

The Struggle to Defend Subjectivity: The Turn in the Subject Paradigm within Popular Culture Theory in the Post-Hall Era

Yunxiao Zhang*

University of Macau, Macau, 999078, China

*Corresponding author: Yunxiao Zhang

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Abstract: In the theoretical context of the post-Hall era, the core challenge facing popular culture studies lies in understanding the modes of existence of the subject within increasingly fragmented and technologically mediated cultural practices, following the suspension of the ontological connection between the symbolic and the real. While Hall's "Gramscian turn" successfully established the image of an actively decoding public, it also rendered the philosophical grounding and political efficacy of subjectivity uncertain by transforming the ontological question into a terrain of struggle. After Hall, theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Henry Jenkins, and Rosi Braidotti, through concepts like affective attachment, participatory culture, and nomadic becoming, collectively advanced the shift in the subject paradigm from a stable, bounded entity toward an immanent, relational, and dynamic process of becoming. The philosophical foundation of this series of theoretical transformations can be summarized as a "generative movement", wherein the identity of the subject no longer stems from a priori essence but resides within the dynamic trajectories formed by cultural practices and affective attunements. This paradigm renews the approach to defending subjectivity by redefining reflection and critique as differential practices internal to the generative process, thereby offering new theoretical pathways for conceptualizing resistance and openness under conditions of flux.

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1. Introduction

Following his "Gramscian turn", Stuart Hall successfully repositioned the "active populace" within the dynamic contested field of cultural hegemony. In the intellectual landscape Hall delineated by drawing on Gramsci's ideas, the masses were no longer passive bearers of ideology but rather "active subjects" capable of participating in the struggle over meaning through decoding practices. However, a deeper ontological dilemma lies concealed beneath the apparent agency of the popular culture subject: to overcome the constraints of structuralism, Hall strategically suspended the question of the ontological connection between the symbolic order and material reality, transforming the ontological "slippage" between the two into the very space for hegemonic contestation. This crucial theoretical move, while granting agency to the masses, also rendered the philosophical foundations of popular subjectivity questionable—if there is no stable correspondence between symbolic practices and social reality, how can the efficacy and authenticity of popular cultural resistance be measured? This uncertainty of subjectivity became the core dilemma that cultural theorists after Hall had to confront directly.

Entering the so-called “Post-Hall era”, the real-world context of popular cultural practices has undergone radical and profound transformations. The further unfolding of the issue of modernity has utterly dismantled any possible path toward a unified and stable subject; the rise of identity politics has rendered subject positions increasingly fragmented and complex; whilst the revolutionary development of digital technology has redefined the forms of cultural production, dissemination, and consumption, leaving even classical concepts such as “the masses” or “the audience” themselves appearing precarious. Against this backdrop, the theoretical project of reconstructing subjectivity in popular culture has grown ever more intricate. The theoretical task we now face is no longer simply to debate whether the masses are active or passive, but rather to engage in a deeper interrogation of the very concept of the “subject” itself.

2. Hall’s Legacy and the “Suspended” Ontology: Achievements and Boundaries of the Old Paradigm

As a leading figure of the Birmingham School, Stuart Hall established an active popular subjectivity through the “Gramscian turn” he initiated within cultural studies. Before Hall, the Birmingham School was embroiled in the debate between culturalist and structuralist paradigms: culturalism, championing the banner of “lived experience”, viewed the masses as active creators of culture, yet risked lapsing into empiricism and a romanticized conception of the subject; structuralism, particularly the Althusserian school, aimed to reveal the powerful structural mechanisms whereby Ideological State Apparatuses and symbolic orders “interpellate” and constitute the subject behind cultural phenomena, but its theoretical cost was reducing the masses to passive bearers of structure, ultimately dissolving subjectivity.^[1] Hall acutely recognized that these two paradigms shared a simplistic model of understanding culture—that cultural practice manifests in only a single form. In other words, for culturalists, culture spontaneously emerges from the lived experience of the masses at the base; for structuralists, culture is coercively imposed from pre-existing, transcendental structures at the apex. This constituted a misconception of understanding culture in a monolithic way. By turning to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony—wherein hegemony is not simple domination or deception, but a dynamic, continuous process of contestation, a struggle through which ruling groups maintain their leadership by winning the “active consent” of the ruled groups^[2]—Hall argued that culture is no longer merely the expression of a “whole way of life,” nor a pure ideological trap, but a crucial “terrain of struggle,” a contested arena where various social forces negotiate, compromise, and resist over meaning.^[3]

