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From Subject to Actor: Louis Althusser, Donna Haraway, and the transition into postmodernity

Remember Lot's wife  
Renounce all sin and vice  
Dream of the bourgeois life  
This heaven gives me migraine

-“Natural’s Not In It” by Gang of Four

The transition from modernism to post-modernism is marked primarily by issues of agency and attitude. Nowhere do these issues become clearer than when one addresses the human being as a concept. The human subject described in Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” is fundamentally different from that suggested by Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto”. This difference serves to illustrate the larger movement in cultural studies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century away from modernism and towards postmodernism. The move from the ideological subject, victim of the larger structures that engulf him/her, to the cyborg actor can be seen as one of the most important changes in cultural studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The death of God is a prominent theme in both modernism and postmodernism, but the two schools of thought have decidedly different attitudes towards the concept. The deconstructive fracturing of narratives and capital-t-truths awakens in the breast of the modernist such feelings as dread, despair and general sorrow. This attitude is best expressed in

Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* by Ivan Karamazov when he suggests "If God is dead, all is lawful". For Ivan (Dostoevsky) and the modernists this idea is awful, an end to morality, the entry into a de-systematized world where all is valueless. The modernist subject is a powerless victim of a Godless universe. For postmodernists this phrase takes on an entirely different tone. Joy and pride mix in the hearts of these new relativistic Nietzschean supermen. For them, this lawlessness is an empowering liberation. The postmodern subject is the powerful, self-creating god of their own subjective world. The progression from Althusser's subject to Haraway's cyborg is almost emblematic of these divisions of opinion.

Louis Althusser was not a self-proclaimed modernist. In fact, he was a Marxist closely associated with structuralism. This is evident in his larger Marxist theories regarding labour and production. However, Althusser was not a straightforward, meat and potatoes Marxist. He emerged in the intellectual community of French Marxism at a time when this group was (in the words of Michel Foucault) "trying to escape Hegel."<sup>1</sup> The French theorists Claude Levi-Strauss and Gilles Deleuze were "escaping Hegel" through Saussurean structuralism and Nietzsche's anti-dialectical theory respectively<sup>2</sup>. Althusser's Marxism contributed to this general move against humanism. His concept of the self is emblematic of the modern subject. Indebted to Sigmund Freud (on whose theories Althusser's structuralist technique of symptomatic reading is based)<sup>3</sup> and Antonio Gramsci, Althusser developed a complex and semi-psychological portrait of the human being as an ideological subject.

Althusser's subject is an unfortunate animal. He lives a life that is not his own, his behaviour and beliefs shaped by the institutional structures in which he lives. He is defined by

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (New York: Verso, 1987) 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976) 36.

“Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs). ISAs can be defined as “a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions”<sup>4</sup>. Althusser include in his list of all the different Ideological State Apparatuses churches (the religious ISA), schools (the educational ISA), the family ISA, and the cultural ISA.

The Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) is the obvious, direct coercive arm of state, consisting of the government, army, police, etc. In the differences between ISAs and the RSA there is evident the move away from humanism and into modernism that defines Althusser’s work. The RSA exists solely in the public domain while ISAs exist in both the public and private domains. The ISAs destabilize the public/private binary. Althusser notes, “While there is one (Repressive) State Apparatus, there is a plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses”<sup>5</sup>. This is the move away from the unified humanistic perspective and into the fractured modernist fly’s-eye view. Althusser allows “that subtle explicit or tacit combinations may be woven from the interplay of the (Repressive) State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses”<sup>6</sup> and thus includes another hallmark of modernism/post-modernism: hybridization.

That said, Althusser is not simply a modernist. He is something of a structuralist. He claims of the Ideological State Apparatuses that “the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions *beneath the ruling ideology*”<sup>7</sup>. In a sense, this clinging to unity can be seen as symptomatic of a reluctant modernism. Althusser, hesitant to accept the modernist disunity, desperately clings to a large overarching structure

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, *Cultural Theory An Anthology*, Ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 207.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 208.

<sup>7</sup> Althusser 209.

inside which his ISAs can safely exist without completely destabilizing his structuralist perspective.

The subject is not static. There is movement inherent in Gramsci's "hegemony" (a concept which Althusser has borrowed from mightily). The ideological state apparatuses slowly evolve and their subjects change along with them. The Althusserian subject exists in relation to the dominant ideology and, as that changes, so does the subject. We can see this clearly in the change in public attitude towards something like racism. Though at one point the dominant discourse, racism has (through the Gramscian process of passive revolution) become culturally taboo. When the institution of culture rejects the idea of racism it doesn't necessary do away with the phenomenon, it simply sets it on the road to unacceptability. Once popular opinion is shaped the subject goes along to get along. It may be argued that such subjects consent to be part of this ideology and that their continuous consent, their continuous affirmation of their status as subjects, makes them actors. But, their decision to participate in the dominant ideology exists relative to ideology. There is no escape. Every action of an ideological subject is simply an extension of ideology.

