

1000 Days of Theory: td008
Date Published: 6/22/2005
www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=481
Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, Editors

1000 DAYS OF THEORY

The Lacanian Conspiracy

[Ted Hiebert](#)

I went to school with an artist named Ryan Klaschinsky. We are no longer in contact, but one of his artworks has stayed with me. A work best not seen, but imagined. *The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh is Weak*. A work about the futility of flesh -- the futility of bodies in a delirious world. Flesh colored liquid foam -- haphazardly strewn about on an old turntable. Prosthetic body parts, refuse. Tongues, or brains. That special shade of rosy pink has never looked more decrepit. *The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh is Weak*. Revolving flesh, spun around, flopping from side to side. Useless flesh. Front row at the car crash -- meaning not only an unobstructed view but the possibility of being hit oneself. The confrontation with one's own being as a result of the horrific -- the fate of the posthuman.

1

It has been asserted by many that the body has become virtual. This is the fate of flesh in the 21st century. Not only coded flesh and data bodies, but more importantly -- as always -- is the inverse. Flesh codes and body data as we self-regulate towards a pending utopia of nihilism itself. Ultimately, it is the fate of nihilism to be exactly that which the posthuman demands.

Make no mistake, *we are posthuman*. Not only because we are inextricably wired to the world around us -- prosthetic extensions on every front, from television to radio, internet to video games, cell phones to email... even clothing and language fit this particular bill -- but more importantly again, because we are wired to ourselves, puppets that will not give up the delusion of being also the puppet master. The history of Western thinking has been -- quite simply -- wrong. The first technology was not language, nor the wheel, nor even the tree-branch-turned-spear. The first technology is and has always been the technology of reflection -- that through which we inscribe ourselves onto our own flesh.

Interestingly enough however, the theories of the posthuman are not yet written, as they should be, upon the flesh of bodies themselves. For the moment at least, it seems that we are content with the rhetoric of resistance -- intellectual self-fashioning in an age of subjective uncertainty and uncertain subjectivity. Consider, as an example, Katherine Hayles' definition of the posthuman:

the posthuman is 'post' not because it is unfree but because there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will.[\[1\]](#)

Might it not be however, in this instance, slightly ironic that the a priori distinguishing of "will" returns as the rhetorical basis for self-definition in an age of technological proliferation? Might one not accuse such a theory of having all too quickly forgotten the writings of the poststructuralists, namely Barthes and Foucault, who argued so eloquently about the death of authorship and the exact *absence* of will in contemporary subjectivity?[\[2\]](#) And, along the lines of such a reconsideration, might we not take Hayles' argument to an even more extreme position, in which it is precisely this "absence of will" that becomes the very factor determining "how we became posthuman"?[\[3\]](#)

Indeed, along these lines, it is no longer the will at stake in posthumanism, but rather the body -- the site upon which the "will-less will" collapses into subjective confusion. And through this collapse, something even more dangerous happens -- now, it is no longer merely selves that are incapable of self-distinguishing, but bodies too. And no longer is this even a function of technological extensions of mind and perception, but rather more fundamentally because this has always been the fate of the self, and indeed the fate of the body as well.

We are posthuman -- our theories *tattooed* on the flesh of our bodies, stamped and branded, not merely as symbols of aesthetic affiliation, but rather as something dangerously equivalent -- symbols of belonging *and* defiance. And it is this particular paradox -- of *defiant belonging* -- can be so dangerous precisely *because* the two are now equivalent: futile resistance in an age of unverifiable self-fashioning.

Consider the hypothesis: *If I didn't already know myself I might well fail to recognize myself in my own reflection.*

The self has never had a reliable face, nor any face a reliable self. And it is the technology of reflection through which this fundamental self-deceit is reflected back to us -- bodies now tattooed only with the alienating futility of nihilism itself.

2

The argument is relatively simple:

- if the self in contemporary crisis (technological or otherwise) is the same as the self at stake in the writings of Foucault,
- and, if the self at stake in the writings of Foucault is the same as the self engendered by the Lacanian mirror-stage,
- and, if the self engendered by the Lacanian mirror-stage is the same as the self behind Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*,
- then, we end up with the following formulation: ***placebo ergo sum*** -- I hallucinate myself into being.

The explanation is slightly more complex.

