A Postplural Attitude[1]

Reflections on subjectivity and ontology

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> I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by 'attitude', I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos. And consequently, rather than seeking to distinguish the 'modern era' from the 'premodern' or 'postmodern', I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of 'countermodernity' (Foucault 1992).

Foucault made one of the strongest contributions to the now commonplace awareness in the social sciences and the humanities that 'modern', 'postmodern', 'premodern' and 'amodern' can be considered attitudes, dispositions; particular stances of self in relation to reality, rather than specific historical eras. This is also the manner in which I aim, in this paper, to characterize a postplural attitude. My effort to do so, moves through concepts developed in post-actor-network theory (post-ANT) (Law & Hassard 1999; Mol 1999, 2002; Gad & Jensen 2010) and the social anthropology of M. Strathern. Strathern uses the notion of the 'postplural' (1991: xvi; 1992a: 3–4, 184, 192, 215 et passim) as a diagnostic term to elucidate the Euro-American present and, notably, how contemporary social anthropology

is conditioned by a certain realization of the limits of pluralism. She describes the current situation, as in some ways contravening modern pluralism, but also as simultaneously retaining a certain nostalgic and intimate relation to it. Postplural designates a certain reflexive mode of conceptualisation that emerges when pluralism becomes aware of its own mode of (re)producing knowledge. For the same reason the term does not entail that pluralism has been left entirely behind. Similarly, when I depict postpluralism as a specific ethos, I am not suggesting that postpluralism 'goes beyond' modern pluralism in an epochal and/or structural sense.[2] This disposition contrasts with pluralism, yet, it is still dependent on it. It is this complicated relationship that I aim to capture with the conceptual constellation of the 'postplural attitude': I argue that the concept ʻpostplural' highlights a controversy with *and* a dependency on pluralism. Simultaneously, the concept 'attitude' indicates an awareness of being a specific and situated ethos. In this sense a postplural attitude both suggests an affinity for a certain *mode of being* and offers *an intellectual challenge* in the Foucauldian sense.

Among other things, this challenge involves finding a way of rethinking relations between subjectivity and ontology. This interest structures the rest of the paper. First, I argue that one source of perspectivism and pluralism is the idea of certain constancy in the relation between subjectivity and ontology. Second, I exemplify a particular perspectivist and pluralist position in the form of a social constructivist argument. Third, I discuss important aspects of Strathern's diagnosis of perspectivism and pluralism: this includes the creation of merographic connection, the effort to make the implicit explicit, and the consequent fragmentation of the very notion of perspective. Fourth, I describe a 'postplural ontology' through science and technology studies (STS) scholar A. Mol's idea of multiple and active ontologies. In Mol's sense, ontologies cannot be understood as different 'options' for how to understand and describe reality. However, this does not imply that *reality* is fragmented. On the contrary, following Mol, reality is *multiplied*. Realities are seen as effects of practical compilations that consist of changing and partial connections between natural–cultural elements. Thus, I use Mol's work to expand constructively on Strathern's diagnosis, which (if read narrowly and in isolation) can be interpreted as a negative reversal of pluralism.[3] Fifth, I illustrate a postplural conception of

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[2]'Ethos' is Greek and means habitué /character. Ethos refers to the distinct the set of beliefs, ideas, etc. about social behavior and relationships of a person or group (Cambridge Dictionaries Online 2011).

[3] In a recent exchange, Mol and Strathern discussed perspectivism (Strathern 2011a, 2011b, Mol 2011). This discussion followed a somewhat different route than the one taken in this paper. Strathern contrasted the American-Indian perspectivism of E. Viveiros de Castro (1998) with perspectivism and suggested that Mol's analysis remains bound up with a Euro-American

subjectivity through the photographic artworks of C. Sherman. Here, subjectivity emerges as *performed*. Sixth, in order to characterize the relation of the postplural attitude to the present, I contrast it with an ascription of a certain analytical 'heroism' that can identified in modern and/or pluralistic approaches. I conclude by discussing a certain nostalgic, yet productive, relation between a postplural attitude and modern pluralism.

Constants in Perspectivism and the Dream of *Theoria*

In a pragmatic sense, relations between concepts of subjectivity and ontology[4] are intertwined, because ideas about subjectivity *afford,* or perhaps even *require,* ideas about reality and vice versa. Simply stated, a modern attitude pictures *something* in this relation as *constant*. Something acts as the basis for a relationship between reality and self: for instance, the relation can be grounded psychologically, epistemologically or scientifically. In my view, the idea of the constant is one important characteristic of a modern outlook that can be identified already in the early modern philosophy of R. Descartes (1960). Here the existence of the *cogito* is depicted as indisputable. 'The subject' is what remains certain after the existence of *everything* has been questioned through sceptical and methodological doubt, while trust in the existence of reality is then established as 'a function' of this exact premise, the existence of the *cogito*.

The idea that a constant exists in the relation between subjectivity and ontology can be seen as an important historical source for the development of *modern pluralism*—via perspectivism. Perspectivism is basically the idea that different viewpoints afford certain visions of the world, or even that they constitute the realities they envision. In this sense any 'perspective on reality' exists 'on a par' with other perspectives. Accordingly, any particular world-view

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'cultural mathematics' of perspectivism. Mol, in turn, attempted to critique and digress from this position 'from within' by focusing on how objects are multiple performed in practices. I do not suggest that either one is right. Rather, I suggest that Strathern's diagnosis of the postplural might be constructively expanded and described as an attitude by adding Mol's reformulation of ontology. Neither would I argue that a postplural attitude entirely transgresses modern pluralism. Instead, I think of them as different, co-existing dispositions.

[4] The concept ontology designates "theories about what is, in so far as it is; Science of being. Ontology is a theory about the specific and necessary aspects of being" (Lübcke 1998: 323f, my translation). In my view, ontology concerns that which calls for explanation or explication where metaphysics, in contrast, might be described at 'that which explains'. In other words, ontology is a conception of what unfolds and the ways it does so. Strictly speaking, of course, this also includes subjectivity. The subject can be instated as the grounding ontological concept; as for instance is the case in Descartes' philosophy. In this text I use ontology in the meaning of 'ontology of reality'. That is in respect to what calls for explanation about reality – in relation to subjectivity. In addition I use the concepts of 'ontology' and 'reality' interchangeably in this paper.

is exactly one out of many, a plurality of possible views. This point is of cardinal importance for pluralism. Either perspectives act as *constants* in relation to a variable world, or the world is *constant* in relation to variable perspectives. In either case, different world-views are constructed that can then be compared to other word-views. Thus, perspectivism diversifies and pluralizes the world. As such, it is based on the idea of the existence of constants: distinguishable perspectives, or an objective reality. Thus, the idea that something basic or solid constitutes our ontologies and conceptualisations of the self does not oppose pluralism. Rather, this idea is one of its important sources.

Postplurality challenges exactly this idea of constancy, inherent in perspectivism and pluralism. The idea of 'perspectives' as such is problematized and fragmented. Another characteristic of the postplural attitude is that it ceases to imagine a universal constant in the relation between subjectivity and ontology.

