

**Towards an Amodern, Aesthetic and Existentialist
Approach to Subjectivity in Management and Organization Studies**

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A Thesis Submitted to Saint Mary's University,
Halifax, Nova Scotia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Business Administration (Management)

August, 2019
Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Abstract

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by Caterina Bettin

The aim of this dissertation is to de-naturalize the overly mentalist, self-contained and singular depictions of subjectivity that populate the field of Management and Organizational Studies. To do so, my dissertation presents an original theoretical recipe that combines insights from Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1993, 1999a, 1999b, 2005; Latour and Woogar, 1979; Law, 1992) and Actor Network Theory and After (Law and Hassard, 1999; Mol, 1999, 2002), Foucault's reflections on the "arts of existence" (1986, 1988, 1990; Foucault, Rabinow, and Faubion, 1997) and de Beauvoir's (1967; 2001) and Merleau-Ponty's existentialisms (1962). My goal is to offer an amodern method that aims at making present the embodied, multiple and relational textures of subjectivity and that accounts for the aesthetic endeavour of crafting personal styles of subjectivity. An example of how my proposed understanding of subjectivity can be performed in practice is illustrated by the exploration of the subjectivities of the mixed-martial artists that work for the world's biggest combat sport promotion companies, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

The contribution of this dissertation is twofold. From a theoretical standpoint, I set out to respond to those calls for more thorough problematizations not only of the ontological rooting of idea of individual, but also of the methodologies used to create knowledge about this construct in MOS (see Nord and Fox, 1996; Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008, Collinson, 2003).

From an empirical perspective, I suggest how the complexity of subjectivity can be rendered in its multiplicity, relationality and aesthetic qualities by tracing how the crafting of one's self occurs in material practices out of series of networked attributes and embodied performances.

August 30th, 2019

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Introducing an Amodern, Aesthetic and Existentialist Approach to Subjectivity in MOS

*“The subject: a complex and fragile thing,
which it is so difficult to speak about,
but without which we cannot speak”
M. Foucault*

1.1 Overview and Contribution of the Dissertation

The aim of this thesis is to problematize and de-naturalize the notion of selfhood prevalent in Management and Organizational Studies (*MOS*), which has traditionally been understood in a logo-centric, self-contained and singular manner. To do so, I present an original theoretical framework that combines Actor Network Theory (ANT), (Latour, 1993, 1999, 2005; Law, 1992; Law & Hassard, 1999); Foucault’s reflections on the *“aesthetics of existence”* (1978, 1985, 1997); and de Beauvoir’s (1948, 2011) and Merleau-Ponty’s existentialisms (1962). In this dissertation my goal is to explore how *MOS* has deployed philosophical understandings of subjectivity in order to move beyond this point and advance a critical working understanding that is rooted in an amodern, relational and multiple ontology and that is able to account for the enterprise of crafting one’s own existential projects of subjectivity in aesthetic terms.

Following Sartre’s commitment to condemn sterile speculation, I take to heart the existentialist teaching that *“existence precedes essence”* (Sartre, 1973) by illustrating the performativity of my theoretical contribution, which will be addressed in chapters 7 and 8. These two chapters will present an empirical example of what an alternative

conceptualization of selfhood looks like. The subjects that I am investigating are the fighters that work for the world's biggest and most renowned combat sport promotion company, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (*UFC*). In my analysis, I explore how doing away with assumptions of ontological singularity and mentalism and deploying an aesthetic sensibility can help make present textures of subjectivity that are not accounted for in MOS. With my examples, my interest is to explore how the organization UFC influences the fighters' embodied subjectivity interacting, challenging and shaping their "*arts of existence*" (Michel Foucault, 1985).

With this dissertation I claim two main contributions, one theoretical and one empirical. The first, theoretical, constitutes an answer to those calls that have highlighted the need of a thorough problematization of how human beings are discussed in MOS (see for example Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Nord & Fox, 1999). While there have been several attempts to address this call (also from an existential perspective, see, for example, (Lecoure & Mills, 2008; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014; MacMillan, Yue, & Mills, 2012), I concur with those who have argued that the core of the matter, namely a "*more engaged conversation across meta-theoretical lenses*" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 9), is an area of the literature that can benefit from new contributions.

As pointed out by Burrell & Morgan (1979) and Peltonen (2016), the knowledge-creation enterprise always hides underpinning ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform the research process. In the field of MOS, the dominant positivist orthodoxy is so powerful that the concepts that are used to make present the human being, including 'identity', 'the individual', 'the self', 'the subject' or 'self-

identity', are taken as *natural*, *neutral* and *self-evident* and they are not explored as complex and multi-faceted cultural artefacts. Moreover, as MacMillan et al. (2012) and Alvesson et al. (2008) point out, notions of the "I" tend to be under-theorized not only in the positivist paradigm but also in the research situated in the traditions of the "post" (including postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism, see Prasad, 2005) and beyond (ANT and ANT and after, Latour, 2005; Law & Hassard, 1999). Thus, my theoretical contribution de-naturalizes the various concepts we are referring to when we are considering questions of selfhood in MOS, making explicit and transparent their philosophical underpinnings and problematizing them. To substantiate this point, I suggest an original framework that attempts to bring the creation of knowledge about individual subjectivity out of its modernist, scientific and self-contained comfort zone.

The second contribution of this thesis is empirical. As pointed out by Collinson (2003), one of the challenges of organizational scholars that are operating from a non-positivist perspective is to find novel appropriate ways of investigating the complexities of subjectivity. I address this point in chapters 7 and 8 with a series of examples that suggest how my theoretical framework can be performed.

In the case study I conceptualize the subjectivity of the mixed martial artists that work for the UFC as a multiple and relational performative outcome enacted within specific locations and held together by self-crafted aesthetic and existential projects (which I call 'poetics' borrowing the term from aesthetic scholar Nanni, 2000). As I will explain in chapter 7 and 8, my empirical contribution aims at debunking some taken-for-granted assumptions about the singular, autonomous and mentalist nature of

subjectivity in organizational settings. First and foremost, my case study explores the multiplicity and the relationality of the subjectivity of UFC fighters as it emerges in practice in the locations where 'being a fighter' unfolds (e.g., the gym, the UFC cage where the fights take place on fight night, etc.). By following the practices that make up UFC fighters in the specific locations where they come to be – professional MMA training facilities, boxing rings, wrestling mats and cages -, my case study suggests that there is no such a thing as a 'singular fighter', but that different versions of the same fighter are enacted in the gym: a UFC fighter is at the same time a boxer, a wrestler, a jiu-jitero, a judoka, a Muay Thai practitioner but also an entertainer, a winner, a loser, a teammate etc. Working through examples, chapter 7 and 8 also suggest how the taken-for-granted assumptions about the contours of our subjectivity are exactly that - just assumptions. In practice, the borders that divide selfhood from Otherness are not clear nor set or defined at all. Subjectivity stretches beyond our skin (literally and metaphorically) and it includes and is negotiated with other people, events, things and organizational dynamics.

The idea that the UFC organizational processes influence the mixed martial artists' existential and aesthetic projects of subjectivity is tackled more in detail in chapter 8. Here I focus on the main tropes that constitute the 'poetics' (that is, creative projects) of UFC fighters as a collective and then I zoom into the case of Dominick Cruz, and discuss his own creative way of coordinating his multiplicity, enacting his own 'poetic' as a UFC fighter.

In this first chapter, I begin by introducing the motivation for my dissertation, namely the need to (re)focus scholarly effort in the theoretical conceptualization of individual subjectivity in MOS voiced in particular by Nord & Fox (1999) and Alvesson et al. (2008). I then outline my theoretical contribution, which draws on and fuses motives from ANT, Foucault's techniques of the self, and existentialism. Next, I offer some self-reflections on my situatedness as a researcher. Finally, I outline the content of each chapter.

1.2 The Subject as a Focus of Study in MOS?

In 1999, Nord & Fox published an article titled "*The individual in organizational studies: The great disappearing act*". In this contribution, they express their concern about the status of 'the individual' in organization studies, which they identify with the self-contained, quantifiable and essentialist subject of mid-twentieth century American Psychology. According to them, this particular understanding of the individual as the main object of investigation has become less prominent in disciplines such as organizational behaviour and industrial/organizational psychology in that, starting from the 1970s, the influence from new conceptual frameworks and the emergence of new paradigms, especially the ones informed by Continental thought, have contributed to a transference of the locus of attention from the "*essential properties and the universal dimensions of the typical human being*" (Nord & Fox, 1999, p. 170) to the displaced and (non) conceptualized subject produced by the fluid postmodern context.

In my opinion, the merit of Nord & Fox's claim about the "*disappearing act*" of the 'individual' in MOS can be questioned, as I explain in chapter 2. The notion of 'individual' that they are concerned about enacts a specific and localized understanding of the term which may or may not be deemed worth investigating. In this regard, I do not especially see their preoccupation as the most significant insight of their research.

What I find much more relevant, instead, is their call for a deeper theoretical engagement with the notions of subjectivity. The same necessity has been voiced a little more than a decade later also by Alvesson et al. (2008) in the pages of a special issue of the journal 'Organization' on the state of research on identity. Echoing Nord & Fox (1999), Alvesson et al. (2008) ¹ also suggest that a more in-depth theoretical and methodological engagement with questions of subjectivity is needed in the field, but unfortunately organizational scholars are not frequently willing to step outside of the boundaries and explore the theoretical foundations of their discipline.

The first part of my dissertation specifically addresses questions related to the enterprise of knowledge-creation and of method (see Law, 2004). I make explicit the conceptual connections with the broader socio-philosophical debate on subjectivity by presenting a recipe for subjectivity that is animated by a modernism, relationality, multiplicity and aesthetics. In the next section, I outline the three main strands of literature that inform my framework, namely ANT, Foucault's technologies of the self and existentialism. These three bodies of thought may seem very distant if not antithetical at first sight, however, as I explain in depth in chapter 6, they share a

¹ The interest for a renewed engagement with the concept of identity is also present in the call for papers for the special issue of the journal 'Management Learning' titled "Identity and Learning (not) to be different" by Coupland, Cutcher, Brown and Beech (2019)

surprising number of commonalities that allows for a theoretical ‘hanging together’ able to make present subjectivity in ways that are not commonly practiced in MOS.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Since the late 1970’s, organizational research has been progressively influenced by theoretical approaches that invited scholars to question the neutrality and universality of the knowledge creation enterprise fostered by organizational scholarship rooted in ontological positivism.

Researchers have been encouraged to self-assess their ontological and epistemological positioning (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and more recent postmodern approaches have pushed further the exploration of the inner workings and the politics that animate the crafting of knowledge. Calas & Smircich (1999) suggest that two of the main contributions of these “post” sensitivities are in the concern for the *“self-reflective awareness of the researcher/theoretician’s complicity in the constitution of their objects of study”* (p. 651) and in the understanding that organizational knowledge, like all types of knowledge, does not come free from politics and power mechanisms.

Overall, these views challenge the modernist assumptions of the neutrality and universality of knowledge as a representation of an ostensive reality that exists “out there” and that is autonomous from its representation.

This incredulity towards realist, universal, neutral and truthful meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984) is one of the tenets that informs the socio-philosophical approach that I present in this thesis. In particular, my framework draws on three perspectives:

a) the amodern, relational and multiple understanding of the social as enacted by ANT (Latour, 1986, 1993; Law, 1992; Law & Hassard, 1999; Law & Urry, 2004),

b) the aesthetic reflections on “technologies of the self” or “arts of existence” that characterize Foucault’s thought in the last years of his life (Michel Foucault, 1978, 1985, 1988d) and

c) the existential motives (such embodiment, intersubjectivity, ambiguity and ‘arts of living’) performed by Merleau-Ponty’s (1961) and Simone de Beauvoir’s (1948, 2010) philosophies.

As I will explain in depth in chapter 3, 4 and 5, each of these perspectives holds considerable promise but also presents some drawbacks in providing insights about subjectivity. While their combination may appear impudent and problematic at first sight, my attempt is to explore their connections, in particular a) their rejection of essentialism and reductionism, b) their relational understanding of selfhood, c) their emphasis on the lived experience and its chaotic character and d) their reflexivity. The result is a method-assemblage of a socio-philosophical look at subjectivity as a network of contextual socio-historical conditions creatively combined that comes to be inscribed into existence through experience.

In the following part I will outline the main tenets of the three bodies of knowledge that I use to craft my framing of subjectivity.

1.3.1 ANT: An Amodern Sociology of Associations

Providing a concise explanation of ANT is almost an impossible task. Here I highlight some of the main methodological insights and concepts that I draw on in my theoretical contribution.

ANT was developed by scholars such as Latour (1999, 2005), Law (1986, 1992) and Callon (1986). The aim of ANT is to expose that entities linked together in a network, including but not exclusively human beings, are constituted and shaped by their interactions with each other. The question that ANT researchers are committed to answer is how the networks that we refer to as “the social” come to be composed as an effect of performances by their actors (Latour, 1986).

Crucial to my approach is the ontological assumption of ANT that the social is not a pre-given entity. The social world, including organizations and its employees, is considered something that is enacted. In other words, ANT rejects the idea of the social as an ostensive and pre-given entity, something that already “is out there” and that needs to be measured and explored. For example, drawing on an ANT perspective, the UFC can be viewed as not only a physical building in Las Vegas (the city where its headquarters are located) nor a pay-per-view event that takes place on Saturday night. Rather, it is a chaotic entanglement that emerges through movement of re-association and reassembling of a number of human and non-human actors: the fighters, the interviews, the fans, the events, the media conferences, the cards, the octagon (namely the cage where the fights take place), the gloves, the fight-camps, the commentators, the journalists, the sweat, the money, the CEO, the twitter pages, the media, the sponsors, the ring girls, the belt, the referees, the Vaseline, the tickets, the pay-per-

views, the rankings and so on. From an ANT perspective, the UFC is at the same time a network of all the components that enact it, but it oscillates into an actor in that all these elements “share” the same interests and are aligned acting as one. This constant oscillation between the status of actor and network explains the term “*Actor-network theory*”.

The goal of ANT researchers is to investigate how the networks that we refer to as “the social” come to be composed as effect of performances by their actors (Latour, 1986). Hence, ANT offers a way of assembling stories about UFC fighters that problematizes and denaturalizes the idea of an already existing essential composition of “what a UFC fighter is”. As a consequence, ANT is not interested in testing hypothesis, because the very act of trying to verify a theory necessarily informs the way in which the researcher will see and interpret that phenomenon. In other words, the assumption of a stable reality in itself imposes the researcher’s ontology on the object of the study (Calas & Smircich, 1999). For Latour (2005) the problem is that, if we follow the realist rationale we end up confusing the “answer” that we are looking for (the explanation of reality) with the “question” itself (our assumptions on reality that we impose on the question).

Hence, in ANT the first rule for the researcher is to stay clear of imposition of theories or interpretations, in the attempt of avoiding perspectivism (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010). The role of researchers is to “follow the actors” (Latour, 1987) and map their movements of association and disassociation and provide a narrative of the social that emerges in heterogeneous networks (Law, 1992), as a performative outcomes of relations between actors as they oscillate into networks (Durepos & Mills, 2012).

It is important to stress that ANT assumes a symmetrical perspective, making no distinction between human and non-human actors, in that both are included in its analytical outlook. As Law noted, *“the stuff of the social is not simply human”* (1992, p. 2). According to ANT, in the performance of the social, every element (human or not) plays a role in relation with one another and in sociological terms there is no “qualitative” difference in the pieces that create the social. Building on this symmetry, in the ANT literature we stumble across a human being that is not special in itself. As Law (1992) suggests, in fact, the social analytical stance of ANT is quite radical because it denies any particular status of supremacy to the human being. The human being is seen as an actor-network, meaning that for ANT the individual comes to be constituted as an effect performed by a network of heterogeneous materials in relation with one another. This is one of the most controversial aspects of ANT, in fact one of the criticisms that has been aimed against it is the lack of adequate problematization of human agency (Lee & Brown, 1994).

This point might appear problematic in a contribution that aims at combining existentialist motives with ANT, but, as I will argue in detail in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, I do not believe that this divergence of stances constitutes a real deal breaker between an existential sensitivity, (especially in the case of de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty) and the understanding of the composition of the social as enacted by ANT.

ANT pays attention to how actors perform their ability to act upon and influence another (Latour, 1986). In this sense, every interaction can be seen as a fight between conditions of possibilities. Actors are seen as continuously engaged in trials and each

one of these “transactions” hides the opportunity of recruiting other actors. This recruiting process is constituted by dynamics of “translation” and “enrolment” (Callon, 1986; Latour & Callon, 1981; Law, 1999). These concepts, together with the notion of “inscription”, are crucial in my analysis.

According to Law (1992), translations imply “*transformation and the possibility of equivalence, the possibility that one thing (for example an actor) may stand for another (for instance a network).*” (p. 5-6). This means that a “translation” happens when an actor is so strong that it speaks or acts on behalf of another/other actors. When actors successfully translate their interests, they become “*spokesmen*” (sic) (Callon, 1986, p.223), and in doing so, they silence the voices of other actors. Translations are not innocent practices, on the contrary, they are acts of power. In fact, as an actor, I become more powerful by having other actors “conforming to my norms”, “*doing what I want*” (Callon & Latour, 1981, p. 279). In chapter 7 we will see how the fighters I focus on are engaged in the constant attempt to *translate* their interests (for example, showing the primacy over their competitors) in several ways. Each athlete does so in a very personal and specific fashion. In fact, as Law (1992) observes, processes of translations are necessarily contingent, local and variable.

Translations of an actor’s interests can take material form through what ANT scholars refer to as “*inscriptions*” (Callon, 1991, p. 143). For example, the prize awarded to the champion of each UFC weight division, namely the UFC belt, constitutes the material inscription of the status of “being the most dominant athlete in the weight division”. In other words, when UFC fighters become champions of their weight class,

they *translate* their primacy over the competition and the belt constitutes the material inscription of their status as champions. The belt is the final stage of a series of actions, people and things (e.g. training sessions, aggressiveness, coaches, boxing gloves, sweat, wrestling practices, rings, sparring partners, mouthpieces, hunger, Vaseline, fear, significant others, blood, injuries, nerves, controlled amounts of food, interviews, boxing bags, gyms, techniques, stretching and so on). As Monteiro & Hanseth, (1996) explain, *“in general, any component of the heterogeneous network of skills, practices, artifacts, institutional arrangements, texts and contracts establishing a social order may be the material for inscriptions”* (p. 330).

This substantiates, again, the empirical commitment of ANT. It is not about attempting to impose a specific order, it is about following the traces and allowing the actors to speak for themselves (Latour, 2005), paying attention to the movements of re-association and re-assembling and tracing these ties as they become (or not become) stable.

Enrolments occur when actors succeed in altering other actors' interests and imposing their own. An actor's power depends on its ability to enroll other actors in its worldview and its growth is associated to the extent that “durable” or powerful actors are enrolled (Callon & Law, 1982). In chapter 8, for example, I trace Dominick Cruz's (former 135 lbs UFC champion) strategies of enrolment of his injuries, wins and losses, suggesting how they have come to constitute who he is as a mixed martial artist.

