditions. Thus, the notion of an

"autonomous subject" is also related to notions of self realization and self actualization of the individual.

Within the history of art similar conception of the question of subjectivity can be witnessed. The art historian George Heard Hamilton in his *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880-1945* (1993) describes how an "epistemological turn" occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many artists, instead of concentrating on the phenomenal world, redirected their attention towards their inner experiences. Among the many artists he mentions, Hamilton discusses Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), who wrote that he could not and did not want to merely represent what he saw in front of his eyes, but instead to express his feelings forcibly by use of arbitrary colours (Hamilton 157). Likewise, Henri Matisse (1869–1954) in *Notes d'un Peintre*, published in 1908, wrote that he could not distinguish between the feeling that he had for life and his way of representing it (Hamilton 169). Examples that address the autonomous expression of an artist, beyond and before the early twentieth century, are just as plentiful. According to the art critic Harold Rosenberg, the works of Jackson Pollock are not mere representation of a subject or an investigation of the opacity of the medium, but are rather the trace of an event, a gestural occurrence in which the canvas becomes an arena to register the spontaneous and accidental marks of the individuality of the painter (Rosenberg 581). The categorical homogeneity of the label "Abstract Expressionism," that is used to join together artists as diverse as Rothko, Newman, Pollock, and de Kooning among others, reminds us of their search for a distinctively autonomous, subjective mark. As Rosenberg writes: "The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence" (Rosenberg 582). Of course, this artistic existence is bound up in the influence artists had on each other, discourses within the artistic community, and the limitations and inspirations of their chosen artistic media and technology. Nevertheless, many artists' and critics' statements stressing the importance of self-realization and autonomous expression prepared this attitude. As art historian Richard Shiff reminds us in an essay on the loaded notion of "originality," Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) claimed that he aspired to imitate "anything but himself;" the critic Théophile Thoré (1807–1869) characterized original artists as "sons of no one;" and Édouard Manet (1832–1883) once represented his aesthetic by stating that he "sought simply to be himself and not another" (Shiff 2003, 150). These statements buttress, so to say, the transcendental quality of the marks left by gestural painters on their works in the mid-twentieth century, among them is de Kooning's 1960 lithograph entitled *Waves #1* (Fig. 1). At the risk of overly simplifying a piece as the mere illustration of a theory, De Kooning's lithograph, for the purposes of this essay, is

most interesting for the way the piece's gestural quality expresses a subjectivity that imitates, in principle, "anything but himself." De Kooning's visual representation, here, renders and confirms the subject, paradoxically, objectifying the subject so as to prove its existence as a "subject."[2] In short, the emphasis on the artist's subjectivity and ability to manifest inner experience acquired tremendous relevance in modern art. In the words of social art historian Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996), "the movement of modern art had therefore an ethical content…the individual's self-realization was the central problem" (Schapiro 152–154).

Now, one cannot overestimate the centrality of the self-sufficient subject to the art and culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For just as many philosophical contributions, critical studies, literary and artistic works have directed their attention to the vaporization and fragmentation of the subject. From Arthur Rimbaud's famous "Je est un autre" (I is an other) to Émile Durkheim's idea that the individual is nothing more than the consequence of society's organization, from Carl Jung's understanding of the "individual psyche" commencing from a "collective psyche" to Jacques Lacan's understanding of the "self" as "wholly other" whose access is only a mirage—the reasons for vaporization seem to have dominated the conversations about the subject during the twentieth century (Siegel 482). Continuing in the tradition of continental philosophy, crucial figures, prominently Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, undertook a project "…to displace the human subject from the central position it had occupied in philosophy since Descartes, and to replace the notion of stable selfhood with a different, fluid, and 'temporal' understanding of the self" (Siegel 568). As famously discussed by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927), the problem with the Cartesian *cogito* is that it is simply wrong (Heidegger 1996, 21–23). Heidegger does not use the term "subject" or "individual" because they are both affiliated with the Cartesian heritage. Instead, he prefers the term *Dasein*, "Being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 1996, 39–48), by which he means that there is really no such thing as a subject detached from the world, the body, temporality, and the experience of one's ordinary, daily activities. In addition, the analytic of *Dasein* investigates a holistic system of belief called by

[2]Of course, other interpretations have undermined the rigid correspondence between pictorial marks and the transcendental manifestation of a subject. For an analysis of de Kooning's work is not grounded in similar concepts, but rather in sensory engagements, see Shiff 2011. For an opposite overview of the Abstract Expressionists' engagement with subjectivity, see Leja 1993.