As I see it, perspectivism is, as well, connected to the (utopian) hope that *one view* might become the basis for the formation of understanding in the sense of *theoria*; that is, as a universal, coherent and all-encompassing, explanatory and conceptual framework.[5] This hope can be seen as one significant driving force for a continual development of new perspectives. Perspectivism undergirds a certain theory-hope (cf. Fish 2004) and precisely because every perspective has so far disappointed this hope, it continues to fuel the development of evermore perspectives. It is in part for this reason, according to Strathern, that the production of perspectives increasingly seems like an endless, or, indeed, futile endeavour, invariably leading to awareness that any one perspective might be *just that*: one out of a plurality of views, from which a potential infinity of, always, partial descriptions of reality emerges. This situation does not undermine perspectivism but infuses the common idea that there is *always* more to reality than meets the eye and that there are always more aspects to discover by looking at reality from new angles with a sense of uncertainty.

Perspectivism exemplified: The relation between subjectivity and ontology in social constructivism

Pluralism and perspectivism have influenced the social sciences and the humanities for many years and they continue to do so. One prominent and

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[5] *Theoria* is the Greek work, from which the English term 'theory' is derived. It is used in various ways, but it is often connected to religious speculative contemplation. *Theoria* is an intellectual striving to contemplate God and the world in its entirety (The Sage Colleges 2011). Here I use the term to designate a strong theory – a theory that is seen to be capable of explaining everything about the world.

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influential example is social constructivism. It is thus useful to depict how subjectivity and ontology are imagined from a social constructivist standpoint, not least to gain insight into how Strathern and Mol's work is different. With this elucidation in mind, I discuss how the relation between subjectivity and ontology is characterized in a classic social constructivist argument. The text is STS pioneer B. Barnes' article 'On the Conventional Character of Knowledge and Cognition' (1983). Although social constructivism is often misread as 'dissolving all grounds', even while pluralizing the world, showing how different culturally grounded perspectives construct the world in so many different ways, in the relation between subject and ontology, Barnes keeps *something* permanently constant.

In Barnes (1983), one finds both a subjective/cognitive relativism, in the idea that subjects and cognition are shaped by something *else*, (in Barnes' case: 'the social'), and an ontological relativism, the idea that reality exists only relative to something else. For Barnes, however, these relativisms do not quite entail that 'everything goes'. On the contrary, intersubjective relations produced by culturally specific 'networks of learning' quite clearly form a kind of 'foundation' for his social constructivism. Such networks of socially created relations *always* exist (in order for the world to make sense to human beings at all; in social constructivism it does not make sense to separate the existence of the world from how we get to know it). Now, of course, intersubjective relations develop *differently* depending on *where* and *when* human beings categorize and learn about reality and each other, from each other. At the same time, it is asserted that the human domain universally *moulds* 'natural reality'; this is not an issue of human choice, but a consequence of the varied and relative ways in which human beings learn to categorize within specific cultures or social groups.

Since social constructivism views *all* knowledge as socially constituted, several modern distinctions such as the one between "common knowledge" and scientific knowledge are demolished. In general, any evaluative distinction between 'knowledge' and 'accepted convictions' is rejected. Instead, understanding of subjects and their ontologies begins with two assumptions: "1) human beings move around in infinite and complex physical environments, which they attend to and therefore learn from; and 2) learning takes place in a social context, where human beings learn to classify, and put their classifications to use in varied practices" (21).

Pointing out that conceptual constructions are grounded on similarities between empirical observations and not on individuation of natural objects, Barnes offers an *empirical* rejection of ontological essentialism. 'Essences' do not magnetically attract concepts and thus, there are no 'natural kinds' (28). Thus,

knowledge about reality is not based on correspondence but grounded in convention. It is common to hear the argument that terms are used in 'the wrong way', with reference to their 'genuine' or 'real' meaning. However, Barnes takes this to simply exemplify how these concepts have become part of a socially negotiated expanded use: "Such consensus merely marks the successful negotiation of an extension of usage" (32). E.g. 'the real' and 'truth' are rooted in the social domain.

Different cultural and conceptual networks are therefore theoretically and analytically *equivalent* in terms of their relation to reality, although they might not be so politically or practically. All are equally conventional 'projections' of reality, representations that cannot be measured in terms of their distance or nearness to reality itself. Indeed, Barnes depicts 'reality itself' as a 'passive mud of information'. Reality, qua mud, does not mind the conceptualizations, classifications, and organizations to which it is submitted: "Reality does not mind how we cluster it; 'reality' is simply the massively complex array of unverbalized information which we cluster" (33).

This latter formulation is revealing about the social constructivist view of the relation between subjectivity and ontology. Subjects are related to their realities as constructors who are 'other than' and 'after' *one* natural, muddy and passive reality. Different cultures or socially constituted conceptual networks simply offer different *perspectives* to their subjects.

In this specific sense, Barnes' social constructivism exemplifies a form of perspectivism. Embedded in this conceptualisation is the idea, immanent to pluralism and perspectivism that 'a view' can operate as a constant in relation to reality (at least temporarily). Social constructivism furthermore shares with perspectivism the basically "egalitarian" idea that reality can be viewed from many different, discrete angles all of which may have their place in knowledge production. In place of the idea that descriptions of reality are ideally correct representations of 'real' reality is offered the suggestion that different perspectives, grounded, as they are, in different cultural conceptions and perceptions of reality, are of equal epistemic (and ontological worth).[6] Reality, however, is seen as 'one and the same', in the passive sense that "it" neither resists nor contributes in any decisive way to our reality constructions. In principle, such constructions could be done in infinitely different ways. This leads to questions such as how we might compare them, how they are related, and what they accomplish. Since, neither

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[6] Again, this does not mean that anything goes or that social constructivism equals moral voluntarism. (Smith 2002). Although social constructivism entails that the objects of reality in principle could have been categorized in an infinite number of different ways, it is also important to recognize that subjects cannot be convinced about anything whatsoever. (Barnes 1983: 39). Instead, the idea is that reality is constructed in relatively constant cultural networks. Subjects act within and because of these networks.

subjects nor reality are seen to be constitutive, this thesis exemplifies what can be called both a cognitive–subjective and an ontological relativism. Meanwhile, intersubjective, cultural and conceptual networks of learning *are* seen to be constant. In all cultures at all times, subjects cooperate to make up and use different, but equivalent, descriptions of one, admittedly complex, reality. In this sense, social constructivism *is* perspectivism, because any description of 'reality' flows from a single culturally located view among a plurality of others.

It is in this sense that social constructivism is also a perspectivist *meta-perspective*, one that enables us to see how different equivalent perspectives exist and produce a plurality of descriptions of reality.[7]

Merographic connections

Now as noted, according to Strathern, perspectivism is a very important characteristic of a modern pluralistic view, in the double sense that it both produces a specific understanding of *relations* and has an important role in *constituting* such relations. Perspectivism is thus intimately linked to what Strathern terms 'merographic connections' (1992a: 72–81, 1999: 246–60). This notion helps to explain how elements of reality are constituted and related *as a consequence of* how they are seen as parts of different 'wholes'. Merographic connections, in Strathern's diagnosis, are intrinsic to modern knowledge production. For example: because 'the concept of the individual' is seen as partly natural and partly societal, it can be assumed that 'new sides' of the individual can always be exposed by viewing the concept from each of these angles:

> Concepts form distinct, in the double sense of at once separate and crystal clear, orders of interpretation of experience. Nonetheless they coexist. The two perspectives can be connected, indeed comprise a pair. Thus one may think of commodified and non-commodified conceptions [...] Like market and non-market economies, joined together as oppositions or complementarities. At the same time, this joining does not yield a reciprocal or mutually defining relation. On the contrary, while the values can be aligned as positive and negative aspects of each other, each conception simultaneously draws on its own universe of connotations, applications and meanings. Each is connected to a unique, in the sense of self-referential, range of phenomena, which gives it its own character: The one differs from the other insofar as it is also part of a quite different context for action (Strathern 1999: 248).