It begins quite simply with the observation that through Descartes the self comes into existence at the moment of its self-conception.^[4] What is not simple are the ways in which this self-conception occurs, nor the particularities of the "existence" which that self-conception engenders. To read Descartes out of his historical context -- in the attempt to find some groundwork for such an assertion in a contemporary setting -- would be to suggest that fundamentally this existence is of the same nature as its conception. Existence then becomes merely the observation of existing, in whatever form that observation might take.

More complex is the question of "who" observes -- a question that Descartes does not actually answer, but which both Lacan and Foucault do.

For Foucault, this "who" is the normalized self. There are no other options. For *despite* the "inside joke" that might be posited through a privileged understanding -- an *enlightened* observation -- there can be no rational hierarchy in play in the ordering of *self-conceived* existence. Rather, Foucault is explicit: "discipline makes individuals,"^[5] and it is not self-conception that is responsible for individualized existence but rather acculturation, education, social participation. We *learn* to perceive ourselves, learn to self-conceive under the shadow of discipline itself.^[6]

Strangely however, we also learn to *forget*. For a normalized self is not quite normal if it does not also think itself thinking itself. In other words, the Foucauldian normalized self is one that is *disciplined* into *self-conception*, indeed one that has a vested stake in maintaining the conception of itself as *autonomous*. Disciplined into autonomous self-perception, what is forgotten -- as a condition of autonomous being -- is that being was never autonomous.

Candy coated autonomy. Except that the sweetness turns sour as soon as we facialize the sinister authorities responsible for our self-deceits. To doubt the doctor is to doubt the medicine, and once "off our meds" the face of identity itself cannot possibly ever look the same.

Under the sign of Foucault, consequently, my identity always will have a face that is not mine. In fact, it is inevitably the

face of the disillusioned doctor, whose medications I cannot possibly believe. This is not a problem as long as I maintain an active forgetfulness in the face of an autonomy that was never mine -- but the moment I cease to forget, my body is no longer my own -- and even its face has changed.

The problem, of course, is that under this sign of identity-in-crisis we are fully able to facialize the authorities responsible. While the signs of self-deceit cause the breach of faith in the autonomy we remember, this self-deceit is immediately transferred and transformed into the *accusation* of deceit levied against our own circumstances of personal formation. This is to say, that we do not -- indeed we cannot -- blame ourselves for our own inherent depersonalization, for we have neither a (self) subject to blame, nor an autonomous perspective to wager.

3

This is why for the formulation of the posthuman "placebo ergo sum" it is necessary to consider Lacan. For while one might say that under the sign of Foucault there is "no a priori way to distinguish a self-will from an other-will," there is most certainly a Foucauldian framework by which to clearly distinguish the other-wills responsible for our formulations of self.^[7] And the futility of identity under the sign of Foucault is precisely that these other-wills are the *only* wills that can be clearly distinguished. We did not choose ourselves but had ourselves chosen for us, in fact by others themselves equally *unchosen*. And again in this case, what is true for wills is true for bodies as well. No longer is it as simple as to say that we do not recognize ourselves in the mirror -- now, in fact, we inevitably recognize *someone else*.

But isn't this exactly Lacan's assertion in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience"? Isn't Lacan's theory of the "mirror-stage" precisely a theory that suggests that the ego is formed -- the self itself is formed -- out of *self-alienation*?

... the important point is that this form [the mirror-stage] situates the agency of the ego, *before its social determination*, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone...by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality... [and which consequently] ... symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination...^[8]

Consequently, wouldn't this mean that Foucault has not, in the end, reduced the possibilities of individuality at all, but merely come full-circle to that position in which *his own self* was born? Here, in a way that is frighteningly poignant, Lacan has out-Foucaulted Foucault -- making his theories of social conditioning and discipline already redundant to the basic self-alienation required for the birth of self-conception itself.