In some cases, when actor-networks create a homogeneous alignment among its constituents, it acts as a single block (Law, 1992, p.5). When enrolled actors act like they

are one, their network disappears and it is replaced by a “*precarious and simplifying effect*” (Law, 1992, p.5). This “effect” starts to be viewed as a new actor, and the network behind is ignored. This process has been referred to in ANT theory as “punctuation” or “black boxing”. In my framework, I discuss this insight in particular on the level of the individual. I am interested in tracing what can be called “self-punctuation”, meaning the beliefs and the visions that have become so deeply rooted that now constitute punctuations of an individual and how they get enacted.

Relationalism and multiplicity (Mol, 2002) are two other key aspects of ANT that play a crucial role in my framework. “*Interaction is all there is*” writes Law “[...] *society, organizations, agents and machines are all effects generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials.*” (1992, p. 2). Moreover, as the ANT and After literature suggests (Law & Hassard, 1999; Mol, 2002), it is more appropriate to discuss multiple enactments of reality, rather than “a” singular reality. For ANT theorists, the performances of the social that emerge through associations and/or disassociations among actor-networks create “*more than one but less than many*” (Law, 1999, 2000) conditions of possibility in which one phenomenon can be enacted. In Mol’s words, multiplicity refers to the idea that “*different realities [...] co-exist in the present*” (2002, p. 79). Moreover, Mol (2002) suggests that looking at the different enactments of the same phenomenon can provide insights on the constitution of that reality. Following her, in my case study I argue that different performances of the same phenomenon, namely being a fighter in the UFC, can stand in contrast with one another, also within the performativity of the same individual, but the very presence of this tension is

relevant, because it suggests how embracing the traces of messiness, complexity and paradoxes offers many insights on a phenomenon and tells us something about us as human beings.

1.3.2 Foucault's "Aesthetics of Existence"

Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) is a French philosopher whose works covered a very diverse range of themes. Nevertheless, there seems to be a preoccupation that encompasses all them, namely the concern for what comes to be considered as knowledge (Burrell, 1988; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2014). In one of his late interviews, when asked about his own intellectual trajectory, he admits that there is a deeper issue that always fascinated him, the "*relationship between the subject and the truth*" (Foucault, 1988a in Bernauer & Rasmussen, 1988, p. 1).

One might find his answer quite peculiar, especially because Foucault is often referred to the "leader" of the post-modern anti-humanist perspective (Gillam, 2013) in the debate of French Continental philosophy after the Second World War. Foucault rejects both Sartre's existential philosophy of interior life and the Marxist idea of the "true human" who will emerge after ideologies will have run their course.

However, his refusal of the notion of an absolute ontologically free and self-contained individual does not translate into a lack of interest in matters related to the crafting of subjectivity. On the contrary, Foucault is very much interested in the sets of disciplinary practices that form the individual, in that they dictate how a subject behaves and thinks about him/herself and also how these practices have an impact on the body.

Foucault approaches these issues in a genealogical way. Genealogy is an approach to history and the creation of knowledge that Foucault adopted in the 70s as a way to critique the traditional assumptions on history, knowledge and concepts such as truth and power. Genealogical research offers a way to explore how the subject can be understood as “the product” of historical forces.

Genealogical analysis critiques “*the idea of universal necessities, the search for underlying laws and universal explanatory systems, the inevitability of lines of development in human progress and the logic that we learn more about things and become better at dealing with them as time goes on*” (Crowley, 2009).

Foucault shows his debt to Nietzsche in adopting this way of understanding the creation of knowledge that disturbs the idea of universal explanatory laws and denaturalises what is taken for granted. Both Nietzsche and Foucault were sceptical of the possibility of objectivity, in that, for them, every claim for an innocent eye always necessarily hides subjective motives (Burrell, 1988).

Moreover, as it happens, for Nietzsche, one of the goals of Foucault’s genealogy is to unmask and disturb the idea of the essential subject (the same preoccupation that concerned both Merleau-Ponty and De Beauvoir). For Foucault there is no such thing, there can only be a “history of subjectivity”, meaning a history of how we become subjects *and at the same time* objects of knowledge. This approach is far from being unproblematic, in the sense that it deals with instability, which is what Foucault (and Nietzsche) are really intrigued by. For both of them, the task of the researcher is to trace

how things are in constant change and to understand how they change, which is something that depends on contextual elements (for example time, location etc.).

One of the main characteristics of genealogical research is its concern with reality as it appears, a notion shared with ANT (and, as we shall see, with De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty as well). This means that reality “is what it is”, there is no hidden underlying essence (Burrell, 1988). This is why, in Foucault’s genealogical accounts (for example in *Discipline and Punish*, 1977 and the three volumes of the *History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978, 1985), which are the main sources that I build on in my theoretical framework) he draws on a vast variety of sources, from archival material to ancient philosophical writings, from paintings to memoirs and so on. His point is to show that those that may appear to be small events and mundane details are, in fact, not small or mundane at all, in that they all provide cues to “*looking at the meaning of small details, minor shifts and subtle contours*” provide cues to “*the singularity of surface events*” (Burrell, 1988, p. 229)

Genealogies are interested in tracing the evolution of certain practices. In “*Discipline and Punish*” (1977), for example, Foucault examines how prisoners become disciplined subjects by means of continuous surveillance and control, producing a “*soul*” or an “*inner self*” (Vintges, 2001, p. 168) installed in them by the panoptic eye. In the prison the inmate is always under observation and needs to behave in a certain way, otherwise he/she will be punished. Eventually, prisoners internalize this controlling eye, regardless of the fact that they actually are being observed or not and end up conforming to this regime. According to Foucault, this model of discipline enacts

dynamics of power not only in prisons, but in all sorts of institutions, for example schools, hospitals, military academies, factories and so on. In other words, he posits that these sets of power practices are creating subjects, they work on the body and they “create” people. A prisoner, for example, knows how to behave in prison. A factory worker knows how to work in an assembly line, a student knows how to be a student. From this perspective, using Huijer’s term, the subject is a “*marionette*” (1999), p. 64), an empty and disciplined body that gets moved around not even realizing that is being acted through power practices.

Here it is crucial to understand what Foucault referred to when he was talking about power. The power he refers to is not something that one possesses and that can be wielded over something or someone else. Power is circulating, ubiquitous, capillary. It is something enacted in all the practises of life. In this sense, he sees power as one of the constituting conditions of experience.

But, as Foucault points out, power - understood always as “power-relation”, in form of concrete action, does not necessarily have to be domination. Power can also be productive.

Power is exercised through action upon action, and it cannot be seen but in relation with forms of resistance. Power and resistance cannot be but relational (Foucault, 1982a). This point is decisive for my discussion on the individual because it introduces the possibility for a genealogical understanding of subjectivity. Forms of resistance, in fact, can be seen as forms of freedom. In Crossley’s words “*power is everywhere because freedom is everywhere*” (Crossley, 1994), p. 117). Of course, the

practices of freedom that Foucault is referring to are not to be confused with the absolute ontological freedom posited by Sartre. For Foucault freedom is always embedded in social discourses, "*proposed, suggested imposed upon (the individual) by his culture, his society and his social group*" (Foucault, 1997, p. 291).

In recognition of the point that in the dynamic of power and resistances human beings do constitute a relation to themselves, Foucault, in the last phase of his career, dedicates himself to explore the subjectivity that gets enacted by the interaction of power and resistance. He sees subjectivity as the changeable collection of fragments among which the tension between power and resistance occurs. In Huijjer's words, for Foucault "*the 'I' is not a unity but a wide range of experiences, intentions, desires, powers, movements, souls and the like*" (1999, p.66).

Thus, while Foucault's subject is fragmented, displaced and fragile, there are ways, which he calls "techniques of the self" or "self-practices," that allow subjects to self-create themselves and to construct a relationship with themselves. Foucault, however, does not seem interested in exploring experiences of subjectivities that emerge, for example, from obedience to the law or to a higher authority. He is intrigued by the aesthetics of the crafting of one's existence.

These are the themes that occupy that last phase of his life. In the trilogy "*The History of Sexuality*," in particular in volume II - "*The Use of Pleasure*" (1985) and III - "*The care of the self*" (1988b), Foucault focuses on the "more inner aspect of the self", and he does so by studying ancient Greek and Roman texts whose main aims were to suggest rules of conduct. In "*The Use of Pleasure*" he analyses four aspects that he sees

to be characteristic of self-practices, namely a) the *ethical substance* that is problematized, b) the *mode of subjection*, meaning how one should deal with such ethical substance, c) the *ethical work on oneself*, which is the work that one should perform on oneself in order to undergo a real change and d) the *teleology of the moral subject*, that is the kind of person one wants to become (Michel Foucault, 1985).

Foucault's elaboration on the aesthetics of existence, in particular the discussion of the instruments that constitute his aesthetic approach, constitutes the second key strand to my look at the individual and I largely draw on his insights in assembling my narratives about the UFC fighters. I elaborate on these topics in detail in chapter 6.

In the next section, I focus on the last philosophical strand that composes my theoretical framework: Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir's existentialism.

1.3.3 Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's Existentialism

The third key strand that informs my non-essentialist look at the individual is existentialism. As a philosophical movement, existentialism is generally associated with Jean Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980), Simone De Beauvoir (1908 – 1986), Albert Camus (1913 - 1960) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961) (Flynn, 2009). It is not uncommon to find also Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) listed as central figures - or more appropriately, as Cooper (2012) suggests, "fathers" of existential thought, even though they never adopted the term as self-description.

Existentialism does not present the cohesion of a “school of thought”. However, there are some main themes that are consistently addressed.

First of all, existentialism is a philosophy that aims at comprehending man’s (sic) experience in the world. Sartre’s famous slogan “*Existence precedes essence*” (1973, p. 20) refers to the fact that human beings are not fixed or stable in their nature, they are not provided with an essence, but they come to be who they are as a result of their choices and in relation to what they decide to do with their lives.

Existentialists look at the human condition from a first-person standpoint and identify human beings as free agents. Their outlook on philosophy is very pragmatic, they share the idea that a man needs to make philosophy out of his life and, in turn, enacts his philosophy. In the case study, one theme that emerges is how the fighters’ own existential project is owned and lived and put into practice on a daily basis. I trace the preoccupation about what type of person and fighter they strive to be in the practice of their everyday life, looking at their “holding together” as individuals while being in The UFC, winning and losing, dealing with a messy load of emotions, setbacks, highs, lows, challenges, boredom, confusion and so on.

Given the wide range of authors that have engaged with existential themes, in this dissertation I had to make a choice with regards to the authors whose insights I am going to elaborate on in the crafting of my framework. As a result, I will consider primarily the existential phenomenological subject that emerges from the dialogue between the works of Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir. There are two main justifications for this decision.

First, as argued elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty's (Cohen, 1984; Crossley, 1994b; Kleinberg-Levin, 1991; Kruks, 1990; Levin, 1985; Marratto, 2012; Visker, 1999) and De Beauvoir's (Kruks, 2006, 2012; Marso & Moynagh, 2006a; O'Brien & Embree, 2001; Simons, 1999) existentialism offers an approach to individual subjectivity that is non-essentialist, embodied, situated in time and space, in tension with power dynamics and in relation with other subjects. All these topics have already come up in the ANT literature and in Foucault's work. In addition, both De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty - in their own way - emphasize the unstable, relational and always-in-negotiation nature of human existence, enacting a body-subject that is reflective, self-aware and capable of choices while being aware of the necessary engagement with the world and with other subjects.

Second, it has been suggested that their works are compatible and complement each other's perspective (Bergoffen, 1997; Cataldi, 2001; Crossley, 1994b; Fullbrook & Fullbrook, 1993; Kruks, 1990; Langer, 2003). I second this opinion in suggesting that engaging with Merleau-Ponty's and De Beauvoir's thought in synergy can provide insights to bridge the modernist vs post-modernist divide that gave life to one of the most popular debate in post-war Continental philosophy, the "*battle over the subject*" (Crossley, 1994, p. 1).

In chapter 4 I discuss four themes that both Merleau-Ponty and De Beauvoir emphasize in their works: the pursuit of authenticity, the embodied subject, the dimension of intersubjectivity and the notion of ambiguity.

In the next section I outline the connective strategy I use to build my framework and I explain how the three strands of knowledge described in the last three sections, while apparently very distant, can contribute to the creation of an approach to the individual as a work of art that is non-essentialist, relational, bearing ethical values and embodied.

1.4 ANT, Foucault, Existentialism: Is A Combination Possible?

The rationale for my framework of subjectivity builds on Mol's notion of multiplicity, that is, the idea that the same phenomenon can assume multiple versions that co-exist in the present (1999). As we have seen in the previous sections, all the three strands of knowledge that I am utilizing in this dissertation present their own version of subjectivity.

In ANT, subjectivity is seen as an effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting material, in other words, as an actor-network.

Foucault enacts another possible version of the subject. In his later work, the individual is portrayed as a fragmented and displaced "I" that is actively engaged in the formation of oneself, developing new and creating modes of living through practices of care of the self in a given socio-cultural context that cannot be transcended (Michel Foucault, 1985).

The last account of subjectivity I engage with is the phenomenological-existential one, where a body-subject interacts with the world through means of perception

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and sees in embracing rather than fearing ambiguity the possibility of the choice to create one's own art of living (de Beauvoir, 1948).

These three versions of subjectivity share commonalities but they also present some challenges. Let us briefly look at the challenges first.

ANT clearly does not negate the existence of the human being, but in its symmetrical analysis it does not provide any kind of privilege to the individual. As Law writes "*ANT does not deny that human beings (...) have an inner life. But it insists that social agents are never located in bodies and bodies alone, but rather than an actor is a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network*" (1992, p.4). In other words, ANT does recognize the individual subject as part of the social but it is simply not interested in investigating - perhaps by deploying its own methodological tools - how subjectivity comes to be.

Nevertheless, the type of human being enacted by ANT has a lot in common with the displaced and fragmented non-unitary "I" that Foucault refers to. One of the main criticisms that has been aimed at Foucault (and ANT) is the deficiency with respect to the question of human agency. On the other hand, one of the problems that is often brought up when it comes to Merleau-Ponty is his lack of a call for political action and ethical dimension. With regards to De Beauvoir, her main problem has always been her role as "*intellectually inferior to Sartre*" (Moi, 2008, p. 37), in-so-much that her voice as a philosopher struggles to be heard (Bergoffen, 1997; Kruks, 2013; Simons, 1999; Vintges, 1996).

In chapter 6, I combine the three approaches to subjectivity emerging from ANT, Foucault's thought and Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's existentialisms in a theoretical recipe (I call it "a theoretical clafoutis" after Mol, 2016) that does not shy away from tensions and frictions but, at the same time, is still capable of 'hanging together' thanks to the convergence on a number of tropes (namely non-essentialism, relationalism, aesthetic sensibility, rejection of universality, the idea that life happens in experience, the existence of power dynamics and the potential to resist them).

My argument is that ANT, Foucault's Arts of Existence and Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir's existentialism can be mutually enriching in that each one has the potential to extend and deepen the project of the other approaches. Of course, some elements that pertain to each strand can represent "*heavy baggage*" (Crossley, 1994, p.6). For example, an ANT researcher can decide to totally ignore the existential dimension of the human actor-network, but this does not pose any type of threat to the ANT researcher. In other words, the ANT researcher can decide to work without engaging with the existential dimension of the human actor network, without even referencing it, and he/she would have all the reasons to do so, in that it would not affect his/her ANT study. But this is due to the fact that my framework does not pose any threat to ANT in that it sets out to be something different from it.

However, I am not deaf to the possible perplexities that this combination may raise, which is why the first part of chapter 6 is dedicated to an in-depth discussion of them.

1.5 Situatedness and reflexivity

As the reader will have already gathered, my ontological perspective rejects essentialism, reductionism, singularity and embraces multiplicity and relationalism (Mol, 1999, Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010, Law & Urry, 2002). For me, as a researcher (and as a human being, two versions of my subjectivity), the substance of life is experience. I do adhere to the idea that “existence precedes essence” and philosophy is a practical endeavor that gets inscribed in action on a daily basis.

As a researcher, I am conscious of my power in constructing my narrative and I am also aware that, as much as I do own a very good portion of freedom in how I am going to assemble it, this freedom is exercised in a particular situation or, like de Beauvoir would say, it has to face “the weight of reality”. This “reality” is that I am writing a PhD dissertation within the context of a School of Business of a University situated in North America (Canada). Thus, provided that MOS are largely (but not entirely) carried out from a positivist and realist perspective, and that this work’s promise is to problematize the conventional approach to organizational knowledge, there are some reflections that I would like to offer before moving on to the next chapter, where I will introduce my case study.

First, the neat distinction between a “theoretical” and an “empirical” part of this thesis is artificial, and it serves as a means to conform to academic standards and to provide a clear structure to these pages. However, as I attempt to enact my own ANT/ existential sensitivity, this so-call distinction between theory and practice comes with a certain amount of existential angst, in that I feel that it betrays the very urgency that I

feel as an organizational scholar, which is the need to try to tell stories that highlight the performative character of the human being in organizations in which we live *most of our lives*, without censoring its instability and its messiness. This is why the well-ordered exposition of this first chapter does not come as an easy process, in that it involves the risk to have the reader think that I am “going into” the data on the UFC fighters with the attempt to “test” my “theory”. As the reader might have noticed, I did not, as a choice, label my theoretical contribution as a “theory”. I understand Latour’s (2005) discomfort with this term, because it creates the opposite effect that this type of knowledge-creation undertaking is trying to realize, that is dealing with the performance of the social, with “what it is”, without imposing the author’s meta-narratives on a particular phenomenon.

In addition, I would like to disclose three influences on my perspective as a researcher. First of all, my educational background includes a BA in performing arts and a master’s degree in management of the arts from a European University. Second, my working experience outside of the academia took place in the creative and in the sport industries. Third, I practice Brazilian jiu-jitsu (one of the combat styles that is included in Mixed Martial Arts, the sport promoted by the UFC) at a gym where a UFC fighter, who is not part of my case study, regularly trains.

I would like to make clear from now that the whole point of this thesis is not to argue for a particular “truthful” or “universal” account of the individual. Here my interest is to discuss my perspective, but I do not claim that this is “the Truth” about individuality. This would be absolutely inconsistent and in contrast with my ontological

stance. My case study is one case among others and its aim is being “plausible” (Kuhn, 1970), not “universal”.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that I am in no way expressing moral or value judgements on the mixed martial artists I am discussing. People live their lives the way they know how and only who is living a certain situation can know if they are acting in good or bad faith. It is not my role nor I am interested in providing guidelines on how to live. What I am interest in investigating is how the “holding together” of a subject comes to be and how people choose and craft for themselves a specific style of subjectivity.

1.6 Outline of the Chapters

Chapter 2 discusses the theorization of subjectivity in MOS by focusing in particular on how notions of selfhood have been mobilized across different orientations (functionalist, interpretivist and critical). The purpose of this chapter is to situate my contribution and to point out the blind spots of the literature that my framework sets out to bring to the table.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 introduce the three strands of literature that compose my framework. Chapter 3 discusses ANT, chapter 4 deals with Foucault’s later thought and chapter 5 elaborates on Merleau-Ponty’s and de Beauvoir’s existentialisms. These three chapters dwell on the aspects of these bodies of knowledge that are germane and relevant to my perspective on subjectivity. I also raise and discuss the critical elements that are problematic in terms of my case.

In chapter 6 I present my theoretical recipe for subjectivity. Specifically, I outline the main elements of an amodern and aesthetic approach to the understanding of the self in organization.