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[7] Such a metaperspective can also be identified in many other modern theories. It can be located in organisational theory, for instance, in G. Morgan's Images of Organisation (1986) where different theories are seen as metaphors, which, if combined, offers a more 'complete', 'whole' or 'comprehensive' image of organisational reality, than any single perspective would be able to convey.

> It [this mode of production of things and knowledge] presupposes that one thing differs from another insofar as it belongs to or is part of something else. I call this kind of connection, link or relationship merographic (Strathern 1992a: 72f, emphasis in original).

According to Strathern, merographic connections are established and become visible as a result of a basic 'cultural mathematics' put to use in comparative practices. For instance, concepts of technology and concepts of the human are related in the sense that we can *simultaneously* imagine that they are parts of the *same* 'wholes' *and* as parts of *different* domains. Thus, it is possible to imagine *both* that technologies and humans share the same world *and* that technologies are 'dead objects' while human beings are 'living creatures'. These conceptualizations can thus also act as perspectives *on each other* as when we talk about the objectifying of humans or the anthropomorphising of technology. Thus merographic connections between technology and humans are constituted.

For another illustration, consider merographic connections between humans and animals. It can be presumed that humans belong to a domain where, for instance, consciousness, thinking or a soul is present, while animals are imagined as creatures driven by instinct. In this way, humans and animals are imagined as different, yet comparable. Through this contrast humans and animals come to be seen as a 'pair' with the consequence that analogies can be drawn between their domains. One can thus talk about the human aspects of animals and *vice versa*. This is possible precisely because the domains *at one and the same* time overlap and draw on *different sets* of connotations. One characteristic of modern knowledge production is thus to bring ideas from different domains together (Strathern 1992b: 19). Indeed, whenever something 'new' is imagined to occur, it is always built from recombining 'older' analogies.

In a sense, merographic connections are constituted by metaphorical moves (cf. Black 1962). It will always be possible to imagine that human beings belong to a cultural domain, which differs from the domains of technologies or animals, just as it will be possible to see humans as intimately related to technologies and animals. Yet, surprises occur, when apparently given distinctions become undone. For instance, from 1859 many have been provoked by Darwin's theory of the origin of species (Darwin 1975) because it allows one to think that between human beings and animals there is no universal difference. The idea of 'the human' and the idea of 'the animal' were pleonastisized in Darwin's developmental perspective. In a similar way, D. Haraway's 'cyborg' (1991a) is both evocative and provocative because of the way her writing evokes the borders between human/animal, human/technology and (not least) man/woman. Thus the cyborg figure breaks away

from using domains as constitutive 'perspectives' and instead envisions 'man' and 'technology' (among others) as fundamentally *hybrid* domains.

We notice, then, that thinking in terms of merographic connections means seeing domains as comparable, yet different, while not envisioning any phenomenon as reducible to the comparison. Drawing on ideas from one domain produces new knowledge about another, and relations between ideas are produced because cultural domains can simultaneously act as pairs and can be differentiated. A Western conception of the individual might draw its power through such syneidetic moves: e.g., a picture of an astronaut, who floats in (*outer space*) and a scan of an embryo in a womb (*inner space*) are very powerful *in combination*, because both domains can be seen to idiomatically frame 'the same'; namely an individualised subject.

Thus merographic connections proliferate with modern conceptions of reality, which view the world as 'dualistic' or 'dichotomous' according to an epistemic or ontic law of '*tertium non datur*'[8]. In social constructivism, we can also identify a similar distinction, namely that between 'the social' and 'reality', which makes it possible to make relations explicit between these domains. Such dichotomies can be viewed as categorization devices[9] that are used to create order in a complex world (Bauman 1992: 183ff). A dichotomous ordering of reality is exactly what amodern thinkers such as Haraway diagnose and tries to denaturalize. As noted, her cyborg figure has the explicit purpose of destabilizing borders between human and technology, human and animal, male and female (1991a).[10] And, of course, the list of dualisms to be challenged could be expanded indefinitely: just consider dichotomies such as individual/society politics/science man/woman, nature/culture, us/them, knowledge/faith.

Today, most social theorists seem to be trying to do away with the idea that such demarcations are given in nature. One interesting consequence of considering modern pluralism and perspectivism as productive of merographic relations, however, is to realize that this 'transgression' has always happened. When 'the moderns' kept domains separated, the domains thus separated could become perspectives for one another. Now, using the concept of merographic

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[8] Tertium non datur means: 'no third is given', 'there is no alternative' or 'take it or leave it'. Refers to 'the law of the excluded middle in logics (Everything2 2011).

[9] Bowker and Star writes that "to classify is human" (1999: 1) with reference to the fact that classification (and thus a dichotomous view of the world) are not abstract constructions, invented by 'unworldly' philosophers. Classifications are necessary in order to navigate reality. However, many cases classifications have serious consequences for the actors involved, as for instance classifications as 'black' or 'white' under apartheid in South Africa. Their task is thus to understand how classifications work, how they are produced, in order to denaturalize them.

[10] Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is also, among other things: "An argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in the construction."(1991a). Thus the task she depicts is not about removing modern categorizations, but of participating in negotiations concerning their ongoing (re)construction.

relations, we can see that this separation enables a continuous flow of relations between e.g. technology and human, etc.—or, in turn, that relations may separate. Dichotomies do not only reduce the world, they also pluralise and diversify it. In this sense, the cultural reproduction of viewing the world as plural and diverse is immanent to perspectivism and, thus, to practices of metaphor and analogy, to dichotomous categorization, and to perceiving the world in terms of distinct domains.

Consequently, the perspectivist reproduction of world views and understandings of the self is rooted, simultaneously, in the idea that the world is divided into different interacting but separate domains, and in the idea that they can be used as 'perspectives' to shed light on ourselves and reality. As a result domains are assumed to be incompatible: while domains certainly do overlap, each domain draws on its own set of connotations. At the same time they are also thought to be incomplete: there is always 'more' to learn than what any one perspective can highlight. This is why one would have to articulate all perspectives in order to describe 'Reality' as a whole. And here we are back at the impetus for constantly developing 'new' perspectives related to the theory-hope described above. We will always be able to discover more by developing new perspectives. There is 'progress' in knowledge production in so far as the 'more' perspectives we use, the 'more' knowledge we seem to produce.

The development of perspectives, by drawing analogies and developing merographic connections, thus forms a basis for the constitution of subjects and elements of reality. This is a core aspect of the idea of reality as plural. Pluralism is in this sense an *effect of perspectivism*. When recognizing that any one specific perspective forms a partial view of reality, there will always be more to discover about reality, (and ourselves) than what is visible from any given angle. Plurality is thus not just one way of imagining, what is reality *here and now*, it is also projected into the *future*, which is imagined to be *more* complex, rather than less.

