

Notes on the Concept of Hyper-Subjectivity—Foucault, Lacan, Illouz

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Michel Foucault's influential book *The Order of Things* was published in 1966. Because Foucault so ingeniously begins his book with a chapter on the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, his account has since come to dominate many of our perspectives on the painting. It is hard to invoke *Las Meninas* without thinking of Foucault's discussion. Less well-known, perhaps, is an intriguing series of exchanges on the painting led by Jacques Lacan in the same year (on 11, 18, 25 May and 1 June 1966) in the 1965-66 seminar (Seminar XIII) devoted to the topic "The Object of Psychoanalysis." Lacan made courteous references to Foucault's work while advancing a fundamentally alternative reading. As a visitor to Lacan's seminar on 18 May, Foucault only responded to a question briefly without saying anything else. Although Lacan's remarks, oriented as they are toward a certain unknowability of the subject, are predictably divergent from Foucault's, the stresses Lacan puts on various parts of the picture are helpful for explicating key aspects of Foucault's ongoing work on power and subjectivity. It is for that reason that we include a sketch of these stresses here.

A Lacanian Detour

What seems to occupy Lacan centrally is the figure of the artist on the left side of *Las Meninas*: what is the painter (supposedly Velázquez himself) drawing on the big canvas, of which we, the audience, can only see the reverse side? This, our lack of access to the face of what is being painted, is of course also noted by Foucault, but for Lacan it constitutes a key hermeneutical interest, which, in Lacan's reading, is further compounded by the unascertainable trajectory of the painter's gaze and also by the noticeable space that stands between the painter and his canvas. These several gaps or intervals—between the audience (us) and the invisible painted scene, between the painter's gaze and its object, and between the painter and the material frame in front of him—provide important clues to Lacan's theorization, in this seminar and arguably elsewhere, of the subject. Following Freud, as is well-known, Lacan has displaced the subject from its classical Cartesian position as the thinking agent and redefined it as a symptom or an effect of underlying linguistic, social, and libidinal structures. In the present context, notably, Lacan theorizes the subject through a work of art—more precisely the painting, *Las Meninas*, that contains within it a painting that cannot be seen, that is available to us only by conjecture. As mentioned, Lacan is, strictly speaking, more concerned with the status and significance of the artist as reflected within the frame rather than what is available to the audience (us). The first thing to underscore about Lacan's interpretation, therefore, is that it is not exactly concerned with those who are, like us, looking at *Las Meninas* but instead revolves around the figure of the artist. For Lacan, subjectivity is entangled specifically with art insofar as the former is exemplified as a process of visualization, of *making-see*. (Indeed, in Seminar XIII, the discussion of *Las Meninas* was preceded by protracted discussions about perspective, the screen, projective geometry, holes, the object a, crossings of a figure plane, the point of infinity in a picture frame, the divided subject, and so forth.) Equally noteworthy is that subjectivity is approached as a process of *creation*.

In Lacan's analysis, it seems fair to say, artmaking encapsulates the essentially libidinal relation between the artist/seer and his object. This libidinal relation is antagonistic, even warlike, involving an exertion of force. Thus, the presence of a painting, even (perhaps, especially?) one whose subject matter remains invisible, is analogized at the start of Lacan's discussion to a laying down of cards: he suggests that Velázquez's (invisible) picture is a "face down card," which was "constructed there to make you lay down your own" (Lacan, 201). This analogy is reiterated verbatim later, when he once again refers to the painting as "a face-down card that forces you to lay down your own" (Lacan, 225). This ritual of subjugation is first a

subjugation of the painter's own gaze and then a subjugation the viewer's gaze, in what Lacan describes as a "permanent vertigo of intersubjectivity" (Lacan, 217). To put this in Foucault's words: "this slender line of reciprocal visibility [between the painter and us] embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints" (Foucault, 1994, 4). And if *perspective* is, according to Lacan, the mode by which the painter, as a divided subject, puts himself (or his scopic drive) into the picture (Lacan, 224), every picture would imply "a return movement" whereby "every drive includes . . . in itself . . . its return to its base" (Lacan, 218). In *Las Meninas* this return movement is intimated by the space that, as Lacan says, divides the figure of Velázquez from his canvas. Lacan's stresses on the return movement suggest that he regards the left portion of *Las Meninas* as a marker of *reflexivity*—that is, the temporal turning-back-on-himself of a subject who, while intimately proximate to the object of his scopic drive, cannot quite seamlessly coincide with that object due to a noticeable distance. This reflexivity, this return to oneself, is what enables Lacan to announce the following condition of a mismatch as fundamental to every relationship of looking (and by implication every relationship which speaks to its inherent non-relation): "You do not see me from where I am looking at you" (Lacan, 227).

