

Literary and
Cultural Theory



Anna Chromik

Disruptive Fluidity

The Poetics of the Pop *Cogito*

PETER LANG

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Literary and Cultural Theory

General Editor: Wojciech H. Kalaga

Vol. 38



PETER LANG

Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Warszawa · Wien

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**Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche
Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the
Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is
available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover Design:

© Olaf Glöckler, Atelier Platen, Friedberg

This publication was funded by the University of Silesia,
Institute of English Cultures and Literatures.

ISSN 1434-0313

ISBN 978-3-631-63398-4 (Print)

ISBN 978-3-653-02187-5 (E-Book)

DOI 10.3726/978-3-653-02187-5

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Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Frankfurt am Main 2012

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“The individual’s self-containment and self-sufficiency
may be another illusion.”

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has often been a struggle between the discipline of academic clarity and a temptation to write a long poem. Many people and institutions have had a hand in the final reconciliation, and I am happy to be able to thank them here. In 2008 I was awarded a research grant funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which enabled me to do a large part of my research and complete the first draft of this book. I owe a large debt of gratitude to Professor Wojciech Kalaga for providing excellent advice and criticism, while still giving me the freedom to follow the sometimes volatile path of my own thinking. I am also grateful to Professor Zbigniew Białas and Professor Mirosława Buchholtz for their kind and helpful comments, and to David Schaffler for his invaluable editorial assistance. My thanks go to my colleagues at the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures, University of Silesia who saw this project through its earliest incarnations as material for numerous work-in-progress papers and offered their generous support and inspiration. My deepest thanks go to my family and friends – for understanding my need to read and write, for encouraging me to discover the hidden rooms in my dreams, for your patience and support – I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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Introduction

This book explores the textual modes in which the phenomena of fluidity and solidity are represented in the context of contemporary reconstructions of modern subjectivity. The key idea that frames the following discussion is the assumption concerning the culture-creating functions of such dichotomies as containment / incontinence, interior / exterior, cleanliness / contamination, and demarcation / boundlessness, and their role in the process of defining the notion of modern subjectivity. These assumptions are based on a conviction that categories traditionally identified with corporeality do not exist in separation from the discourse of subjectivity. What is more, they might even constitute an inscription and record of its norm-creating practices. Treated as constructs reflecting the hierarchies and paradigms of prevailing discourses, they will be analysed as products of a certain conceptual apparatus which also shapes our perception of identity and subjectivity.

The modern / Cartesian subject is constructed in contemporary philosophical discourse in opposition to the metaphorical fluidity that can be identified with unstable borders and a lack of clear-cut identity. The starting point for this study is thus the assumption that the imagery of solidity, along with the implied metaphors of fluidity, shapes the discourse of subjectivity and strategies of material culture, and, therefore, might be treated as a key to the analysis of the contemporary conceptualization of the modern subject.

As much as postmodern philosophies link the twilight of the era of the dense, coherent subject to the fall of grand narrations (Jean-François Lyotard) and the liquefaction of discourse (Zygmunt Bauman), the studies dealing with the discourse of corporeal phenomena point to the significance of strategies aimed at “sealing” and “consolidating” modern structures. The nomenclature of theories describing the process of the emergence of the individual self (Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva) reverberates with metaphors of solidity and fluidity similar to those which are used to create an image of the constitution of the Cartesian *cogito* (Susan Bordo, Dalia Judovitz, Fritjof Capra). What is more, the discourse of body borders in contemporary studies that theorize corporeality (Elizabeth Grosz, Gail Kern Paster, Mary Douglas) is constructed in strikingly similar terms. The central notions for these seemingly distant spheres overlap and per-

meate each other, thus creating a space for analysis founded upon a fresh perspective, shedding new light both on the discourse of subjectivity and on the discourse of corporeality by pointing to their mutual impact. The general message of this book is thus a critique of the perception that the phenomena traditionally associated with corporeality exists in separation from the notions that construct our discourse of subjectivity. What should be considered instead is an attempt to demonstrate the mutual connections and cross-contamination of these categories, thus pointing to the close relation that exists between central values of the prevalent discourse on the self and the symbolic mechanisms for curbing elements constructed as “disruptively fluid.”

It has to be stressed at this point that my aim is not to explore the ontological complexities of the modern subject as such, but rather to focus on the mechanisms that create this notion as a “standard textbook anecdote, a symbol of the seventeenth-century rationalist project.”¹ In the “digested” discourse of the humanities the *cogito* serves as a universal mental shortcut, implicitly marked by a series of adjectives that describe this abstract phenomenon, such as: detached, thinking, autonomous, autoreferential, independent, clearly delineated, coherent, consolidated, and so on. The Cartesian subject, according to Žižek, functions today as a kind of a shibboleth, a buzzword, both in the standard philosophy of subjectivity and in the discourse of postmodern critique of the “unified transcendental subject.”² The process at work here is thus a procedure of iconisation, schematisation, and reduction, which makes the conceptualisation of *cogito* possible. As Susan Bordo claims, the dominant discourse of critique of the modern project is imbued with the conviction that “we are now grasping ‘modernity,’ ‘the scientific paradigm,’ ‘the Cartesian model,’ as discrete, contained, historical entities about which coherent ‘closing narratives’ can be told.”³ Thus, the Cartesian subject we now know is a term already processed through the twentieth-century narration on the project of modernity and put to work for a classifying grid of meanings whose central function is the ordering of experience.