Problematizing perspectivism

According to Strathern, Euro-Americans have thus for a long time reproduced ideas about themselves and their relations by drawing analogies between different cultural domains. To use an aphorism, this is 'culture in action'.[11] Academic practices, for example in social anthropology and STS, can be seen as basically pertaining to this quite mundane strategy.

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[11] Referencing B. Latour's *Science in action* (1987)

A modern attitude characterized by perspectivism continuously (re)constructs reality as plural. As noted, it follows that reality turns into an inexhaustible container of 'new' phenomena and perspectives to be discovered and explored. Yet, if the inertia in the continuous production of perspectives is based on the hope of developing *theoria*, then the production of perspectives and pluralism also seem to contain an immanent, self-produced *absurdity*:

> In the late twentieth century, anthropology has already moved from a plural to what could be called a postplural perception of the world […] the realization of the multiplier effect produced by innumerable perspectives extends to the substitutive effect of apprehending that no one perspective offers the totalizing vista it presupposes. It ceases to be perspectival (Strathern 1991: xvi).

Perspectivism, through the development of more and more perspectives, quite simply, produces the dissolution of the idea of *perspective as perspective*. This realization signifies the postplural moment. Yet, it is hard to envision alternatives. Strathern's diagnosis points to an important problem of the present moment: If perspectives cease to be perspectival, there is risk of a certain cultural/cognitive loss: cultural elements might simply *disappear*. For instance, if a 'societal perspective' and a 'nature perspective' have made visible and/or constituted the 'individual' or 'the person', what happens then if these perspectives dissolve? Will the individual also disappear? (Strathern 1992a: 144–50). A kind of cultural amnesia might be one rather radical consequence of the fragmentation of perspectivism. The entailment would be that the possibility for different cultural domains to act as perspectives for one another dissolve along with the merographic connections produced. How then to imagine *reality as diverse* and *how things are interrelated*?

This realization might, indeed, sap motivation to continue the development of perspectives, which can produce understandings of the relation between subject and world as basically absurd. An example from contemporary Norwegian literature makes the point. In E. Loe's popular novel, *Naïve. Super*, a friend of the main character suggests that he should travel the world to gain a 'new perspective'. To this suggestion the main character replies that "perspective is something you ought to get as a pill and inject intravenously" (1996, my translation). The possibility of discovering something 'new' by gaining yet another 'perspective' is seen as futile. The example elucidates how an effort to get a new perspective, or develop already existing ones, quite easily can come to appear to be *meaningless* in the contemporary moment.

Processes of making explicit

We can apprehend the 'self-undermining' effect of perspectivism and pluralism as a 'reflexive' or 'unintended' consequence of a modern drive to make everything explicit, to articulate phenomena through multiple perspectives, either in the hope that this might to lead to *theoria*, or merely as a habitual mode of knowledge production that is able to reproduce itself indefinitely.

> Making the implicit explicit I refer to as an act of literalisation, that is, a mode of laying out the coordinates or conventional point of reference of what is otherwise taken for granted (Strathern 1992*a*: 5).

In the Western world, at some point it became taken for granted that there will always be 'more' to reality than what is presently visible from any one perspective. This idea is connected to another idea that has become common sense; namely that reality and the self both contain 'depths' and 'secrets' (Strathern 2002). At least since the romantic era, the idea of a 'layered self' has been a dominant way of imagining the subject in the West (Taylor 1989: 368ff). In an early modern novel, for instance, the self was depicted as an 'onion' with many layers to be peeled off.[12] Following this conception, there is always a 'ground' or 'dimension' behind what is seen. Another motor for knowledge production is therefore expressionistic; a curiosity to discover *and articulate* what lies behind or under what can be readily seen.

Making explicit can be understood as bringing to the surface what is taken for granted, and the analogy between this mode of enquiry and perspectivism is clear. Westerners can be apprehended as having *always* taken a lot for granted, which has fuelled need to make the hidden explicit. Perspectivist and pluralist knowledge production can, thus, also be seen as the continual explication of implicit assumptions In this sense, too, modern perspectivism is related to an idea of progress: As time goes by, and 'more and more' perspectives are developed, thus more and more will be revealed, and more *insights* will be accumulated.

As described above, to learn something new by analogical or metaphorical operations has become a prerequisite for understanding cultural domains. When what is taken for granted is brought to the surface, this new knowledge may, in turn, become, yet another perspective that can be used in the hunt for yet more

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[12] The illustration of the human being or the self as an 'onion', which through 'peeling' reveals new aspects comes from the Norwegian writer H. Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* from 1867 (1975). The main character, Peer, peels an onion while articulating the hope of discovering his inner, true self, but when he removes the last layer he finds nothing. That this might be the endpoint of continuous digging is sometimes ignored in romantic conceptions of human beings as containing 'depths' and 'layers'. The task of 'peeling' can go on forever. The postplural attitude could be apprehended as the point where we no longer think that anything specific (whether nothingness or essence) is revealed. Rather this mode of revealing is exactly what becomes explicit.

undiscovered relations *ad infinitum*. Strathern points out, however, that processes of making explicit are never neutral in relation to the knowledge produced or *vice versa*. Instead, established knowledge is *displaced* when 'new' knowledge is created. What was made explicit loses its taken for granted status and the 'context of discovery' (or put more adequately: the situated knowledge, perception and understanding at play) thereby *also* changes its meaning:

> The displacement effect of uncovering assumptions, of making the implicit explicit, sets off an irreversible process. The implicit can never be recovered, and there is no return to old assumptions; displacement becomes radical (Strathern 1995).

Both 'what we understand' and 'what we understood' changes, when specific ideas are made explicit (after which such ideas might be viewed as relative to culture or as no more than certain possibilities among others). There is no return, no way to re-embed 'old' assumptions. In this sense, knowledge production loses its aura of progression. We no longer seem to produce *more and more* because there is also a dimension of loss or forgetting related to any kind of knowledge production.

Strathern points out that the current state of affairs is exactly characterized by the becoming explicit of this mode of making explicit. The result is a problematization of perspectivism and pluralism:

> One effect of literalisation is to realise that describing a process as construction is itself a construction of sorts. This is the autoproof of social constructionism (Strathern 1992a: 5).

Social constructivism is 'auto-proofed' when analytical texts are also viewed as constructions. When it becomes explicit that our own texts are also constructions, it seems that what they bring to the surface is just another surface, which in turn, can lead to yet other surfaces, *ad infinitum*. But if no ground is ever really revealed, the purpose of making explicit becomes unclear. The auto-proof of social constructivism is thus ambiguous from a post-plural conceptualisation. It is unclear, from where we see, why we construct, and what the material used for construction really is.[13]

When perspectivism, pluralism, and the strategy of explication itself are made explicit, however, according to Strathern, it contributes to 'a sense of being post', a sense that characterizes current times:

> Making the implicit explicit is a mode of constructing knowledge which has been the engine of change for more than a hundred years. It has also produced an internal sense of complexity and diversity. But to make explicit, *this* mode has its own effect: the outliteralization of the literal-minded. I suspect something similar

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[13] This kind of confusion has lead to critical discussions of social constructivism such as Hacking (1999).