Within this framework, Hall successfully reshaped the image of the “active masses”. The masses were repositioned as participants in hegemony, their subjectivity manifested in the active decoding practices applied to cultural products. Hall’s renowned “encoding/decoding” model represents the concretisation of this theoretical conception. Television institutions (encoders) weave ideological content into symbolic products, attempting to predetermine the flow of meaning. However, the audience (decoders) are not docile receiving terminals; they can adopt “dominant-hegemonic,” “negotiated,” or “oppositional” decoding positions.^[4] This signifies that the masses are fully capable of interpreting dominant ideologies, even engaging in subversive “misreading” or direct resistance, within the framework of their own class positions and lived experiences. Here, Hall effectively accomplished another turn in the cultural paradigm: transforming the generation of cultural meaning from a unidirectional process of inculcation and reception into a potentially dialogic relationship, albeit one permeated by actual inequalities of power and status. Consequently, Hall’s “active masses” attained an unprecedented dignity of subjectivity: their “activity” was not a naïve autonomy, but a practical capacity for tactical manoeuvring and struggle over meaning within the tight encirclement of hegemonic structures. This subjectivity is deeply rooted in specific social relations and historical contexts, simultaneously constrained by structure yet constantly seeking possibilities to break through it. By anchoring the question of subjectivity in concrete historical and cultural struggles rather than abstract philosophical speculation, Hall infused Cultural Studies with enduring political vitality and critical incisiveness.

However, this very solution proactively delineated its own insurmountable theoretical boundary: the “suspended” ontological problem. Hall’s theory is, in essence, a form of “strategic avoidance”. By focusing his analysis entirely within the internal contested field of cultural hegemony, he skilfully circumvented a more fundamental ontological dilemma: the reliability and reality of the connection between the symbolic order and the “real” social reality to which it purports to refer. Structuralism, particularly its radical subsequent developments, had profoundly revealed this issue—that there is no necessary, fixed link

between signifier and signified, and that meaning arises from the play of differences within the symbolic system. Hall was deeply aware of the crisis of representation brought about by this “slippage”; in his critique of structuralism, he had already pointed out that a “sliding” of meaning exists between symbolic forms and the “real social relations and structures” to which they refer.^[1] However, in constructing his theory of hegemony, Hall did not attempt to suture or resolve this “sliding”. On the contrary, he directly transformed this ontological fissure into the very field of political struggle itself. That is to say, for Hall, the connection between sign and reality appears “natural” and “fixed” not because it is inherently true, but as a result of hegemonic operations. It is the outcome of specific social forces, through ongoing cultural struggle, temporarily “articulating” a particular signifier with a particular signified. The “fixing” of meaning is temporary and precarious, beneath which there always surges undetermined, contestable potential.

While this theoretical approach undoubtedly allows cultural studies to focus on analyzing the micro-mechanisms of power and resistance, it simultaneously leaves a crucial philosophical suspension: we still lack a reliable ultimate criterion to determine whether a decoding practice or resistance action truly touches and alters the “real” social reality it intends to affect. Furthermore, the decoding agency Hall ascribes to the masses may merely be an “internal circulation” within the symbolic order chain, and the resistance of the masses may also be merely a “ritualistic resistance” within the symbolic system, rather than affecting the system itself. Therefore, while Hall’s model of subjectivity successfully responds to the passivity of subjects brought about by their passive obedience to structures as proposed by structuralism, it seems to fail to thoroughly address the second, more subtle level of subjectivity passivity in terms of ontology. He turns the ontological question into a stage for struggle full of political hope, but does not provide actors with a coordinate for judging whether their actions truly touch the truth. The positivity of the subject is thus shrouded in a doubtful glow—it is real and powerful, but its ultimate political efficacy and ontological foundation are strategically left in the shadowy realm of theory by Hall.

It is precisely this suspended ontological question, along with the deep anxiety it engenders regarding the authenticity and reliability of active subjects, that constitutes the theoretical starting point that thinkers in the post-Hall era must confront and attempt to answer. They are no longer content with engaging in theoretical and ideological battles within the arena Hall pioneered, but rather further question whether the mode of existence of subjectivity itself has undergone fundamental changes in the contemporary context of a high degree of implosion between symbols and reality, capital and life, technology and the body.