Heidegger *um-Welt* (the surrounding world), the pre-ontology.[3] *Dasein* is always temporalized and embodied in a specific world-system. Thus, *Dasein* is never a "pure" disengaged subject nor the materialization of existence *as such*. Instead of speaking in terms of an autonomous subject, Heidegger's philosophy opened up the space for a phenomenological understanding and investigation of the materialized activity of existence (Dreyfus 13–29).

Just as there are historical reasons for the development of the "autonomous" subject, so too are there many historical motivations to explain the progressive decentering of the subject. According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) such reasons can be identified in the development of three disciplines during the twentieth century: ethnology, psychoanalysis, and semiology. As Foucault writes in *The Order of Things* (1966):

> [Psychoanalysis and ethnology never]…come near to a general concept of man: at no moment do they come near to isolating a quality in him that is specific, irreducible and uniformly valid wherever he is given to experience… Not only they are able to do without the concept of man, they are also unable to pass through it, for they always address themselves to that which constitutes his outer limits…[they show that] the signifying chain by which the unique experience of the individual is constituted is perpendicular to the formal system on the basis of which the significations of a culture are constituted… (Foucault 1971, 379–380).

What Foucault argues here is that the above mentioned disciplines do not provide a well-established number of qualities that a-historically could be applied to the category of the "subject." Thus, "man" appears as the product of certain historically-determined discourses, and the category of the "subject" calls into question notions of a private and self-conscious individuality. As a corollary to Foucault's passage, one should also consider that even desire becomes culturally instigated and, hence, collective. Three brief examples related to the disciplines Foucault identified further illustrate how multiple historical and theoretical occurrences participate in the development of this decentered idea of the "subject."

First, Sigmund Freud's work *The Resistance to Psychoanalysis* (1925) furnishes an overview of the three "blows to human dignity"

[3]For a brief overview of "the idea of background" that refers to Heideggerian philosophy and the discussion over this notion in relation to other prominent figures such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Charles Taylor, see Gordon 2008.

that destabilized a coherent notion of "subjectivity." These "blows" include the Copernican revolution which displaced man from the central position in a divinely-ordered world; the Darwinian revolution which overturned man's confidence in his status as a being created and appointed by God to have dominion over his creation; and, finally, the psycho-analytical revolution which blew away the last vestiges of mankind's pride, uprooting even our own control over our actions. With these three revolutions "mankind" is definitively humbled. With the discovery of the "unconscious," in particular, conversation about a "stable," "unified," "autonomous subject" cannot be taken for granted anymore (Freud 222–233). Instead of stressing the unifying capacity of the "I," for Freud, the "I," notably is a component of the psychic apparatus of the human being. It is true that Freud and, in general, psychoanalysts do not deny the existence of subjectivity, but rather they multiply and fragment the layers of subjectivity and illuminate its complexity.

Second, ethnology does not approach the question of the subject by trying to reach a general definition of the concept "man," but rather it concentrates its attention on the social, cultural, and historically specific conditions which determine the formation of a particular and time-bound idea of "identity." The work of ethnologist Marcel Mauss refers to the notion of the person as a "category of the human mind" which indicates the invalidity of every discussion related to the question of the "origin" and "definition" of the subject. Mauss notices, for example, that in the Native American Group of the Kwakiutl every person changes their name according to the phase of their life and, therefore, one person—both man and woman—might have different names in their childhood, in their mature life, and older life. Moreover, each individual in the Native American Group of the Kwakiutl has a name for each season, one for the summer and another one for the winter, and so on (Mauss 7–8). According to Mauss, for specific cultural communities the notion of "persona" is strictly intertwined with the social role (*personagge*). As an instance, Mauss also points to the development of the Roman Code of Law which established the division between *personae*, *res*, and *actiones*. In this case, slaves are considered *res* because they do not have any right to a body and a name. On the other hand, the division between *personae* and *actiones* was useful for identifying people's responsibility over their actions. With the Roman Code of Law the "person" is more than a name or a right to assume a social role. For the Latins, the person refers to the identity between an individual and his or her own actions (Mauss 14–17). The comparison between the Native American Group and the Roman Code of Law with its understanding of the notion of *persona* as both social and forensic does not indicate that one notion of subjectivity might be more

or less authentic than another. As the title of Mauss' text reminds us, they are only different "categories" of the human mind.