Historically speaking, it is tempting to surmise that the decline of spiritual authority traditionally rooted in religion in the West has led some philosophers to relocate such authority in the realm of art.¹ For Lacan, it seems, it is the artist, a male working with his hands and eyes, who has come to stand in for the elusive subject of creation, God. With the inconclusive meanings presented by works of art now arises a secularized hermeneutic pursuit of ontological intimations through unfathomable depths and vertiginous surfaces. If Lacan's reading is oriented toward the invisible lurking in the painting we cannot see, this mysterious object does not exactly yield its secret even after a laborious process of interpretation. In this process, the viewer is thus *tamed* and must lay down his card, as it were, like a suitor whose amorous overtures are doomed to fail or remain unrequited. This basic non-reciprocity between viewer and object, lover and beloved, underpins Lacan's formulation "You do not see me from where I am looking at you" (Ibid.). The artist, too, participates in such non-reciprocity but turns it into the premise, the ground, for his creation.²

Because his theorization of the subject is based on the visual, libidinal, and reflexive trajectories originating with the artist, Lacan's reading differs from Foucault's in one major respect: he is indifferent to the place occupied by the implied spectator of *Las Meninas*. Whereas for Foucault, that place is arguably the crux of the matter. Foucault brings attention to the spectator by tracking the lines of composition:

There are . . . two centres around which the picture may be organized, according to whether the fluttering attention of the spectator decides to settle in this place or in that . . . [F]rom each of them [the princess and the mirror on the back wall] there springs an ineluctable line . . . These two sagittal lines converge at a very sharp angle, and the point where they meet, springing out from the painted surface, occurs in front of the picture, more or less exactly at the spot from which we are observing it.

What is there, then, we ask at least, in that place which is completely inaccessible because it is exterior to the picture, yet is prescribed by all the lines of its composition? (Foucault, 1994, 13). It is impossible to know if Lacan's comments, delivered after he had already read Foucault's dazzling book, were intended as a critique of Foucault's reading. What is clear is that Lacan is disputing, or at least minimizing, Foucault's interest in the spectator (by saying, somewhat unfairly, that the essential point of the reversed canvas is eluded by Foucault [Lacan, 201]). For this reason, Lacan also must de-emphasize the significance of the mirror in the back (whose position is described by Foucault as "more or less completely central" [Foucault, 1994, 7]), redirecting attention instead to the picture in front of the painter (on the left). For Foucault, the figures of King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana, reflected in the mirror, should by the painting's spatial logic be seated in front of the scene being painted: Foucault's point, repeatedly, is that *Las Meninas* conjures the fascinating realization that the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing (Foucault, 1994, 16). Aside from the sovereigns, of course, this realization about invisibility also pertains to the place where we, the spectators, are located. This rendering of monarchical authority as just a reflection in the dark recess of the background and an absence in the foreground resonates with Foucault's historicization, in the rest of *The Order of Things*, of the emergence of various discourses structuring Western bourgeois society, which, according to him, is steadily controlled by disciplinary surveillance rather than by sovereign power. In this modern political arrangement, kings and queens have become mere figureheads, but the status of the spectator is as yet indeterminate:

Because we can see only that reverse side [of the canvas], we do not know who we are, or what we are doing. Seen or seeing? The painter is observing a place which, from moment to moment, never ceases to change its content, its form, its face, its identity. (Foucault, 1994, 5)

Above all, Foucault argues that the spectator's position is, geometrically speaking, on a par with both the sovereigns and the painter: "These three 'observing' functions [of the spectator, sovereign, and painter] come together in a point exterior to the picture: that is, an ideal point in relation to what is represented, but a perfectly real one too, since it is also the starting-point that makes the representation possible" (Foucault, 1994, 15). By aligning the three observing positions in what he calls "the triple function" (Foucault, 1994, 14), and by placing the spectator in their midst, Foucault offers a *visually egalitarian* analysis, preparing the way for nothing less than a new force field.³

What does this new force field entail? Whereas for Lacan subjectivity is a matter of a return movement—a reflexive looking at oneself—the factor of the looming spectator signals for Foucault something quite different, namely, that subjectivity can no longer simply be imagined as an individuated mentation loop, as in the case of a contemplative, inward-turning bourgeois subject. Instead of being a single, and singular, entity (a consciousness) facing external reality and looking inside himself for answers, the subject needs to be reassembled conceptually as a nexus of new socioeconomic investments in science, technology, financial transactions, and mathematical and statistical calculations. As spectator, the subject as (a docile/disciplined) individual is folded into a (biopolitical) mass, the amorphous and heterogeneous character of which becomes the condition of possibility for another type of order: population management by the state, corporations, and other institutions. Precisely the indeterminate (and invisible) status of the spectator makes it necessary to measure, calibrate, project, and predict, with increasingly sophisticated tools that convert that indeterminate status into accruable and manipulable data.

Although *Las Meninas* is used by Foucault more or less as a visual encapsulation of his thesis in *The Order of Things*, it is possible to see affinities between his alertness to the spectator of *Las Meninas* and his elaboration of the prison inmate in the later book *Discipline and Punish*. Despite the rather different contexts, the one feature that enjoins his readings in the two books is a way of approaching subjectivity that does not take the convoluted and philosophically well-trodden path of reflexivity. Rather than engaging the mental loop of seeing oneself seeing (or seeing oneself acting), as Lacan does, Foucault approaches subjectivity as a hub of transit, a vehicle through which heterogeneous forces pass, interact, and become entangled. In *Las Meninas*, the mirror in the back thus serves less as an instrument of imaginary identification (as, for instance, in Lacan's mirror stage) than as a reflective surface, a shiny object, onto and against which the spectator as such is a bit-player in an exponentially proliferating aggregate of information. For Foucault,

in other words, what the mirror reflects is less important than the *heterotopia* of relations emerging on the front side of the scene—a multiplicity of spaces, locales, and positions (the king and queen, the painter's gaze, the multitudes of spectators viewing and coming to view *Las Meninas*, etc.) that suggests shifting modes of socioeconomic organization. Indeed, in the preface to *The Order of Things* he invokes *heterotopias* as what challenge the presumed coherent order of sense-making, of things holding together in a culture:

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together" . . . heterotopias . . . dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (Foucault, 1994, xviii, emphases Foucault's)⁴

In *Discipline and Punish*, this heterotopia of relations is theorized through the phenomenon of Panoptical transparency. The penitentiary structure that subjugates inmates to an impersonal gaze—a blinding source of light emanating from the watchtower—can only be resisted, as it were, with cleverly modified behaviors and refashioned souls. The two antagonistic sides remain divided yet enjoined precisely in their heterogeneous, uneven shares of power: increasingly adaptive modes of opposition on the part of those being caught in the gaze of the other, vis-à-vis an increasingly smooth and effective state machinery of imprisonment.

Because of the influence exerted by Foucault's work, it is now a commonplace to see Jeremy Bentham's penitentiary design as a precursor to the omnipresent surveillance apparatuses in our time. In that equation, perhaps reintroducing the repressive hypothesis, subjectivity tends either to be analogized to incarceration or to a condition of resistance against such incarceration. Drawing on this analogy, for instance, Marshall Berman in *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982) describes Foucault as a (Weberian) critic of the "iron cage" of modernity. Berman laments,

Just about the only writer of the past decade who has had anything substantial to say about modernity is Michel Foucault. And what he has to say is an endless, excruciating series of variations on the Weberian themes of the iron cage and the human nullities whose souls are shaped to fit the bars. (34)

This striking formulation of subjectivity as nullity, however, returns us to the Lacanian-theological problematic, a problematic from which we see Foucault, to the contrary, noticeably departing in his theory of power and subjectivity.

In brief, while we understand the reasoning and motivation behind this commonplace approach to the subject, which typically are based on Foucault's early work on large-scale institutions, we would like to propose a different theoretical direction by invoking some other interlocutors with Foucault's ideas, specifically regarding the contemporary and technological constitution of subjectivity.

Foucault's Underappreciated Conceptual Turn

In our view, the popular reduction of the subject to incarceration (or its consequent protestation) has, wittingly or unwittingly, evacuated Foucault's theory of its own density by tilting the model of subjectification-in-structure toward the model of the subject-who-resists, as if subjectivity were simply reducible to a negativity (in Berman's formula, a nullity). As is well known, however, Foucault's theory of discipline and biopolitics actually relies on a *technical* notion of subjectification that crucially links the production of the subject to what we (in the previous section of the present discussion) have termed the "shifting modes of socioeconomic organization" in modern capitalism. Consider Foucault's many allusions in *Discipline and Punish* to historical shifts in production that were, simultaneously, shifts in forms of punishment or power more generally. As he writes, "With the new forms of capital accumulation, new relations of production and the new legal status of property" (Foucault, 1995, 86) came a shift to generalized punishment and the emergence of discipline. More succinctly, "The growth of a capitalist economy gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power" (Ibid, 221). This is to say that although Foucault does not present himself as a Marxist thinker, his argument nonetheless places subjectivity (and its associated capacity for agency) within the broader emerging or institutionalized strategies of power in a capitalist economy. To simplify even further, at the theoretical level, subjectivity is thus interestingly conjoined to the organization of modes of production. In this sense, Foucault's evident contribution to a Marxian theory of modernity is the conceptual linking of a historically specific mode of production to a historically specific mode of subjection (or subjectification). In a more expansive summation of his view, Foucault writes of the genealogy of disciplinary punishment as follows:

If the economic take-off of the West began with the techniques that made possible the accumulation of capital, it might perhaps be said that the

methods for administering the accumulation of men made possible a political take-off in relation to the traditional, ritual, costly, violent forms of power, which soon fell into disuse and were superseded by a subtle, calculated technology of subjection. In fact, *the two processes--the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital--cannot be separated*, it would not have been possible to solve the problem of the accumulation of men without the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital. (Ibid., emphasis added)

To put it somewhat differently: between *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault had ferreted out important historical connections between subjectivity and power. If in the former study he theorizes that the “modern soul” is the correlate of disciplinary-political practices of individualization (Ibid., 23, 192-94), in the latter study, he highlights confession as a key mechanism for the voluntary production of truth in biopolitical “procedures of individualization” (Foucault, 1990, 59). In particular, the ascendance of psychoanalysis, in its inheritance of the practice of religious confession, appears instructive for revealing a vital link between subjectivity and capitalist organization; it is this link that had occupied Foucault’s attention. Many of these studies’ most striking moments, in our view, highlight the novel connections between traditional capital accumulation and the accumulation of (discourses on) sexualities: “Surely no other type of society has ever accumulated—and in such a relatively short span of time—a similar *quantity* of discourses concerned with sex,” Foucault notes (Ibid., 33, emphasis added). The history of confession thus concerns “[a]n immense labor to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce—while other forms of work ensured the accumulation of capital—men’s subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word” (Ibid., 60). Of course, the organization of the body by forces of capital had already been flagged in the earlier study of disciplinary power. Discipline is a solution to the problem: “How can one capitalize the time of individuals, accumulate it in each of them, in their bodies, in their forces or in their abilities, in a way that is susceptible of use and control?” (Foucault, 1995, 157). It is of no surprise, then, that *The History of Sexuality*, through its elaboration of biopower, further extends this focus on disciplinary procedures. In Foucault’s words,