3.Continuation and Breakthrough: The Evolution of Subjectivity Theory in Post-Hall Thought

Following Stuart Hall, theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Henry Jenkins, and Rosi Braidotti have conducted profound theoretical explorations on the question of subjectivity, effectively advancing a paradigm shift in the conception of the subject within popular culture studies. This section will centre on the theories of subjectivity proposed by these thinkers and trace the intellectual pathways of their respective approaches to the problem of mass subjectivity.

3.1 Lauren Berlant: The Affective Subject and the Movement of Impasse

Within the theoretical landscape of cultural studies in the post-Hall era, Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism can be understood as a profound response to and reconfiguration of the Hallian model of the subject. Addressing the question of subjectivity, Berlant shifts the analytical gaze towards microscopic, affective existential “gestures” and “attachments”. In her view, the subject does not exist primarily as a political or class warrior, but rather as an “affective being” structured by the fantasy of the good life, perpetually struggling amidst its broken promises.^[5] The objects of such attachment are precisely those normative promises that constitute the “good life” fantasy—such as stable employment, romantic intimacy, familial security, state protection, or upward social mobility. The formation of subjectivity occurs, first and foremost, within this deep affective investment in and maintenance of the fantasy, rather than within a clear antagonistic act of decoding. Thus, this affective investment itself constitutes a fundamental, “internal” relationship between the subject and its conditions of existence. Here, Berlant’s crucial transformation of the subject category signals a significant theoretical displacement: the core of the subjectivity question shifts from how the subject resists external hegemony to how the subject organizes its desires, emotions, and daily practices within a structural fantasy that impedes its flourishing. This is no longer the “active

decoding” of a text in Hall’s sense, but rather a form of “active sustenance” within the gravitational field of the fantasy, simultaneously drawn to and wounded by it.

Berlant refers to this state of stalemate, where the subject is caught in a dilemma between its illusory object, unable to move forward or completely abandon it, as “impass”. This is not only the field of the subject’s activity but also ontologically rewrites the understanding of the subject as a substance. Specifically, this concept reflects on the question of what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift (Berlant, 2011)^[6]. Within the impasse, the subject does not advance towards a liberatory future, but rather cycles and wanders within an ongoing present, navigating crises and preventing the fantasy from complete collapse through a series of repetitive, often exhausting practices. Steve Marotta (2023) suggests that Berlant’s impasse refers to an affective field or environment, i.e., “The impasse is an affect world, an atmospheric attunement to structural transformation in which crisis is normalised and people become at once hyperaware of potential threats and exhausted by the constant management required to fend those threats off.”^[7] In other words, the impasse denotes a processual terrain where individuals, while being acutely aware of crises, find themselves recurrently enmeshed within them, ultimately constituting a complete, dynamic mode of existence. It is crucial to note that this theoretical interpretation of the subjective condition as a mode of existence is of paramount importance. It supplants resistance as the primary expression of subjective agency. Subjects navigate their structural predicaments through quotidian, dynamic states—such as persistent job hunting, maintaining a painful relationship, consuming goods that promise happiness, or participating in formulaic political expressions. These gestures are active, even energetic, yet their aim is not necessarily to break through the structure, but often to recalibrate their relationship to the structure in order to endure within it.

In summary, although Lauren Berlant does not engage in direct theoretical debate with Hall over the concept of subjectivity, she effectively reconfigures the very coordinates for understanding it. Through her elaboration of concepts such as cruel optimism and impasse, she thereby relocates the conceptual anchor of subjectivity from the “audience” in Hall’s model—a relatively distinct entity possessing a degree of externality and engaged in symbolic struggle with hegemonic structures—towards an affective-dynamic being deeply embedded within power fantasies and emotional structures, self-sustaining through daily gestures and survival management, wherein agency is inextricably intertwined with suffering. From Berlant’s perspective, the subject is no longer a stable entity preceding cultural practice, but rather a process of becoming, perpetually shaped and reshaped within the ongoing tension between attachment and disappointment, fantasy and crisis, emotional investment and existential depletion. The activity of the masses is manifested not primarily in oppositional readings of cultural industry products, but in the tenacious and painful maintenance of life fantasies that ultimately impede their own flourishing. This very act of maintenance constitutes the core practical arena of contemporary subjectivity.

