

## **Review of Andrew Wilson's BA thesis *A New Subject(ion): Dark Transformations, Bodies and Affect in Online Erotic Hypnosis*.**

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Andrew Wilson's BA thesis is a very ambitious and intriguing work, which explores important new social phenomena (new digital media, new subcultural practices), and employs in this relation a selection of more or less relevant interdisciplinary combination of current theoretical and disciplinary approaches (assemblage theory, affect theory, theories of new media, theories of subjectivization), coupled with ethnographic research. However, while the work does produce some relevant and successful results (particularly in relation to ethnographic descriptions and ethnographic vignettes, and partially in relation to the theorization of ethnographic data on the topic of OEH assemblages), it falls short of achieving all of its goals, in addition to some other problematic aspects of the work. I will elaborate on this evaluative statement in relation to the following aspects of the student's thesis: research design, theory, methodology, analysis.

First, I argue that the main research design of the work tackles some important scholarly questions and promises some relevant results. It comprises three main dimensions, as it attempts to explore, first, how online erotic hypnosis is constituted as a social assemblage, second, how this assemblage affects subjects, and third, how it transforms their subjectivity in potentially exploitative, harmful, and/or also empowering ways. These questions are then, some more and some less successfully, addressed in the analysis part (about which more later).

Second, the whole study is framed through theories of assemblage, affect, and subjectivity, as responding to the main three research questions (see above). These theories are first outlined in the introduction chapter, but not always most successfully. For example, while the student provides a general definition of assemblage theory ("decentralized network of technics and bodies and discourse and matter"), it fails to properly elaborate it in relation to its main facets, and presents it as a hodgepodge of disparate and disorganized elements: technics, bodies, discourse, matter, utterances, regimes, humans, cultural artefacts, practices, objects (technical, digital, and natural), relations, infrastructures, materials, norms, events, semiotics (pages 2, 3). It is unclear from the theoretical discussion how these aspects relate to each other, and how are they organized, or how they might form a model that would properly frame the analysis of ethnographic data in main chapters. Student then introduces some vaguely established order into this constellation of concepts and terms later in the beginning of chapter 2, by introducing main constitutive parts that structure assemblages (de/re/territorialisation, content/expression, form/substance, and the notion of scales and relations with other assemblages), but many of these actually remain vague and undefined. For example, expression level is defined as "functional structures" (18), which doesn't say much about what this concept signifies in Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual universe, and similar for the term "form" and "substance" levels, which are only defined via examples ("Discord server functions as a *form* of content, the individual people participating (and the files they share) make up the *substance* of content, the ethos of a safe (kink) community serve as a *form* of expression therein, and role-playing or LARPing emerge as the Discord server's *substance* of expression" 18), and not by what they actually mean. The readers are left to their own devices, and only those who are (fairly) familiar with Deleuze and Guattari's theories might be able to understand the utilization of these concepts in the analysis parts of Chapters 2 and 3.

Further, the affect theory is explained in a slightly more efficient way in the introductory chapter. However, the most promising parts of this theory (indeterminacy, pre-conscious dimension of affect, its difference from emotion, see pages 4, 5), are not most successfully elaborated (they are mostly dealt through quotes by other scholars). For example, I would be

interested to learn more about the following Andrew's statement about how affects relate to arousal from OEH media: "arousal, despite the obvious 'intent' behind the [OEH's] video's production, is not limited to the sexual domain. Arousal, in a broader sense, has more to do with the *potential for action*" (4; emphasis added). The question here is, what are these potentials, where can we see them in the data, and how can they help us understand better the relation between OEH assemblage, affect, and subjectivity?

Finally, the theorization of the third fundamental theoretical concept of this work, i.e., subjectivity, is probably most problematic, since the student only writes about how it is constituted, i.e., it is produced (not essential), co-constituted by other actors, and transformed in the assemblages (see 5, 6), but not what it actually is. The author writes the subjectivity is assemblage (6), but he doesn't say what are the integral parts of this assemblage (could these include ideas, beliefs, desires, tastes, opinions, identifications? Or something other?). This is important, since we cannot establish a proper and rigorous analysis without having a proper conceptual model for it (e.g., we cannot follow transformations of subjectivity if we don't know what elements of subjectivity that we should be observing are being or not being transformed). The author adds other theoretical aspects of subjectivity in Chapter 3 (i.e., subject of enunciation and subject of statement), but these only further obfuscate the issue, as they only offer a very partial and incomplete perspective of Deleuze-Guattari's notion of subjectivity (taken from Lacan), without employing all the other necessary aspects of Lacanian theory of subjectivization that would provide for the proper understanding of this phenomenon. Therefore, is impossible to discuss the subject of enunciation without understanding it in relation to the unconscious (and the Other), or similar with the subject of statement, which would need to be discussed in conjunction with concepts such as ego ideal, ideal ego, and superego; plus all of these terms can only properly be understood in relation to the wider Lacanian triad of Symbolic/Imaginary/Real (see also below). However, this minimum of understanding of subjectivity from psychoanalytical point of view would of course not be possible to achieve on the level of BA thesis, and thus would be better to avoid Lacan (and his elaborations in Deleuze and Guattari) entirely (including the concepts of subject of enunciation and subject of statement), and to incorporate some more modest and manageable theory of subjectivity in this regard.