Chapter 7 introduces the empirical demonstration of how my combination can be performed in practice. It discusses the research strategy, the data analyzed and the method. This chapter tackles the idea that being a mixed martial artist is an individual, self-contained and autonomous affair by mobilizing in particular the notions of multiplicity and relationalism.

In chapter 8 I discuss the poetics of UFC fighters. First, I present an overview of the main tropes that compose the repertoire of the subjectivity of UFC fighter. Second, I focus on the how Dominick Cruz, former 135 lbs UFC champion, interacts with this repertoire by tailoring these tropes into his own specific style of subjectivity. In other words, I trace the aesthetic project that innerves his creative action and that comes to substantiate who he is as a mixed martial artist. In short, I trace his poetic as a fighter.

Chapter 9, I offer my final thoughts on the relevance of my approach to individual subjectivity in the context of MOS. I discuss some limitations but also remark on some promising leads, including some ideas for further developments.

Subjectivity and MOS:

The Status of the Artefact

*“Any explanation or logic that explains
everything so easily has a hidden trap in it.
I’m speaking from experience.
Somebody once said
if it’s something a single book can explain,
it’s not worth having explained.”
Haruki Murakami*

2.1 Introduction

In this second chapter I review how the field of Management and Organization Studies has been engaging with ideas of subjectivity. My goal here is to uncover the type of understanding of human being that organizational scholars perform, in order to make the case for the amodern, aesthetic and existentialist contribution that is at the core of this dissertation.

This chapter is organized into three sections. In the first part, I discuss the composition of MOS building on the map presented by (Alvesson et al., 2008). This outline focuses on the intents and purposes that substantiate the enterprise of crafting knowledge (Habermas, 1972). Specifically, it distinguishes three main approaches to the study of organizations: functionalist, interpretivist and critical.

In the second part of the chapter, I review what type of understanding of the human subject undergirds each approach, tracing its roots and discussing the way in

which knowledge about it is created. An aerial overview of the current debate identifying the main lines of inquiry is also presented.

In the third and concluding part, I lay out the case for my theoretical input by outlining how it differs and what it adds to the extant discussion.

2.2 The Composition of MOS

As an academic endeavor, and, more specifically, as a branch of the social sciences, MOS is a highly multidisciplinary field that draws on a number of different areas of inquiry. The lion's share of insights and intellectual tools, especially in the early days, derived from psychology and sociology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Clegg & Bailey, 2008; Wren, 2009); however, also biology, social psychology, engineering, economics, communication studies, anthropology, philosophy, cultural theory, political sciences and critical theory have provided relevant insights (Bryman, Bell, Mills, & Yue, 2011; Peltonen, 2016; P. Prasad, 2005).

While approaches to the study of organizations have been classified in several ways (see, for example, Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Peltonen, 2016; P. Prasad, 2005), in this chapter I will build mainly on the distinction suggested by Alvesson et al (2008), who have identified three main meta-theoretical orientations (functionalist, interpretivist and critical) and linked them with Habermas' (1972) three types of knowledge-constitutive interests (respectively technical, practical and emancipatory). I would like to stress that my goal in this chapter is to provide a general working overview that allows us to navigate the field with a common frame of reference. In this sense, I am *not*

interested in proposing another classificatory review that more or less harshly polices how questions of subjectivity have been discussed in organizational literature.

In the following sections, I will consider the functionalist, the interpretivist and the critical approach and address how each of them has mobilized notions of individual subjectivity, looking in particular at questions of ontology and epistemology. For every orientation, I briefly outline the state of the art of the discussion pointing out what I find unpersuasive and showing what I believe my framework can add to the conversation.

2.3 The Functionalist Approach to the Study of Organizations

2.3.1 Theoretical Assumptions

The functionalist approach to MOS is by far the most dominant orientation in the field. According to Willmott (1993), functionalist organizational scholarship has gained the status of “*intellectual hegemony*” (p. 681), so much so that scholars that carry out their research from this perspective seldom acknowledge the very specific philosophical commitments that this approach embeds (Alvesson et al., 2008; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Prasad & Mills, 2010; Willmott, 1993). This ‘negligence’ applies to issues regarding ontology and epistemology (not to mention metaphysics) and it indeed concerns the matter of our present investigation, the notion of subjectivity. I shall now outline the main philosophical tenets that inform the inquiry and claims offered by functionalist organizational scholarship. This step is the pre-requisite that will allow us to better appreciate the specific model of subjectivity that has been mobilized in the vast majority of the research in MOS.

Functionalist organizational theory comprises a rich variety of theoretical approaches (scientific management, human relations approach, social system theory, contingency theory, social action theory and so on), however, as Burrell & Morgan (1979) suggest in their seminal work “Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis”, organizational functionalism as a meta-theoretical orientation holds together as a cohesive approach in that it builds on a relatively limited set of assumptions. Ontologically, functionalist organizational scholarship is realist, meaning that it maintains that the social world, just like the natural one, is a tangible entity that exists *a priori* of the human’s appreciation of it (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Organizations are seen as hard and concrete realities that exist ‘out there’ in the real world. Epistemologically, functionalist organizational scholars operate within a positivist perspective. Positivism is a socio-philosophical tradition which revolves around the idea that social reality can be investigated with the same methods and approaches used in the natural sciences. It owes to the thought of thinkers like Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857), considered the father of sociology and of functionalism itself (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and other influential figures like Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, Alfred Marshall, Georg Simmel, William James, George Herbert Mead etc. (see Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Smart & Ritzer, 2001).

One of the main assumptions that characterizes positivist social sciences is the idea that the social world is governed by the same types of regular patterns that are attributed to nature. Thus, the methods of the positive² natural sciences (mathematics,

² The noun *positivism* was introduced into the English language in the nineteenth century. This word has its roots in the French *positivisme*, which derives from *positif*, understood in its philosophical sense of ‘imposed on the mind by experience’.

physics, biology and astronomy) are seen as the most appropriate to explain social reality because of the accuracy they have shown in capturing the general laws of the natural world. Positivism claims that scientific knowledge is the only authentic knowledge in that it is the unbiased outcome of a process of systematic verification of hypotheses against hard reality. Functionalist organizational theory rooted in positivism posits that, through valid conceptualizations and reliable measurements, it is possible to discover the underlying laws that regulate organizations and predict their dynamics and behaviors in order to improve efficiency and productivity.

2.3.2 The Individual as a Subject of Science

Given the positivist emphasis on the theme of scientific knowledge, the model of human being that we come across within the functionalist orientation in MOS emerges as a “*subject-of-science*” (Venn, 1984, p. 135). The science Venn refers to is psychology.

Psychology emerged as an autonomous field of knowledge in the second half of the nineteenth century (Canguilhem, 2012), emancipating itself from philosophy with the promise of becoming the “*science of the individual*” (Venn, 1984, p. 127) and, more specifically, the “*science of the mind and its behavioral manifestations*” (Venn, 1984, p. 127). For Venn (1982, 1984), the conditions of possibility for the separation between psychology and philosophy have their roots in Darwin’s theory of evolution and in particular what Venn calls the project of “*naturalization of the human mind*” (1984, p. 141), namely the idea that the human mind itself has to be considered an object of

scientific investigation. This link between subjectivity and science is foundational in order to understand the primacy of this construction of subjectivity in MOS. Let us explain it.

With the Enlightenment the human mind began to be viewed as characterizing man's uniqueness, the divine attribute by virtue of which man could distinguish himself from the rest of nature and control it. One of the main figures that contributed to the shift of the understanding of the human experience in the world is traditionally identified in René Descartes' (1596 - 1650). His idea that the conscious self is the starting point of attainable and truthful knowledge is a key element of Western philosophy. "Cogito ergo sum" is the first step towards knowledge in that it places the conscious process of observation and analysis as the foundation for the quest for truth (Descartes, 1968). According to Descartes, some forms of knowledge could be illusive or imaginary. Thus, to make sure knowledge is not deceptive, one needs to doubt everything and only what the conscious self can verify can be accepted as truthful knowledge. Following this line of reasoning, the very act of questioning one's own existence proves the reality of one's own mind, and this is because there must be a thinking self for there to be a thought. In this sense, 'the self' that is theorized by Descartes is a self that can know, order and consequently dominate the world through its rational faculties, through intellect, logic and reason.

This shift in the understanding of the human mind underpinned the thought of another seminal figure associated with the Enlightenment, Charles Darwin. Before the Enlightenment, the idea that the human mind could itself be made the object of

scientific explanation was unavailable because human reason was understood as something divine, something that existed *a-priori* to human cognition (Venn, 1982, 1984). Darwin rejected this idea and, conversely, posited a very materialist conceptualization of man's mind based on his theory of evolution. For him, in order to survive, different species transmute from one to another in the attempt to adapt to the environment. In doing so, subjects physically transform their traits to better accommodate the new conditions. Following this logic, Darwin dragged man's 'unique and divine' attributes into the realm of biology and, in doing so, he made of it an object of scientific inquiry. In Venn's (1984) words: "*the proposition that mind and its capabilities and faculties were amenable to scientific explanations of the same kind as physiological changes clearly brought with it the idea that these capabilities could be investigated using appropriate scientific methodologies*" (p. 144).

It is crucial to notice that the new "science of the individual" took as its key object of investigation essentially the same model deployed by the very philosophy it was releasing itself from (Henriques, 1984; Venn, 1984). In other words, the Cartesian model of man was adopted by psychology with no modifications in its attributes. The only thing that changed was that before Darwin the notion of human mind was seen as God's creation, whereas after Darwin the notion of human mind became the outcome of the evolutionary progress.

This is a crucial shift in the modernist practice of knowledge creation. From this moment on, nature and science started to be viewed as "*mutually underwriting each other's claims*" (Venn, 1984, p. 145). This meant that the modern construction of the

individual came to be considered the norm also because *science* demonstrated so. In other words, science proved that the white European male logocentric rational autonomous self-contained individual was rightfully considered the natural state of human existence and the standard of human normalcy.

Darwinism and, more broadly, biology and natural history (Jacob, 1987) heavily influenced the construction of the subject of psychology. I will focus in particular on the three aspects that are still very much at work in the way in which subjectivity is understood by the functionalist orientation to MOS.

The first influence comes from the Darwinist idea that the human mind was an object of scientific investigation just like every other attribute belonging to each living organism. This point about positivist sciences has already been explained earlier in the chapter, so I will not dwell further into it.

The second influence relates to the conceptual tools that were used in the scientific inquiry of the processes of the mind. For Venn (1984) and Henriques (1984), the biological approach strongly affected the way in which positivist psychology understood its subject and specifically, it perpetuated the idea that the knowledge of a specific organism was subordinated to the knowledge of the group the organism was a member of. In Venn's (1984) words, "*knowledge of living objects became secondary to knowledge of the type to which they belong*" (p. 144). What followed was that the group could be seized by surveying the distribution of the characteristics of each individual member, which came to be viewed as the average of the characteristics of all the

members that were part of the group. Thus framed, the individual exemplar of a category became an average, an abstraction.

The third Darwinist influence on psychology is the notion of normalcy. It is important to notice that, in its practices of classification of living organisms, Darwinism did contemplate possible variations of traits. Before, the way in which biology categorized typologies was based on fixed sets of characteristics that had to be shared among exemplars: had these specific attributes not been there, the exemplar would have been considered a mistake, an abnormality. Darwin surpassed this view, positing that a certain variation of attributes was a means by which one species could evolve and survive. Thus, in its effort to distinguish itself from both philosophy and sociology (Jacob, 1987), psychology set out to a) measure what constituted the “normal” subject, b) measure what could be considered tolerable detouring from the norm and, more importantly, c) provide solutions to fix said abnormalities and take them back to the norm. As Foucault pointed out (Michel Foucault, 1988a, 2006), these anxieties for anomalies and non-conformities (with madness being the most unsettling) were antecedent to the emergence of psychology and got embedded in it with its emergence as a discipline. The clinical gaze calibrating normalcy had already manifested itself in the psychopathological investigations of the eighteenth century, which, for Foucault (1988, 2006), were telling of how madness had come to be seen as the most dreaded condition. This was because madness was claimed to be what prevented man, the modernist rational creature, to see Truth. It is also in this spirit that psychology set out to scientifically standardize the human subject, following “the task of plotting the

distribution of human characteristics, of charting people's 'abnormalities' and 'pathologies'" (Venn, 1984, p. 119).

The reason why I dwelled on the explanation of the role played by science in shaping the model of subjectivity deployed by psychology is because MOS has a tight relationship with psychology. As Nord & Fox (1999) observe, "*organization studies, at least in America, were founded on psychology. Thus, early concerns of organization studies, and the methodologies to study them, fell comfortably within the general paradigm of psychology*" (Nord & Fox, 1999, p. 170). Let us focus on how this construction of individual subjectivity has been mobilized by the functionalist approach to MOS.

2.3.3 The Individual in MOS

The model of human being that functionalist organizational scholars assume as the basis of their theorizations is the modern subject of Cartesian memory, the autonomous, unitary and self-interested model of humanity. The human being is understood as an ostensible self-contained logocentric organism that can be known by means of scientific investigation. One's behaviors are considered manifestations of intelligible mental activities that are regulated by an underlying regularity in their patterns and, as a consequence, actions can be predicted within a certain range of possibilities and, when out of the norm, systems of intervention can be put into place to bring them again into the realm of normalcy.

Interestingly enough, while functionalist organizational theory analyses a high number of organizational phenomena with an impressive range of different types of theory and research, the foundation for the conceptualization of individual subjectivity within this orientation has not significantly changed since the emergence of MOS as a discipline (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Henriques, 1984; Venn, 1984). The point that I am stressing here is that, despite all the different theories and approaches that on the surface might seem very different, the notion of subjectivity in functionalist organizational scholarship has fundamentally remained loyal to a) the presuppositions, b) the methodological tools and c) the type of questions that pertain to the modernist framing of the individual as a tangible entity that exists “for real” and that can be revealed and predicted by scientific inquiry.

It needs to be clear that I am not suggesting that functionalist organizational scholars have been incapable of producing new, original and interesting research; nor that the state of the art of the debate within this paradigm has remained the same as in the early twentieth century. What I am stressing is that, in spite of the sophistication of the model of individual subjectivity mobilized (for example, providing more emphasis on self-interest as opposed to needs and/or or focusing more or less on the role of the social context), functionalist scholars overall still retain a strong attachment to the modern singular, scientific, mentalist, essentialist and rational attributes that of the Cartesian model of selfhood. In this sense, the different theories comprised by the functionalist approach share much more than what it is generally pointed out. Thus, while there are undoubtedly some differences (also very significant in

some cases) on the surface, these tend to gradually dissolve the more one penetrates the modern grounding of positivist scholarship, revealing that, on a meta-theoretical level, these differences are based on a rather limited cluster of ontological and epistemological assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). To substantiate this point, I will now discuss Nord & Fox's (1999) concern with the 'disappearance of the individual from MOS'. In contrast to Nord & Fox, who argue that the psychological and socio-psychological theorizations present radically different understandings of the notion of individual subjectivity, I maintain that the differences between the two approaches is only superficial in that they substantially retain their modernist, realist and positivist assumptions.

2.3.4 The Disappearance of the Individual?

Nowadays, the current status of the discussion about individual subjectivity in MOS is dominated by the notion of "identity" across the board (Alvesson et al., 2008; Miscenko & Day, 2016). This concept has begun to assume a central role in the social sciences starting from the fifties (Gleason, 1983; Wetherell & Mohanty, 2010) and has gained popularity in MOS only in the last thirty years (Alvesson et al, 2008, Miscenko & Day, 2016). Before that, as Nord & Fox (1999) observe, the privileged notion of subjectivity deployed by organizational scholars was the notion of 'the individual'. This is not surprising at all, especially given the links between psychology and MOS explained in the previous section. As Henriques (1984) notes, 'the individual' has always been the generic term mobilized by psychologists to refer to their object of study.

However, starting from the late sixties (Gleason, 1983; Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010; Weigert, 1983), ideas and methodologies coming from sociology, literature, cultural theory and communication studies progressively found their way into MOS (Nord & Fox, 1999) and complicated the essentialist psychological inquiry of the individual. In particular, the insights deriving from social psychology (specifically the Social Identity Approaches (SIA) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Reynolds, 2010) acquainted the functionalist approach with lines of inquiry that, while still stemming from the modern understanding of human being, offered a novel emphasis to social context as an additional element to consider when studying the behavior of the human beings within organizations.

As hinted in the first chapter, the 'social-psychological turn' of the modern conceptualization of the individual has been viewed by some as a radical rupture. Nord & Fox (1999) in particular express their concern for what they view as the *"disappearance of the individual from organization studies"* (p. 148), which they identify as rooted in the shift from the understanding of the individual as the *"independent variable"* in MOS (p. 152) to the focus on the 'individual/social context' relationship. As Nord & Fox (1999) point out, it is psychology (especially in North America) that has passed onto MOS the habit of accounting for behavior in organizations as a result of one's own personal tendencies. Socio-psychological perspectives (see for example Tajfel & Turner, 1979) turned the table by suggesting that the crucial area that needed inquiry was *"that of the relations between man and social change"* (Tajfel, 1979, p. 108) instead of individual traits.

Social identity approaches, that is, those approaches that see ‘who we are’ as stemming from the interaction with the social world, did indeed provide new intellectual inputs to the conceptualization of the human being in organizations and undeniably partially complicated it. However, beyond the surface appearance, they did not undermine the modern, realist and positivist model of the human being. In this sense, Nord & Fox’s claim that MOS has progressively shown a “*growing discomfort with traditional assumptions about human beings*” (1999, p.170) seems to be more a function of the positivist “identity as individual project” (the psychological approach) vs “identity as a social predicament” (the sociological position) debate rather than a substantial shift in theorization. From my perspective, the modern understanding of the human being in MOS has not disappeared at all. On the contrary, it has become the taken for granted backdrop against which mentalist identity processes play out. It is this topic that I shall address in the next section.

2.3.5 The Current Debate in the Functionalist Approach

Today, the state of the art of the functionalist approach to MOS revolves around the construct of identity, which has become a powerful tool to explore a variety of phenomena such as motivation, team performance, role conflict, participation, leadership, organizational commitment and identification and corporate mergers. In the first decade of this century, the mobilization of this notion has become so ubiquitous that Alvesson et al (2008) have proposed the notion of a “*turn to identity*” in MOS (p. 6), observing how researchers utilize this construct to pump fresh blood into the veins of

already existing areas of inquiry without, however, utilizing it as a new overarching “grand theory”.

The trajectory of the theorization of individual subjectivity in the functionalist orientation to MOS has embodied the evolutionary linearity that is assumed by the modern enterprise of knowledge creation. As a socio-cultural formation, modernism views knowledge, in particular when informed by science, as proceeding in a progressive fashion, as a sequence of improvements that lead towards the discovery of the final Truth (Mannheim, 1954). In the functionalist orientation, the theorization of a highly complex phenomenon such as the “human being” has been progressively reduced into smaller, simpler and more manageable ‘portions’, with some of them that having been deemed more relevant than others. Mindful of the ‘technical’ prerogative of the functionalist approach to the study of organizations, it is of no surprise that questions related to a) ‘personal identities’ and b) dynamics of organizational identification have been the ones receiving the lion’s share of attention.