3.2 Henry Jenkins: The “Poaching” Subject and the Network of Production

In contrast to Lauren Berlant, Henry Jenkins’s research delineates a more affirmative and agentic picture of popular cultural practice. Jenkins’s theory, particularly his early work on fan cultures, is often viewed as an optimistic extension and empirical validation of Hall’s concept of the active audience. However, a deeper engagement with his theoretical framework reveals that the configurations of subjectivity outlined by Jenkins equally reflect the complex shift in the subject paradigm characteristic of the post-Hall era—namely, a transition from a relatively clear resistance/incorporation binary and a subjectivity framed by struggle towards a “networked participatory subject” who engages creatively within the cultural industries, continuously reconstructing both individual and collective identity in the process.

Jenkins’s theory maintains a relationship of both inheritance and transcendence with the Hall’s encoding/decoding model. In his seminal work, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins, drawing on de Certeau’s metaphor of “poaching”, describes media audiences, particularly fans, as active “nomads” who “poach” upon the symbolic territory provided by the cultural industries, appropriating materials meaningful to them and subsequently creating their own culture (Jenkins, 2012)^[8]. This assertion undoubtedly resonates strongly with Hall’s propositions regarding negotiated and oppositional decoding. However, Jenkins’s unique contribution lies in his shift of analytical focus from momentary, individualized strategies of “meaning interpretation” to sustained, collective practices of cultural production. Fans are no longer merely “decoders” of meaning, but become “producers” of new texts, new communities, and even new cultural forms.

They write fan fiction, produce fan videos, establish online communities, and organize offline events—all these practices constitute a vibrant participatory culture that exists in parallel to official commercial culture. Regarding this, Jenkins (2008) further notes: “And in the process, the focus on individual consumers is giving way to a new emphasis on the social networks through which production and consumption occur.”^[9] Within this framework, the formation of subjectivity is discussed within the context of social networks, becoming markedly externalized and embodied through collective, visible creative labour and social interaction. Consequently, the subjectivity of the masses becomes a practical identity that is generated and affirmed through acts of “participation”.

Although, on the level of theoretical inclination, Jenkins shares Stuart Hall’s commitment to upholding the activity and agency of the subject, his shift in focus from reading to production effectively accomplishes a displacement of the theoretical foundation of subjectivity theory. The core of Hall’s subjectivity lies in the politics of meaning—that is, the struggle over the power to interpret symbolic significance. Jenkins, conversely, turns towards the politics of participation—the fight for the right and capacity for cultural creation and dissemination. This shift signifies that the agency of subjectivity is no longer primarily manifested as a posture of resistance to dominant ideology displayed by the masses within the realm of cultural consumption. Instead, it is realised through active involvement in content creation and community building, where individuals act as producers or co-producers of cultural content and meaning. Jenkins’s detailed analyses of cases such as Star Trek fan culture and audience interactions with reality television vividly demonstrate how ordinary people utilise accessible media technologies to transform acts of consumption into a form of creative, socially-embedded self-expression.

Of course, Jenkins’s strong endorsement of popular subjectivity is not without its theoretical vulnerabilities. For instance, Mark Andrejevic has questioned Jenkins’s concept of “activity”, stating: “Although Jenkins once noted that fandom proves ‘not all audiences are passive,’ the advent of interactive media highlights what has been true all along: that all audiences are active, although perhaps not in the progressive sense the term has come to imply.”^[10] However, when considered from the perspective of Jenkins’s own understanding of subjectivity, this theoretical predicament further illuminates the condition of the modern subject within the realm of popular culture: the subject is no longer merely a passive recipient or an active negotiator of meaning, but a participant deeply embedded in the cycles of cultural production, wherein agency and subordination, creativity and potential for exploitation, are intricately intertwined within the context of new media technologies. This paradigm of subjectivity differs both from the relatively clear-cut “combatant” opposing hegemonic structures in Hall’s model, and from the isolated individual “mired” in affective fantasies described by Berlant. It manifests as a “generative node” that constantly adjusts itself within networked participation, embodying both cooperation and resistance.