Third, regarding the analysis part, I need to give credit to the student for his very engaging, well-written, and illuminating ethnographic descriptions and ethnographic vignettes (in both main chapters), and also for his ethnographic analysis of the OEH assemblage and its interconnection with other assemblages (in Chapter 2). I would argue that the student successfully achieved his first goal in this regard ("how online erotic hypnosis is constituted as a social assemblage"). His second goal (about OEH's effects on subjects) is also mainly realized in the analysis parts of Chapters 2 and 3, at least implicitly (since the ethnographic data that shows OEH's affectivity is not always explicitly linked to affect theory—the problem that I already mentioned in the theory section above).

However, his analysis and his interpretations of transformations of subjectivity (in Chapter 3) are often very speculative, ethnographically thin, and theoretically unconvincing. First, the author reduces subjectivity to one or two sex or drug related traits, and ignores the complex constitution of the assemblage of subjectivity. We learn almost nothing in relation to how the subjectivities of main subjects looked like before OEH sessions. For example, for Ryan, we only discover he was transformed from non-addict to addict, and from having interest in "power" in sexuality to somebody who developed several fetishes afterwards (sexual, financial, drug-related). And for Sleepinggirl, Andrew explains only how she was transformed by OEH from asexual to sexual person, and from the one interested in kink to one interested in bimbofication. Plus, we learn nothing about these subjects' ordinary lives before and after these sessions up to today. How they cope with their issues (addictions, or non-normative identities) in real lives, what are their hobbies, occupations, beliefs, tastes, opinions, (other) desires, etc. The concept of assemblage of subjectivity should help us

understand the complexities of subjectivization, but here this complexity is reduced to caricature (Ryan is transformed to an addict and Sleepinggirl to a bimbo).

This is also a methodological problem, since the author of the thesis mostly relies on only a couple of quotes (taken from several interviews with Ryan, and only from one online interview with Sleepinggirl) in making such bold interpretations, and doesn't triangulate the data (although he states he will do so in the introduction). For example, he takes Sleepinggirl's statements at face value, without considering a possibility that a person might be performing an imaginary identity (we should not overlook the fact here that the author is talking, not to a person with ordinary first and last name, for example, Jane Doe, but to a person named "Sleepinggirl", which already points to an imaginary/performative self-identification), and that that person might also foster illusions about how the practices of bimbofication are empowering for her (we don't know how these affect her in her real life, in which, she admits, people sometimes say she is "less smart", 48). It would also be important to know if this person is a feminist or not (this would be an important part of her subjectivity to learn about in relation to the notion of bimbofication). Plus, it would be important to use some suitable feminist theory when (re)interpreting such practices of subjection and humiliation as gender empowering (if such theory exists). Instead of critically questioning, theorizing, and triangulating such statements, the author concludes: "Thus, in Sleepinggirl's case, an affirmative potential presents itself: bimbofication without misogyny, domination without subjugation, dissociation without alienation, subjectification without subjection – the erotic hypnosis Sleepinggirl assembles with is not subsumed by the assemblages of capital, pornography or the Internet" (49). This constitutes another problem here, the issue of romanticization of OEH. Although the author in some places attempts to show more complexity, and acknowledges the fact that not only emancipation, but also exploitation might be simultaneous parts of these experiences (50), he nevertheless navigates toward the affirmative side when talking about Sleepinggirl (whom he in fact uses as an example of the "positive" side of OEH, in opposition to Ryan, who presents the negative one, see 47, 53, 55). The author in this way demonstrates not so much the contradictions permeating the phenomenon of OEH, but actually reveals the contradictions in his own argument (see also page 54, and below).