There is no assumption in this discussion about the existence of the “actual” phenomenon of modern subjectivity, nor an attempt to establish its subject-matter around the historical experience of the Cartesian *cogito*. Its focus is rather on what might be labelled a “pop-*cogito*” – a product of a postmodern narrative

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- 1 Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity. Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 1987, p. 1.
 - 2 Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth,” in: Slavoj Žižek, ed.: *Cogito and the Unconscious* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 3.
 - 3 Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, p. 2.

(however paradoxical this idea might seem) which has processed the notion and reduced it to a series of images functioning as useful “buzzwords” in contemporary critical theory. Roy Porter writes:

Narratives of this kind – of how the West discovered a unique self unknown to former times, an inner psyche unfamiliar in other cultures – carry a huge appeal and underpin familiar thinking. They shape our image of the medieval peasant, of the Romantic poet – and of ourselves. And who can deny they contain a measure of truth? After all, much of our artistic and intellectual heritage – Petrarch and Rilke, Milton and Mill, love poetry and liberalism – amounts to defences and celebrations of the uniqueness of the outpourings of the individual imagination and heart. Yet the tale also has the ring of myth, even an air of soap-box rhetoric especially when recounted as an epic in which the heroic self is portrayed as surmounting ridge after ridge until it reaches its peak of perfection in our own times. That’s a story flattering to ourselves [...]. Looked at closely, however, it also proves a story full of loose ends and begged questions. And so it’s time to rethink our received grand saga of the self.⁴

The following discussion by no means sets as its goal the tracing of these loose ends, or ontologizing the subject, or excavating the core of the *cogito*, or examining its seventeenth-century conditioning. Quite the opposite – by deliberately following the path of contemporary academic clichés⁵ and handbook catchphrases, it takes as its subject matter not the essentialist Cartesian subject, but the conventionalized construct already processed through the mechanisms of constant defining and classifying. It is the very nomenclature of the mythologized *cogito* that facilitates the examination of the procedure of creating its schematized conceptualizations, at the same time revealing the role certain notions play in constructing the conceptual frame of modernity. Moreover, what contributes to the schematization of the *cogito* is the whole spectrum of connotations connected with its attributes, such as coherence, clarity, and distinctness. And vice versa – the conceptual frame that maps our understanding of coherence, clarity, and distinctness is marked by the prevalent cognitive model of subjectivity.

Slavoj Žižek argues: “[o]ur philosophical and everyday common sense identifies the subject with a series of features: the autonomous source of spontaneous, selforiginating activity, the capacity of free choice; the presence of some kind of ‘inner life’,”⁶ but there are many attributes we could add to the list, such

4 Roy Porter, “Introduction,” in: Roy Porter, ed. *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 8.

5 Mostly based on the analysis of critical texts from the last forty-year period, or texts that have been considered most influential for contemporary critical theory.

6 Žižek, “Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth,” p. 5.

as autonomy, agency, self-determination, individuality, self-identity, distinctiveness, etc. At the same time the conceptual picture of the Cartesian self is constructed by such values as cohesion, self-containment, and separateness. According to Bordo, the modern subject is branded with the epistemological ideals of clarity, differentiation and objectivity, which have often been interpreted as manifestations of an obsessive pursuit of purity and transcendence of the messier dimension of existence,⁷ as well as the “sense of the separate self, conscious of itself and of its own distinctness from a world ‘outside’,”⁸ and the concept of “clean boundaries and discrete natures, a universe amenable to conceptual sorting.”⁹ The Cartesian *cogito* thus appears as clear and turned towards itself, separated from the world of extended things, which suggests that our conceptualization of the phenomena of clarity and distinctness must have an influence on our conceptual picture of the *cogito*.

The notion of a separate self associated with inwardness, subjectivity and “locatedness” in space and time creates and perpetuates the differentiation between inside and outside, mind and matter, cohesion and extension. What is important is that the prevalent conceptualization of the modern self metaphorically delineates it as an entity which, to constitute itself as a subject, has to solidify, congeal, and harden. Hence its most significant features include coherence, hermeticism, and impenetrability. Expressed in such a way, the determinants of the self also constitute the conceptual tool of description of such categories as inside and outside, subject and object, and even purity and impurity, or order and disorder. The concept of borders seems to be a key notion here. The modern self is preoccupied with delineating the boundaries between itself and the world: “[c]ertainly, Cartesianism is nothing if not a passion for separation, purification, and demarcation,”¹⁰ and it is mostly on those notions that the subject depends in terms of its identity. What is more, in so far as the conceptual frame of modernity is based upon the semiotics of demarcation and maintaining borders intact, its significant opposite – “pre-modernity” – is often associated with a lack of boundaries and with the plasmatic, pulsating continuity of experience. If the key-word in our conceptualization of modernity is order, then the notion of a boundary is inscribed in the very core of this concept, as order appears to be a central notion in what Adeline Masquelier calls the “semiotics of

7 Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, p. 4. See also: Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1993).