3.3 Rosi Braidotti: The “Nomadic” Subject and the “Affective Flow”

Compared to Lauren Berlant and Henry Jenkins, Rosi Braidotti’s perspective on subjectivity is more radical and bears a stronger intellectual imprint of post-Hall era subjectivity theory. Deeply rooted in Spinozist ethics, Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of “becoming”, feminist theory, and post-structuralism, Braidotti proposes a “subject-in-becoming” that fundamentally transcends anthropocentrism, individualism, and fixed identity. The “subject-in-becoming” is no longer content with merely repairing the existing humanist model of the subject; instead, it aims to thoroughly dismantle that model and conceive of subjectivity as a dynamic, relational, and non-unified process. In Braidotti’s view, the concept of the subject debated in the Hall era remained largely a humanist subject—presupposed by the Western philosophical tradition, possessing rational consciousness and relatively stable boundaries—even if this subject was interpellated by ideology or constructed by culture. Her theoretical aim is precisely to move beyond this framework.

At the core of Braidotti’s theory of subjectivity lies the concept of becoming. She argues that life does not develop toward a predetermined, singular rational goal, but unfolds as a multiplicity of processes of “becoming”—a non-teleological, creative force that continually exceeds established forms (Braidotti, 2006)^[11]. From this, Braidotti advances the notion of the subject-as-becoming. The essential characteristic of this becoming-subjectivity is its nomadic nature: “nomadism” does not refer to physical migration, but to an existential and intellectual stance of refusing to be bound by fixed identities, territories, or norms^[12]. Nomadic subjectivity emphasises fluidity, change, and transgression. It always operates in-between, traversing the junctions between different social symbolic systems, bodily sensations, and geographical spaces, thereby constantly

deterritorialising and reterritorialising its own constitution. For studies of popular culture, this means that the subjectivity of the masses can no longer be simplistically reduced to a static “identity” based on class, gender, or race. Instead, it should be seen as a series of fluid and transformative processes of becoming, enacted through the complex practices of consuming, imitating, parodying, and reconfiguring cultural signs.

To render possible a non-unified, relational subject, Braidotti creatively revitalises Spinoza’s concept of affectus, linking it to conatus—the fundamental tendency of every being to persist in its existence and enhance its capacity to act (Braidotti, 2019) ^[13]. In her view, subjectivity is essentially an “affective flow,” a product of the various relations—which enhance or diminish the power of living—that arise from encounters between bodies, and between bodies and the world. Consequently, the real force of popular culture lies not only in its ideological content, but also in its capacity to function as an “affective machinery”: it directly mobilises, shapes, and channels the affective flows of bodies, thereby participating in the production of subjectivity at a subconscious, pre-personal level. The rhythm of a short video, the interactive feedback of a video game, the collective atmosphere of a concert—their political and ethical significance extends far beyond what “decoding” can exhaust; rather, they perform an “affective modulation” that acts directly upon the very life of the masses.

Judging from the conceptions of mass cultural subjectivity articulated by these three pivotal thinkers, the very category of the subject has undeniably undergone a transformation relative to Stuart Hall’s more substantive concept of the audience. This shift, on one hand, has advanced the trajectory of subjectivity within cultural studies, and on the other hand, illustrates that in contemporary cultural practice, the concept of the subject can no longer be adequately captured by traditional binary frameworks, urgently necessitating theoretical pathways for a breakthrough.

4. From “Substance” to “Becoming”: The Subject Paradigm in the Post-Hall Era

A coherent theoretical trajectory emerges from a synthesis of these three perspectives: the paradigm of subjectivity within popular culture studies is undergoing a profound shift from a “substance” possessing relatively stable boundaries and clear social positions towards a “process” or “relational effect” that is perpetually generated within specific networks of power, technology, or affect. The subject no longer exists prior to practice but is provisionally constituted within practice, through relations, and influx. Berlant’s “affective being”, Jenkins’s “networked participant”, and Braidotti’s “assemblage-in-becoming”, despite their distinct emphases, collectively foreground the core characteristics of subjectivity as immanence, relationality, and generativity. They no longer seek a pure point of resistance external to structures of power and culture. Instead, they commit to analyzing how subjectivity is shaped within these very structures and how it utilizes the resources of the structures themselves to manifest potential for creation, negotiation, and even escape.