Overall - and the reader will again forgive me for sacrificing detailed examination in favor of a more aerial approach - inquiries dealing with personal identities seek to explore the distinctive and persistent characteristics that make ‘effective leaders’, ‘efficient managers’ and ‘high performing’, ‘highly motivated’, ‘highly committed’ and ‘highly engaged’ employees. For example, theories that look at ‘leadership’ or ‘organizational fit’, ‘motivation’, ‘engagement’, ‘organizational commitment’, not to mention discussions on ‘personality types’ aim at providing metrics that bullet-point the features and actions of an effective leader (in the first case), classifying behavioral traits

and facilitate the matching of a candidate with a certain position in the second, or discovering what stimulate people into being more productive and identify the essential ingredients of resiliency in the third. Functionalist scholars also tackle the dark side of identity, investigating phenomena like ‘burnout’, ‘stress’ and all the pitfalls that hinder the efficient and productive unfolding of organizational life.

The essentialist flavor of this type of research, the use of the curve to create the abstract “normal”, the quest for consistency in patterns and, overall, the underpinning assumption that identity is fundamentally a cohesive ‘mental operation system’ plugged into the ‘real’ individual (the human as a machine that Descartes talked about) enact the modern theme of the quest for “*the essential properties and universal features of the typical human being [in organizations]*” (Nord & Fox, 1999, p. 148). In particular, two different lines of inquiry can be identified.

The first one is a ‘personal identity’ stream, which is heavily influenced by psychological reductionism (Lukes, 1985). From this perspective, organizational identities are conceptualized as the sum of individual traits. While this type of inquiry is still generative these days, a second massively prolific approach of inquiry of identity has emerged in the functionalist orientation, this time targeting the organizational level. This line of inquiry looks at organizations as social wholes. Here, identity is understood in its variant of ‘social identity’, purporting the idea that membership of a specific social group plays a significant role in determining an employee’s own identity.

In MOS, the notion of social identity as influenced by the interaction with the organizational context has massively resonated with scholars, so much so that Tajfel and

Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and consequent elaborations targeted at the organizational sphere (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) have become the most utilized frames of reference to discuss organizational dynamics of group identification and team relations. The SIT approach fuses together sociological and psychological processes bringing the social context under the umbrella of men's psychological mental activities and has unlocked many new aspects of inquiry from a socio-psychological perspective. The topics explored range from what constitutes organizational identification to what creates commitment towards a company but, most importantly, how to leverage identification dynamics in order to improve the efficiency, the productivity and the performance of a company (see for example Reicher et al., 2010; Sass & Canary, 1991; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

The current mobilization of the notion of identity in its socio-psychological version has unquestionably offered new insights to the more psychological reductionist notions of individual subjectivity. Nevertheless, at its core, the functionalist paradigm has never freed itself from the modernist notion of the human being and has kept on exploring how individuals forge their sense of self in a universalist and essentialist fashion, positing an underlying order or "Truth" about humanity that is waiting to be discovered. This way of conceiving the study of organizations is consistent with the idea that the role of MOS should be to provide "prêt-à-porter" knowledge (in its literal sense of ready-to-use) to managers in order to improve productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. However, while the functionalist approach to the study of identity in organizations is the mainstream and the most common, it does not exhaust all the

possibilities of inquiring into organizational life. In the next section I will describe a second orientation, the interpretivist one, which is concerned with the exploration of dynamics of meaning-making and understanding of the human experience within organizational contexts.

2.4 The Interpretivist Approach to the Study of Organizations

2.4.1 Theoretical Assumptions

Interpretivism in MOS is an umbrella notion used to identify those orientations that place man's subjective interpretation of reality at the center of their inquiry (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hatch, 2006; Peltonen, 2016; P. Prasad, 2005). Theoretical and empirical contributions within this orientation and within the critical/emancipatory one (which will be discussed later on in this chapter) constitute a much more modest portion of organizational research in comparison to functionalist studies. Also, I need to stress that the distinctions I am pointing out here between the interpretivist and the critical/emancipatory approach are not as clear cut as it may appear from my account. It is not rare to engage with interpretivist inquiry that is also critical/emancipatory in scope. Nonetheless, cognizant of the limits of this classification, in the context of this chapter I draw a line based on the attention that is paid to issues pertaining to power. Specifically, I identify critical/emancipatory approaches as more interested in tackling the relationship between power-dynamics and the regulation/control of subjectivity, while I view interpretivist research as more keen to look at how actors navigate

organizational situations creating meaningful narratives that allow them to navigate their experience in the workplace.

Interpretivism has its roots deep in German Idealism and, specifically, into Kant's (1724 - 1803) philosophy, which was later re-discussed, complicated and taken into a new direction by Husserl³ (1859 - 1938), a thinker traditionally identified as the "father of phenomenology" (Bryman et al., 2011; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Peltonen, 2016; P. Prasad, 2005). Interpretivist organizational scholarship is varied and comprises a number of different approaches. However, to a certain extent, all of these draws on Kant and on the phenomenological tradition. These two philosophical strands are far from being uniform and cohesive schools of thought so I will follow Prasad's (2005) rationale and highlight three key elements that are common concerns of interpretivist organizational scholarship.

The first key tenet of interpretivism lies in the emphasis given to the human being as a *perceiving subject*. Ontologically, interpretivists offer a subjectivist view of society, positing that social reality is constituted by the way in which phenomena appear to us. The idea here is that we discover the properties of things, situations and organizational dynamics in that we experience and interpret them and not because they possess *in themselves* properties that we then discover through our senses. Interpretivism refutes the ontological realism and objectivism espoused by functionalists and conversely, it posits that social reality cannot be conceived as separated from our experience of it. Thus, while functionalists view organizations as "*stable associations of*

³ I will come back to Husserl in chapter 5, namely the chapter dedicated to the discussion of existentialism.

persons engaged in concerted activities directed to the attainment of specific objectives" (Bittner, 1965, p. 239), interpretivists see them as meaningful intersubjective experiences that are constantly built and rebuilt through interaction symbolically mediated (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Language is considered one of the powerful mediators in that it shapes and informs our grasping of reality.

Interpretivists assume that social reality assume its structure through the names, concepts and labels that help us make sense of it. This is what brings interpretivists to claim that reality is a social construction. One of the accusations that is frequently brought forward by realists is that social constructionists are in a state of denial of the material substance of reality. Yet, the constructionist claim does not negate the concrete level of reality, what it stresses instead is that even physical tangibility "*comes into being through acts of social interpretation and meaningful sense making*" (Prasad, 2005, p. 13).

The second key point shared by interpretivist organizational scholarship is the *intersubjective* dimension of the construction of reality. This means that the individual act of attaching meaning to a certain object or situation is not totally random, but that it is shared by other human beings that accept and reinforce common interpretations. Intersubjective interpretations of organizational realities constitute a primary interest of interpretivist scholars in that, in being constantly reproduced, they come to be seen as 'taken for granted' facts or "*reifications*". As Berger & Luckman (1967) explain, a "*reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things [...] as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic*

laws, or manifestations of divine will" (p. 89). For Chia (1995), MOS is often trapped in reification. As we will see in the next part, the inquiry of identity from the interpretivist perspective cannot call itself innocent from this tricky issue.

The third key element that underpins the interpretivist approach to MOS pertains to what it is considered to be the matter of inquiry. If functionalists place great emphasis on the discovery of objective cause-and-effect relationships and universal explanations of underlying patterns of regularity, interpretivists are interested in understanding how people navigate their professional lives by "getting a grip" of their conditions through the lenses of their own expectations, memories and experiences. In this scenario, the goal of organizational knowledge is to offer theorizations and methodologies to study how people make meaning of their organizational contexts, looking in particular at how intersubjective interpretations and sense-making in social situations emerge and come to be reified. As Prasad (2005) observes, some of the reifications that interpretivist organizational research has unpacked include constructs such as leadership, concepts of masculine and feminine aptitudes and most notably, in the last twenty years, the notion of subjectivity. It is to this key topic that I turn to in the next section.

2.4.2 Roles, Work and Struggle: Subjectivity in the Interpretivist Approach

The primary concern of interpretivist organizational scholars has been linked to what Habermas, (1972) identifies as the hermeneutic knowledge-constitutive interest, meaning the type of knowledge that seeks to make sense of our human condition. In this

scenario, questions such as “who am I?”, “how does one figure out the sense of one’s own subjectivity?”, “how does one create meaningful experience in organizations?” have been mostly addressed in processual terms, pointing at the construction of the sense of self as a relational “work in progress” rather than the “*integral, originary and unified*” (Hall, 1996, p. 15) act of social identification purported by the social identity functionalist approaches.

While broadly maintaining that making sense of who we are is an on-going process that unfolds through the juggling of different elements (e.g. organizational discourses, social roles, personal accounts of the self, memories etc.), interpretivist scholars investigate a variety of aspects that characterize the construction of one’s own identity. Those coming from a symbolic interactionist perspective, for example, draw on Mead’s distinction between the ‘I’ (our personal and distinctive unique individuality) and the ‘me’ (the internalized conception of societal expectations) to seek to understand how one’s job becomes one of the many elements that are to be taken into account in the constant negotiation between one’s own agency and intersubjective pressures and societal expectations (Vaught & Wiehagen, 1991). Others, building on Goffman’s thought (1978), look at identity as an exercise of role-taking, casting light in particular onto the constant compromises that take place between what we perceive as our private self and what we feel we ought to present as our public persona. For example, Hochschild (2012), Rafaeli & Sutton (1991) and Swan (1994) all draw on Goffman’s dramaturgical sensibility to explore the idea of emotional labor, investigating the tensions originated by the pressure that employees feel when they are obligated to

convey a certain professional image when this is not endorsed by a genuine corresponding emotional state or, even worse, when it stands in open contrast with one's personal inclinations. Along the same lines, Kunda (1993) investigates how organizational roles follow systematic and pre-given scripts that determine how employees should feel about their job, looking at their identity as an interplay between phases of 'buying into' and rejecting these organizational prescriptions.

Both the symbolic interactionist and the dramaturgical orientation underscore the importance of the role of language in the ongoing process of creating narratives about ourselves. Language is both an intersubjective artefact and the substance of our self-reflection, and thus it is seen as a fertile site for research in that - using Meads' lingo- it informs how the "I" encounters the "Me", linking the elements deriving from the social dimension of life with more personal emotions, inclinations, desires and memories.

The views of human subjectivity proposed by symbolic interactionism and Goffman's dramaturgy are only two examples of the many conceptualizations organizational scholars have drawn on to discuss how one makes sense of his/her identity. As Miscenko & Day (2016) observe, in the last two decades notions like *identity work*, *identity construction* and *identity narrative* (see for example Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2015; Collinson, 2003; Dunne, 1995; McAdams, 1993; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) have been eagerly mobilized by the interpretivist researchers and also by a substantial portion of the more critical orientations to MOS. These three concepts are partially over-lapping and they are often deployed as complementing each other

(Brown, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). *“Identity work”* has been linked to *“the mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued”* (Alvesson et al. 2008, p. 12, my emphasis). The focus here is on the *conscious processes* that inform the fabrication of a sense of cohesiveness of identity. The reason why I stress the mentalist and cognitivist focus of this research is because it is in agreement with the modern theme of the primacy of the mind over the body. In the organizational literature, identity construction is almost unescapably explained in terms of what happens inside of our heads, reinforcing the idea that knowing who we are is a matter of investigating our mental and cognitive processes, leaving out the flesh and the materiality of our bodies.

Broadly, the literature on identity work regularly grapples with three specific themes.

First, in the literature about identity work the emphasis on the processual character of identity formation is prevalent (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ashforth, 1998; Miscenko & Day, 2016). A second recurrent idea is that identity work is triggered by interfacing and clashing with the organizational context. Encounters with the workplace are viewed as a contribution to the acknowledgement of a more or less precarious sense of self-possession. A third common theme is the notion of *“narrative self-identity”* (Alvesson et al., 2008; Dunne, 1995; McAdams, 1993; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), which is a knowledge device deployed by both the interpretivist and the critical/emancipatory orientation to MOS. *“Narrative self-identities”* are viewed as more or less conscious habitual self-summaries we deploy as means to come to terms with ourselves.

Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003) refer to them as “*stabilizers*” (p. 1184), meaning personal self-arrangements that combine discursive conditions with elements belonging to one’s own life-history. Some studies season the notion of narrative self-identities with a more accentuated element of self-possession. Here, narratives are seen to provide some type of continuity to which one holds on to as a reaction to the instability and precariousness of organizational life. This is the “personal myth” McAdams (1993) refers to; an organizing story that consolidates and orders our own specific mixture of personal history and societal pressures we have to deal with on a daily basis.

As previously mentioned, the contours that delineate interpretivist and more critical approaches to MOS are quite blurry and it is not infrequent to find narrative accounts of identity as the focus of more critical/emancipatory orientations. However, as we will see in the next section, the personal ownership and the sense of cohesiveness in these narratives of the self tend to be challenging studies drawing, in particular, on postmodernism.

2.5 The Critical/Emancipatory Approach to the Study of Organizations

2.5.1 Challenging Realism and Positivism

Critical research is generally referred to as a variety of perspectives that stems from different theoretical traditions, including but not limited to critical theory, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis and postmodernism (see for example Fournier & Grey, 2000; Grey, Huault, Perret, & Taskin, 2016; A. Prasad, Prasad, Mills, & Mills, 2015). These orientations have been linked to Habermas’ (1972) emancipatory knowledge-

driving interest (Alvesson et al., 2008). This type of scholarship seeks to unpack how societal and institutional dynamics shape and inform what we see as “taken for granted” Truths, offering means of emancipation through self-awareness and reflexivity. In MOS, these concerns have been tackled in particular by a specific approach to the study of organizations that, in the last thirty years, has become “*an influential paradigm for organization and management researchers*” (Ajneesh Prasad & Mills, 2010, p. 227). I am referring to CMS, an acronym for Critical Management Studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992).

CMS have been loosely described as “*a branch of management theory that critiques our intellectual and social practices, questions the ‘natural order’ of institutional arrangements, and engages in actions that support challenges to prevailing systems of domination*” (A. Cunliffe, Forray, & Knights, 2002, p. 489). Thus, notwithstanding the variety of theoretical underpinnings that animate CMS, Fournier and Gray (2000) suggest that there are three main concerns that can be said to be broadly shared by CMS scholars.

The first key concern relates to the interest in uncovering how organizational power affects who is in position of weakness and vulnerability by paying attention to issues of inequality, subordination and exploitation (Fournier & Grey, 2000). CMS surface how both organizational processes and organizational research have almost entirely concentrated on questions of rationality, efficiency, performance and managerial control, with no or very little attention paid to the *other* non - managerial voices or practices (e.g., the employees’, the exploited, the weaker etc) (Adler, Forbes, &

Willmott, 2007; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Cunliffe et al., 2002).

A second concern of critical scholarship is to deconstruct the ways in which traditional organizational research is carried out, questioning and problematizing notions and practices that organizational mainstream scholarship views as self-evident and neutral. A third concern shared by researchers that identify with CMS, specifically in its postmodern enactment, is to stress that knowledge is a cultural artefact that comes into being through language and, as such, it is always affected by its creator and his or her worldviews. One of the most problematic aspects of functionalist organizational scholarship is that it seldom – if ever - acknowledges its ontological and epistemological rooting, with the results of “overselling” itself as the universal and truthful knowledge. Contrary to this view, critical approaches are more prone to challenge the idea of the researcher as an external unbiased observer and emphasize the notion of “reflexivity”, understood as being explicit about the philosophical and methodological choices that undergird one’s investigations and claims (Calas & Smircich, 1999; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Grey, 2011).

While critical researchers seem to overall agree on employing an investigative gaze that a) includes inquiry of power dynamics, b) challenges “taken-for-granted” assumptions about organizations and c) presupposes a certain amount of reflexivity, the gravitas with which these concerns are taken largely depends on how scholars conceive and enact their critical/emancipatory edge. In particular, the extent to which critical scholars take issue with modernism varies a great deal. For example, while Marxist scholars are very much concerned with pointing out dynamics of organizational

oppression, their critique is not geared to challenging ontological realism. It is the organizational scholarship rooted in postmodernism that presents a challenge to the modern apparatus. The postmodern approach, promises to surpass the modern ways of thinking about the world stressing in particular “*the incredulity towards metanarratives, the undecidability of meaning, the crisis of representation and the problematization of the subject and of the author*” (Calas & Smircich, 1999, p. 650).

Postmodernism is not the only ‘tradition of the post’ that has been explored by organizational scholars. Poststructuralism, postcolonialism (see Prasad, 2005) and more recently posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013) are also considered productive sensibilities able to inform organizational analysis (see for example Gherardi, 2015). The extent to which postmodernism is viewed as an entirely distinguished and distinguishable ‘tradition of the post’ as opposed to an umbrella term that comprises ‘post’ orientations seeking critique of the modern categorical apparatus is a matter of discussion and much has been written about it (Hassard & Parker, 1993; Peltonen, 2016; P. Prasad, 2005).

Cognizant of the restlessness of this debate, here I will adopt Peltonen’s (2016) view and use ‘postmodernism’ as a broad term that gathers all those different approaches that challenge modern thought and its underlying assumptions. In the next sections I shall sketch out a general working outline of the main characterizing themes of the postmodern sensibility.

2.5.2 Postmodernism

As an approach to knowledge, postmodernism sets out to destabilize the

conviction that a universal, rational and true order of reality exists. The idea that we can hold on to a stable and universal Truth is seen with disenchantment, in that Truth is conceived as a human artefact, and its nature only illusory. While modernism is based on metanarratives that, with their strive to be universally valid, assume that the concepts we mobilize refer to something “out there” that exists beyond representation, for postmodern, all we have is the relationship among concepts as opposed to concepts and “real” object in the “real world”. The inquiry of organizations drawing on postmodernism has been receptive to Lyotard’s (Lyotard, 1984) perplexity towards universal metanarratives and has instead built on the idea that knowledge needs to be seen as a matter of “small stories” or “modest narratives” (“*petit récits*”), which are more apt to capture the unstable, constantly shifting, fragmented and liquid character of the postmodern vision of the social. These small stories do not promise nor pretend to have universal validity, and they are considered as modest products of a certain time and location.