The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of

bio-power in its many forms and modes of application. The investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces were at the time [of capitalist modernization] indispensable. (Foucault, 1990, 141)

Even so, when considering Foucault's analysis of capitalism, it is necessary to acknowledge a difference in his interpretation of *modern* and *postmodern* organizations. Although Foucault's periodization is often loose and conceptually experimental, it nonetheless remains tied to more conventional signposts of history.⁵ Consider the narrative of *Discipline and Punish*, for instance, which charts a passage from early modern enclosure to 19th-century industrialization. In his portrayal of this transition into industrial capitalism, Foucault noticeably draws his inspiration from the familiar image of the factory machine and the process of material production based on such mechanical equipment. Accordingly, in his conception of this historical period of modernization, physical bodies are assembled like raw materials, and discipline is "understood as machinery for adding up and capitalizing time" that is, he writes, "accumulate[d]" in the body (Foucault, 1995, 157). In other words, discipline is theorized as an art for "composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine" (Ibid, 164). Thus, Foucault alludes to La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* for its exemplary vision of reducing the organic animal to machinic automata (Ibid, 136). As such, the text of *Discipline and Punish* clearly reflects the historical conditions of industrial capitalism: disciplinary power produces a human machine.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, however, the chronological frame of Foucault's historical narrative is extended. Although still beginning in the early modern period, Foucault ultimately traces the deployment of sexuality further into the 20th century. Whereas his analysis could have ended with the 19th century, as in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's interest in sexuality brings the analysis into the post-Fordist and, arguably, postmodern era. Having expanded his temporal horizon this way, Foucault also offers some theorization about the nascent *postmodernization of sexuality*. Importantly, therefore, his conception of biopower's production of sexuality is effectively divided by two chronologically distinct strategies of power: a *modern-capitalist* and a *late-(modern-)capitalist* form. Whereas modern power may have been figured in the model of the engine, late-modern power is analogized to a different kind of machinery. The earlier, modern analogy of the human being to an industrial machine (as in the case of *Discipline and Punish*) has undergone a transformation in the context of the shift to late-capitalist power.

In an underappreciated passage just before the "Periodization" section of *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault alludes to a major difference between capitalist and late-capitalist modes of sexualization. This point has seldom been

taken up by his readers, yet it is quite pertinent for the present discussion. Foucault notes:

The *first phase* [of sexualization] corresponded to the *need to form a "labor force"* (hence to avoid any useless "expenditure," any wasted energy, so that all forces were reduced to labor capacity alone) and to ensure its reproduction (conjuality, the regulated fabrication of children). The *second phase* corresponded to that epoch of *Spätkapitalismus* [late capitalism] in which the exploitation of wage labor does not demand the same violent and physical constraints as in the nineteenth century, and where the politics of the body does not require the elision of sex or its restriction solely to the reproductive function; it relies instead on a *multiple channeling into the controlled circuits of the economy*—on what has been called a *hyperrepressive desublimation*. (Foucault, 1990, 114, emphases added)

Why is this passage so remarkable? In invoking the theoretical concept of *Spätkapitalismus*, or late capitalism, Foucault is underscoring what is arguably a landmark distinction, a historic threshold, in the modes of production. Whereas the "first phase" inhabits the domain of industrial production—accompanied with constraints, such as a principle of the conservation of energy—the "second phase" inhabits the realm of postindustrial technology, as is evident in Foucault's telltale switch into the language of electricity (thermal conduction). Whereas the first period "avoid[s] . . . wasted energy" (Ibid.) by sublimating excess energy into pure work, the second rather depends on a "multiple channeling" of such energy into "controlled circuits." This multiple channeling results in the "desublimation" of energy—that is, away from the work of material labor and toward the socially and politically *manageable* (thus "hyperrepressive") practices of cultural consumption.

In our reading, this notable, albeit entirely underappreciated, shift in Foucault's imagery reflects the aesthetic impact of historical developments in machinic power, developments that may be encapsulated as an evolution from the thermodynamic engine to the electronic apparatus. While the first phase corresponds to the mode of production and ideology of modern capitalism, the second aligns more appropriately with the mode of production and ideology of the postmodern. Even though only mentioned by Foucault in passing, this shift signals the way in which he conceptualizes the mutating historicity of the subject. The economic conduction of forces through controlled circuits is a provocative intimation of the technological advances of electrification. The allusion to the electrical apparatus alerts us to what

Michael Hardt, in his essay "Affective Labor," calls the "contemporary phase of postmodernization" and its ideology of immaterial labor (90). As Hardt writes,

One face of immaterial labor can be recognized in analogy to the functioning of a computer. The increasingly extensive use of computers has tended progressively to redefine laboring practices and relations . . . Today, as general social knowledge becomes ever more a direct postmodernization, we increasingly think like computers, and the interactive model of communication technologies becomes more and more central to our laboring activities. (Ibid., 95)

Similarly, in Fredric Jameson's broader theorization of the postmodern period of *Spätkapitalismus*,⁶ the subject is analogized to a kind of computer circuitry, in contrast to the earlier image of an industrial engine.