Third, semiology makes us consider that language itself participates into the process of subjectivization. In the famous words of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, "we can only use language to produce meanings by positioning ourselves within the rules of language and the systems of meaning of our culture. Language is a social, not an individual system. It pre-exists us. We cannot in any simple sense be its authors…" (qtd. in Hall 608). In this sense, if our own identity and subjectivity is a consequence of our own language and language "pre-exists us," identity itself is a consequence of language, a point this essay will further discuss.

The relationships between psychoanalysis, ethnology, and semiology provide convincing arguments to question the idea of an "autonomous subject." But a thorough critique of such a notion must also take into consideration a more strictly political content. Again, Foucault's work has been fundamental for considering what is at stake politically for the notion of the subject. Foucault's method is "consistently materialist" which means that it does not search for formal structures with universal value, but rather it is an "…historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying" (Foucault 1984, 46). A recurrent question for such a materialist approach is: how does power historically and socially circulate, spread, adapt, and shape subjects? Setting aside his broader discussion on the notion of Biopolitics,[4] Foucault considers that power has always tried to exercise a form of control over and access to "…the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behavior" (Foucault 1984, 67). At least from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the human being's singularity has become even more a function of pressing questions related to demography, public health, hygiene, housing conditions, longevity, and so on. The expression used by Foucault to define these procedures of power centered on the body as a machine that has to be disciplined, optimized, made docile, and integrated into a system of efficient and economic controls are "*anatomo-politics of the human body* [and] *biopolitics of the population*" (Foucault 1978, 139). According to Foucault, in every society bodies are objects of pressing attentions, prohibitions or obligations, but during the eighteenth century, the body has become even more intensely subjected in order to make it more obedient, healthier, and more productive (Foucault 1984, 180–

[4]For an introduction to the concept of Biopolitics, see Foucault 1991 and Lemke 2001.

182). The modern ambition of power structures is not 'simply' to repress, but to discipline and to 'normalize'; to develop "an art of correct training" (Foucault 1984, 188). With a reference to our own time, one might say that in late capitalism opinions, fantasies, and even the desires of the bodies fall under an economic domain in a managed way, and can be destabilized and disciplined through fake news, Big Data, and forms of techno-scientific anesthetization. For this reason, Foucault's materialist approach is detached from any idea of the *authenticity* of the subject. The self and the subject are products of power structures.

In order to further illustrate how the "subject," far from being an autonomous entity, is politically and historically constituted, consider the example of a 1925 employment chart of the Central Tube Company in Pittsburgh reprinted in *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900–1920* (1982). In this employment chart, "races" are ranked according to their fitness for different job types and working conditions. For instance, Armenians are defined as "good" in none of the twenty job categories; Italians could not handle serving as helpers for engineers; Jewish people supposedly do not fit in any industrial jobs; Black workers are considered "good" in certain occupations "requiring speed" and in a "hot," "dusty," "polluted atmosphere," but finally are marked as "unadaptable" in every listed skilled position. White Americans, instead, excel in every voice of the chart. This chart represents a visual demonstration of what Foucault called "*anatomo-politics of the human body* [and] *biopolitics of the population.*" The chart is a visual example of Foucault's assertion that: "for capitalist society is the biopolitical that is important before everything else; the biological, the somatic, the corporeal. The body is a biopolitical reality…" (Foucault 2000, 137). The chart naturalizes a racist ranking in which White Americans and other "races" are at the top of this schema according to a biological and corporeal "logic." Simultaneously, a more subtle form of racism affects *every* subject—White Americans included—which becomes a mere function of "adaptability to working conditions." In a biopolitical form of industry, as the Central Tube Company of Pittsburgh in 1925, human beings have no agency *per se*. All the "races" become a function of more pressing questions related to productivity, economic growth, and establishment of racial forms of privilege or disadvantage.