In other words, the child body, before even recognizing itself as alienated, comes to its own self-conception through precisely a form of alienation. The mechanism of this alienation however, is not quite equivalent to that of which Foucault speaks, but rather more similar to the *technological* alienation that a theorist like Paul Virilio would call the *automation of perception*:

'Now objects perceive me', the painter Paul Klee wrote in his *Notebooks*. This rather startling assertion has recently become objective fact, the truth.^[9]

While Virilio's automated perception is strictly *industrial*, and Lacan's is *biological*, this nevertheless suggests that it is a *technology* of perception -- in this instance the *technology of reflection* -- that is the primordial factor responsible for the self-alienation of the individual. In other words: *I* have always been *other*, indeed that is my *condition* of being. *I am unchosen*. And what this means, of course, is that no longer can I facialize the world around me as responsible for my lack of individuality -- rather, I must recognize that in my self-recognition I have already chosen, however circumstantially it might seem, through my engagement with technological mediation, to *not* be myself. And this is not simply the result of social control or discourses of power, but rather the very condition of having a self to begin with. The (adult) confrontation with oneself as another is the re-enactment of something much more primal, much more fundamental, much less human.

Could we not then say, given the dual frameworks of Foucauldian depersonalization and its a priori Lacanian counterpart, that there is something that happens when we "re-realize" the self-alienation at the core of subjective being? A second-order mirror-stage perhaps -- that re-death of the self that was already fundamentally dead? And to re-realize ourselves as such entities is also to realize that our own personal histories, our personal trajectories and

formulations, are themselves equally hallucinatory -- equally unchosen -- as the "I" that spawned them.

Consequently, if Foucault -- as an already self-alienated individual -- can come to the conclusion that individuality is already self-alienated, is his declaration self-revealing or prophetic? In other words, is the fate of the posthuman to return, not to the redundancy of humanist fantasies of autonomy, but rather to the re-realization that humanity was only ever a phase in its cultural development? And, in this spirit could we not assert that: *to be human is to be alienated; to be posthuman is to be self-alienated?*

placebo ergo sum -- I am born into posthuman destiny.

It is an already normalized self that now confronts itself as already normalized. Yet no longer is there any *hope* of recovery, for it is not as simple as to attribute contextual development as the root of self-formation. Lacan posits a "nature" in contrast to Foucault's "nurture," and yet the result is the same. Doubly depersonalized, the myth of autonomy has always already been the spectre of the myth of biology.

These reflections [on the workings of the mirror-stage] lead me to recognize in the spatial captation manifested in the mirror-stage, even before the social dialectic, the effect in man of an organic insufficiency in his natural reality -- in so far as any meaning can be given to the word 'nature'.[\[10\]](#)

But it is also precisely here, in this attribution of essence -- this attribution of a non-human (alienated) nature to all things human -- that the truly sinister side of Lacan comes out. For if the spectre of autonomy under the sign of Foucault begins to look somewhat like a *social* conspiracy, under the sign of Lacan this conspiracy is precisely *genetic*. Betrayed by our own bodies into not-being, the mirror stage becomes the literal stage upon which the fantasy of existence is acted out.

The mirror-stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation... [and] which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.[\[11\]](#)

Consequently, a question: *what would Lacan see when he looks in the mirror?* For if the fantasy of autonomy resides with the spectral double -- the self-alienated ego -- are the words of Lacan not *precisely* the words rather of his reversed reflection? And if Lacan himself is and *must be* seen as exactly self-alienated to the same extent as everyone else, *which* Lacan do we hear when he speaks? The answer is obvious: we hear the posthuman Lacan, the *doubled* Lacan. This is necessary since, as a biological theory, the "mirror stage" does not allow for a privileged recovery, nor for even the possibility of "inside knowledge" of one's a priori alienation.[\[12\]](#) In fact, Lacan's theory itself is a better answer to "how we became posthuman" than any other: we became human through self-alienation, we became posthuman through (re)recognition of our own humanity as *myth*. Lacan's voice is not the voice of (human) alienation, but rather that of (posthuman) belonging.

One need not try very hard to turn this into a conspiracy theory of sorts, as the fundamental politics of identity, that in which the self is irrecoverably alienated, serves the convenient (or sinister) purpose for which psychoanalysis itself becomes indispensable. The sympathetic ear that knowingly tells the individual that it understands the frustration of alienation, simultaneously leads it further into the trauma of irrecoverable loss. Indeed in the mirror of psychoanalysis we recognize that which we can never recover, namely a fantasy of an autonomous whole that, without psychoanalysis, without Lacan, *we never would have known we had*.