In Jameson's account, special attention is paid to technology in capitalism: historical moments in the "evolution of machinery under capital," spanning from the development of steam-powered motors in the 19th century to the electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses of the 20th (77). Just as Foucault implicitly draws on the technological imagery of late capitalism to point to the circuitous channeling of social and political energy in a distinctly postindustrial (or late-capitalist) consumer economy, so does Jameson invoke the technological developments in late capitalism to address the postmodern and its basis in postindustrial (or "multinational") capitalism (78, 85). In a phrase that could have served as an explanation for Foucault's allusion to the electric machine in his description of the late-capitalist constitution of sexuality, Jameson writes, "[I]t would seem only logical that the relationship to, and representation of, the machine could be expected to shift dialectically with each of these qualitatively different stages of technological development" (78). As in the genealogies provided by Foucault, in Jameson's theory of postmodernism, too, technological innovations in capitalism anticipate a transformation in the dominant form of human subjectivity, a molding of experience to the form of the electric machine.⁷

In contrast to the image of the powerful and explosive engine that has been emblematic of modern capitalism, our late-capitalist era is dominated instead, in Jameson's view, by "the computer, whose outer shell has no emblematic or visual power, or even the casings of the various media themselves, as with that home appliance called television which articulates nothing but rather implodes, carrying its flattened image surface within itself" (79). Commenting on the transformation of space with the same adjective "hyper" that we use below to describe the

contemporary “hyper-subject,” Jameson writes: “this latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson, 83).⁸ Jameson’s emphasis on the screen and the engulfment of subjectivity in a transcendent networked space brings us to the threshold of the postmodern experience, gesturing toward the incorporation of subjectivity into a new structure of capitalism capable of inciting and inventing new kinds of desires and pleasures.

To reiterate the point we make in our preceding discussion of *Las Meninas*, then: it is exactly this multiply channeled, trans-individual postmodern subject that Foucault associates with the absent-present position of the spectator in his reading of Velázquez’s painting.

Sexuality in Late/Scopic Capitalism: Illouz’s Hyper-subject

As has been principally theorized by Frankfurt School critics such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the ascendance of *Spätkapitalismus* needs to be located in what is variously called mass culture, consumer society, and the culture industry. We can now add to this list what Foucault calls the multiple channeling of energy (or libido) into the controlled circuits of the economy. In his suggestive passage, cited above, Foucault shows how postmodern capitalism functions like a *switchboard* that connects the individual (consumer) to a marketplace where wants, needs, and desires may be expressed or incited—in effect, *(re)wired and turned on*. In her sociological study of postindustrial intimacy, *The End of Love*, Eva Illouz adopts precisely this (little noticed) aspect of Foucault’s approach to the contemporary period by spotlighting the central role played by sexuality on the switchboard of consumer capitalism. As Illouz writes, “The economic-sexual subject is *the* proper subject of modernity” (Illouz, 2021, 99). She explains:

Emancipated sexuality spread to most social classes through the slow shift from Fordist consumer economy to a post-Fordist one, using images and ideals of authenticity, fun, coolness, and pleasure. Sexuality was the key cultural value and practice bridging between “authentic” liberation projects and the commercialization of social life. . . . Sexuality provided capitalism with extraordinary opportunity to expand because it required incessant self-fashioning and provided endless opportunities to create sexy atmospheres. (Ibid., 50-51)

In the ever-expanding economic circuitry, social life is incessantly *charged* with these sexualized values and opportunities that organize and direct, indeed train, the expression of desire through multiple channels. In this process, a specific kind of economic-sexual subject is constituted as the fundamental agent in late capitalism by being tethered to an exponentially growing artificial space.

Reading Illouz alongside Foucault, it becomes possible to see not only a different energy model consolidating in *Spätkapitalismus* but also—thanks largely to Illouz's contribution—the twin phenomena of the consumer sphere becoming increasingly “saturated with intimacy” *and* the private sphere becoming extensively “commodified” (Ibid., 99). Illouz's emphasis on the subjectification of emotional energy in consumer capitalism illuminates the construction of subjectivity through various late-capitalist trading zones, so to speak. As if shaping what Foucault might call the “ethical substance” of the emotions, contemporary practices of the self are indexed to the logic of commodified intimacy—a situation that confirms Foucault's speculation about the “multiple channeling [of libido] into the controlled circuits of the economy” (Foucault, 1990, 114).

In this process of networked subjectification-through-consumption, Illouz locates the appearance of the “hyper-subject” (Illouz, 2021, 99, 137). In her words, the hyper-subject is “a subject defined by the activity of having needs and desires and by practices to *satisfy* such needs and desires” (Ibid., 99, emphasis added). Examples of such mass-cultural practices include therapy, tourism, pornography, and self-fashioning,⁹ all of which involve designs and structures that induce the subject to attain, or even produce, her own satisfaction. The theoretically simple process of meeting needs and wants with supplies of merchandise is thus practically complexified by the post-Fordist rise of the consumer marketplace, whose business runs on the invention of new and largely fantastical forms of desire to reinforce the spirit of consumption for the modern individual.¹⁰

While advancing the concept of the hyper-subject, Illouz draws attention to a conundrum. The subject who keeps seeking satisfaction through the market—who, in other words, proactively purchases away in order to fulfill some fantasy self-image—suffers a new kind of emotional and epistemological difficulty in judging herself. How, indeed on what basis, does she *know* that she is happy or pretty, when the feeling or knowledge of such happiness or prettiness is part of the endless circuits of commodified exchange into which she has been plugged as an economic-sexual agent? How, and on what basis, can she distinguish herself from uncountable others, or can she ever? If she cannot, then who is she? This symptom of a basic uneasiness resulting from late-capitalist consumer practices suggests that

the hyper-subject is captured by forces that impede or obstruct self-knowledge in novel, perhaps historically unprecedented, ways.