Emphasising the situatedness of knowledge, postmodernism has pushed organizational scholars to “*turn their gaze inwards*” (Calas & Smircich, 1999, p. 651) with the goal of being wary and critical about the philosophical underpinnings that animate the enterprise of doing research (Hassard & Parker, 1993). In other words, postmodern scholarship acknowledges that theorizing about organization is not a neutral predicament but, conversely, it is a power-laden enterprise that requires the effort of questioning one’s own worldview and the transparency to make it explicit. In this sense, postmodernists seek to expose the power dynamics that come into play when choosing

what and how we say (or write) something, or, paraphrasing Latour & Woolgar (1986), how we build order out of chaos, with the latter understood as the multiplicity of possibilities each researcher has to choose from in terms of whose voices to include in a narrative and how, and the former as the inevitable operation of emplotment one has to deal with in attempting to craft a text or a narrative. From a postmodern perspective, a narrative is revealing both because of what it explicitly tells and also because of what it leaves out. Absence becomes an object of inquiry as much as presence, in that it signals choices of privileging some perspectives over other, delimiting the territory of what becomes 'acceptable knowledge'. Postmodernists often find themselves at pains when they negotiate their own way to participate into the "language game", understood as the tension between the cognizance that each of us is necessarily entangled in a discourse and cannot operate from outside of it (Michel Foucault, 1970a) and the power we exert through the choices we must make in order to write a dissertation, a paper, teaching in a classroom and down to all the practices that constitute the production of knowledge. These power-knowledge mechanisms are always at play according to Foucault (Michel Foucault, 1980a), who uses a hyphen to stress the synergic functioning of the two constructs, power and knowledge. These two notions are viewed as constitutive and supporting of each other: on the one hand knowledge is the basis of power and it constantly re-produces it. On the other, power is what creates knowledge and uses it, and, in doing so, it privileges the forms of knowledge that it is interested in establishing while silencing others. Postmodern scholars emphasise the productive dimension of mechanisms of power – knowledge, which they see as the basis of the

practices of social regulation and control that shape and regiment not only how we act, but also who we are as individual subjects and how we think about ourselves. Drawing on these insights, critical organizational scholarship, critical to modern thought, conceptualizes organizations as “*texts⁴ produced by and in language*” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 14), where power dynamics are constantly produced and re-produced in practice supporting a specific model of “appropriate” employee in compliance with what deemed convenient by organisational elites. This is not achieved by an explicit demonstration of hierarchical superiority or by muscular physical subjugation, conversely, it happens through the subtle and constant producing and reproducing of signification that dictates what or who is considered acceptable and desirable in organizations

As we will see in the following section, one of the broad aims of critical scholarship, and in particular, the one displaying a postmodern sensibility, is to suggest how it is the *subject* that constitutes the target of managerial practices of control so that, organizations (and social institutions) can produce the appropriate worker and subordinate him to managerial goals and objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

2.5.3 De-Centered Selves, the Logic of Surveillance and Resistance: The Critical Approach to Subjectivity

As illustrated above, the inquiry of power dynamics takes the spotlight in the critical approach to MOS. Critical scholarship echoes the same interest with regards to

⁴“Text” here is used in its semiotic connotation. It refers to a number of ensembles of signs, ranging from visual text such as films, photography, artwork and advertising to literary text, such as books, newspapers and so on (Eco, 1986).

individual subjectivity, discussing, for example, issues related to the role of organizational elites, discursive mechanisms of regimentation of workers and practices of resistance to power.

The critical approach to MOS broadly focuses on three main problematizations.

a) The modern understanding of identity

The first challenge is directed towards the modern assumptions that underpin the concept of identity. This notion influences the narrative in MOS by providing a cozy sense of comfort and identification with the unitary and rational individual that critical scholarship, specifically in its postmodern enactments, aims at estranging. Some (see for example Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Hall, 1996; Rutherford, 2007) have pointed out that the notion of identity nowadays shows some signs of exhaustion in that it is inextricably entangled with the modern essentialist project that has now lost much of its productive power.

However, while critical organizational scholarship rooted in particular in postmodernism is undoubtedly interested in deconstructing the inner workings that underlie the notion of the Western individual and Western identity with relative implications, studies engaging with the construct of 'identity' are still very, very popular in this approach. Several scholars that identify themselves as critical have offered a number of theoretical and empirical contributions that, while not entirely discounting some of the ontological challenges posited by postmodernism, have preferred to "*take them less seriously*" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1167), especially with regards to

the extent to which the subject is seen as constructed only through discourse. In this sense, it is not rare to see critical/emancipatory studies that deploy the constructs of identity that we have already encountered in the interpretivist approach, namely 'identity work', 'identity construction' and 'narrative identity'. This line of research seeks to strike a balance between a) a non-essentialist understanding of identity that claims that the subject is deeply affected (if not produced) by the organizational contexts, practices and discourses and b) the pro-active ways through which one tries to create a sense of continuity by means of creating self-narratives which allow for the navigation of the messiness, the confusion and the precariousness of life (see, for example, Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

b) Power

A second key theme that characterizes the critical approach to organizational scholarship is the attentiveness to *power relations* and the ways in which they play out in organizational contexts. From this perspective, the modern idea of the human being as the sovereign of his biography and possessing an unmediated sense of self-ownership is not accepted with ease. On the contrary, critical/emancipatory approaches claim instead that subjectivity constitutes the target of organizational practices of control. In this sense, critical (but also some interpretivist) scholars explore how what are considered to be neutral and taken for granted practices of organizational life (supposedly shared mission and vision, values, beliefs, symbols etc.) can shape, more or less voluntarily, a specific type of organizational experience for "*the consumption of the*

employee” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 621; but see also Kunda, 1993; Mumby, 1988; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). More recent studies (dated from the late nineties on) have focused on how organizational practices (e.g. reward systems, leadership deeds, managerial choices, more or less overtly exposed hierarchies and privileges, role and task attribution etc.) can affect employees’ ‘identity work’ by virtue of mechanisms of internalization that end up disciplining behaviors from the inside. According to these studies, managerial practices, by alluring to self-image, values and career trajectories deeply affect how an employee thinks about himself, his values, goals and priorities (Kunda, 1993; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Willmott, 1993). Yet, the extent to which managerial interests is viewed as regulating an employees’ sense of self is a matter of nuances. Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003), for example, present an account of how the interplay of several organizational discourses intertwining with personal life-history, societal expectations, self-perceptions etc. are productive of identity as processes of integration-fragmentation. The hyphen here indicates a middle way between the static and essentialist understanding of the human being as a self-transparent agent and the postmodern notion of the subject as regimented by power-knowledge practices.

In contrast to this “middle ground approach”, some critical organizational scholarship has taken very seriously early Foucault’s theorization of disciplinary power as productive of normalized subjects. Scholars that mobilize the notion of the ‘*anti-subject*’ do not and cannot see any possibility for self-determination in that, in their eyes, man is an outcome of a multitude of discourses, a de-centered unstable subject that is constructed on the fly by forms of power that we internalize and that “act” on us

from the inside. From this perspective, organizational discourses become powerful and pervasive productive forces that produce 'the perfect employee' according to managerially defined goals (see Deetz, 1995).

c) *Resistance*

A third and final theme that critical organizational scholars inquiring into subjectivity have found of particular interest in the last thirty years is *resistance*.

As many have stressed (Collinson, 2003; Anshuman Prasad & Prasad, 2001; R. Thomas, Mills, & Mills, 2004), the inquiry of workplace resistance is not a novel topic in MOS. In the functionalist paradigm, the literature has focused in particular on individual dynamics of organizational misbehavior, misconduct or sabotage workplace conflict, treating resisters and their acts as pathological dysfunctionalities or the results of irrational choices stemming from the fallacies of an individual.

Conversely, scholarship rooted in Marxism or neo-Marxism, has concentrated in particular on the collective struggles of workers versus managers, framing resistance as the natural outcome of structural dynamics of domination and inequality between capital and labor (R. Thomas et al., 2004). In this sense, the traditional perspectives on resistance basically re-enact what Giddens has referred to as the agency vs structure debate (Giddens, 1991).

In the last thirty years, the influence of the Foucauldian (1977) analysis of disciplinary power in terms of panoptic surveillance has challenged the idea that the notion of resistance can be determined a-priori (Anshuman Prasad & Prasad, 2001).

Thus, the focus on resistance has opened up to discussions targeting not only specific acts and behaviors that can be ascribed as recalcitrant of organizational practices, but also to the discursive forms of resistance that occur at the level of subjectivity. An interesting example of this is presented in Brewis' (2004) auto-ethnographical work, in which she reflects on her personal subjective condition that sees her in the paradoxical situation of not recognizing herself as being her. In this sense, on the one hand she is acknowledging that she is "acted" on by a set of pre-defined discourses but, at the same time, she is also mindful that power-knowledge dynamics can be played out creatively and leveraged as practices of self-care (Michel Foucault, 1985), in the pursuit of what she calls, borrowing from Foucault, an "*identity project*" (p. Foucault, 1983, p. 216). Brewis' (2004) understanding of resistance provides a fresh version to the Foucauldian notion of de-centered subject, playfully offering how projects of '*self-bricolage*' (p.33) can constitute viable and, most importantly, creative, practices of resistance at the level of the self.

Postulating an ambiguous, multiple and unstable understanding of selfhood, Kondo's (Kondo, 2009) seminal auto-ethnographic empirical study suggests that resistance is far from being a muscular univocal act of opposition against one clearly identified force. In her work she offers a more nuanced and layered understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and resistance, rejecting the idea of a self-transparent and never-changing idea of resistance that is set in stone within ourselves. For Kondo, resistance is a constitutive part of subjectivity, but, as she stresses (1990), "*words like "resistance" and "accommodation" truly seem inadequate, for apparent*

resistance is constantly mitigated by collusion and compromise at different levels of consciousness, just as accommodation may have unexpectedly subversive effects” (p. 299).

The notion of resistance as discursive has also inspired organizational research interested in investigating how managerial practices operate not only at the level of the individual, but at the level of “*hearts and minds*” (Thomas et al, 2004, p. 4). Deetz, (1995) has eloquently summed up this line of inquiry by commenting how “*the modern business of management is often managing the “insides” – the hopes, fears, and aspirations – of workers, rather than their behaviors directly*” (p. 87).

2.6 Entering the Conversation: Making the Case for an Amodern and Aesthetic Approach to Subjectivity in MOS

So far, this chapter has provided a broad review of the ways in which questions related to subjectivity have been addressed in MOS and for which purpose.

In this final section I will take the discussion to an even ‘bigger picture’ level. Specifically, I will sketch out the underlying ideas that seem to underpin the discussion of subjectivity in MOS, regardless of the specific approach and explain how my framework attempts to tackle these issues I detect. The reason why I do so is because I am interested in pointing out what I consider to be the most egregious grey areas (if not downright blind spots) of the current conversation, so that the contribution I am attempting to make with this dissertation can be as clear as possible.

So, how does subjectivity emerge from organizational scholarship across different orientations? What are its most common themes?

Five main tropes can be taken away from the discussion in this chapter:

- a. 'Who we are' as a mentalist phenomenon;
- b. Lines of inquiry on subjectivity are based on dualisms;
- c. The relationship between subjectivity and action is undertheorized (see Alvesson et al., 2008)
- d. Subjectivity is treated as a metaphysically singular object (see Law, 2004, 2015; Mol, 2002) and
- e. Subjectivity is discussed by means of literal and direct representations (see Law, 2004)

Let us explain each item in the list.

A. *'Who we are' as a mentalist phenomenon*

The first feature that strikes one's attention is that subjectivity in MOS is treated as something that pertains to what happens between our neck and our hair. It does not matter whether we are dealing with an analysis geared to improve organizational engagement or a quest to understand how one negotiates one's own gender in the workplace or how managerial power is changing our sense of selfhood: the central focus of organizational scholars is on *cognitive* processes. Subjectivity is seen to happen, unfold, be perceived and be made sense of behind people's eyes. I dare the reader to pick up a random Organizational Behavior book and find a chapter or a single page dealing with the body. Where is the body? Is not our body who we are?

As an attempt to make justice to modes of knowing that reify our brains over carnal experience and knowledge (Crossley, 1994a), my understanding of subjectivity breaks away with turning an eye blind towards the body. All the three literatures that I engage with, that is, ANT, Foucault's later thought and the existentialisms of De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, make a point of stressing the material, embodied and fleshy dimension of who we are.

B. Lines of inquiry of subjectivity based on dualisms

The second main theme that characterizes the treatment of subjectivity in MOS is that organizational scholarship tends to theorize identity⁵ reifying lines of reasoning that are based on dualisms. Debates like "stability vs instability", "fragmentation vs cohesiveness", "personal vs social", "essentialist vs anti-essentialist", "agency vs structure" tend to define the field of explanation of selfhood by providing the spectrum of possibilities among which one can choose to place one's theoretical position.

While I do not argue that it is useless to have a minimal referential structure in place in order to have a meaningful discussion, drawing on the ANT literature (see Latour, 1993, 1999, 2005; Law & Mol, 1995), my framework makes a point of avoiding discussing subjectivity in terms of normative dualisms. Modern binary thinking is inconsistent with the perspective presented in chapter 6 in that it steers the attention towards a particular pre-given framing of selfhood, whereas my goal is to explore how

⁵ The notion of 'Identity', which is a term that is used in the field of psychology, has become a proxy-term for the human subject in MOS. In my opinion, utilizing the term 'identity' as the spokesperson for human being stresses once again how the materiality and the carnal dimension of existence is systematically ignored in MOS.

subjectivity emerges in different locations in practice as an effect of the formation of a patterned network.

C. Undertheorized relationship with action

As Alvesson et al. (2008) acutely point out, all the different approaches to MOS, to a certain degree, embed the assumption that there is “*some link between identity and action*” (p. 9). However, as the authors stress, what it is not clear is the nature and purpose of this link and the reason why it is relevant to investigate it. Thus, they invite researchers to be explicit in addressing this assumption that often remains peripheral to many theoretical contributions, thus reducing the possibilities of metatheoretical developments.

In my framework, the link between subjectivity and action is foundational because I see selfhood as a performative phenomenon, not as a representational one. Building on the ontological assumption that experience is the substance of phenomena, my claim is that subjectivity *is* action in that it emerges in action, in experience, in existence. As Nietzsche would say, I make no distinction between the doer and the deed. What I maintain is that one’s subjectivity constitutes itself as an effect of an actor-network made of material and non-material entities, a performative outcome that emerges in action through practices of self-care that are an effect of one’s existential project. Moreover, my contribution adds to the extant literature in using a strong aesthetic sensibility to discuss subjectivity, which is a perspective that is seldom found in studies of identity in MOS. From this perspective, I share Foucault’s (2014) astonishment

that *“in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”* (in Foucault, Dryfus and Rainbow, p. 236).

D. Subjectivity as a metaphysically singular object (see Law, 2004, 2015; Mol, 2002).

The fourth point that I want to draw the reader's attention to is that in MOS subjectivity is treated as a singular phenomenon. The assumption is that, as human beings, we deal with a universe and not with a “fractiverse” (Law, 2015, p. 126). This taken-for-granted character of reality is a byproduct of the European/American metaphysical notion that reality is a matter of a-priori existing reals that are outside of us and that we are contained in (Law, 2015). As I will explain in depth in chapter 6, functionalist, interpretivist and more critical scholarships tend to enact a version of metaphysical singularity in that they start off with the idea that subjectivity (in positive or negative terms) is a universal and unitary phenomenon. My framework suggests that there is no one single order to which subjectivity is ascribable to, but, instead, that there are multiple realities of ‘who-we-are’ that co-exist in the present. In other words, my contention is that different enactments of our subjectivity emerge from the different sites where our self is produced. The Caterina produced in the classroom in front of an audience of student, for example, is different from the

Caterina produced on the squash court. The enactment of Caterina performed in Italy with my family is different from the Caterina created in English with my supervisor. It is in this sense that, drawing on Mol (2002), I see the reality of subjectivity as multiple, made up by “*more than one but less than many*” (Mol, 2002, p. 55) styles by virtue of which who I am come to be in experience.

It needs to be clear that stating that subjectivity is a multiple object is not the same thing as saying that subjectivity can be described from different perspectives, which is what organizational scholarship tends to do. As Mol (2002) and Law (2004) make a point to stress, multiplicity should not be confused with perspectivalism, pluralism or fragmentation. These three notions still operate under the assumption that there is a singular reality “out-there”. Perspectivalism implies that there are a number of points of view on a specific reality, which, eventually, is still considered as a singular object. Pluralism and fragmentation suggest that “realities may co-exist in different locations without interfering with another other so long as appropriate ground rules can be put in place to regulate their relations and secure their independence. Hence a version of singularity (since ground rules would need to be shared by all)” (Law, 2004, p. 162). In contrast to these views, multiplicity refers to the simultaneous enactment of realities in different practices, when these objects are said to be the same. Thus, the argument I set out to explore in this dissertation is that the reality of subjectivity is multiple, implying that the different versions of who we are that are produced in different locations overlap and interfere with one another.

E. Subjectivity described by virtue of direct and literal representations

The last trope shared by organizational scholarship across paradigms is its tendency to describe subjectivity in linear and direct manners. Law (2004) sees the reliance on as another trope of Euro/American modes of crafting academic knowledge. Within the Euro/American context, descriptions are supposed to describe reality in a straightforward, clear and direct way. However, this reliance on direct representations is misleading in that it brackets out and conceals all the practical work that goes into producing the reality of subjectivity, as I will explain in chapter 3. According to Law (2004), the problem with direct and linear representations is that they are not well suited to discuss about realities that are not linear and simple. This is why, drawing on ANT and on de Beauvoir's use of example in particular, in this dissertation I set out to provide a way to discuss subjectivity that is more 'generous' (Law, 2004), attempting to make justice to the complexity, richness and ambiguity of who we are as subjects.

Table 2.1 presents an overview of the main issues I detect in the treatment of subjectivity in MOS and how my framework attempts to tackle them.

Issue	How my framework tackles it	Literature(s) involved and related concepts
Subjectivity as a mentalist phenomenon	Subjectivity as a phenomenon that unfolds as material and embodied	<u>ANT</u> (attention to materiality) <u>Foucault</u> (attention to how power/knowledge dynamics do to the body)

		<u>Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir</u> (embodiment – the body as the opening to the world)
Lines of inquiry of subjectivity based on dualisms	Subjectivity is achieved in practice	<u>ANT</u> (amodernism and relationalism) <u>Foucault</u> (aesthetics of existence – the subjectivity as a work of art) <u>Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir</u> (ambiguity, intersubjectivity and de Beauvoir’s ‘arts of living’)
Undertheorized relationship with action	Subjectivity is action in that it unfolds in practice	<u>ANT</u> (paying attention to the practice) <u>Foucault</u> (aesthetics of existence – building oneself up as a work of art) <u>Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir</u> (focus on experience, ‘arts of living’ as a creative endeavor of self-possession)
Subjectivity as a metaphysically singular object	Subjectivity is a multiple object	<u>ANT</u> (multiplicity)
Overreliance on direct and linear representations of subjectivity	More generous methods, gatherings of examples	<u>ANT</u> (researcher as part of the network, re-assembled thick descriptions) <u>de Beauvoir</u> (use of examples as a performative allegory)

Overall, my framework “*encourages productive confusion*” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 62) with the extant debate in the study of organizations by offering a framework based on three literatures:

- 1 ANT
- 2 Foucault’s aesthetics of existence and

3 Merleau-Ponty and De Beauvoir's existentialism

These three bodies of thought will be explored in chapter 3, 4 and 5. In chapter 6, I will combine them together in my original theoretical framework, making a point of explaining how I see them being compatible.

*“We have to remember that what we observe is not nature herself,
but nature exposed to our method of questioning”*

Werner Heisenberg

“Realities are fabricated but they are not less real for that”

Bruno Latour

3.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of the first body of knowledge that informs my theoretical contribution, Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 1993, 2005; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Law, 1992, 2009). While ANT was not primarily developed with the goal of exploring human subjectivity, its ontological and methodological insights infuse the alternative reflections on selfhood that I offer in this dissertation.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I will present the core tenets of ANT, paying particular attention to the ones that are relevant to the development of my framework. Second, I will explain how ANT as a method of creating knowledge sets out to “tell stories about ‘how’ relations assemble or don’t” (Law, 1992, p. 2) and I will outline the main criticisms that have been moved against it. Third and last section, I will sketch out the understanding of subjectivity that emerges from ANT.