> to this particular literalisating move has been behind the prevalent sense of a now that is after an event. This sense of being after an event, of being post-, defines the present epoch (1992a: 7, emphasis in original).

Making explicit irreversibly changes both 'new' and 'old' ideas. This leads to a situation of infinite regress and hence a sense of being 'post-'.

A postplural perception—partial connections

A postplural understanding emerges when the strategy of making things explicit in is itself made explicit; when the penetration of 'surfaces' is seen to reveal only other 'surfaces'. When the perspective is fragmented, elements of reality can no longer be viewed as parts of domain–wholes, but only as so many 'parts', which can be connected to so many other 'parts'.

The development of 'new' insights, descriptions of self and reality, cannot be understood as the effect of finding new angles on reality or as the disclosure of depths. Instead, the term 'new' comes to refer to reconfigurations of already existing cultural elements. When perspectives 'merely' seem to bring 'surfaces' to 'surface' and no alternative can be imagined, a sense of absurdity in finding new perspectives emerges (as in the example of taking perspectives as pills), as does a certain nostalgia for a moment when knowledge was considered (or at least imagined to be) less problematic. But this does not mean that the development of new understandings of subjectivity or reality comes to a halt. While cultural practices still consist of creating and describing relations between ideas (Strathern 1992a: 19), we now have to imagine this as *pastiche* or collage (165), *bricolage* (Butler, see Klages 1997), or *assemblage* (Deleuze, see Rose 1998: 169ff).

Even though the development of new descriptions of the self and reality does not stop when the perception of inertia in the development of new perspectives is undermined, differences and similarities cannot, in a post-plural conception, be reduced to what different perspectives have or do not have 'in common'. Further, post-plurality means that the hope of constructing a finite perspective is gone. Rather, ambition shifts to 'repeating', 'calibrating' or 'performing' already outspoken and visible differences and similarities and inventing 'new' relations between cultural elements. Thus relations are always partial:

> The relativising effect of multiple perspectives will make everything seem partial; the recurrence of similar bits and propositions will make everything seem connected (Strathern 1991: xx).

The explication of any particular perspective as just one among a plurality of perspectives sets in motion a cultural process of substitution, where the idea of perspective as such is fragmented, and perspectivism and pluralism are problematized.

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Attempts to go beyond perspectivism and pluralism, however, risk loss of the ability to articulate important aspects of the cultural. Another risk is undermining a plural idea of a diverse world and respect for other valuable perspectives.

Yet, explications are irreversible: there is no return to the belief that the development of new perspectives will forever continue to fuel knowledge production and progression, or that we will ever learn more about reality. In a perspectivist and pluralist conception of reality there is always more to the case, always a part of the world or the subject, which is yet to be highlighted, and something will always remain hidden, waiting to be made visible. A modern pluralist attitude immanently produces *the energy* to perform the continual work of making things explicit. In the long, however, this basic relation to reality in modern Euro-American knowledge production runs out of steam. The modern attitude becomes explicit and can no longer be taken for granted, but neither is it possible to leave it entirely behind. It is in this sense that a certain *nostalgia* characterizes the post-plural attitude and Strathern's diagnosis.

Yet, in my view, the task is not to *resolve* these cultural problems, even if they are serious ones. People seemingly continue to succeed in holding 'differences' and 'similarities' in their life worlds together, in spite of fragmented and partial visions. One task is, indeed, to rethink how this is possible.

Multiplicities—a conception of ontology for a postplural attitude

Postplural nostalgia proffers the challenge of rethinking relations between subjectivity and ontology. This challenge is addressed in post-ANT (Gad & Jensen 2010). The Dutch philosopher Mol has made one of the most convincing arguments in this regard. In the following I will describe her post-ANT-ontology as a constructive expansion of Strathern's postplural diagnosis.

Mol addresses how post-ANT has contributed to a re-formulation of dominant conceptions of ontology (1999). (Post-)ANT has described how reality is performed in multiple practices. Mol draws the conclusion that reality itself is multiple. While it is commonly accepted that reality is always changing, many still think about reality in terms of *mastering* and *controlling* a rather *passive* reality; passive, for instance, in the sense that it is controlled by various natural forces, or passive in the social constructivist sense that reality does not mind how we categorize it. The basic building blocks of reality are thus often assumed to be constant, facilitating our endeavours to observe and map it. In contrast, Mol suggests that we are dealing with *active*, *resistant* reali*ties*.[14]

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[14] Re-presentation is political strategic presentation; that is, re-presentation always means intervention (Haraway 1994). But reality also intervenes.

According to Mol, post-ANT strips reality of its stable and universal character and does this in its ontological dimension. She suggests that ontologies are situated, historically, culturally and materially—and not just theoretically speaking, but also in relation to things—realities are 'done', 'practiced', 'enacted' or ʻperformed' by many heterogeneous actors. This enables her to talk about ontolog*ies* because if reality is ʻenacted' and ʻperformed' in differently situated practises and by different constellations of hybrid actors, then it is—literally—multiple.[15] While some might find this conception similar to perspectivism, implicating that different realities emerge in relation to subjectivities, Mol rather suggests that *ontological politics* are expressed in different practices; the ontological does not precede the political or the cultural and active, actors (which can be both human and non-human) impact 'culture'. 'The real' is implicated in politics and vice versa (Mol 1999).

Thus, multiple does not mean the same as plural, even if the concept, like perspectivism, entails a critique of the idea of 'one objective reality'. In perspectivism, observers view reality using culturally constituted, differently informed perspectives. One result of this plurality of views, even if a single objective reality existed, would be to render that reality objectively unknowable. While perspectivism breaks away from an objectivist, scientific, monopolising regime of truth, perspectivism does not multiply reality, which is still viewed as *one* reality. Perspectivism only multiplies 'the eyes of the beholders'. In perspectivism 'the Cartesian gaze' becomes seen as one perspective among many other points of view.

> And this in turn brought *pluralism* in its wake. For there they are: mutually exclusive perspectives, discrete existing side by side, in a transparent space. While in the center the object of the many gazes and glances remains singular, intangible, untouched (76, org. emphasis).

According to Mol, some social constructivist accounts, with points of departure in this objectivism, create a pluralism that enables them to address how different people make different interpretations because they are part of different cultures. Other constructivist studies, to demonstrate the existence of historical alternatives to the artefacts we take for granted today, emphasize materiality.[16] Thus, it is shown that seeds for alternative constructions of reality were present, but not allowed to flourish. In such cases plurality and contingency are projected into the past.

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[15] The concept of performance is not to be understood in the sense that there is something real behind what is being performed. In her later work, Mol prefers the concept 'enactment' (2002: chap. 2). However the concept of performativity also connotes that there is creativity in unfolding ontologies in practice. This is why I like to keep it with the just mentioned reservation in mind.

[16] For instance, Bijker & Pinch (1989) describe how several historical alternatives existed to the bicycle that we see as natural today.