What this is to say, in the end, is not that psychoanalysis is itself a form of normalization, understandable under the Foucauldian umbrella of disciplined thinking, but just the inverse. Alienation is the form in which we come to the world, and it may thus be only "natural" that we continue to seek it out, continue to be fascinated by the very desire for nihilism that is the only predictable trajectory initiated by the original fall from singularity. "Mirrors make individuals." And the Lacanian conspiracy is one that has his name only because he was the first to "alienate" it from the already self-alienated perspective of posthuman destiny.

placebo ergo sum.

And isn't this why Narcissus and Icarus are, in fact, the same person?

We all know the story of Narcissus, he who was so completely infatuated with his own reflection that he refused all human company in the name of self-absorption. We know also that his fate was death, starvation due to a complete indifference to the world around him.[\[13\]](#) Narcissus was the first nihilist -- accidental self-destruction as a result of overzealous self-obsession.

The story of Icarus is different, for he was not obsessed, but rather *possessed*, by his reflection. They say that Icarus, flying on wings of wax and feathers, flew too close to sun, his wings melted and he fell to his death in the ocean waters below.[\[14\]](#) This is only part of the story. For Icarus was (no less than Narcissus) posthuman. And it was not the sun, but the gravity of his reflection, peering up at him from the ocean waters below, that caused his (literal) downfall. Pulled, disciplined, infatuated, Icarus simply could not help himself -- his mistake was to self-conceive, his accidental self-conception his downfall.

Narcissus is Icarus born again.

5

placebo ergo sum.

I think of Daniel White's "The Bride of Compassionate Conservatism," and the tragedy of Terri Schiavo's spectacularized death in a "culture of life." And I wonder if the spectacularization of life might not be in some ways equivalent. Is it only silenced flesh that cannot speak on its own behalf, or was Foucault right and even the "free speech" of humanist identity is couched in such extreme formulae of social and cultural conditioning that its own voice is already that of White's *Vox Angelae*?

'I' speak through the aperture of the media... My body is the property of medicine, of my spouse, of my parents, of the courts, of the legislatures, of the society of spectacle. I am a death parade. I am a life without consciousness... a hybrid of biology and technology, a cyborg whose consciousness is no longer 'mine'...

'I' am cortically dead.[\[15\]](#)

But was I ever cortically alive?

placebo ergo sum.

I think of Arthur Kroker's "Born Again Ideology," and the chilling account of American politics as the "faith-based" attempt to provoke the Apocalypse in the name of Christ's second coming. And I wonder if there isn't something frighteningly similar in this account to the "cortical" life of spectacularized death?

The second coming of god then as the real politics of American empire: a fateful meeting of the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament with full-spectrum futurism of cyber-warfare. That's Born Again Ideology, and this time, the rulers of the American covenant intend to get it right, far right, with a style of political action -- an unyielding politics based on preemptive action, a politics of hand to mouth existence, constant military interventions, ceaselessly stirring up turbulence, media provocations intended to provoke panic fear among the domestic population for which redemptive violence is the only recourse...[\[16\]](#)

With "born again politics" do we not also then find *ourselves* "re-born" as a domesticated population?

placebo ergo sum.

Now, quite simply, I wonder why these two stories feel so similar. Might it not be exactly because they say the same thing? Might it not in fact be precisely because we have all been born twice -- once the birth we have been told to remember -- the other, the engendering of self, the memory of our own Icarian plummet into being?

Born once at birth -- born a second time through the mirror-stage.[\[17\]](#)

Born once into flesh -- then born again into humanist being.

Isn't the similarity striking? Perhaps we are all "born again" to be "brides of compassionate conservatism," formed to be submissive to our very delusions of autonomy. And while this may sound tenuous to some, let us remember that both Lacan and Žižek (his "born again" counterpart) are adamant that autonomy cannot be sustained without the prosthetic (prophetic?) sustenance of precisely the big Other.[\[18\]](#) Born itself out of opposition, autonomy needs the discourse of power, indeed the discourses of conspiracy and fascism as well. Consequently, even autonomy has been mis-thought by the Western mind. Not the freedom to choose, but rather only ever the mere freedom to refuse.

But this is dangerous. For to rethink autonomy as the freedom to refuse is also to say that none of us is autonomous -- at least insofar as we invoke a right to make choices. Rather to choose, under this paradigm, is devastating to the very notions of precious self and inextricable subjectivity that might otherwise be the (prosthetic) grounds upon which individuality could be based.