3.2 The Actor-Network Approach

ANT is generally associated with scholars such as Bruno Latour (1987, 1993, 2005; with Woolgar, 1986), John Law (Law, 1986, 1992, 1994, 2009) and Michael Callon (1984, 1986; with Latour, 1981; with Law, 1982). As Law (1992) explains, ANT is “a

disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located" (p. 2). For ANT scholars "*interaction is all there is*" (Law, 1992, p. 2), meaning that the world is made up of bundles of heterogeneous interactions (comprising both human and non-human actors) that are performed in practice. In this sense, ANT is a constructivist approach and rejects essentialisms. Its main interest is to understand how different elements combine, interact and associate with each other and come to hold together as what we consider 'the social'. ANT offers an understanding of reality that differs from realism: society is not seen as an outer reference, an a-priori backdrop against which one tests different hypothesis, but as a combination of heterogeneous elements that stick together. The main concern of ANT scholars is not to explain "*what holds us together, but rather it is what is held together*" (Latour, 1986, p. 276).

This understanding of reality is foundational in my way of conceptualizing selfhood.

From my perspective, the self is not an essential substance that requires to be explained.

I do not conceive the self as an anterior and independent substance that needs to be uncovered. Paraphrasing Law (1986), I do not assume the self to be the referent of a definition, but as something that is "*being performed through its various efforts to define it*" (p. 18). Specifically, as I will explain in chapter 6, my argument is that our subjectivity unfolds in practice, in a series of situated networked relations made up of

heterogeneous elements that hold together and, in doing so, enact aesthetic projects and strategies of self-organizing and self-coordination (or 'poetics of the self'⁶).

As it has been pointed out (Latour, 1999a; Law, 2009), the use of the word 'theory' in the label ANT is deceiving. 'Theory' is commonly understood as an abstract account that explains *why* something hangs together the way it does. However, ANT does not bother with imposing rationales or rationalizations on what is-in-the-world. This is why ANT scholars tend to be wary of the word "theory" and prefer to describe ANT as a "*socio-philosophical approach*" (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010, p. 419), a "*method*" (Latour & Callon, 1981, p. 292; Law, 2000, p. 4), "*a toolkit*" (Law, 2009, p. 2) or "*a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world*" (Law, 2009, p. 2).

ANT has achieved its current status of autonomous approach to sociology in the eighties and in the nineties (Law, 2009) and nowadays it constitutes an established methodological framework. Moreover, at the turn of the century, a specific development of ANT has been broadly captured under the label of 'ANT and After' (Law & Hassard, 1999). While encompassing many of the insights brought about by the ANT literature, 'ANT and After', drawing specifically from disciplines like anthropology (Strathern, 2004) and gender studies (D. J. Haraway, 1991), places its emphasis and elaborates on tropes such as ontological politics, multiplicity (Mol, 1999a, 2002) and complexity (Law, 2004; Law & Mol, 2002).

⁶ In this dissertation I use the word 'poetic' as understood by Luciano Nanni (that is, an aesthetic and creative project). I will explain this choice in chapter 6.

ANT is far from being a monolithic approach and it gives its best when mobilized in empirical examples⁷ (Law, 2009). Nonetheless, it is indeed possible to sketch its core tenets in more ‘theoretical’ (or abstract) terms. Thus, in the following sections, I will illustrate how ANT understands social reality, discussing how its approach erodes the traditional distinction between ontology and epistemology and modifies the frames of reference we traditionally and a-critically rely on when we think about ‘the social’.

3.3 Realities Made in Practices

3.3.1 From the Investigation of Scientific Practices to ANT

ANT has its roots deep into the interdisciplinary field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). This area of inquiry was developed in the Sixties and the Seventies and it problematized the idea of science as a neutral and objective process of ‘discovery’ of a stable and independent reality existing ‘out-there’. In particular, STS scholars would explore how social, political and cultural factors affected and moulded the creation of science and technology (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987; Ihde, Selinger, Haraway, Pickering, & Latour, 2003).

A key example of STS research is “*Laboratory Life*” (Latour & Woolgar, 1986), which presents an ethnographic account of the day-to-day operations that occur in a laboratory. The book was written by philosopher/anthropologist Bruno Latour⁸ in

⁷ ANT has been deployed across many different disciplines, informing studies on business history (see for example Durepos and Mills, 2012), architecture (Sarvimaki, 2019), anthropology (Oppenheim, 2007), environmental studies (Goodman, 2001), accounting (Corrigan, 2016), journalism (Fioravanti & Velho, 2010), economics (Callon, 1991; Callon, Méadel, & Rabeharisoa, 2002), and organizational studies (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010; Hemes & Czarniawska-Joerges, 2005).

⁸ Latour’s disciplinary affiliations are far from being easily categorized. As he explained in an interview (Crease et al., 2003) “*although I teach sociology I have always considered myself as a philosopher at heart, but of course, let me add that no one in France*

collaboration with sociologist of science researcher Steve Woolgar and it is considered a precursor of ANT. While in its pages there is no mention of ANT as a 'label' of a specific research approach, many of the signature notions that will become foundational to ANT are already present in embryonic form. Given the relevance that these insights had in the development of ANT, it is worth delving into them.

In "*Laboratory Life*", Latour & Woolgar (1986) approached the question 'how does scientific knowledge come to be?' from a material perspective⁹, noticing how scientific practices are not exclusively ascribable to humans but they also extend to a variety of non-human actors (from the desks where scientists typed their results to machinery used to carry out the experiments and so on). According to their observations, if one attends to the practices of how science comes to be in a laboratory, the lines that divide what are commonly thought to be distinct realms (e.g., human and non-human, nature and culture) are very blurred. In the workings of the laboratory, "*most claims about the world are vague and promiscuously mix the social and the natural*" (Law, 2009, p. 4). The creation of scientific knowledge does not appear to be the objective and unbiased process of "*nature somehow impressing its reality directly on those who study it if they just set aside their own biases*" (Law, 2004, p. 19). Conversely, in Latour & Woolgar's (1986) eyes, science boils down to a bundle of heterogeneous more-or-less routinized practices. These practices are not exclusively 'social', that is, ascribable only to the scientists, but they also involve a number of other material and

ever took me as really a sociologist nor as a professional philosopher, nor for that matter an anthropologist. (...) I would define myself as an 'empirical philosopher', (...), someone who tries to get at classical philosophical questions through the methods of fieldwork and case studies" (p. 15).

⁹ As Law (2004) observes, Latour & Woolgar "*wouldn't call themselves materialists because they do not think that everything derives from, or can be ultimately explained in, material terms*" (p. 19)

non-material accomplices (e.g. instruments, tools, books, notions, texts, other people and so on) without which scientific knowledge could not be.

For Latour & Woolgar (1986), all the material elements involved in the scientific practices (the bioassay, the computers, the desks, the machines but also the spatial arrangement that characterize the life of a laboratory) play a crucial role in the performance of scientific knowledge not only because they are mere tools through which scientists create science. This reading would reinforce the notion that it is the scientists' activity that is the one to be privileged, which is what Latour & Woolgar (1986) are questioning. Conversely, what they argue is that *"if we become attentive to humbler ways of speaking, [the] agency shifts from the all-powerful master to the many "things", "agents", "actants" with which they have to share the action"* (Latour, 2003, p. 31). In other words, the bioassay and the word processor, for example, not only facilitate the scientists' job, they are also active producers of scientific knowledge. In Latour & Woolgar's (1986) words, *"not simply [does] phenomena depend on certain material instrumentation, the phenomena are thoroughly constituted by the material setting of the laboratory."* (p. 64).

Let us discuss this point in the following section. It is in fact crucial to understand how ANT conceives the social.

3.3.2 Inscription Devices

By paying close attention to what possesses agency in the laboratory, Latour & Woolgar (1986) observe that particular arrangements of materials and practices (e.g.,

the bioassay) constitute what they define as *'inscription devices.'* An inscription device is *"any item of apparatus or particular configuration of such items that can transform a material substance into a figure or a diagram which is directly usable by one of the members of the office space"* (Latour & Woolgar, 1986, p. 51). For example, an inscription device can start out with mice that are subjected to specific manipulations so that some substances can be extracted out of them. These substances end up in test tubes that are placed into a machine that performs some kind of action. At the end of this process, the machine expels a sheet with some numbers, graphs and curves. The mice have become a series of numbers and figures on a piece of paper and the network (or, as Law, 2004, calls it, the *'hinterland'*, p. 32) that has produced those very numbers and graphs on the sheet has gone, it has been bracketed off. Thus, at this stage producing scientific knowledge becomes the business of comparing graphs and curves.

Latour & Woolgar's (1986) main takeaway is that scientific realities are constructed in practices, which involve inscription devices and the networks within which they are situated. However, this leads to another question: if, as they maintain, scientific realities emerge from the practices in the laboratory, why do we engage and treat them as if they were independent and a-priori?

3.3.3 Making Scientific Facts

To explain how the enterprise of creating scientific knowledge unfolds in practice in the ways that it does, we need to go back in the laboratory and attend to what happens once a new substance has been discovered. At this stage, the location where

science is produced shifts from the bioassay (the inscription device) to the scientists' desks, where the scientists now engage with many different texts. Some of these were originated internally in the Salk institute (e.g. the printed reports coming out of the machines, notes, meeting minutes) while others had been produced elsewhere (e.g. scientific journals, academic reviews, books etc.). These texts are now compared one against the other, with the goal of coming up with new claims that carry legitimacy so that they can be communicated outside of the laboratory. Latour & Woolgar (1986) notice that the claims and statements with which scientists work are not all the same in terms of strength. They vary according to the level of strength and potential controversy that they generate. Some claims are merely descriptive, but others, like *modalities* (p. 78), introduce some degree of qualification or contextualization that provide a more solid rooting. For example, the citation of the work of another scientist is a modality and it lends strength to the new statement by reinforcing it with its already validated legitimacy.

The statements that scientists in the laboratory are aiming at producing are the unqualified ones, that is, statements that do not require further explanation or qualification. The more a new statement presents similarities and affinities with the ones that are already 'out-there', the stronger it will be and the less controversy its 'stand-aloneness' will raise, meaning that it will require fewer and fewer modalities to qualify it. Following Latour & Woolgar (1986), in the laboratory "*the objective [is] to persuade colleagues that they drop all modalities used in relation to a particular assertion*" (p. 81).

As Law (2004) stresses, at this stage the enterprise of creating scientific knowledge requires some kind of literary engagement. However, Latour & Woolgar (1986) are *not* reducing science to an exercise of creative writing. Scientific statements are not fantasies, they are not made up out of such stuff as dreams are made of. On the contrary, they relate and interact with hinterlands that include already existing knowledge. The more the quality of the hinterland of a claim is reinforced and supported by others, the stronger the claim is. The less the statement relates with others, the weaker it becomes and the more likely it is to “*enter the limbo of the might-have-beens*” (Law, 2004, p. 29).

Overall, “*Laboratory Life*” conceives the enterprise of creating scientific knowledge as a matter of relating, coordinating and harmonizing traces left by material modalities that are transformed into texts by inscription devices. But, again, it needs to be clear that Latour & Woolgar (1986) are *not* trying to argue that scientific facts are not real. What they are pointing at us that the ‘realness’ of facts we take for granted “*is the consequence of scientific work rather than its cause*” (Latour & Woolgar, 1986, p. 182, my emphasis). In Law’s (2004) eloquent words, “*the practices of science make relations, but as they make relations they also make realities*” (p. 29). The takeaway message is that ‘reality’ and the ‘knowledge of reality’ - scientific and, as we will see with ANT, also social - are not two separate entities. The way in which one questions and interact with a specific reality also concurs in creating it. Knowing reality is making it (Law, 2004). But, as Latour & Woolgar (1986) make clear, making realities is a very costly activity and it requires a lot of work.

By now, the idea that realities are made in practice is sufficiently been explored. But how do Latour & Woolgar (1986) make sense of the strong grip that the realist modernist understanding of reality has on us?

3.3.4 Concealing Modalities

As seen in the previous section, the goal of scientists (including social scientists) is to produce statements that are unqualified (that is, statements that carry such a high level of authority that they are perceived as standing alone). To reach this effect of autonomy, all the modalities that are part of the hinterland that have created and sustained these statements have to be rendered invisible¹⁰. From this perspective, Latour & Woolgar (1986) see scientific facts akin to a two-headed coin with one face made up by a bunch of words that state something about an entity, and the other face corresponding to the entity “*which takes a life on its own. It is as if the original statement had projected a virtual image of itself which exists outside of the statement*” (p. 37).

We have now reached the final stage of the process of making scientific realities: the causal reversal. This is where “*the end product*” (Latour & Woolgar, 1986, p. 64) of the many negotiations of different inscriptions starts to be seen as *anterior* to the whole process. In Latour & Woolgar’s (1986) words “*more and more reality is attributed to the object and less to the statement about the object. Consequently, an inversion takes*

¹⁰ As Latour & Woolgar (1986) stress, for example, the very perspective of the scientist is perhaps the first modality that needs to be concealed because it undermines the authority of the statement. Science operates on the Euro/American common-sense assumption that reality is anterior, independent and singular, and that scientific statements are the accurate reading of this reality.

place: the object becomes the reason why the statement was made in first place" (p. 183). This means that the scientific reality that has been produced by the concatenations of actions, things, inscription devices, scientists and so on now starts to be seen as the *explanation* of that reality, that is, as if the fabricated reality existed first.

The idea that scientific reality is an achievement, an accomplishment or a destination constitutes Latour & Woolgar's key takeaway of "*Laboratory Life*" (1986). This vision stands in stark contrast to the Euro/American metaphysical understanding according to which we deal with an independent, anterior, definite and singular 'out-there-ness' (Law, 2004). For Latour & Woolgar (1986), it is how reality comes to hold together that needs to be explored, not the contrary. "*Laboratory Life*" (1986) emphasises how much instability, uncertainty and messiness are baked into the ways in which we construct our realities. It also suggests how concealing the hinterlands that have produced certain realities purifies them from their constituting chaos and ambiguity, making us perceive them as singular, unitary, sanitized and well-definite effects.

As mentioned earlier, "*Laboratory Life*" (1986) is not a book strictly about ANT. Nonetheless, the key insights that have been discussed in this section have, in particular, offered a fertile ground for ANT to grow. Specifically, I am referring to the questioning of the nature of reality as understood in a modernist sense. It is this topic and its ramifications that I tackle in the next sections.

3.3.5 ANT: An Amodern Approach to the Social

From an ontological perspective, ANT is rooted in amodernism (Latour, 2005). An explanation of what an amodern approach looks like is offered in Bruno Latour's seminal "*We have never been modern*" (1993). In this book, Latour carries out an anthropological analysis of modernity.

For him, 'being modern' refers to a specific way of making sense of reality which has been framed as an emancipation of a previous way of conceptualizing the world, the one pertaining to the Middle Ages. As Latour (1993) maintains¹¹, the Middle Ages were characterized by what moderns have deemed an unsophisticated and naïve promiscuity between different realms of reality: human and non-human, nature and culture, subject and object and so on. The modern way of conceiving the world which emerged in the seventeenth century challenged this pre-modern indiscrimination. Specifically, it assumed that human beings and their rational minds were the privileged entities in the world by virtue of their ability to grasp, control and change reality, which they understood as an independent a-priori out-there-ness. However, according to Latour (1993), the primacy bestowed to the humanist/dualist approach resulted in the under-consideration of the material side of the equation. This brought moderns to think that humans and non-humans were separated and separable entities not only in abstract theory, but also in practice. Latour offers different examples of the moderns' way of reasoning. Thomas Hobbes is one of these. He conceptualized politics in terms of human conflicts and divergences, extrapolating the material circumstances in which disagreements and controversies had taken place. Robert Boyle, his fellows at the Royal

¹¹ For some contentiously, see Pickering (1995).

Society and the emergence of experimental science constitute another example of the modern pretensions, with the idea of science as a neutral activity that has nothing to do with who performs it.

While in *“Laboratory Life”* (1986) Latour elaborated on the notion of scientific knowledge as sustained by a system that systematically conceals and deletes traces, in *“We have never been modern”* he (1993) explains how processes of purification constitute the primary feature of the modern categorical apparatus. According to him, modernism is sustained by the notion that reality is made up by neatly distinguished and distinguishable ‘purified’ realms (e.g., the social, the material, the political, the scientific, the emotional, the organizational and so on). While these different domains can overlap and interface with each other, moderns consider them as essentially separated. The assumption at work here is that nature is independent from culture, that science deals with object and politics with subjects and, most notably, that humans are separated from non-humans. This is why, for example, good science is understood as such when it is perceived as independent from social, political or emotional circumstances.

According to Latour (1993), these artificial segregations made up by moderns work very well *in theory* because, as we have seen in the previous section, they allow for the creation of realities that constitute a map of the world *and*, at the same time, provide an explanation of it. This is valid not only for what pertains to the creation of knowledge about the natural, but also for the social sciences.

In other words, for Latour, just like science, sociology fabricates social realities with its methodological actions and tools (which are very similar to the ones used by the

scientists in the laboratory, specifically in the case of positivist sociology, see chapter 2). Then, exactly as it happens with scientific statements, also sociological accounts are purified from the processes and inscription devices that have produced them and they come to be seen as the reality of a certain society.

Latour (1993) has a problem with the purification processes required by the modern formula. According to him, the maps constructed by modern traditional sociology provide only abstract representations of the world and do not make justice to the fact that, in our daily experience, the neat and certain lines that the modern sociology traces are not so neat and certain. Thus, Latour's idea of amodernism makes a point to voice that, *in practice*, we are always engaging with 'hybrids', that is, with heterogeneous networks of humans and non-humans, science and politics intertwined, of nature and culture smashed together. As we have seen before (section 3.3.3), science is not the sanitized and objective enterprise that moderns make it to be. An amodern eye sees a laboratory more akin to a construction site (Latour, 2003, p. 27), where scientific claims are fabricated in interaction with technology. Technology, in turn, is not a produced in a vacuum. Amodernism sees it as embedded and emerging in geographical, social, environmental and political contexts which get all meshed together into the final product. To be clear, amodernism posits that ontologically everything is part of networks of associations and that nothing has (or is) reality outside of these networks.

Amodernism is one of the main ingredients that constitutes the alternative framework of selfhood in MOS that I present in this dissertation. As I will explain in

chapter 6, my argument is that our subjectivity emerges in practice in social *and* material conditions that cannot be separated and purified one from the other. From this perspective, amodernism allows us to put the very idea of what constitutes the 'I' under critical scrutiny and it cautions us against accepting uncritically the traditional dualisms that are deployed when discussing subjectivity (mind vs body, agency vs structure, unity vs fragmentation etc). In other words, the amodern perspective highlights that the traditional ways of framing the reality of the self are extremely powerful and productive fabrications that need to be explained and questioned as opposed to being used as a starting point for an exploration of subjectivity.

Before proceeding with the explanation of ANT, one crucial consideration is needed. It is important to notice that amodernism should not be confused with postmodernism. As Latour (1993) explains, postmodernism is a reaction to modernism and, as such, it constitutes itself as a by-product of the latter. In criticizing moderns, postmoderns only add another twist on modernism. Postmodernism does not succeed in cutting its ties with modernism in that it configures itself as an amended version of it. This is why Latour (1993) writes that postmodernism is only "*a symptom [of modernism], not a fresh solution*" (p. 46). The amodern ontological grounding of ANT, conversely, allows for a conceptualization of social realities that implies a change in the references that are used to determine what the social is. Let us turn to this topic in the next section.

3.3.6 Social Realities Enacted in Practice

As explained so far, the idea that realities are fabricated in practice along with the statements that depicts them – a key trope discussed by Latour & Woolgar (1986) – is foundational to ANT.