In Illouz's words, "Hyper-subjectivity . . . rests on a paradox: it activates ontological uncertainty, an uncertainty about the very nature of the self. Ontological uncertainty is shaped by three processes—valuation, evaluation, and devaluation" (Ibid., 99). She further highlights two aspects of these processes of valuation: first, they are "determined by the still-powerful economic and symbolic domination of men over women" (Ibid); second, they "are tightly connected to the intensification and dissolution of subjectivity in capitalist culture" (Ibid, 100). Ultimately, these processes of valuation are entangled with a number of interrelated global domains in what she describes as *scopic capitalism*.¹¹ These domains are "mediated by the consumer market, by Internet technology, and by media industries, and reciprocally shape one another" (Ibid).

The systemic valuation of the (female) body provides a convenient reminder of how what we are describing as the emergence of ontological uncertainty is tied to a gendered organization of power. Feminist theorists, as is well-known, have repeatedly brought attention to how women's subjection by men can be tracked through the cultural fetishization of the female body in the form of a spectacle.¹² Likewise, by attending to the ways in which subjectivity is mediated by images and image-viewing, Illouz's work comprehensively reformats Foucault's general theorization of power by reintroducing the Debordian concept of spectacle that was (perhaps too hastily) rejected by Foucault.¹³ In Illouz's reading, however, the stress is more historically specific: such spectacularization exemplifies the complex, and obviously gendered, constitution of the economic-sexual subject *in late capitalism*. In this context, it is *sexiness*, an abstract quality, that comes to signify a certain creative and innovative capacity—namely, the body's becoming a "source of surplus value" that can be put on display, as in the case of a style or manner of presentation (Ibid., 101). Particularly noteworthy is how the channels of sexualization utilize visual technologies—or more precisely, technologies of making-visible—for (the hyper-subject's) consumption habits. As Illouz comments in reference to the female body:

The economic valuation of the female body was made possible by the fact that it was transformed into a tradeable visual unit. New norms of attractiveness started being diffused through a vast network of industries. From the beginning of the twentieth century onward, mass media and the fashion-cosmetics industrial complex propagated images of beautiful and fashionable women on an unprecedented scale. These images created new norms of attractiveness that transcended class-based sartorial codes and had

a cross-class appeal. . . . *The individual body thus became a legitimately tradeable commodity through a process of spectacularization: it became an image that imitated and reflected public images of bodies.* (Ibid., emphasis added)

Sexiness as *Askesis*, or *Scientia Sexualis* Upstaged

Let us consider the logic of late-capitalist sexiness a little more closely. It is, if anything, a form of *askesis*, an exercise of the self on the self, whose training plan may be derived from a variety of popular sources, such as sex-advice media, advertising, social media, and other kinds of mass-media entertainment such as television and film. As has been argued by Rosalind Gill and Shani Organ in the essay “The Confidence Cult(ure),” the valuation of the female body participates in the late-capitalist redesign of “confidence”—a “technology of self that invites girls and women to work on themselves” (324). It is not simply a matter of mastering the art of pleasure, as in the model of *ars erotica*; rather, as Gill puts it in her piece “Empowerment/Sexism,” postfeminist “female sexual agency” is constituted specifically through the “performance of confident sexual agency” drawing on “technology of sexiness” (53). Hilary Radner, in her introduction to the volume *Swinging Single*, describes such technological production of sexiness as follows: “[T]he task of the Single Girl is to embody heterosexuality through the disciplined use of make-up, clothing, exercise and cosmetic surgery, linking femininity, consumer culture and heterosexuality” (15). Expounding on such insights, Gill and Laura Harvey propose, in their essay “Spicing it Up,” a concept of the female “sexual *entrepreneur*” (emphasis added) who envisions sex transactionally and invests in her own sexy body (52). “[I]ncited to be compulsorily sexy and always ‘up for it,’” the sexual entrepreneur is, they write, “interpellated through discourses in which sex is work that requires constant labor and reskilling” (Ibid., 56).

In the context of these discourses, Illouz flags the centrality of scopism by describing the strategies and practices used for the production of symbolic and economic sexual value. She compares the immaterial labor of sexiness to character-acting (Illouz, 2021, 104-105): one is always playing the part of an image or a visually-symbolic role. It is as if the economic-sexual subject were tasked with the invention of her own persona. In particular, according to Illouz, as the body “*stages itself*” through consumer culture, consumer culture has, more generally, “transformed the ontology of sexuality into a *theater* of the self, a visible, public performance mediated by consumer objects” (Ibid., 101, 104, emphases added). In addition to creating sexiness, the self may also publicize sexiness through visual media industries (as in

the example of a selfie), perform competences against popular benchmarks, and leverage visual display on social media and other Internet platforms that convert “bodies into images that themselves become commodities to be traded and even auctioned” (Ibid., 107). In sum, in modes of self-branding that are specific to scopical capitalism, the sexual entrepreneur transforms herself through an ascetic routine that enhances the value of her body by making that body a screen—one on which different kinds of visibilities are strategically played out.