According to Mol, an understanding of reality as multiple requires of us other metaphors than perspective and construction, for example, intervention and performance. Reality is *done* or *enacted* rather than observed (Mol 1999: 77). Reality is manipulated in many different ways, in distinct practices, and does not lie around waiting untouched under a diversity of gazing eyes. Reality does not only appear in the light of perspectives, it emerges in situated practical work in which different versions of objects and subjects enact each other. Different, yet related, versions of objects and subject exist, taking part in the performance of different versions of reality.

If multiple realities are performed, in other words, different realities are practiced simultaneously, it then becomes easy to conceive that one can choose between these different performed worlds. However, asking *where* one would situate oneself in order to be able to make such a choice, Mol asserts that no such location exists. Rather, she points out, normative moments are often linked to noticing the absence of such a place: possibilities seem to be everywhere, but always somewhere else than *here*. For instance, normative decisions often make reference to 'facts', coming from elsewhere. In my view, the idea that a place exists from where it is possible to get an overview and choose between world-views, is rooted in the implicit metaperspective constructed by social constructivism and perspectivism, mentioned above. According to Mol, however, ontological analysis is not about making possibilities of choice more explicit. Rather, the intellectual task is to investigate what it means to live in situation of "choice incorporated" (Mol 1999: 86).

In Mol's 'ontological approach', unlike the perspectivist apprehension of a plurality of epistemically equivalent and limited perspectives, different versions of reality are performed together; different performances do not exclude each other—indeed, they are often entangled: "What is 'other' is also within" (Mol 1999: 85). Realities are complex networks of many different objects, ideas, subjects etc. and no description of them is ever final. As in perspectivism, there is always more to account for, but no privileged meta-perspective from where one can criticise, judge, or choose between specific performances. Consequently, the multiplication of reality does not mean that different 'aspects' of reality can be revealed. Rather it calls for investigation of how different versions of reality are practiced and how they interrelate.

These conditions also apply to the relation between subject and ontology. Subjects do not stand as external, constant observers of reality. They are situated and practice their partial views in relation to multiple realities. Mol's idea of multiple ontologies, thus, in a sense, takes into account Strathern's diagnosis and the fragmentation of perspective to which it leads.

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Our outlooks, in a certain sense, have always been fragmented and situated: no more and no less. Yet, this does not mean that reality falls apart. The multiplicity of objects means instead that they are not singular and separated. Objects exist as different, yet related, 'versions'. They are "more than one, but less than many" (2002: 82). The social constructivist idea that reality is one 'passive mud' is rejected, because it is noticed that reality consists multiplicities of actors and networks, including the ones we refer to as subjects, who participate in onto-political activity and dynamic resistance during world-building activities.

Since a postplural attitude is connected to the idea of reality as multiple and active, in the form of situated and changing configurations of theory and practice, ontological descriptions and constructions of subjectivity are revitalized. Nothing in the relation between subject and ontology is seen as constant. Instead this attitude acknowledges that both objects and subjects are hybrid participants in the performance of varied realities. Cognitive, subjective and ontological essentialism, as along with relativism, are thus rejected. Instead, a relativist *relationism* appears, in which subjects and other natural–cultural elements are seen as co-constitutive actors–networks.

The adoption of Mol's 'post-ANT-ontology' is consequential if one subscribes to a postplural attitude. It both facilitates a rebellion against the modern idea of a constant reality, and against the idea that reality is a passive, yet complex, 'mud'.[17] Consequently, it also calls for a rejection of ideas of the subject as either constant or passive. A version of such resistance is offered in the photographic works of Sherman which, below I suggest can be used to exemplify a postplural attitude. Analogically to Mol's post-ANT-ontology, Sherman articulates an understanding of subjectivity as *performed*. The subject is not pluralized but multiplied.

Subjectivity performed

The works of Sherman rebels against modern conceptions of subjectivity as part of a Cartesian and 'free-standing' view of reality. From the point of view of the history of photography, the idea of a 'constant' subjectivity is assumed in naturalism and in the modern portrait: here *real* subjects are presented. Sherman's works, in contrast, declares that subjectivity is performed. Simultaneously it

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[17] In post-ANT and similar perceptions, reality is not passive, but rather 'that which resists' (Latour in Bowker and Star 1999: 49). Pickering (1995) also offers the convincing argument that 'the real' emerges in an interplay between resistance and accommodation including human beings, natural phenomena, technologies, etc.

provokes the sense that the point of view observing the photographs is fragmented. To clarify this point I first offer a contrast to the photographs of Sherman:[18]

Den samme mand overfor de samme opgaver — men med 25 aar imellem. Winston Churchill paa vej til marineministeriet ved krigsudbrudet i 1914. Og samme situation i september 1939, da Churchill anden gang blev marineminister og gnisttelegrafen lynede sin velkomsthilsen mellem alle flaadens skibe: »Winnie is back«, Winnie er kommet tilbage

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[18] I found this clipping in the diary of my grandfather Ulf Gad, which was written during the Second World War. It probably appeared in one of the major Danish newspapers on October 9, 1950, and it was added to his diary after the war ended to commemorate the role of the British.

W. Churchill is on his way to the War Office, first, during The First World War and then, after an interval of 25 years, The Second World War. 'Winnie is back', the caption pronounces. The photographs depict Churchill appearing in an eerily similar way. Nothing, except hat fashion, seems to have changed over time. The pictures show two particular 'heroic' moments: Churchill on his way to save the day. To return to Foucault's text, the rubric for this essay, where he describes the characteristics of a modern attitude (1992), the pictures also try to capture something heroic and lasting about the present moment, nothing before or after, but something that is unique about exactly this moment. I will return to this characterisation below.

To interpret the picture psychologically, the photographs *work* because the observer sees a patriarchal figure: an authentic, goal-oriented, esteemed, and powerful subject. Churchill looks downwards and inwards, as a rational being with an important task at hand. We are presented with a masculine ideal, the universal man (Haraway 1997: 241–4), to the contextualized observer, nationalism and other resonant narrative. Meanwhile, the pictures also invite us to think of the inner depths of human beings, as presented, for example, in 1899 by J. Conrad in *The Heart of Darkness* (1998).[19] Churchill was particularly known for his conscious self-presentation, a point, which, of course, could be used to modify this interpretation. In combination, however, the photos nevertheless provide a strong metaphorical material for the idea of the autonomous, constant, modern Cartesian subject and romantic ideas about inner 'depths' and 'layers'. Let us then contrast this presentation with Sherman's photography.

According to the artist herself, she aims to put subjectivity *at stake:* to be "in the picture' [...] is to feel dispersed, subject to a picture organized not by form but by formlessness" (in Smith unpublished). The subjects *in* the pictures are fragmented, and as a consequence, the 'perspective' of the observer also becomes fragmented: "It is the very fragmentation of that 'point' of view that prevents this invisible, unlocateable gaze from being the site of coherence, meaning, unity, gestalt, eidos" (Smith unpublished). Indeed, Sherman's hope is that through the experience of her photographs, notions of subjectivity will become unmoored from a singular point from where it is assumed that the world can be viewed.

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[19] Conrad's The Heart of Darkness is a story about a journey to the almost impenetrable 'center' of Africa. And the novel provides one of the most powerful metaphors for humans travelling the depths of the soul. The novel posits a strong critique of the idea of the subject containing a 'core', or a constant, stable aspect. At the end of the journey (to the depth of the soul), no core or truth is found. Instead, one is confronted with a version of 'the nothing', which Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* discovers when he peels of the layers of the onion of subjectivity (cf. note 12). In Conrad this is pure madness. F. F. Coppola's epic Vietnam movie Apocalypse Now (1979) is moulded over The Heart of Darkness.