From an ANT perspective, society is to be understood as something that is “*accomplished or achieved*” (Law, 2004, p. 38) as opposed to be seen as an essence that has an anterior, ostensible and determinate form of its own. The apparent independency and anteriority of social reality is an effect that is achieved through practices as a consequence of a specific method (Law, 2004). This means that, in the same way in which scientific realities are brought into being by scientists, sociologists contribute to enact the social in practice.

To better understand this point, Law (2004) and Law & Urry (2004), reflect on one of the most common methodological tools used by sociologists, statistics. As Law (2004) explains, statistical methods showed up in the eighteenth century with the goal of collecting economic and demographic information about a certain group of people. Over time, statistical tools of measurement and quantification (censuses, surveys etc.) have become integral parts of the hinterlands on which the social sciences built on. As a consequence, the maps of the social realities brought to life by these tools have emerged embedding very specific views on the nature of society. Moreover, the rationales underpinning these tools have informed strategies of political and social control. Nowadays, the number of practices built on statistical data is so high that attempting to change them is not even an option because it would be too costly and too complicated. Thus, Law (2004) notices, our society enacts quantitative, individualist and

rationalist traits, and the hinterlands that have produced it is both embedded and productive of sociological research. This indiscernible process of 'making' and 'knowing' of social realities (Law, 2004) is what ANT scholars refer to when they argue that social sciences not only describe the social world; they also produce it in practice. But, just like in the case of science, also here it needs to be clear that maintaining that societies are made in practice does not mean that they are not real or that statistics are imaginary fantasies. As Law & Urry (2004) write, "*while the real is indeed real, it is also made, and (...) it is made within relations*" (p. 395). In other words, the key point here is that reality is a relational effect. "*Interaction is all there is*" Law explains (1992, p. 2), meaning that, from an ANT perspective, social reality is brought into being and stabilized in relations that are both material and social. Thus, ANT is not realist nor relativist. It is not realist in that it does not assume that reality is an a-priori 'given' out-there, but it is not relativist in that it does not see reality as an arbitrary invention. Besides, as Law & Urry (2004) observe, relativism makes more of an epistemological argument (it targets the nature of knowledge about an anterior independent reality), while in ANT the distinctions between ontology and epistemology collapse because reality is seen as being fabricated by different methods and performed. Let us discuss this point.

As previously hinted but not elaborated, methods are productive of social reality in that they *enact* it. ANT understands reality as an 'enactment' or as a 'performative effect', meaning that it looks at society as "*performed through the various efforts to define it*" (Law, 1986, p. 18). In this sense, the social is conceived as something that is endlessly "*brought into being in a continuing process of production and re-production*

and having no status, standing or reality outside of these processes” (Law, 2004, p. 159).

In other words, the goal of ANT scholars is not to explore what *“holds us together, [but instead] what is held together”* (Latour, 1986, p. 276).

My discussion of subjectivity presented in this dissertation borrows on the performative sensibility of ANT. Specifically, in chapters 6, 7 and 8 I will suggest that ‘who one is’ is not a state of nature, a true essence or a projection of an inner self but, instead, a bundle of practical performances that come to assume their reality through their enactments in practice.

3.3.7 Multiplicity

From its amodern stance, ANT and, more specifically, its development into ‘ANT and After’ (Law, 2004; Law & Hassard, 1999; Mol, 1999b, 2002), questions another trope that is foundational in Euro/American metaphysics, namely the idea of reality understood as singular.

As a performative approach, ANT sees the methods that are used to achieve a certain reality as actively contributing to the creation of reality (see previous section). The implication that derives from this line of reasoning is that different methods will enact different realities. As Law & Urry (2004) remark, this is not a particularly controversial claim. It is common for social scientists to obtain different results when implying different methods and there are some common explanations for this. Law & Urry (2004) points at three main ways. The first one is to explain away the differences in results by looking at the quality of the methods used. This is an epistemological argument which portrays the idea that some methods are better than others at

capturing the nature of reality. The second explanation is more pragmatic. It maintains that methods are tools and different tools are deployed for different purposes. In other words, in some instances it is probably better to approach reality from a quantitative perspective while in others it makes more sense to mobilize a qualitative sensibility. The last way to explain differences in results is by invoking the idea that there are different perspectives. '*Perspecivalism*' refers to the notion that there is one single outer reality that can be appreciated from several different standpoints (that is, perspectives). The reality we are observing is one, but it is approached from different locations.

All these explanations are plausible, but, as Mol (2002), and, following her, Law (2002; 2004) and Law & Urry (2004) notice, the problem with all of them is that they do not take into consideration the idea that methods are performative. But if one accepts that methods contribute to the creation of realities, then one can logically conclude that different methods will contribute to the creation of different realities. Thus, we are not dealing with a singular reality, but with a multiple one. "*Not a universe, but a pluriverse*" (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 399).

In "*The Body Multiple*" (Mol, 2002), Annemarie Mol plays with this line of reasoning in her exploration of how lower limb atherosclerosis is diagnosed and treated. What emerges from her work is that *in theory*, atherosclerosis can be conceptualized as a singular disease. However, *in practice*, atherosclerosis is a multiple object. In the hospital, atherosclerosis is different things in different locations. In the surgeon's office, it shows up as pain when walking, in the operating room it is something white that needs to be scrapped away from the vessels, in radiology it takes the form of an x-ray

that shows blood vessels that are obstructed, etc. (Mol, 2002). One might argue that these are all different ways of seeing one singular disease, however, the point that Mol (2002) makes is precisely against this, for perspectivalism “*multiplies the observers but leaves the object observed alone*” (p. 12). Mol’s claim, instead, is that atherosclerosis is a multiple object, that is, “*more than one and less than many*” (p. 55). By doing so, she moves the conversation about the reality of atherosclerosis into the realm of ontology, that is, *from the description of phenomena to the phenomena themselves*. Not only does Mol argue that realities emerge in practices, but also that different practices give life to “*different realities, that co-exist in the present*” (Mol, 1999, p.79). One ought not to think that these realities are disconnected, for sometimes they are co-ordinated into an object that appears as singular. However, most of the times different enactments do not entirely overlap and support each other. Conversely, they tend to stand in complex and at times paradoxical tension. As Mol (2002) explains, the word ‘atherosclerosis’ is thus better understood as “*a co-ordinating mechanism operative in conjunction with the various distributions. It bridges the boundaries between the sites over which the disease is distributed. It thereby helps to prevent distribution from becoming the pluralizing of a disease into separate and unrelated objects*” (p. 117). This latter remark highlights a crucial insight, namely that multiplicity is not the same as pluralism. The notion of pluralism implies that our reality is made up of an indefinite number of disconnected elements. In other words, it refers to fragmentation. Multiplicity, instead, suggests that different realities hang together, that they connect and interfere with each other. Consequently, for Mol (2002) and Law (2004), what researchers should be interested in

is the connections and co-ordinating mechanisms that allow for realities to relate with one another. This is, again, something that occurs in practice and specifically, that requires a focus on the alterations, on the interferences and on the shifts that happen as objects are enacted in different sites and different forms.

The idea of reality as a multiple object presupposes that different hinterlands can produce and enact different realities. In this scenario, “Truth” (understood as essential) ceases to be the golden standard that must be used to judge the quality and the certainty of a reality. In multiplicity, in fact, we deal with a variety of realities and a variety of Truths. Thus, as Mol (1999) illustrates, a metaphysics that allows for multiplicity brings about the idea of “*ontological politics*”. Dealing with ontological politics requires a different attitude, namely attending to the processes according to which some realities become more or less real, true and certain. Looking at reality in ontologically political terms implies that we have to attend to how certain realities have become stronger and more legitimate (sometimes in such a way that they appear to be The Only Possible Essential Truth) while others have become weaker and got lost.

The concept of multiplicity is another foundational piece to the understanding of selfhood that I present in this dissertation. Perhaps the less straightforward contention of my framework is the notion that the self is a multiple object that emerges in different enactments bound to specific locations. As chapters 6, 7 and 8 will illustrate, positing a multiple self opens up possibilities to think about projects of subjectivity as co-ordinating mechanisms that allow for different enactments of ‘who we are’ to hold

together, ontologically eroding the idea of subjectivity as a singular, necessarily consistent and unitary entity.

3.4 ANT as a Method: Crafting Stories About How Relations Do or Do not Assemble

Up to now, this chapter has focused on illustrating how the idea of reality offered by ANT introduces new frames of reference to talk about the social world. In this section, I will be shifting gears and explaining how ANT as a methodological toolkit reaches its goal of assembling stories of how relationships come to hold together or to break down. To do so, I will proceed by clarifying the vocabulary of ANT, explaining what it means to mobilize the notions of Actor-Network, translation, interestment, enrolment and punctualization.

3.4.1 Following the Actors as They Become Networks

In *“Reassembling the Social”* (2005), Latour warns that in deploying ANT one needs to adopt the same slow-pace attitude that cartographers deploy when they are tracing the paths and intersections that they will reproduce in their maps. *“ANT prefers to travel slow”* in that *“(…) instead of taking a reasonable position and imposing some order beforehand, it claims to be able to find order much better after having let the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed”* (Latour, 2005, p. 22). ANT accounts for realities that are flattened out, meaning that no pre-determined hierarchical orders are to be imposed to the entities that comprise a network. There are no essential and/or intrinsic characteristics that define clusters in

that their reality is produced in and by hybrid mixes of heterogeneous actors and pre-existing relations.

3.4.2 Actors or Actants

In ANT, an actor is understood as every entity “*which bends space around itself, makes other elements depend upon itself and translates their will into a language of its own*” (Callon & Law, 1982, p. 286). ‘Actors’ (or ‘actants’) are not necessarily only human beings, but they can be also animals or things. The emphasis is on the pro-activity of the entities. In ANT, in fact, an actor is whoever or whatever undertakes an action that *does* something. Building on Latour & Woolgar’s (1986) insights on symmetry, from an analytical standpoint ANT refuses to grant to the agency of the human being a privileged role in the account of the fabrication of the social. As Latour (2003) remarks, in ANT the focus “*shifts from the all-powerful master (the human being) to the many ‘things’, ‘agents’, ‘actants’ with which they have to share the action*” (in Ihde et al., 2003, p. 31).

The analytical equalization of human and non-human entities is one of the most discussed and arguably misunderstood tropes in ANT. The critique that is generally moved is that ANT conceives human beings and things as bearing no differences. This is not what ANT suggests. The point “*is not to extend subjectivity to things, to treat humans like objects (...) but to avoid using the subject-object distinction at all in order to talk about the folding of humans and nonhumans*” (Latour, 1999b, p. 193 -194). This means that ANT researchers do not take for granted that the distinction between human and non-humans as having an a-priori significance in how realities are enacted. Both human and non-human entities are seen as active participants in performing the social.

In this sense, ANT reflects a so-called *principle of generalized symmetry* (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1993), which requires the by-passing of the modern categorical references built on dualist thinking (e.g., human-nonhuman, small-big, inside-outside, subject-object, true-false, nature-culture). From the ANT a modern standpoint, these oppositions are not relevant in that their very own mobilization already implies the existence of some inherent pre-given order of the nature of what is. Conversely, ANT sets out to understand how realities come to be constituted by considering every piece belonging to a network (regardless if human or non-human, scientific or social, rich or poor, small or big etc.) as having equal performative agency in fabricating a specific reality.

Overall, the focus of ANT accounts is on the acts of connection as opposed to the agent (person, thing or animal) that performs said acts. In this sense, it needs to be clear that ANT scholars do not reject the idea that human beings exist, nor they negate that, as human beings, we experience reality in first-person terms. ANT researchers also understand that there are differences between humans, animals and things. These points are not in contention. What is in contention is the modern habit of ascribing agency exclusively to human beings. For ANT, human subjectivity is not a matter of special concern in that human beings are seen as active participants and creators of realities just like non-human actors are. Thus, from an ANT perspective, the fact that human and non-human entities are different is not seen as an a-priori assumption, but as the outcome of what actors do in practice.

3.4.3 Networks

In ANT the term 'actor' not only refers to "*accounts of what makes us act*" (Latour, 2005, p. 54-55) but also to the associations of several actors that come to hold together and achieve alignment. This is what the term 'network' refers to. In ANT, actors are simultaneously actors *and* networks, meaning that each entity (human and non-human) is seen as made up of a group of heterogeneous elements that act in extreme co-ordination and, as a consequence, they start to be perceived as if they were one single actor. Thus, if we look at an actor from a very close distance, we are able to distinguish the network of connections and relationships that constitute that actor. Let us think for example of an academic. If we zoom in, an academic is made up of a bundle of different human and non-human 'stuff' (academic traditions, university degrees, published articles, drafts, pens, offices, computers, students, syllabi, conferences, colleagues, university affiliations, business cards, drafts, exams to mark, lectures, power points etc) that are assembled together. However, if we look at this very network from a distance, an academic appears to us as one actor, and we do not distinguish the different elements that make him/her up.

While the hyphen between actor and network has been adopted not without perplexity (see Latour, 1999a in Law & Hassard, 1999), it is relevant to reference it in that it brings the attention to the main focus of ANT, namely the dynamic movement of making and remaking of the networks. In chapter 6, I posit that the self is an actor-network, and, as such, it is not inherently stable and does not have a fixed essence, on the contrary, it is accomplished in practice constantly. Here, the insight drawn from ANT is that subjectivity is not 'a destiny' nor an essence, conversely, it is an oscillating entity

that is enacted and changes over time by virtue of movements of translation (Callon, 1984, 1986), enrolment (Callon, 1984; Callon & Law, 1982) and punctualization (Latour, 1999b).

3.4.4 Tracing Practices of Translation and Punctualization *Translating Interests*

As a method, ANT can be seen as the endeavour of tracing the connections that are established between actors as they come to hold together in such a way that, at a certain point, they cease to be seen as a group of entities and they start to be perceived as a singular unit. '*Translations*' is the term used to refer to the dynamics according to which actors achieve alignment and form a network with specific connotations. As Law (1992) explains, the notion of translation "*implies transformation and the possibility of equivalence, the possibility that one thing (for example one actor) may stand for another (for instance a network)*" (p. 6). Translations are better understood as movements, shifts and eventually harmonies between the will of one actor and the will of another. They are not innocent procedures; on the contrary, they are Machiavellian power trials (Law, 1992). After a successful translation, the actors that are part of the a network are modified and the whole network, as a whole, assumes a specific configuration that is necessarily "*contingent, local and variable*" (Law, 1992, p. 6) in that it emerges as the outcome of negotiations and, as such, it can break down at any time.

A practical example of how to follow translations is offered by another ANT exemplary work, namely Callon's (1986) chapter dedicated to the scallops of St. Brieuc Bay and the attempts of three scientists to come up with a conservation plan aimed at

increasing their population. In this case study, molluscs, fisherman, scientists and their colleagues are all engaged in dynamics of precarious associations and disassociations that continuously redefine their roles and control their interests. In attempting to improve the rearing of scallops by means of an experimental technology, all actors are domesticated and become docile. The processes of translation align and transform the actors' interests, ordering and defining the configuration of the network. Following the principle of generalized symmetry, Callon suggests how all actors, human and non-human, display the ability of altering another actor's interests but also of resisting translation. The holding together of the network, in fact, is very precarious because all it takes to break down is one failing translation.

But how do translations occur in practice? Callon (1986) outlines four stages (or '*moments*', p. 196) that characterize successful translations: problematization, interestment, enrolment and mobilization.

During the stage of "*problematization*" (also known as the "*how to become indispensable*" moment, Callon, 1986, p. 202), a set of relevant actors identify the problem and seek to become necessary for the other actors by coming out with a strategy to solve said problem. In the case of the St. Brieuc Bay, it is the three marine biologists that are attempting to become indispensable to the scallops, the fishermen and their colleagues. Not only do they define the terms of the problems (pointing at the scarcity of scallops), they also offer a strategy as a solution (using a new technology that would have helped the breeding). In the second moment of the translation process, namely the "*interestment*" (or "*how the allies are locked into place*", Callon, 1986, p.

204), the main actors are engaged in assigning roles to the other members of the network. In the St Brieuc Bay case, the group of scientists “*attempt to impose and stabilize the identity of the other actors*” (Callon, 1986, p. 204) in order to build a system of alliances. At this stage, the acceptance of a certain role by an actor is not guaranteed in that the alliances that are proposed during processes of interestment are not certain yet and they can be undone. It is only when interestment is successful that it achieves the third stage of translation, that is, *enrolment*. The purpose of enrolment is to “*define and co-ordinate the roles*” (Callon, 1986, p. 204). During processes of enrolment, actors accept the role that has been given to them and, in doing so, they become docile to the vision of the more powerful actor. When actors are enrolled, they end up aligning their interests to the ones of the main actor. In the St. Brieuc example, the fishermen and the scallops at one point became enrolled in the definition of the situation offered by the scientists, they ‘buy into it’ and, by doing so, allow the scientists to frame the reality of the Bay. The enrollment of the fishermen into the conservation plan, for example, is enacted in the agreement of refraining from fishing near the protected areas where the scallops’ larvae are being reared.

The last stage of translation is known as “mobilization”. Mobilization is the set of dynamics that allows the primary actors to speak in the name of the other more passive actors of the network. In the account of St. Brieuc, Callon (1986) shows how scientists succeed in becoming the spokesmen for different groups: scallops, fisherman and other experts. This is the result of a growing mobilization of actors who made the framing of the situation offered by scientists believable and indisputable by creating alliances and

acting as one unit with aligned interests. However, becoming the spokesperson for a network always entails silencing other actors' voices in that "*to speak for others is to first silence those in whose name we speak*" (Callon, 1986, p. 216). Moreover, the power of the spokesperson is not a 'once and forever' given. Thus, while a successful translation provides one group of actors the "*authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force*" (Callon and Latour, 1981, p. 279), the negotiations that have bestowed this authority in first place can fall apart, causing disassociations or 'counter-enrollments'. In St Brieuc Bay, this happened during a winter when fishermen decided to betray the scientists' long-term plans for the conservation of the scallops and invade the secured areas brimming with larvae to obtain an abundant catch.

The appreciation of the four stages of translation explain Law's claim that "*ANT is all about power*" (1992, p. 6), with power understood as an effect of networks and not as their cause. By virtue of translation and its articulation in power dynamics of seduction, negotiation, persuasion, inducement and influence, actors' wills are homogenized under the flagship of a group of actors that has been successful in convincing the others that they are the best spokesmen for their interests (Callon, 1986). As a result of the "*extreme alignment*" (Durepos & Mills, 2012, p. 103) achieved in translation, different groups of actors start to be perceived as they are only one singular actor. This is known as punctualization (Latour, 1999b), and it will be described in the next section.

Punctualization

“Punctualization” stands for the processes according to which the heterogeneous network that makes up an actor (the ‘hinterland’, in Law’s term, 2004) ceases to be perceived and, as a result, an actor starts to be seen as a stand-alone entity.

The notion of punctualization has already been introduced in the first section of this chapter, when discussing the fabrication of scientific knowledge. The argument offered by Latour & Woolgar (1986) – namely that scientific knowledge emerges and is sustained by a complex hinterland of relationships that, for simplification purposes, at one point is obliterated – is the same one used by ANT scholars when talking about punctualizations of social realities. A university, a partner, a job, an email, a cup of coffee: ‘the stuff of life’ comes at us in punctuated single entities and not as endless complex ramifications and chains of associations. In this sense, punctualizations are but “*simplificatory effect*” (Law, 1992, p. 5) in that they allow us to interact with pre-made “*standardized packages*” (Law, 2004, p. 33) instead of the variety of different elements that together compose an actor-network.