Indeed, although the three thinkers differ markedly in their specific approaches to and methods of situating subjectivity, they broadly share a similar theoretical model: abandoning the Hallian orientation towards a substantialist subject in favour of a more open, dynamic, and active conception. However, this shift inherently dissolves the foundational ground of identity required for the subject to stand as a subject into the very interior of the dynamic concept of subjectivity. Consequently, in order to preserve the relative stability of the subject as subject, its identity is reconceptualised as a self-referential movement of the concept itself. More specifically, this identity is no longer a transcendental, solidified essence or core, but rather the very movement of differentiation that unfolds continuously in time—a dynamic process that maintains its recognisability through constant “repetition” and “iteration”. Its stability derives precisely from the internal rhythm and provisional equilibrium of this movement, not from any static substance.

The philosophical underpinnings of this theoretical approach can be traced back to the famous Hegelian proposition, “the substance is subject”, thoroughly rewritten through post-structuralist and postmodern thought. Hegel’s “Concept” is not a static, abstract category, but a process of movement that continually externalises, enriches, and returns to itself through the negation of the negation. The truth of the subject resides precisely in this activity of self-mediation and self-differentiation. While thinkers of the post-Hall era reject Hegel’s teleology of Absolute Spirit, they surreptitiously inherit this dialectical mode of thought that understands identity as a “process” rather than a “thing”. Of course, their intellectual inclination to replace dialectical sublation and synthesis with difference, rupture, and nomadism is also, to some degree, influenced by Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of difference. In any case, it is clear that post-Hall era thinkers have broken with the grand

narrative of Hegelian dialectics. They resolutely reject the overarching teleological tendency and closed totality that enveloped his system. Yet, at the more implicit level of philosophical methodology, they find it difficult to relinquish and, in fact, have inherited a profound Hegelian insight: namely, a suspicion towards any solidified, given “thing”, and a preference for dialectical thinking that understands identity and essence as a “process” or “activity”. Thus, the philosophical foundation of the post-Hall subject paradigm comes into clear focus: it inherits the Hegelian form of conceiving subjectivity as a dynamic process, while thoroughly displacing its content. Identity is no longer a spiral-ascending synthesis achieved through the negation of the negation, but a provisional dynamic effect—a dynamic movement that becomes, in essence, the new subject-category itself.

Applying this philosophical lens to the theories of subjectivity examined in the three thinkers discussed above reveals how the “generative movement of the subject-concept” unfolds in concrete and nuanced ways. In Lauren Berlant’s theory, the identity of the subject—that “I” which feels attachment, becomes mired in impasse, and strives to survive—is not grounded in a stable, transcendently identical self-consciousness. Instead, it unfolds and returns to itself as a persistent movement of “affective attunement” within the field of the impasse. This movement of identity is inward-folding: it produces a narrative coherence about one’s own suffering and perseverance, a continuous self-recognition of “this is how I live”. As a form of persistent self-knowing, the movement of subjectivity in this dimension must inevitably evolve as this knowing changes and deepens. Consequently, Berlant intrinsically links the subject to the affective process—the very truth and stability of self-knowledge stem precisely from the ongoing process of affective attunement. Should this attachment rupture completely or this attuning activity cease, the sense of subjective identity founded upon it also faces dissolution. The “impasse” Berlant describes is precisely a state where the movement of identity becomes caught in a fixed rhythm, struggling to generate transformative difference.

Henry Jenkins’ research on fan culture reveals another possible form of the generative movement of the subject—an outward, expansive one. Here, the subject’s self-perception and self-identity—the fan’s “self”—becomes externally yet directly bound to the cultural objects and products they are passionate about, as well as to the participatory communities they inhabit. In his theory of the subject, identity does not manifest as a static cultural label, such as “I am a fan of a certain celebrity”. Instead, it is activated and substantiated through a series of continuous, creative cultural praxis: persistently tracking series information, participating in forum discussions, creating fan works, attending fan gatherings. Each new act of participation and creation is another instantiation of the “fan” identity; every generative activity subtly re-fills and refines the subject’s identity. Therefore, this movement of identity is networked and distributed, relying on the ongoing generation of meaning and the behavioral connections between the individual and the text, and between the individual and the community. Once detached from cultural praxis and community connections, the subject’s identity atrophies or transforms.