While in some ways less dramatic than the case of the employment chart of the Central Tube Company, the history of art provides examples that might more clearly illustrate the idea of a decentered subject, just as it did for the "autonomous" subject. As we saw earlier with Rosenberg's investigation of Abstract Expressionism, one

important artistic trend has been for early and mid-twentieth century art to rest "…on the romantic assumption that meaningful subject matter emanates from the individual" (Fineberg 206). But, as Jonathan Fineberg clearly summarizes in his *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, the art of Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) or Jasper Johns, among others, called into question the centrality of the autonomous subject, seeing it instead as a nexus of information, reorienting input rather than originating content. For instance, in Rauschenberg's *Estate* (1963) (Fig. 2) autobiographical references are inserted into the array of anonymous images, and matter related to the artist's life is combined with matter originating from the material milieu in which he lived. Even though the co-existence of the individual and the public is integral to Rauschenberg's imagination, any reading of his work as having a stable meaning, as arising from the artist's inner self would be questionable (Potts 268–269). Likewise, Andy Warhol (1928–1987), Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997), and other American Pop artists also followed suit with their denial of individuality through anesthetizing repetitions of images.[5] Finally, art historian Micheal Leja also notices that fragmentation, disintegration, and loss of autonomy had already begun earlier in the artworks of Abstract Expressionists and will continue well beyond the reign of American Pop Artists (Leja 331). As Barbara Rose considers in the famous essay "ABC Art," published in 1965, "Minimal Art" was an "…art whose blank, neutral, mechanical impersonality contrasts so violently with the romantic, biographical abstract expressionist style which preceded it that spectators are chilled by its apparent lack of feeling or content" (qtd. in Fineberg 294). Distrust of the idea of "modern originality" followed an equal dissatisfaction with the concept of subjectivity itself, as the works of artists such as Sherri Levine or Vija Celmins have more recently testified.

Critics have raised legitimate issues with this second paradigm of the "non-autonomous subject" and its overemphasis on the subject's inaccessibility and constructed nature. But how can we affirm the certain existence of structures of power as pervasive elements in the formation of subjectivities and, at the same time, *allow* for subjects' critical and autonomous action? A similar question has been fundamental to the work of philosopher Amy Allen, among others. In *The Politics of Our Selves. Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (2008), Allen begins her investigation with a recurrent question for theorists interested in Foucault's legacy: if power is everywhere, is it possible to liberate ourselves from its oppressive aspects through specific techniques and critical thinking? How do we pursue a

[5]For a similar discussion see Foster 2012.

history of the structures of power while reaffirming the possibility for the subjects to have a positive, critical agency? According to Allen, Foucault relied on an "…overly narrow conception of the social, one that tends to equate *all* social relations with strategic relations of power" (Allen 174, emphasis added). In other terms, Allen considers that for Foucault every social relation *is* a relation of power and subordination (Allen 70). At the same time, Foucault's later work grants some autonomy of action to the subject which is not reduced to a mere *fiction* and consequence of structures of power (Foucault 2003, 146-147).[6]

The ideas of "self-transformation" and "care of the self" speculate on the possibility of an empowered idea of subjectivity (Foucault 2003, 146). As explored by Michael Kelly, Foucault's ideas of "care of the self" and "self-transformations" describe the possibility for a subject to create a relationship with the self through "curative and therapeutic" modes, "critical thinking," and "struggle" (201). The process of "self-transformation" is more widely defined by Foucault as a method of "unlearning" the array of bad habits and dispositions a subject accumulates. In addition, Mark G. E. Kelly's essay on "Foucault, Subjectivity, and Technology of the Self" clarifies that the subject for Foucault is "something that must be constructed" (513). Concomitantly, the possibility of the subject to constitute itself is what Foucault calls "self-transformation" which has to pass through an "ethical conduct." Whereby for "ethics" Foucault does not mean "a set of rules" that have to be followed, but rather a relation of the self with his or her own self, that is, a form of "care of the self" (Kelly 517). Even if these propositions testify to an interest on Foucault's side in a new conception of subjectivity through a relation of the self with the self, one of the major problems in Foucault's analysis of the notion of "self-transformation" remains that it happens exclusively at the individual level without any reference to the social. As Allen noticed, Foucault seems to be limited by a rather narrow idea of social interaction and "…remains hesitant about embracing such a normative ideal of reciprocity" (70). Ultimately, for Foucault, relationships are always strategic and dangerous.