The analogy of sexiness to a theater and of self-fashioning to the labor of an actor denotes an interesting historical shift in the social organization of sexuality. The older relation of master and disciple, authority and patient, and so on, that informs the clinical dyad of analyst/analysand in the bourgeois apparatus of sexuality as described by Foucault no longer counts so much in the postmodern scenario as described by Illouz. Polemically, one might argue that in the latter, the sexy subject's *methodical and indefinite self-fashioning* through consumerism has replaced the clinical expert's methodical and indefinite interpretation of the desiring subject. It is as though *scientia sexualis* and its corresponding decipherments of truth have given way to a wholesale sexualization of culture and the requisite practices of self-presentation.

Not surprisingly, Illouz's thesis introduces an approach to sexuality that differs from more classical psychoanalytic approaches in one major respect: sexuality is not understood by her as a secret, often unknown even to its bearer and awaiting discovery (or unveiling) with the help of an expert, the trained analyst. (Lacan's reading of the Infanta figure in *Las Meninas* would be a good instance of such discovery.) Rather, sexuality is emitted on the surfaces of body-images beaming with spectacular shapes, colors, and details—media symbols whose value ultimately derives from the consumer sphere. Thus, Illouz compares late-capitalist sexuality to the spectatorial situation presaged by Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* :

The modern *flâneur* . . . is a *sexual spectator*, who consumes women's bodies as a commodity-spectacle of sexuality and consumer objects. . . This spectator attends to the body as a visual surface containing signs of sexuality and experiences the consumer sphere as an ongoing low-key flow of sexual desire, organized in urban public spaces. (Ibid., 102, emphasis added)

If sexuality was once objectified scientifically through a taxonomic discourse of classification, in late capitalism it has metamorphosed into what we have been calling *sexiness*: a quality of economic value made manifest on the (female) body, itself put together through entrepreneurial self-fashioning. As Illouz puts it:

Sexual attractiveness [or “sexiness”] constitutes a new way for the body to stage itself, through media visual symbols and consumer items. . . [Sexiness is the] result of self-fashioning rather than in-born beauty, [*making*] *consumption an ongoing and permanent feature of the experience of the self*. (Ibid., 101-102, emphasis added)

In this fundamental conjoining of sexuality to consumption, the stage is set for the dilemma of ontological uncertainty. How does one evaluate the body when it has become, literally, *multifaceted* with the accumulation of spectacular images? Such proliferation of surfaces—of looks—propels the connotations of Lacan's memorable line “You do not see me from where I am looking at you” into a whole new dimension. Much less than any essential nullity of the self, however, it is rather the spectacularization of the self that crowds out, that nullifies the self's ability to know her own value in any (scopic) relationship. Put differently, if the entrepreneurial labor of sexiness, particularly in its hyper-reliance on consumption, produces a form of objectification through spectacular subjectification, the hyper-subject (or the sexual entrepreneur) is, nonetheless, systemically barred from self-recognition (an essential step in self-valuation) in this process.

We might go so far as to suggest that objectification per se no longer consists in the basic form of the scopic drive, so to speak, that is disjunctively structured between the seeing subject and the objectified (seen) other. Instead, in this newer framework of scopic capitalism, objectification takes the shape of a relationship of self to self. As Illouz perceptively states, “[O]bjectification itself has changed. It has taken the form of subjectification, or of what I dubbed . . . hyper-subjectivity . . . This hyper-subjectivity is paradoxically based on a fundamental uncertainty about the status of the subject” (Ibid., 137).

What Illouz's account foregrounds is not the disciplinary enclosure of sexuality (in what Foucault discusses as *dressage*), but rather the epistemological predicament that accompanies economic valuation. Novel interests advanced through the sophisticated techniques of scopic capitalism result in what is arguably a historically singular experience of irresolvable doubt, as each individual body can become sexy (and supposedly increase its value) only to the extent that it is mimicking the images of other sexy bodies that saturate the fields of social interaction. This incessant diffraction of the self through images renders self-evaluation increasingly difficult if not altogether impossible.

We believe that this epistemological-affective character of postmodern subjectivity (as uncertain both in self-evaluation and in intimacy) needs to be

grasped as a consequence of the *efficiencies* of late-capitalist production. The smooth and speedy appearance of images on a digital screen, for instance, leads readily to a deflation of the value of the self as that self becomes oversupplied, literally, with sexual charges. This is how Illouz writes of this dynamic:

The insertion of romantic and sexual practices in the consumer market leads then to a deflation of worth. Because sexual actors meet in a market situation, these actors face what we may call emotional deflation, much like the economic mechanisms of deflation. (Ibid.,134)

As she further clarifies,

[T]he market form increases uncertainty about the nature and stability of one's worth. The abundance of sexual choice activates evaluation processes that short-circuit recognition, namely the capacity to singularize others as whole selves. The difficulty to engage in recognition provokes ontological uncertainty, which is an uncertainty about the worth, the value, and ultimately the nature of the self-engaged in an interaction. (Ibid., 136)