Rosi Braidotti’s subject-in-becoming pushes the model of the subject’s generative movement to its most complete and radical form. She explicitly rejects any model of fixed identity, positing that subjectivity is “becoming” itself—a perpetual movement towards the other. Here, identity is thoroughly equated with the process of differentiation. The self-identity of the subject lies not in maintaining sameness with itself, but in its uniqueness as a “force”, in its specific mode of traversing and connecting heterogeneous elements to perpetually create novelty. Inheriting Deleuze’s concept of the nomadic subject, Braidotti embodies the particularity and revolutionary potential of the subject’s movement as a distinctive style of movement. This is an identity without fixed coordinates, comprised only of vectors and intensities. Its self-knowledge and self-identification stem from the tangible experience of life’s power increasing and bursting forth within the process of becoming, not from conformity to any image or identity.

In summary, the identity within the post-Hall subject paradigm can be broadly characterised as a practical and generative model of movement: through participating in culture, managing affect, and forging connections, the subject continuously “recognises”, “discovers”, and “constitutes” the self that is participating, managing, and generating. This is not a solid, core entity issuing commands, but rather a dynamic circuit of interaction: practices shape dispositions, which in turn guide subsequent practices. This cycle ultimately forms a time-thickened trajectory with a discernible pattern, and this trajectory is the subject’s identity. It is unstable, for practices may encounter contingencies, connections may rupture, and affect may shift,

yet it possesses relative continuity, for habits, memories, social relations, and material environments constitute the inertial pathways of practice.

5.Rethinking Subjectivity: Defence and Struggle Under the New Subject Paradigm

However, it is crucial to note that within the framework of a practical and dynamic subject paradigm, the defence of and struggle for subjectivity seemingly become a “pseudo-problem”: the subject’s mode of movement constitutively constructs the subject itself, and any fragmented reduction of the subject represents a reified and substantialist understanding of it. Consequently, there ceases to be a transcendental “I” observing the movement of subjectivity from the outside, and thus, the real possibility of constituting a “we” also dissolves.

More specifically, from a philosophical perspective, the dynamic, processual, and generative understanding of the subject directly negates the possibility of speculative reflection upon the very concept of subjectivity. The very act of thinking or theorising—the attempt to grasp either a particular moment or the total movement of this perpetually becoming subject—is itself a moment or part of this total movement. We can never truly leap outside the becoming-subjectivity, as well as we can only attempt to reconstruct or capture past moments or fragments of its movement. This dilemma is not an oversight of theoretical construction but an inherent, fundamental epistemological paradox within the generative paradigm. If subjectivity is indeed, as described, an ongoing process of differentiation rooted in concrete networks of practice, then any theoretical endeavour that attempts to “objectify” it for examination, analysis, and judgement inevitably becomes a new event within this process, a new instance of becoming. This theoretically necessitates a state of near-absolute immanence: we can only think within becoming and describe from within movement. The relatively stable “exterior” or “benchmark” required for critique—against which to measure and compare—appears to vanish entirely, leaving only the endless, self-referential flow of generation. Within this horizon, not only does “defending a subject” become dubious, but even “critiquing a form of subjectivity” confronts a void at its foundation.

The theoretical dilemma at the philosophical level manifests concretely at the political level as the fragmentation of classes or collectives. When subjectivity is rendered thoroughly fluid and differential, the unified identity essential for constructing stable political alliances becomes difficult to achieve. Political action requires a degree of “pause”—the formation of provisional identities and group solidarities for specific struggle objectives. However, a subject paradigm that emphasises becoming and difference fundamentally undermines this basis for collective agency, dispersing political struggle into innumerable incommensurable micro-resistances, thereby rendering it difficult to confront systems of oppression that remain powerfully structural and totalising. This political impasse is directly reflected in the breakdown of an oppositional political logic. Traditional leftist politics largely depended on clear demarcations between “us” and “them”—proletariat and bourgeoisie, women and patriarchy. Such distinctions presupposed relatively stable common interests, experiences, and identities within groups, thus providing the cognitive and affective foundation for collective mobilisation. The paradigm of becoming, however, fundamentally destabilises the coherence of the “we” as a political body. If the subjectivity of every “proletarian” or “woman” is perpetually situated within concrete, differential acts of becoming, with vastly differing experiences, desires, and survival strategies, then the “class subject” or “gendered subject” of traditional theory becomes a theoretical chimera unsustainable in practice.