If it is true that the social, historical, and material conditions of existence influence the speaking subject, it is equally important not to reduce the subject to nothing more than a fully determined factor. As

[6]Allen's critique could certainly transfer to Jacques Lacan who considered the subject completely *subordinated to* and *spoken by* the unconscious. The "I" for Lacan should not be considered as a *subject*, but as *subjected.* For an introduction to Lacan's conception of the subject see Dean 1992.

the philosopher Linda Alcoff has written: "... there is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says …" (6). At the same time, Alcoff's analysis also refuses any essentialism and determinism, and "…to say that location *bears* on meaning and truth is not the same as saying that location *determines* meaning and truth" (16). The illusion of an authentic subjectivity completely detachable from others is as questionable as a completely erased subject whose shape is utterly constructed.[7]

Between these—the authentic, detached subject and the utterly constructed, erased subject—there is room for a more robust notion of subjectivity, one holds in itself the dialectical tension of "vaporization" *and* "centralization." Thinkers have stressed a number of elements that would be needed in such a multidimensional theory of the subject. First, it would require something like the positions elaborated by the sociologists George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Charles Cooley (1864–1927) who support the idea of subjectivity as interactive, that is, formed at the intersection of self and world, something given to the subject and something constructed by the subject (Hall 597). Subjectivity still has an inner core, but it is formed in or modified by a continuous dialogue with the world—world, in its broadest possible sense understood as institutions, technologies, the body, and so on. A similar notion of interactivity could be related to the ideas of the French linguist Benveniste and Cooley himself whereby they consider the linguistic correlation between *I* and *You*. The linguists' over-emphasis on language as the only way to have access to the subject and, more precisely, their assumption that "identity" is nothing more than the pronouns "I," "me," "mine," "you," "she," "he," etc., is certainly questionable (Cooley 163). For instance, people often individuate, identify, and define a person by sight alone and without any direct use of language. In addition, Stuart Hall reminds us that "most modern nations consist of disparate cultures which were only unified by a lengthy process of violent conquest - that is, by the forcible suppression of cultural difference" (616). "Identity" is more than a linguistic construction. But what is useful is the acknowledgement that the pronoun *I* is used in the discourse *in principle* and *always* referring to a present, non-present, or implicit *You*. In other words, the condition of the subject is inherently *intersubjective*. As noticed by Benveniste, in world languages we find instances—Farsi or Chinese serve as examples of

[7]Undoubtedly, more critiques might be moved to this paradigm of the non-autonomous subject. For instance, both structuralism and poststructuralism have often supported that such a notion is a mere linguistic construction. From Heidegger's phrase the "Language is the House of Being" (Heidegger 217) to Émile Benveniste (1902–1976)'s statement that "*Ego* is he who says *ego*" (Benveniste 224), such over-emphasis on language has become, today, a strong cliché in the philosophical circles.

this—in which we are missing the linguistic division among genders "he" or "she"; however, we do not know any language missing the distinction/relation between *I-You* (Benveniste 225). The "others" are never simply external to me, but rather they help constitute my own selfhood.[8]

The emphasis on language and intersubjectivity opens the door to another major discussion point, that is, the role of "narrative" for the constitution of the subject. In the essay, "Narrative Identity," Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) argues that identity is always something fixed as the characters of a story yet it is able to change according to new circumstances (188). Charles Taylor, like Ricoeur, in *Sources of the Self* (1989) incisively states: "…we grasp our lives in a *narrative…* In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become [who we are], and of where we are going" (47). "We" is an important indicator of Taylor's thought because it suggests that we "…can only learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness…are through *my* and *others'* experience of these being objects of *us*, in some common space" (35). The sense of ourselves necessarily passes through a "story" that we narrate to ourselves and to others. As Ricoeur puts it, narrative identity's particular utility lies in its capacity to allow both stability and change. As scholar Gerald Izenberg posits about narrative identity, "…a character in a story, and in life, is to some extent fixed, pushed along by its inner dynamic, yet is also able to alter itself in the face of new circumstances. Sameness-identity is indispensable to narrative identity: without it, we would not be 'characters' and we could therefore not have stories" (9).

Finally, a fourth major aspect needed for the conception of subjectivity, both autonomous and non-autonomous, can be drawn by returning to Foucault's notion of "care of the self." Through a reading of Ancient Greek Philosophy, Foucault suggests that the famous Socratic motto *gnothi seauton* ("Know thyself") was part of a greater and even more important project: the *epimeleia heautou* (the "Care of the Self"), that is, a list of well-defined actions which aimed at the perfectibility and care of the mankind (Foucault 2005, 4). These two realms—the *gnothi seauton* ("Know thyself") and the *epimeleia heautou* (the "Care of the Self")—are not separated, but rather one self-knowledge can be acquired only through the care of one-self. In this sense, the *epimeleia heautou* pre-dates and determines the *gnoti seauton*. What is also fas-