Most of her photographs are differently orchestrated 'self-portraits'. Sherman 'performs' dressed as different figures: a Hollywood star, a man, a woman, an animal. Individually, the photographs may not tell us much but, in combination, they provide us with a view of subjectivity quite different from the paired photographs of Churchill. Both sets have one thing in common, though: to achieve their effect, they rely on combinations of images. The paired Churchill pictures promote the idea of constant subjectivity. By contrast, Sherman's pictures exhibit how this epistemological trick *works*, as her pictures in combination problematize assumptions that precede and guide the act of viewing: such as individuality, identity, essentialism, the dichotomies of man/woman, staged/authentic etc. Conceptions of what is natural and normal about subjects are disturbed. A discussion about subjectivity beyond the pictures takes place *between* the pictures.

Samples of Sherman's pictures. It is in their interplay that a view of subjectivity as performed emerges.

Subjectivity is explicitly performed and staged in these photographs. These performances suggest, however, that staging is always involved, also *outside* the world of the photos. Aside from disrupting taken-for-granted conceptions of the normal subject, Sherman, especially in her later works, also attacks the idea of subjectivity as *detached* from the world. She calls into question the ability of the subject to delimit itself from reality by objectifying it. By questioning the notion of a stable border between subjectivity and world, the idea of an autonomous, freestanding, self-relying subject is presented as a kind of dystopia, out of sync with reality. Instead, we are offered through Sherman's combination of pictures, a vision in which subjects are shaped through relations with other kinds of actors In this sense, too, we may suggest that Sherman's photographs are in line with J. Butler's diagnosis of the utopian nature of the distinction between a pure subject and a 'messy' reality:

> For inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability. This sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely that excremental filth that it fears (Butler 1999: 170).

Sherman's photographs as a statement resonate with Butler's and exemplify a postplural conception because they suggest that it is only possible to think of the subject as distinct from reality by closing the shutters between the subject and something else, such as the impure, animalistic, unknown, strange, or other. It is only by means of such artificial boundaries that the subject can be viewed as special and privileged being, like a Cartesian subject, which, indeed, acquires self-worthiness by submitting both its own body and reality at large to the will and control of the subject (Taylor 1989: 148ff).

For both Sherman and Butler, however, this demarcation seems both utopian and political: how the border between self and reality is constituted is of serious consequence for what is excluded and included. For instance, it will often matter greatly whether something is considered to be human or nonhuman. Sherman's photographs express the hope that the Cartesian view of the self will be problematized in meeting 'the other'. Subjectivity might then be understood to contain a kind of strangeness itself; it becomes possible to realize that: "what is 'other' is also within" (Mol 1999: 75).

In this conception, there is thus no constant subjectivity or reality, no authenticity or moment of origination behind what is performed. Accordingly, the romantic idea of the human as a creature of layers and depths is also problematized. What might seem universal is shown in Sherman's photographs to be instead anchored in situated performances. Subjectivity thus emerges as

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so many different, yet possibly related, performances: as a non-definite number of 'done', 'enacted' versions of subjectivity. Subjectivity is as multiple as Mol's reality. This is why it becomes possible to displace the traditional, utopian and individualistic understanding of subjectivity. This form of subjectivity, however, is not viewed as 'an illusion', which can be wiped away by a pure theoretical or intellectual operation because, among other reasons, it is itself enacted in various ways.

Further characterisation of a postplural attitude

I have contrasted a postplural attitude to modern, social constructivist, perspectivist, and pluralist ideas. Making this very contrast also illustrates, however, how a post-plural attitude actually *depends* on such ideas. Postpluralism thinks against certain conceptualizations related to a modern attitude, and it does so in some particular ways.

This interdependence, in my view, is related to the infeasibility of moving entirely beyond important modern conceptualizations. At the very least, it is very hard to imagine that they will stop impacting how we think. Thus, adopting a postplural attitude is not a call for *radical* transgression, nor is the aim to dissolve a modern attitude. Rather, it is a call for experimentation involving the displacement of modern demarcations, a matter of *rethinking* dominant conceptualizations. This might be what diagnosis of our concepts of subjectivity and ontology was always about:

> The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault 1992).

Even though it is possible to think of 'the perspective' as partial and fragmented, and of reality and subjectivity as multiple, this postplural conception, first and foremost, is enabled by the existing modern attitude. Likewise, the understanding of reality as plural is partially constituted in interplay with modern pluralism and modern objectivism. In this sense, any postplural attitude *needs* a modern attitude and differs from 'postmodern theories', those proclaiming, for example, 'the death of the subject' or 'the end of history' or making similar types of epochal pronouncements.

Even so, this dependence does not necessarily mean that a postplural attitude is faithful to its origins, just like the cyborg postplural thinking is able to diverge from its problematic heritage (Haraway 1991a). Rethinking and diagnosis are not only a

'reflexive' project, which displaces the same to elsewhere, but also a project of diffraction: A non-innocent, complex, and 'erotic' practice of producing a difference, however small and partial it might be (Haraway 1994).[20] Because Sherman seeks to displace the boundaries of the subject by confronting it with something other, her works can be apprehended as examples of diffractive experimentation.

I have highlighted several characteristics of a modern attitude. They include pluralism and perspectivism, the assumption of a certain constancy in the relation between subject and ontology, and application of the modern law of *tertium non datur*, which continues to produce dichotomies such as subject/reality, human/technology, and nature/culture. This is, of course, not a complete description of 'the modern'. Foucault (1992) finds a modern attitude at play in the works of the French writer Baudelaire, whom he sees as having a special heroical way of relating to the present: perhaps similar to the aura of the photographs of Churchill. To adopt a modern attitude is, according to Foucault, thus also characterized by ascribing a specific heroism to the present. Heroic, in the sense that the task is always to catch something eternal in this very moment. A modern attitude for Foucault is then, too, a particular way of situating oneself historically.

I do not argue that a postplural attitude 'goes beyond' seeing itself as a historically specific way of relating to the present, although it does do so in certain respects. A postplural attitude does not see the present moment as heroical. Rather it finds it ambiguous, ambivalent, and hence somewhat ironical. The difference can be clarified with assistance from Foucault, Kant, R. M. Rilke, and Loe. As well as Baudelaire, Foucault (1992) also sees another source of the modern attitude in German philosopher Kant's text *What is Enlightenment?* (1993). Kant wrote the text in 1783, and Foucault holds it be a very special text because it offers an original explication of its own historical moment. Kant, Foucault suggested, tried to articulate what difference today introduces with respect to yesterday (Foucault 1992). Kant's understanding of the present was defined by the idea of enlightenment as an 'event', which he believed could unfold at some point in the future, given the right circumstances. According to Foucault, this projection of the future was, almost exclusively, negatively defined because enlightenment is seen as an exit from a "self-indulged state of disability" (1993: 71, my translation). This negative view of the present moment in relation to a potential future event infuses the present moment with a need for heroism.