Therefore, to address this issue, we must return to the philosophical level and answer the question of the possibility of reflecting upon and critiquing the concept of subjectivity within the generative paradigm. In fact, the generative subject paradigm itself necessitates a generative mode of apprehending the subject. It compels critical theory to abandon the attempt to posit a transcendental “I” to grasp the empirical “I”, and instead to acknowledge its own “situatedness” and “interventionist” nature. Critique ceases to be an external judgement and becomes an act of “self-differentiation” and “self-problematisation” internal to the generative process. In other words, the act of critique is itself an intensive form through which the generative movement of subjectivity attempts to break through its established patterns and create difference. When we analyse a particular mode of subjectivation, this very act of thought already constitutes an intervention, an event, a new connection within that smooth process of reproduction. It may loosen existing affective arrangements, awaken suppressed potential lines, or establish new resonances between thought and experience. The truth of theory does not lie in its correct representation of

an external object, but in its efficacy as a practice that ‘intervenes’ in the process of becoming, catalyzing new possibilities for thought and existence. Here, the critic is not an external observer but participates, through their work, in the ongoing shaping and re-shaping of “ourselves” as a historical subject.

Thus, far from eliminating the theoretical possibility of reflection and critique, the generative subject paradigm demands a more demanding and more radical form of reflection. We cannot, and need not, leap outside the generative process itself. Instead, we must continually attempt to create provisional “vortices” or moments of “looking back” from within and upon the movement—not to seize a static essence, but to map the trajectories of our own becoming, to discern its patterns, nodes, ruptures, and relations of force. This form of reflection is not merely internal to practice; it is itself a particular, highly self-conscious form of practice.

Therefore, what the generative subject paradigm truly opposes is the traditional epistemological model that severs the reflecting subject from the acting subject, placing theory above practice. It proposes instead the conception of a “practice-reflection continuum”. Within this continuum, defense and struggle do not disappear but transform: defending subjectivity is no longer about protecting a pre-existing core, but is dedicated to safeguarding the openness, plurality, and creative potential of the generative process, resisting those forces of power that seek to solidify life into singular, closed, and rigid patterns. Struggle or resistance, then, becomes the ongoing activity within the flow of becoming of discerning, choosing, and experimenting—of striving to open differentiated lines of becoming that enhance symbiotic power and expand freedom and joy. Theoretical reflection and speculative thought are indispensable dimensions of this struggle: they constitute a special practice that seeks to clarify the conditions of becoming and explore possible directions. They are the arduous attempt of the generative process to gain self-awareness and self-adjustment. We truly cannot leap outside becoming, but within becoming, we can attempt to understand it and, guided by a commitment to greater possibilities for life, carefully intervene in it, hoping that this endless flow may give rise to forms marked by less suffering and more symbiosis. This, perhaps, is the humble yet steadfast stance that critique and defense in the post-Hall era—in a world without a firm Archimedean point—must accept.

Conclusion

In summary, in the theoretical evolution of the post-Hall era, the subject paradigm within popular culture studies has undergone a profound shift. Stuart Hall’s establishment of the actively decoding subject through the “Gramscian turn,” while successfully dismantling the myth of the passive audience, strategically suspended the ontological link between the symbolic and the real. This move bequeathed to subsequent scholarship a core dilemma: the uncertain foundation of subjectivity.

Confronted with the fragmentation and technologization of contemporary cultural practice, the theoretical explorations of Lauren Berlant, Henry Jenkins, and Rosi Braidotti collectively propelled the subject paradigm from a bounded “substance” towards an immanent, relational, and dynamic “process of becoming.” Berlant’s theory of affective attachment reveals the subject’s stance of survival within fantasy; Jenkins’s participatory culture highlights the subject’s creativity within networked production; and Braidotti’s concept of nomadic becoming radically equates subjectivity with differentiated flux itself. The philosophical underpinning of this series of transformations can be summarized as a “generative movement”: the identity of the subject no longer originates from an a priori essence but resides within the dynamic trajectories formed by cultural practice and affective attunement.

This new paradigm also brings fresh theoretical challenges, particularly regarding the very possibility of reflection and critique. It demands that we abandon the illusion of seeking an external Archimedean point and instead recognize that critique itself is an intensive practice of self-differentiation internal to the generative process. Consequently, the struggle to defend subjectivity is no longer about protecting a pre-given core but transforms into safeguarding the openness, plurality, and creative potential of the process of becoming. It commits to exploring practical pathways within a fluid reality that enhance the power of life. This marks an entry into a new, more complex and more intervention phase of thinking about and defending subjectivity in the post-Hall era.

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