

Jan D. Kucharzewski, Stefanie Schäfer, Lutz Schowalter (Eds.)

# "Hello, I Say, It's Me"

Contemporary Reconstructions  
Of Self and Subjectivity

Bernd Engler, Michael Hochgeschwender, Jörg Nagler,  
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JAN D. KUCHARZEWSKI, STEFANIE SCHÄFER, LUTZ SCHOWALTER

## (Re)Constructions of Subjectivity in Contemporary Literature and Culture

### I. "Who comes after the subject?"

Jean-Luc Nancy's inquiry, articulated in the heyday of postmodern thinking, pinpoints two presuppositions: first, it reiterates one key legacy of postmodern thought, the "liquidation" (Nancy, 1991, 5) of the subject. Second, however, Nancy wonders about the consequences of this liquidation, indicating that a void has been created that eventually needs to be filled – by "some one else in its place" (ibid.).

While the present volume does not intend to provide one simple answer to Nancy's question, it displays various contemporary literary and theoretical responses to the supposed disappearance of the subject. When taken together, the contributions assembled here provide an affirmative notion of subjectivity and contribute to the discussion about what might lie beyond postmodernism by bearing witness to (re)constructions of subjectivity in contemporary literature and culture. The collection's title is chosen to indicate this development: The quote from Jennifer Egan's novel *Look At Me* (2001) is uttered by protagonist Charlotte Swenson, who literally reconstructs herself after undergoing physical change in plastic surgery and seeing herself multiplied by a virtual avatar cast in an Internet entertainment show. Upon returning to a non-simulated world, Charlotte phones the virtual being who has taken her place on the Internet and sets the record straight by simply claiming her subjectivity: "'Hello,' I say, 'it's me.'" (415)

Likewise, the cover photograph may serve as a point of departure for explorations of the human subject's condition in present-day cultural production. For decades, it seems, literary criticism has been strongly influenced by postmodernist ideas that have left the human subject in the rain. Pouring down on the supposed rational agent of the enlightenment, postulations about our fundamental dependence on language and discourses, on economic systems, and on power relations have left the human being facelessly hidden underneath an umbrella of signs and ciphers at best, and "liquidated," as Nancy claims, at worst. The image can also be interpreted in other ways: On the one hand, the

umbrella disguises the subject's individual features and covers it from view in the postmodern downpour. On the other hand, can it be a protective shield that the subject can apply to its own needs? Interpreted in this way, the photo is representative of the articulations of subjectivity collected in this volume, which appropriate postmodern paradigms in their own way, form alternatives to postmodernist thought and illustrate the subject's current reconception.

## **II. The Loss of the Subject and Contemporary Theorizations of Subjectivity**

The subject, we read in postmodern literary criticism and in (popularizations of) critical theory, is lost in forces and networks beyond its control and beyond its grasp. Consequently, its final destination is, as Donald E. Hall suggests, its deconstructionist dissolution and/or its pluralization in "Subjectivities." The oft-cited postmodernist attack on the 'Cartesian ego' has, in this context, been a contestation of the mind's ability to reason independently or to retain an "extra edge of consciousness" (Williams, 1985, 24) that would allow us to remain rational agents in the world. If these characterizations of postmodern notions of the subject appear as gross simplifications of elaborate theories, we would argue that they do capture the substance of what is commonly understood as 'postmodern' notions of the self – as problematic as the term "postmodern" might be due to its semantic fuzziness. As a case in point, recent introductions to literary theory typically highlight the subject's disappearance in discourses, hierarchies, and networks, and a general distrust towards language, communication, and human rationality as postmodernist ideas. Thus, for Gregory Castle (2007, 145) "[p]ostmodernist thought is characterized by a principled skepticism about language, truth, causality, history, and subjectivity." According to Mary Klages, "[p]ostmodern art (and thought) favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject" (Klages, 2006, 165). And in Lois Tyson's words, "deconstruction asserts that our experience of ourselves and our world is produced by the language we speak, and because all language is an unstable, ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies, we are, ourselves, unstable and ambiguous force-fields of competing ideologies" (Tyson, 2006, 257).

Still, there might be a danger in oversimplifying 'the postmodern' now that it seems to be "over" (Hutcheon, 1989, 166). Assessments of subjectivity in con-