[8]As Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, in rather Heideggerian terms, "community means…that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is, therefore, what might be called, in a rather inappropriate idiom, an originally or ontological 'sociality' that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being" (Nancy 66).

cinating in Foucault's thesis is that classical philosophy is detached from a contemplative purpose and it becomes a philosophy as a way of living based around a number of spiritual exercises, including meditation, political discussion, abstention from food, sex and pleasure, journal writing, rumination about death. The goal of such *epimeleia heautou* was intended to help the subjects to gain control over their own thoughts, emotions, words, desires, fears, and so on. Foucault defines the "care of the self" in terms of "…those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre" (Foucault 1986, 10). The paradigmatic shift proposed by Foucault is to consider the "self" not as an object of rational apprehension, but an aim, a scope, an endless task for a better life.

The four principles listed here—*interactivity*, *intersubjectivity*, *narrative-mediated*, and *in need of care*—do not provide a non-historical and transcendental understanding of the notion of the subject. At the same time, these principles should limit and cut out the two extreme paradigms considered in the first half of this essay: that the subject is a fully-conscious, autonomous agent, detached from external determinations and that the "subject" is a mere construction of historical forces or an impossible "other." It is precisely the tension between "vaporization" *and* "centralization," the contrast between different forces and worldviews that should be ultimately stressed as the distinctive trait of the notion of the subject. Finally, these four principles—defined as constituents of subjectivity—are interlocked and intertwined. They do not constitute separate realms that separately fashion the subject. They are rather woven together and surround the processes of subjectivization like a glove surrounds a hand. In other words, the question of the subject cannot be thought of separately as, on the one hand, a theory of the interaction among subjects and, on the other, a theory of the subject's relation with him or herself and the environment. One is a subject only in relation to other subjects. At the same time, the interaction between subjects and technologies contribute to the development of potentialities, to forms of empowerment and *centralization* of the subject as much as to forms of anesthetization and *vaporization* of the subject.[9] Any discourse on the subject cannot be limited either to a process of intersubjective formation or to the interaction of the subject with his or her technological habitat. Further, a person's internalized and evolving life story in which the past is integrated within some sort of more or less coherent narrative actively par-

[9]For a discussion of the coupling development of potentialities and development of anesthetization see Montani 2007.

ticipates in the process of identity formation too (McAdams and McLean 2013). But subjectivity cannot be reduced to a linguistic, narrative mode either, because it is an active practice, a business in which the subject, ideally, creates a relationship with the self through curative and therapeutic modes. As Foucault notices, in order for the subject to constitute itself, it has to pass through "ethical conduct" that calls for a relation of the self with his or her own self (Kelly 517). The principles of *interactivity, intersubjectivity*, *narrative-mediation,* and *in need of care* co-participate to the process of subject-formation, but in different degrees and not always simultaneously. It is important to imagine a process of interplay among these formative forces. These certainly are simplifications, but they are meant to map the major arguments at stake in debates about the concept of the subject.

One final visual example might further illuminate the principles of *interactivity, intersubjectivity, narrative-mediated,* and *in need of care* that, in principle, are at work with the subject. In 2012, the engineer and designer Salvatore Iaconesi was diagnosed with brain cancer. After having left the hospital and received the digital medical records, Iaconesi decided to upload html and jpeg files on a website that he created, "La-Cura.it." On the website, Iaconesi invited users to download, reuse, re-elaborate, and re-upload those files. In a message, he also asked the users to not treat him strictly as a victim of a disease or an ill person. The quality of replies received by Iaconesi is not important to this study. Some people suggested alternative ways of curing his cancer, others sent poems, while some users, instead, created printed 3D object of his cancer or revitalized the X-Ray of his brain through colorful insertion.[10] In 2015, Iaconesi was finally operated upon and, today, he is well and alive. He continues working on the collaborative project of "La-Cura.it."

What is Iaconesi telling us about subjectivity with his work? On a material level, Iaconesi decided to objectify, as much as possible, the diseased part of his body through a form of collective and intersubjective mediation, as demonstrated by the printed 3D object. But Iaconesi did not escape or refuse his medical condition through a virtualized and illusionary self. He underwent all the necessary cures that a medical institution (a *dispositif*) could offer him. Simultaneously, Iaconesi initiated a therapeutic process of self-transformation by deciding not to merely accept the condition of the "diseased person/subject" broadly defined by society. The "interactive" component at work in Iaconesi's example refers to the social engagement that he activated by sharing his personal medical records and allowing people

[10]See (Fig. 3).