It is representative of an irony common in the history of postmodernism that, in describing the vast structures which shape the modern human being, in structuring the state, Althusser deconstructs the self. The Ideological State Apparatuses are static. But they reveal the inherent malleability of the human subject. The understanding of people as being self-contained takes a blow. Althusser's human being exists relative to ideology. His/her identity is a shape-able plurality, existing within the ideological spheres of family, religion, education, etc. While the letter of the Althusserian law points towards pre-modern desire to systematize, the implications of his theory are decidedly less structuralist.

Donna Haraway is a post-modern feminist and (to a lesser extent) a neo-Marxist. Her concept of the cyborg perfectly exemplifies the postmodern actor. The cyborg is a fearsome hybrid of the organic and the mechanical. The cyborg also does away with “organic reproduction” in favour of replication<sup>8</sup>. The cyborg is a superman, an “irreverent upstart god, mocking the Father’s ubiquity and spirituality”<sup>9</sup>. This is practically the definition of a Nietzschean and may actually be a reference to Jacques Derrida’s pharmakon in which one finds reference made to Thoth, the upstart bastard god of Derrida’s “differance”.

Haraway writes that irony (by which she means the cyborg and, by extension, postmodern identity) “is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both are necessary and true”<sup>10</sup>. This can be contrasted with the Althusserian view, in which contradictions *do* resolve into the larger whole of the dominant ideology. One accepts the dissonance, the other tries to cover it in a theoretical harmony.

There is a certain dynamism to be found in Haraway’s cyborg. The cyborg is in a constant state of “becoming”. In its “irony” the cyborg represents an ongoing process of non-synthesis or “hybridizing”. The divisions between the organic and mechanical are being constantly redefined. Althusser’s subject is also fluid (or at least malleable). But, while the aforementioned subject is carried along in the larger, unified river of the dominant ideology, the cyborg is its own tributary. This “upstart god” creates itself, it is the agent of its own destiny.

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<sup>8</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”, *Cultural Theory An Anthology*, Ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 454.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 456.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 454.

There is a difference between a (cyborg) actor and a (ideological) subject. Judith Butler (in an interview) says the following of Haraway's move away from the (Althusserian) subject:

I think that the work of Haraway and Latour is very important. And I don't have a problem with the notion of the actor. Still, I think there are reasons to work with the notion of the subject, reasons that have everything to do with the way in which it is bound up with the legacies of humanism. I would suggest as well that the notion of the subject carries with it a doubleness that is crucial to emphasize: the subject is one who is presumed to be the presupposition of agency, as you suggest, but the subject is also one who is subjected to a set of rules or laws that precede the subject. This second sense works against the humanist conception of an autonomous self or self-grounded human actor.<sup>11</sup>

The cyborg is not a subject. The cyborg is a (slightly unrealistic) conception of the human being outside of the rules and laws that necessarily govern the subject. Haraway presents the cyborg as a being that, recognizing the anachronism of humanism, simply moves on. The modern man bears humanism reluctantly forward into a new, inhospitable world, wearing it like an ox wears its yoke.

The primary conflict between Haraway's and Althusser has to do with problems of agency. It is the conflict can be summed up in this question: Are human beings actors or subjects? The Althusserian subject is passive. He/she is the victim of a large deterministic universe. Her/his agency is an illusion, in the sense that all his/her choices are the product of a selfhood defined by ideologies. He/she is entirely subject to external forces. Haraway's cyborg is

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<sup>11</sup> Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler", *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter, 1998) 285.

an actor. She/he exists in a constant state of “hybridizing”. The relationship between the binaries which structure his/her identity is perpetually in flux. The cyborg is an “upstart god”.

Meanwhile, as Alex Callinicos writes of the Althusserian subject, “we can assume that ideology will take the form of transforming the world into a subject that has created the individual rather than (outside philosophy and various pathological mental states) endowing the individuals with the attributes of a God”<sup>12</sup>. To be or to become? Arguably, this is the question that divides modernism and its successor.

Althusser’s and Haraway’s concepts of “the human being” illustrate the 20<sup>th</sup> century transition from modern man to “upstart god” (not to be confused with the much-loathed “goddess”<sup>13</sup>). The lyrics from Gang of Four’s classic “Natural’s Not In It” express the plight of the modern Marxist subject. Indoctrinated into a society where ideology steals his/her agency, he/she even dreams in terms of ideology. This is the cage of the modernist Marxist subject, a tragic system designed (no doubt) by these systematizers Nietzsche was so distrustful of. The post-modern cyborg actor is free. It exists outside of any system. It perpetually creates itself through the dynamism of the hybrid. The move from modernism to post-modernism is a liberating one. This liberation is evident when one compares the ideological subject to the cyborg. So, to end this essay on a rhyming couplet: This new heaven is not migraine-free, this new heaven is ok by me.

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<sup>12</sup> Callinicos 66.

<sup>13</sup> Haraway 467.

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