In the end, the late-capitalist condition of sexuality is not only a switchboard; it is an inoperable switchboard that effectively leaves us, as Illouz says, "short-circuit[ed]." Hence, from the switchboard channeling energy in Foucault's *Spätkapitalismus* to the routines of spectacularization and spectatorship in Illouz's scopic capitalism, the postmodern *dispositif* of sexuality generates effects of unease, doubt, depression, and anxiety that in turn feed directly into the hegemonic therapeutic ethos of our time. Illouz depicts the vicious circle of this deployment:

The market—as an institution of freedom—throws the individual squarely in a consumer-technological path, which both rationalizes conduct and creates a nagging uncertainty about one's own and another's value. This uncertainty is in turn translated into further emotional commodities, provided by the infinite market of commodities supposed to help one achieve a more optimal self and relationships. (Ibid., 227)

In other words, just as sexuality is hooked to consumer culture, so, too, is the uncertain hyper-subject prepped for therapeutic optimization under the regime of contemporary biopower. Beyond mere theorization of sexuality, therefore, Illouz's analysis of the hyper-subject points to the elaboration of biopower as indispensable

to the writing of a history of the present, dominated as this present is by scopical capitalism. Only by elaborating biopower in the context of hyper-subjectivity would we be able to understand more accurately the function of the psy-disciplines in what is called postmodernity.¹⁴ On that front, we cannot help but wonder: do not such psy-disciplines (and their popular-cultural descendants such as self-help) now predominantly serve as technologies for *managing* the hyper-subject's characteristic malaise, springing from precisely the new "sociality ridden with uncertainty" (Ibid., 96)? If so, has not *scientia sexualis* metamorphosed into something more like *technologia sexualis*?

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Notes

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- ¹ Romantic aesthetics illustrates this clearly. As if modeled on divine creation, "The essence of the modern consists in a *creation out of nothing*. Such a principle lay in Christianity," Schlegel writes (165).
- ² In Lacan's reading, at the center of the picture is the hidden object, what he calls "the slit" (Lacan, 237), a not-too-subtle reference to the sexually attractive Infanta Margarita and a corroboration of his suggestion that creation is a "primal scene" (Lacan, 214). See Thomas Brockelman, "The Other Side of the Canvas," for a rich and informative discussion along these lines, based on Lacan's passing mention of the comparability between *Las Meninas* and Balthus's painting *La Rue*.
- ³ Another way of putting this would be that Lacan provides a (Sartrean) phenomenological interpretation of *Las Meninas*, which veers toward the theological absolutes of being and nothingness (cf. the point made by Emilie Zum Brunn in *St. Augustine*), whereas for Foucault these categories are simply not relevant for analysis of power.
- ⁴ For a related discussion of the differences between Foucault's and Lacan's handling of the concept of the mirror, differences that may be understood by way of Foucault's notion of heterotopia, see Chow, 158-64.
- ⁵ See a similar point made by Denis Hollier about Foucault's attachment to traditional signposts of history, especially in the turn to the 18th century as a transitional moment: "In Foucault's historical references, the turn of the eighteenth century (the revolutionary period, the turning point between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) has a pivotal function" (Hollier, 132).
- ⁶ Jameson's mention of *Spätkapitalismus*, like Foucault's, is a reference to Ernest Mandel's *Late Capitalism* (1972), which helped to popularize the German term/concept.
- ⁷ The striking similarity in theoretical focus may be seen as stemming from Marx's own phenomenological insights: in a kind of mimetic process, human experience—what Marx termed the "general intellect"—is rendered commensurate with contemporary technologies of production (Hardt, 95, fn. 8). We should add, leading us back to Foucault, that this of course includes technologies for the production of subjects.
- ⁸ For related interest, see Andrew Cole, "The Dialectic of Space."
- ⁹ For related interest, see also Illouz's other works such as *Saving the Modern Soul*, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery*, and *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*.

¹⁰ For further exploration of this so-called “spirit of consumption,” see the titles by Colin Campbell and Tristan Garcia.

¹¹ Bernard Stiegler associates scopic capitalism with the hegemony of the U.S.A. “North America, country of cinematographic images (televisual included), has essentially established itself as a world power through the mastery of cinematographic technology, industry and art—and now of digital technologies as well, which will soon allow for the complete control of access. Political power understood very quickly the incomparable power of cinema: as early as 1912 an American senator said that ‘trade follows films,’ and Jean-Michel Frodon has summarized the American understanding of cinematographic power by arguing that films and television programmes garnering the esteem and money of populations were worth more than GIs. Isn’t this how the West won the Cold War?” (Stiegler, “Tiresias and the War of Time,” in *Symbolic Misery*, 84)

¹² Feminist film theory led the debates here: for a classic, see Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”; for critical discussions inspired by Mulvey, see, for instance, the essays in Patricia Erens, ed., *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. For an account of the prevalent logic of feminist interventions of the late 1970s and 1980s, see Mary Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers.”

¹³ “Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance,” Foucault writes (Foucault, 1995, 217).

¹⁴ For a critical account of the psy-disciplines and consumer culture, see Adorno; see also Illouz’s discussion, in *Saving the Modern Soul*, of advice literature, movies, and advertising (Illouz, 2008, 51-56).