8 Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, s. 7

9 Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 19.

10 Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*, p. 17.

boundary maintenance.”¹¹ In this connection, the principles of modern subjectivity which regulate the self’s position and relation in the world are built upon the notion of borders: “[t]he whole concept of body-image boundaries has implicit in it the idea of the structuring of one’s relations with the world.”¹²

Analogously to its understanding of subjectivity discussed above, the reading of “modernity” that this argument offers is thus informed by the critique of modernity in contemporary critical theory, and not the actual historical sources. The closest definition of the term “modernity” to the one used throughout this thesis is probably what Chris Barker broadly labels the “post-traditional, post-medieval historical period”¹³ associated with industrialization and secularization, and with the rise of capitalism and the nation-state with its mechanisms of control. Such a definition implies that modernity should be understood not necessarily as a specific historical period, but rather as a mode of the political, economical and philosophical status of a society marked by those processes. It is therefore impossible to confine in to any definite frames – very broadly, it can be said that modernity might be associated with the recent history of the West, from the Enlightenment era (although in some of its aspects the Renaissance will be considered a modern epoch¹⁴) to the twentieth century with its failure of the totalizing metanarratives of universal and transcendent truths.¹⁵ This lack of chronological precision (often implying generalizations and simplifications) is justified by the objective of this study: it analyses the notion of modernity as a construct processed through the contemporary critical discourse and therefore follows the historical inaccuracies present in that discourse.¹⁶

11 Adeline Masquelier, “Introduction,” in: *Dirt, Undress, and Difference. Critical Perspective on the Body’s Surface*, ed. Adeline Masquelier (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 7.

12 Seymour Fisher and Sydney Cleveland, *Body Image and Personality* (New York and London: D. van Nostrand Company Inc., 1958), p. 206, quoted after: Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1986), p. 10.

13 Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 444.

14 I will come back to these terminological discrepancies later on.

15 I follow Lyotard who associates the decline of grand narratives with the Second World War, which he saw as an abuse of modern ideals which called the whole project into question, so that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility.” (See: Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennigton and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 37). Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman sees the Holocaust as “a byproduct of the modern drive to a fully designated, fully controlled world.” (Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and The Holocaust*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 93).

16 This point will be elaborated upon at the beginning of Chapter 1.

In its reflection on how the emergence of the modern self is conceptualized in the contemporary discourse of the postmodern critique of the project of modernity, in which it has been reduced to a set of instantly recognizable images and cognitive catchphrases, the following discussion deals with the modern project as a concept already processed through the cognitive categories of the present. “Modern subject” is seen here as a certain finite construct consolidated by constant revisiting and revising. In this process it has also become mythologized, that is, to refer to Roland Barthes, given a natural and eternal justification, a clarity that is “not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.”¹⁷ Myth, according to Barthes, does not reject reality *per se*; it rather simplifies facts by purifying them and making them innocent. Mythologizing, he argues, is economical in its attempts to reduce the complexity of experience to simple essences. It helps organize the world by focusing on what is immediately visible and disregarding ambiguities and contradictions. Myth flattens reality and makes it blissfully clear.¹⁸ The mythologized “modern subjectivity” may be the only “modern subjectivity” we now have access to: this constructed project that emerged not only in Descartes and Kant, but also in Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault, and Habermas. Its systematic character and finiteness is a result of a certain schematization whose proceedings invite a scrutinizing view.

What is striking in the “mythologized” accounts of modern subjectivity understood as the “grand epoch” identified with the ideas of the Enlightenment is that it often reverberates with the imagery of solidity, coherence, and self-containment. It seems that to “grasp modernity,” the contemporary critique very often operates within the conceptual field normally associated with categories of corporeality: the ideal modern subject appears as pure and detached, with clearly delineated boundaries. At the same, time identifying cleanliness with what is separate, individual and distinct constitutes an important part of modern narratives. The notions of such concepts as fluid / solid, pure / filthy, finite / infinite, and coherent / incoherent are deeply embedded in the cognitive structure of modern subjectivity with its conceptual constructions of rationalism, individualism, efficiency, objectivism, and mechanization. The relation is reciprocal: modernity is described by the language of the body just as the concepts which construct the imaginary categories of modernity contribute to the construction of the modern discourse of the body.

The “synoptic” understanding of selfhood that relies on the notions of individuality achieved by the process of emancipation and the idea of an authentic

17 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 143.

18 Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 143.