I have some additional comments and suggestions for the student, which might be especially useful for him, if he wants to continue with this research on MA or PhD level, but I am only adding them as appendices below (these notes can potentially also be incorporated into the discussion at the thesis defence). Therefore, based on my main points of critique given so far, I would like to conclude that I assess Andrew Wilson's thesis as partially successful in relation to its goals. I claim that Wilson achieved his first two goals (analysis of OEH assemblage, and analysis of OEH affectivity), but not the third one (transformations of subjectivity). Plus, although I see some problems with his theoretical discussions in the work, I would evaluate most of his ethnographic description and analysis parts as excellent. Therefore, in sum, I propose grade 2 for his efforts (this evaluation takes into account that the student wanted to achieve too much in this thesis, and that first two mentioned goals above would suffice for the work—therefore I am willing to leave the third goal out from evaluation, but this is also open for debate at the defence, and subsequently open to reevaluation, if necessary).

David Verbuč

## **Appendix: additional points of critique**

**Page count** of the thesis exceeds the limit of 55 pages (author uses single spacing instead of

1.5 spacing, therefore the final 66 pages count of the thesis is actually more likely to be around 90 pages).

**Child pornography** should be mentioned as the main problematic issue related to the **Pornhub** scandal (from the student's writing it appears the scandal was only about the erotic hypnosis videos).

There is a lack of **theorization** in Chapter 3, regarding the notion of **recoiling / doubling** of subjectivity between mental and dominant reality. There is also a lack of **critical** (beyond speculative) and preferably anthropological theorization of the concept of desubjectification.

The author **confuses unconsciousness** (as related to mental reality, and subject of enunciation) with **fantasy** (and subject of statement). There is a lack of proper **understanding of Lacan**, who differentiates all these phenomena. See for example the quote from the thesis: "Thus bimbofication has, for Sleepinggirl, enacted a process of subjectification not unlike the one described in the previous section, wherein a "doubling" occurred, by which a *mental* reality came into conformity with a dominant reality, folding and reinforcing, making *fantasy* real" (48, see also page 45). Fantasy is a separate category in Lacanian psychoanalysis, not to be confused with the unconscious (i.e., mental reality).

Further, the author also **confuses altered states with dominant reality** (in Lacanian terms, the author is conflating Imaginary, Real, and Symbolic realms). This is evident in the following quote: "Whether or not OEH represents such possibility [of desubjectification, loss of identity] is not determined by what we, who look on from academic or reflective positions, may attribute as either virtuous or immoral – there is no essence here, in assemblages of assemblages. Such potentials are only determined by the organization of affects within which those on the *inside* assemble" (55; emphasis added). I would disagree, as these kinds of potentials are not only determined by the "inside" assemblage (i.e., the Imaginary realm; also liminal realm), but also by the outside one (i.e., the Symbolic realm). There is an evident lack of more integral understanding of subjectivization, not one limited only to the liminal worlds (as the liminal is always in structural relation to the dominant, i.e., as antistructure, it reinforces the [dominant] structure—see Turner).

The statement "**I am gone**" (in Chapter 3) is **taken at face value** as a proof of desubjectification (loss of identity) and not as a performative statement by Sleepinggirl, which, as author later on page 54 acknowledges, is probably some kind of ideology in this subculture, and therefore not a point of dissolution of subjectivity but a point of fixation of subjectivity. However, this possibility of fixation is only briefly mentioned on page 54, and not taken on for further examination, and the author immediately returns there to his initial claim that "a line opened up out of subjectivity, a new vector by which reality itself seemed, momentarily, to dissolve".

Example of **speculative** writing (speculative interpretive conclusions): "the "transformation" interrogated by this research is not a visible shift from one determinant mode of being to another, but is instead covert, *dark* – a mediation between affects and acts, an *exchange of one subjectivity for another*. Simply put, subjectivity is transformed in this way: by *assembling differently*." (45). This interpretation is not based on any actual ethnographic data examined in the work.

This also relates to the next problem, which is that the discussion of subjectivization in the thesis is limited to liminal and altered states (e.g., drug-induced and hypnosis-induced states) and to pathological or addicted states, and not to ordinary everyday subjectivities, which

theoretically presents a whole different problem. A whole **different set of theoretical tools** would need to be employed here, not only the ones dealing with standard issues of subjectivity (the concepts of subject of enunciation and subject of statement are not really useful here), but mainly the ones dealing with theory and anthropology of transformations under drug-use, hypnosis, and sexual role play or BDSM and kink, and perhaps also psychosis.

Note on **ethics**: I was surprised and disturbed by the student casually engaging with the practice of hypnosis (see Chapter 3), as this probably constitutes an unethical conduct (Within and without OEH), and is potentially also dangerous, for both the hypnotist and the hypnotized.