6

Might we not rethink the history of humanist theory then as precisely equivalent to Kroker's "faith-based politics"?[\[19\]](#) Might it not in fact be suggested that "faith-based politics" can be both so deadly and so prominent because it has always already been the face of philosophy? Faith-based philosophy? Isn't that the accusation that Wittgenstein levies against the traditions of analytic thought when he says quite simply that "behind every well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded"?[\[20\]](#) And sadly, isn't it also through this identical formulation that the "faith-based self" comes back as the unverifiable, illegitimate offspring of psychoanalysis?

Consequently, if (according to Kroker) American politics never really broke with its 17th century Puritan roots, but simply added a revamped technological face to its "faith-based" body,[\[21\]](#) might we not assert that something similar is true for all things faith-based, from philosophy to identity itself? "Born again identity" as the sign of all things Western, all things humanist.

Consequently, is it possible that philosophy never left the Renaissance, the literal "re-birth" that has remained the pinnacle moment of Western culture itself? And might this not then be the singularly decisive moment, after which we have all become posthuman, reborn into nihilist self-alienation?

placebo ergo sum.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. p.4.

[\[2\]](#) see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*. Stephen Heath, trans. London: Fontana, 1977; also, Michel Foucault, "On the Author." In *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*. Charles Harrison and Paul Woods, eds. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

[\[3\]](#) Hayles does, in fact, address the question of the body. However, her analysis limits itself to the discourses of embodiment and experience and, despite her dismissal of Foucault for precisely not addressing the question of embodiment, her discussion itself remains (arguably) rhetorical. see Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, Chapter 8.

[\[4\]](#) The following passage (from Lex Newman, "Descartes' Epistemology." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology) should make this assertion clear:

Famously, Descartes puts forward a very simple candidate as the "first item of knowledge." The candidate

is suggested by methodic doubt -- by the very effort at thinking all my thoughts might be mistaken. Early in the Second Meditation, Descartes has his meditator observe:

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (Med. 2, AT 7:25)

As the canonical formulation has it, I think therefore I am (Latin: *cogito ergo sum*; French: *je pense, donc je suis*) -- a formulation which does not expressly arise in the Meditations.

[5] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Alan Sheridan, trans. New York: Vintage, 1979. p. 170.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 183.

[7] see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 183.

[8] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In A. Elliott, ed. *The Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. p. 62.

[9] Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. p. 59

[10] Lacan, p.63.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 64.

[12] In his analysis of Lacan, Zizek argues that the goal of psychoanalysis is precisely "*not* the pacification/gentrification of the trauma, but the acceptance of the very fact that our lives involve a traumatic kernel beyond redemption, that there is a dimension of our being which forever resists redemption-deliverance." This traumatic kernel, if it is to be "accepted" and cannot be redeemed, cannot be less present in the voice of Lacan, or of Zizek for that matter, than anyone else. Even an "enlightened" voice remains traumatized. see: Slavoj Zizek, *On Belief*. London: Routledge, 2001. p. 98.

[13] For a full account of the myth of Narcissus see: Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol.1. London: Penguin, 1955. pp. 286-288.

[14] For a full account of the myth of Icarus see: Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol.1. London: Penguin, 1955. pp. 311-318.

[15] Daniel White, "Terri Schiavo -- Bride of Compassionate Conservatism." *CTheory*, article td152, www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=449

[16] Arthur Kroker, "Born Again Ideology." *CTheory*, article td153, www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=451

[17] This is analogous to what Lacan calls the "*specific prematurity of birth* in man." Lacan, p.63.

[18] "The notion of sacrifice usually associated with Lacanian psychoanalysis is that of a gesture that enacts the disavowal of the impotence of the big Other: at its most elementary, the subject does not offer his sacrifice to profit from it himself, but to fill in the lack in the Other, to sustain the appearance of the Other's omnipotence or, at least, consistency." Zizek, p.70.

[19] Kroker argues that under the sign of "Born Again Ideology," contemporary American politics are reducible to their "faith-based" Puritan roots. Kroker, "Born Again Ideology."

[20] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*. Dennis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. New York: Harper, 1972. p. 253 (33e).

[21] Kroker, "Born Again Ideology."

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