to reuse them. For instance, Lichty's 3D replica of Iaconesi's brain tumor at 500% scale might have participated into a broader, self-therapeutic change in Iaconesi's consciousness. At the same time, what is "interactive" is Iaconesi's approach to himself who, on the one hand, accepts the institutional cures of a medical apparatus and, on the other hand, triggers new cures through the technological apparatus of the web. It is beyond the scope of this essay to understand how powerful participants' contribution has been in alleviating and even "curing" Iaconesi of his cancer. Perhaps, the sculptural 3D replica participated to Iaconesi's therapeutic process of elaboration and care of the self. In the context of this essay, what counts most is the implicit message that Iaconesi offers about the notion of subjectivity as something in need of care, mediation, and that necessarily passes through other people's recognition. Iaconesi's project offers an image of subjectivity as something constructed, and not only found. If subjectivity has to be considered through "the historical variable practices of self-constitution" (Kelly 517), Iaconesi's use of the internet and new media materializes a similar process of self- and collective constitution with curative finalities. Through *La-Cura.it*, Iaconesi claimed a more positive, social, and intersubjective agency. Self-realization, in Iaconesi's project, passes through collective realization. As Foucault reminds us, one of the most important aspects of the care of the self is that "it constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice" (Foucault 1988, 51). Iaconesi demonstrates that "care" is not the activity of solitary, narcissistic individual, but that of a subject who is able to consider his or her life as a material and a source to be shaped through collective effort. Thinking more specifically about the notion of "care of the self" and how it operates within Iaconesi's example, the subject appears more than a "thing," a state or identity, but as a process of self-transformation. Foucault reminds that the "…art of existence…is dominated by the principle that says one must 'take care of oneself'" (1988, 43). Iaconesi's project is intimately intertwined with his own existence and, at the same time, it has implications that transcend his own particular position. For what the project demonstrates is that one ought to attend to oneself beyond—which does not necessarily mean against—the set of rules that can be predetermined by an institutional apparatus, like the hospital. Finally, "…the term *epimeleia* designates not just a preoccupation but a whole set of occupations…*epimeleia* implies a labor" (Foucault 1988, 50). Likewise, Iaconesi's work does not only designate a form of preoccupation of Iaconesi himself towards his own health. It produces a "labor" in the actual, material sense of the term in which the designer engages himself through a whole set of occupations, such as sharing his own personal story, relating to the responses of other users, elaborating and building on his own personal experience through talks and papers, and so on. In sum,

Iaconesi's work on *La-Cura.it* in the form of videos, articles, and public lectures also demonstrates the importance of narrative-identity for the formation of the subject. *La-Cura.it* proposes a sophisticated understanding of the "subject," not as something "authentic" per se or strictly autonomous, neither as irremediably defined by "structures of power" and society at large. Iaconesi's project gives us a better insight into the notion of "subject," as a continuous, complicated, collective, coercitive, fallible, and, at times, successful process.[11] In Foucault's discussion, the care of the self is an ancient ideal, but Iaconesi's project demonstrates that it can continue to inspire modern life too.

The "everything is there" of Baudelaire's motto that began this paper would seem to point to a model of subjectivity this paper is offering: for "vaporization" and "centralization" *co-participate* to the formation of the subject. The "everything" that is "there" refers to the active capacity of the subject to shape the reality ("everything") according to his or her own centralized positions. But the "everything" also refers to the forces within society and within the human being itself that tend to the "vaporization" of the subject itself. Ultimately, what Baudelaire's motto reminds us is that *subjectivity is a battle-field*.

[11]For a discussion of Iaconesi's project see: Pietro Montani, "Reality, Authenticity, and Images' Authentication," 16–17 June, Istituto Svizzero in Rome. Online Video Clip. *YouTube*, Jul. 11 2016. Web. Oct. 19 2019.

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Fig. 1 Willem de Kooning, *Litho #1 (Waves #1)*, 1960, lithograph, 45 13/16 x 31 3/4 in, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

Fig. 2 Robert Rauschenberg, *Estate*, 1963, Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 95 3/4 x 69 3/4 inches, (243.2 x 177.2 cm), Philadelphia Museum of Art. Source: Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Fig. 3 Patrick Lichty, 3D replica of Iaconesi's brain tumor at 500% scale from Iaconesi, Salvatore, Persico, Oriana, (2012, September 10, Open Source) La-Cura.it. Retrieved from http://la-cura.it

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