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[20] So, too, with this paper. Of course, I would not claim that this text holds any power to change much. In my view, academic work and the theoretical practice it entails might, however, produce small particular differences, without guarantee.

In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), German poet Rilke likewise relates to the present through a vision of the future:

> For the sake of one verse one would have to visit many places, people, and things, one would have to become familiar with the animals, one would have to feel how the birds fly, and get to know the small movements of flowers, when they open in the morning. One should be able to think of roads in foreign places, of unexpected encounters, and of goodbyes that were anticipated for a while, […] One needs memories of nights making love, of which none were alike; of the screams of women in labour and of light, white women around the time of delivery, who close themselves. Yet, one must also have been close to the dying; one should have sat by the dead in the room with the open window and the pulsing sounds. And it is even not enough to have these memories. One should also be able to forget them, if they are plenty, and patience is needed for them to reoccur, because they are not yet themselves memories. Not until they become the blood of our bodies, our gaze and movement, namelessly, and can no longer be separated from us, not until this moment it might happen, on a very rare occasion, that the first word of verse, emerges from their centre and ascend from them (1986: 16–17, my translation, original emphasis removed).

The idea of 'the here and now' constituted with reference to a projected future event, where practically everything that life has to offer might crystallize in a single verse, is illustrated in this quote. Rilke idealizes a moment of catharsis in the future through a *pluralist attitude of the present moment*. In the following pages, however, Rilke points to the possibility that we might be wrong about all our knowledge, about our interpretation of the past history, and, indeed about all the aspects that he has just described as extremely important. The point in this context, however, is that this precise insight, makes Rilke's main character Brigge, realize that he *cannot* wait, and that he has to write *heroically* night and day, from this moment on. Scepticism does not impede action; rather it forms the basis for imagining a future of revelation. It is extremely productive; if we cannot know anything for sure we have to start writing *right now*.

The postplural attitude is out of sympathy with Rilkean and Kantian ideas of the heroic moment and negatively defined projected visions of the future; it is 'post' in that it comes after the sentiment that the here and now is a heroic or extraordinary moment; it is based on an irreversible explication of pluralism. There is no return to pluralism, and the future seems almost *completely* unknowable. In contrast to Rilke's account, it seems somewhat absurd to go on with the pluralistic heritage. In relation to Kant, it seems that no exit can be found.

'Post' does not refer to epochal change. Rather, post implies a problematic dependence on what has gone before, that is, *even if* they seem absurd, modern ideas. In an exemplary manner, Loe captures this condition. In *L* he describes his

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own situation, minimalistically, and with irony: "Here I am, 29 years old. In Norway. The birthplace of giants. I am at my prime. I am big and strong. I am in good shape. And I ask myself; what have I built? What have I, Erlend, 29 years old, in Norway, really built?" (1999, my translation). Loe concludes that he has built a wall and a bicycle. His discussion revolves around how people at his age in the contemporary West, currently do not have the sense of having built society or discovered anything important. Building nothing, they merely keep reproducing inherited cultural practices, but with a certain ironical insight; that there is no higher purpose: "Bach composed his music in honour of God. If we compose music it is in order to get laid. Or something similar. We, who did not build Norway. This is us." (1999, my translation).

Adopting a postplural attitude, thus, also means taking seriously the possible absurdity of continuing inherited practices. It does not immediately make sense, as it did for Rilke, to *experience*, *forget*, *wait*, and *remember* in order to develop a more insightful 'perspective', or, as it did for Kant, to wait for enlightenment. For Loe, there is absolutely nothing heroical or eternal about the present moment.

Yet, as I have tried to describe with reference to the works of Mol and Sherman, the sense of being 'post' and without purpose, might also encourage a somewhat more positive attitude. It would be an attitude inclined to empirical philosophical experiments with different conceptions of subjectivity and ontology. To both Mol and Sherman, that no "greater good" or final meta-perspective exists is simply not that problematic. Instead, they encourage us to appreciate the mundane and boring aspects of ordinary practices and performances of self and reality. It is, after all, in such practices that lives take form, and it still seems worthwhile to try to understand how and why.[21]

Conclusion: postplural nostalgia

As noted, Strathern's diagnosis of perspectivism and pluralism contains a certain nostalgia for modern pluralism. In *Ignorance*, Czech novelist M. Kundera writes that the word 'nostalgia' has its etymological roots in 'nostos' and 'algos', 'nostos' meaning 'home' and 'algos' meaning suffering. Thus, nostalgia refers to the suffering of the person who cannot return home: it refers to a certain

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[21] Of course, this is not a completely new idea. See, for instance, Montaigne's proclamation: [in relation to understanding oneself] "no theme is too insignificant to not deserve its place in this rhapsody!" (1998: 69). Furthermore, Rilke's call for patience could also be read as a modern insight, which is quite parallel to a postplural attitude insofar as the idea of a heroic moment leading to an 'exit' is dropped. Kant's idea of enlightenment simply seems too grand.

longing for a *homecoming* (Kundera 2000: 6f). Kundera's main characters are in a permanent crisis of identity and they are absorbed in self-reflexivity precisely because of their inability to return home.

It is quite interesting that the Norwegian philosopher A. Næss has characterized this "longing to return" as an important characteristic of present (Heideggerian) philosophy (1991: 303f). Secularisation and the widespread rejection of universalism of any kind has produced a certain void because the ability to regard things as wholes and articulate a foundation has vanished. In this situation, philosophy itself no longer has a home, and this produces a longing for a past where philosophy once belonged. Similarly, the nostalgia inherent in Strathern's post-plural diagnosis is an impossible longing for a moment when pluralism and perspectivism were unproblematic, unexplicated. At the start of this paper, I quoted Foucault stating that an attitude, among other things, refers to a task and a *specific mode of belonging*. The postplural attitude might be apprehended as a mode of belonging to a moment of non-belonging.

On the other hand, it is precisely this nostalgia, this belonging to non-belonging, that forces an experimental rethinking of subjectivity and ontology. Here, as examples of such rethinking, I have used Mol's post-ANT-ontology, which develops a conception of reality as performed and multiple, and Cindy Sherman's work, which elicits subjectivity as performed and multiple. Ontology and subjectivity are important *modern* 'topoi' that are nevertheless possible to displace. A postplural attitude is a matter of underlining that these topoi are not constantly or universally given, but dynamic, multiple and performed. One cannot escape the historical roots of the modern attitude, hence, it can never be rejected *radically*. A postplural attitude is, however, developed in experiments that aim to displace the given, including the perspective of perspectives.

If one does not consider the modern and postmodern as epochal references but as attitudes, and if one considers modern universalism and pluralism as still active in the present moment, then the nostalgia immanent in Strathern's diagnosis, can itself diagnose a particular way of relating to this pivotal moment. Nostalgia is thus not only a historical relation to a lost past; it is also a driving force in rethinking self and reality in the present. Yet, this rethinking requires the simultaneous relinquishing of two dreams: that of developing a total *overview (theoria* or metaperspective), and its converse, the possibility of achieving *insight* through continuous discovery of what lies beneath 'surfaces'. Rather, the task set by a postplural attitude is to relate to a *flat* plane of hybridity, multiplicity, and partialness in both subjects, ontologies and their interrelations.

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