Law (2004) explains this point as follows: “[...] *if machines and skills and statements can be turned into packages (that is, punctualizations), then so long as everything works (this is always uncertain) there is no longer any need to individually assemble all the elements that make up the package, and deal with all the complexities*” (p. 33). Dealing with punctualizations “*is like buying a personal computer rather than understanding the electronics and the physics embedded in the electronics and assembling one out of components*” (Law, 2004, p. 33).

3.5 Criticisms of ANT

While in the last thirty years ANT has been widely adopted by scholars belonging to different fields of studies, its approach has also been challenged. Walsham, (1997) lists four main critiques that have been aimed against it, which I report below with my comments.

Following Walshman (1997), the first main problem that ANT presents is that it focuses too much on what presents itself in front of us. The criticism targets the ANT suggestion of following the actors in their journey as they become networks. The problem that is detected here is that the attention to the contingent results in an underestimation of the influence exercised by encompassing social structures (see for example Reed, 1997 and Habers, 1995).

I do not see this critique as valid because it seems to stem from a misunderstanding of ANT. This attack assumes that social structures are pre-existing givens and not networks that are produced in practice and, as such, that can be changed. As this chapter hopefully made clear, what ANT suggests is that the very notion of social structures needs to be scrutinized and questioned, which is a task that ANT is clearly geared to carry out.

The second critique questions the amoral stance of ANT, detecting a fundamental inability to properly conceptualize ethical issues related to power and politics (Winner, 1993). A variation of this critique has been brought forward by some critical organizational scholars (Whittle & Spicer, 2008), who have expressed their perplexities about the potential of ANT to offer a critical analysis of organization that challenges managerial views.

As in the previous case, I believe that this second critique arises from a narrow understanding of ANT. The 'criticality' of ANT, in my opinion, is to be found in its ontological amodernism, in the notion of multiplicity and in its focus on relationships of associations and mediations. 'Knowing' and 'making' reality according to these ideas is by itself an inherent critique to normative modes of knowing that privilege ontological singularity, clear division of subject vs object, etc. In other words, the potential for critique that ANT offers is to be found in the ways it makes us think and frame accounts of power, politics and organizations, which can be empowering and can open up practical possibilities for change.

A third critique of ANT points fingers against the way in which its accounts are crafted. Specifically, what is seen as problematic here is the lack of reflection on the role of the author that is crafting an ANT analysis (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1999; McLean & Hassard, 2004). ANT, in fact, does not explicitly tackle questions of reflexivity. In other words, ANT does not invite an assessment of how the researcher's eyes are shaped by sets of societal norms. There is little attention to the situatedness of the positioning of the eyes that decide which actors to follow (and, inevitably, which ones to leave out of the research). I believe this observation makes a good point. This is why, in proposing my framework, I do address questions of reflexivity, aided in particular by existentialism, the third strand of literature that I utilize in building my theoretical contribution. Thus, in chapters 6 and 7 I make a point of elaborating on the role of researcher when it comes to discussing subjectivity from an amodern and aesthetic perspective.

The fourth aspect of ANT that has been criticized is the principle of generalized symmetry and, in particular, the equalization of humans and non-human entities (see Pels, 1995). Given that the topic of this dissertation is human subjectivity, I will dedicate the next section specifically to this critique in that I find it to be the most relevant in the discussion of how ANT can inform knowledge about selfhood. In doing so, I will also review the understanding of the human being that ANT offers and the promises that I see in it to inform an amodern take on the exploration of human subjectivity.

3.6 The Self in ANT

As we have seen throughout the chapter, ANT posits that social reality is performed in interactions by heterogeneous networks that comprise not only people, but also material entities like machines, animals, buildings, products, texts and so on. This assimilation of humans and non-humans under the same analytical framework is one of the most controversial aspects of ANT, criticized in particular by whoever is enrolled into a humanist understanding of society (Walshman, 1997).

In their rebuttals, ANT scholars maintain that the idea that “*the stuff of the social is not simply human*” (Law, 1992, p. 2) does not represent an ethical stance but an analytical one (Law, 1992). In the *analysis* of how the social is performed, people are not granted an a-priori status of supremacy only because ‘they are inherently worth it’. For ANT, both human and non-human entities are elements of the associations that enact the social. Nonetheless, this does not imply that ANT denies that the reality of human beings can be performed and as ‘special’. From an ANT perspective, ‘being special’ is the

effect of how relationships between actors unfold. In short, for ANT researchers, human beings are not special in essence, but they emerge as such in that, over time, we have fabricated and black-boxed human specialness.

ANT makes a point of emphasizing the importance of including the non-human material in the analysis of the social. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why the research agenda of ANT scholars has not been enthusiastically dedicated to explore questions of human subjectivity. However, even if ANT has not been specifically generated as a theory of self, it would be myopic to state that ANT has nothing to offer on the topic. In this sense, as offered in the previous section, I agree with Law (1992) when he observes that ANT is also analytically radical because it offers a significant shift of reference in what we consider to be a human being.

The claim that ANT scholars bring forward is the same that has been mentioned for science and for social reality: what counts as a person, in ANT, is understood as an effect generated by a bundle of associations. This does not mean that ANT denies that human beings have a body or that there is an inner life. But what it implies is that humans cannot be reduced to the human body, mind or life, for that being a subject goes much beyond this. Subjectivity is performed in all the associations that make us who we are. In ANT, the human being is an actor-network, an effect performed by a network of heterogeneous materials in relation with one another. As Law writes: *"If you took away my computer, my colleagues, my office, my books, my desk, my telephone. I wouldn't be a sociologist writing papers, delivering lectures and producing knowledge". I would be something quite other -- and the same is true for all of us*" (1992, p.4).

Latour (1999b) touches on this point when he offers the example of the gunman. He writes: *"You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered a relationship with you"* (Latour, 1999b, p. 179). This means that it is the *interaction* of a man and a gun that creates the gunman. The gunman cannot be reduced to either the man or the gun: without a gun, in fact, a man cannot shoot. However, the same can be said for the gun: by itself it does not have the ability to shoot. Thus, the gunman emerges as a third entity, a hybrid, a network made up of human and non-human entities entangled together. Thus, ANT allows me to argue that our subjectivity emerges in a variegated network of human and non-human relations. The constant fluctuation between processes of enrolment and translation is a crucial element in how we configure ourselves as human subjects.

As the reader will appreciate, the idea of human being as actor - network takes its distance from both the modernist and the post-modernist understanding of selfhood. In the first case, ANT rejects the idea of a unitary, self-contained and singular human subject. While the modern man's motto is "I think therefore I am", in ANT someone/something is in that he/she/it connects and establishes relations. In the second case, the notion of subject as an actor-network also challenges the fragmented, relativist and divided postmodernist enactment of subjectivity. While from an ANT perspective one can argue for the de-centering of selfhood, this does not imply that ANT sees the subject as made up of scattered unrelated pieces. As an actor-network, in fact, the self holds together, not because of some essentialist independent (more or less

mentalist) properties, but because it constitutes itself in practice as a multiple object, as the effect of a hinterland of associations of heterogeneous elements.

4

Foucault and the Aesthetic Subject

*“But there is no substratum;
there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming;
‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything”
Foucault*

*“Who are we, who is each one of us,
if not a combination of experiences, information,
books we have read, things imagined?
Each life is an encyclopedia, a library,
an inventory of objects, a series of styles,
and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.”
Italo Calvino*

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced ANT and its framing of social reality. While one can argue - as I do in this dissertation - that ANT does offer relevant insights on the investigation of human subjectivity, it needs to be recognized that the actor-network approach was not specifically developed with the objective of exploring this topic. Thus, it can use some supplementation. This is the reason why the alternative understanding of selfhood that I present also draws on authors that made questions about subjectivity their intellectual priority. Specifically, I refer to Foucault and his notion of aesthetics of existence and to Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir and their ideas on the embodied and ambiguous subject. The former will be the topic of this chapter while the latter will be discussed in the next one.

Before diving into Foucault's ideas on subjectivity as a work of art, it is necessary to briefly address the perplexity that the juxtaposition of Foucault and existentialists like Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir may spark. I will come back to this topic in the next chapter, but for now suffice it to say that these authors are traditionally associated with radically different understandings of selfhood, constituting the poles of the "*battle over the subject*" (Crossley, 1994, p.1), one of the most (if not the most) heated philosophical debates that took place after the Second World War in Continental philosophy. The conventional narrative of this (supposed) opposition can be summed up as follows. On one side of the field we have the existential-phenomenologists, with Jean-Paul Sartre in first line. His position on selfhood is conventionally qualified as the humanist and modernist one, revolving around a transcendent, unitary and self-contained Man immersed in interiority and in the quest of a self-defined meaning in life. Facing this faction, we find the anti-humanists. This squad revolves around the Foucault that in "*The Order of Things*" (1970a) posited that the notion of 'human subject' is not a natural, a-priori given concept, but, instead, it is a construction that is defined by relationships of power and knowledge, and more specifically, in modernity, by scientific discourses that promise to portray the 'Truth' about the individual.

The narrative of the polarization between existentialism and Foucault's ideas is still alive and well, corroborated also by the fact that both Sartre and Foucault, in several occasions, publicly declared their intellectual divergences (see Crossley, 1994; Levy, 2001). However, in the last twenty-five years, an increasing number of commentators have started to challenge this seemingly unbridgeable distance (Crossley, 1994a; Flynn,

2006; Fraser, 1989; Kruks, 1990; Visker, 1999). According to these interpretations, the sharpness of the antagonism between Foucault (specifically in his later works) and the existentialists (late Sartre, de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty specifically) has been over-emphasised, while the striking similarities have been moved into the background (Crossley, 1994a; Kruks, 2006; Levy, 2001; Vintges, 2001).

In developing my framework, I lean on the latter position. Drawing on a 'common ground approach' already utilized by Crossley (1994), Kruks (2006), Levy (2001) and Vintges (2001), I too will attempt to create a dialogue between Foucault and existentialism. In particular, I will focus on the similarities that Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir share. The three of them, posit a subject that is a) embedded and constituted by and within contexts but b) is also capable of negotiating his/her being-in-the-world through an ethos that revolves around creative acts (or projects) of self-stylization. My emphasis on affinities does not imply that there are no significant differences between Foucault and the existentialists. There clearly are and smoothing away differences as an intellectual exercise is not the point of this dissertation. What I am interested in pointing out is that their insights can be seen as complementary even if not reducible to one another. Moreover, as I will argue in chapter 6, I believe that in their partial connections (Strathern, 2004), they provide a take on selfhood that complements, enriches and refines the amodern ANT approach with regards to subjectivity.

4.2 Foucault and the Subject: Early Reflections

The investigation of “*the modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects*” (Foucault, 1982, p. 777) has been a lifelong interest in Foucault’s intellectual production. While his reflections on subjectivity have varied a lot throughout his life, it is possible to distinguish two main phases. The first one, traceable in his works up to the mid-Seventies/early Eighties, focuses on how power and disciplinary practices impact how we define and relate to ourselves. The second one, comprising his later works (from the late Seventies until 1984, the year of his death), is more concerned with the exploration of how one can creatively negotiate his/her own position as a subject. In my framework, I will draw in particular on the latter, that is, on Foucault’s insights on the creation of subjectivity in form of an aesthetics of existence. However, in order to appreciate how Foucault arrives to a proposal of the constitution of the self as a work of art, it is worth sketching out the content of his early thought.

4.2.1 The Subject as the Product of Power

If Friedrich Nietzsche is conventionally portrayed as the philosopher that killed God, then Michel Foucault is the thinker that is said to have executed Man. Following Nietzsche’s steps, Foucault takes issue with the modernist and humanist understanding of Man as a universal and naturally occurring reality. In particular, what Foucault considers perhaps the most problematic aspect of the modern model, is the (lack of) conceptualization of power that it presupposes.

In “*The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*” (1970a), Foucault argues that the modern understanding of ‘Man’ is a relatively recent construction that

saw the light in the late Eighteenth century. According to this construction, the human being is an autonomous rational-thinking free agent that comes into the world bearing an 'inherent nature', an 'authentic essence' (the 'inner self' much despised by Foucault and, as we will see, also by de Beauvoir). Following this narrative, when as subjects we enter in relationship with the world, our 'true essence' encounters the obligations, the roles and the duties that society imposes on us, and consequently it needs to adjust to them, finding itself being constricted and limited. Rousseau's ideas on the social contract are an excellent example of this line of reasoning: in order to be able to function in groups (society), the human being has to compromise a portion of its 'real nature'. The underlying idea is that the subject (specifically his/her 'true self') is the originating source of action and meaning, "*transcendental in relation to the field of events [...], running in its empty sameness throughout the course of history*" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 117). In this scenario, power looks like a (more or less) neatly identifiable force that impresses itself from the outside on a pre-existing self-contained individual, impacting and frustrating one's own possibilities of free expression. The fact that, at times, we experience the will or the need to resist power and to go against it is nothing but a confirmation of the existence of this inner essence: we rebel to the limitations that society forces on us because we want to recover our 'real self'. It needs to be stressed that this way of thinking about subjectivity is not something that belongs to the past, it is very alive and well in our times. Let us think, for example, of the many times that we find ourselves thinking: 'this is not who I am' or 'I want to express my real self', as if somewhere there were some platonic idea of who we are waiting to be realized.

This framing of subjectivity is the kind that Foucault starkly criticizes, together with the notion of power that it embeds. For Foucault, there is no such thing as an essential selfhood. Human beings are not entities that pre-exist power and, even less, that own it and that exercise it at their own will. On the contrary, Foucault maintains that power comes first and the modern conception of subjectivity is but the product of it. As he explained during a lecture in 1976 (in Foucault, 1980):

“The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (p.98).

Thus, following Foucault, the constitutive elements of what we are brought up to consider to be our own autonomous and self-possessed subjectivity – that is, how we speak, how we dress, how we move, how we frame our thoughts, how we connect with others, how we act, what we do, how we direct our passions, our convictions, our values, our fears – is fed to us by power, the same power that produces and perpetuates all of these elements.

It needs to be stressed that for Foucault, (1980a) the privileged target of power is not the mind, but the body. Power acts on our bodies, it bypasses the level of cognition and it gets hold of us. In his words: *“power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject’s own representations. If power takes hold of the body, this isn’t through its having first interiorized in people’s consciousness”* (p. 186).

As the reader will notice, this represents an inversion of the traditional narrative of power. While we are used to think that the human being is the original and primary source of it, for Foucault it is the opposite: power creates us. The idea that we are autonomous decisional agents is totally discarded, for it is power that operates us, making us vehicles for its expressions. For Foucault, it is not a case that the modern understanding of the individual minimizes the role of power while, at the same time, promulgating an almost omnipotent understanding of subjectivity¹². This narrative is necessary for power to function properly in that thinking about ourselves as subjects equipped with a unique inner substratum urges us to be constantly preoccupied with whether we are realizing our own “special” individuality or not. By doing so, we are constantly monitoring what happens “inside” of us, keeping in check our actions, emotions and inclinations. In this sense, not only does the construction of the modern individual have us thinking about ourselves as self-determining and independent

¹² The trope of self-consciousness as the main mode according to which we interface with the world has had an extraordinary grip on the way in which moderns think about themselves. Both Kant and Hegel gave a primary role to this notion: the former saw it as the core element of human experience and the second conceptualized it as the very substance of it and as the highest prerogative of human history (Mansfield, 2000).

subjects, it also makes us the perfect medium and target for power, for it constantly keeps us engaged with self-scrutinies and self-judgements of our behaviors and feelings.

But how does power concretely operate on and through us according to Foucault? What does it mean for subjects to become “*subjectified*?” (Kruks, 2006, p. 55). These two questions are crucial for Foucault and he amply addresses them by discussing in particular a) the notion of power as indivisibly fused with knowledge and b) the techniques by virtue of which one internalizes disciplinary power (the so-called “*panopticism*”). Let us turn to the explanation of these ideas.

4.2.2 Power/Knowledge and Panopticism

When Foucault talks about power, he is not thinking about the common definition of power as a clearly identifiable exercise of influence that makes actor B do something that actor A wants. His understanding is much broader, more refined and more nuanced. First of all, for him, power is an omnipresent force in social relationships, it innerves everything, and it travels everywhere. It is “*produced at every moment in time, at every point or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is all over, which does not mean that it contains everything, but that it comes from everywhere*” (Foucault, 1978, p. 122). Thus, power is not something owned or yielded by one specific individual, institution or organization. It emerges in relationships and in practices and it manifests itself in many different ways, sometimes in contrast to one another. In Foucault’s works, power always works in alliance with knowledge, so much so that he talks about ‘power/knowledge’ as an indivisible pair. Power always needs to

lean on knowledge and knowledge is always innervated by power. Systems of power, in fact, always build (on) some truth to justify their own actions and the notion of subjectivity is not an exception. In *"The Order of Things"* (1970a) Foucault argues that the 'I' that we take for granted as a natural entity is nothing but the product of power/knowledge relations that emerged in the modern age. Before that, the functioning of society was based on obedience to religion or on subservience to the aristocracy. In the late eighteenth century, with the population progressively growing and spreading out in space, the authority over society exercised by religion and aristocracy started to be gradually substituted by administrative systems organized around institutions such as prisons, hospitals, mental asylums, schools, factories and workplaces. The operations of these institutions were animated by the newborn privileged form of knowledge, that is, the human sciences that emerged around that period (psychology, psychiatry, economics and sociology). The goal of these disciplines was to discover the scientific 'Truth' about human nature (see chapter 2). Foucault observes that the scientific inquiry of the nature of humanity distinguishes the members of society according to their characteristics, creating clear-cut categories that part normalcy from deviance, sanity from insanity, functionality from madness and so on. These distinctions constitute an ideal tool for power because they operate at the level of the subject. This is why Foucault at this stage refers to the subject as an effect of power: he sees it as fashioned after the 'Truths' derived by the human sciences, which have come to be accepted as the standards according to which we behave and think about our experience in the world. They provide the vocabularies and the repertoires we use

to relate to our subjectivity, working not only from the outside to the inside but also from the inside to the outside (Kruks, 2006).

A key way in which power produces subjects is what Foucault refers to as “panopticism”. He derives this idea from Jeremy Bentham’s description of the ideal prison, the Panopticon, which is arranged in a circle with a central tower from where inmates are surveilled. In such an environment, inmates are always potentially exposed to the gaze of the guards, but they have no chance to know if someone is actually in the tower watching over them. Nevertheless, the prisoner knows that there is always the chance of a pair of eyes staring, and the constant threat of being controlled causes self-restraint and self-censorship in terms of behaviors. As Foucault explains in *“Discipline and Punishment”* (1977), being constantly worried that someone may be scrutinizing our actions is a formidable tool of discipline in that it transfers the locus of control ‘inside’ the observed, making him/her act in the ways that are considered appropriate by the surveillance system. In other words, the will of the observer is interiorized and it restraints how one acts from the inside. As Foucault (1995) explains, the inmate *“inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection”* (p. 203).

For Foucault, the Panopticon and its techniques are not exclusive to the prison life. On the contrary, he sees them as a pervasive, capillary and constitutive mode of existence of our modern society. The prison is paradigmatic of how Foucault conceptualizes power/knowledge; it exemplifies how subjectivity is both something constituted and constituting (Kruks, 2006). Constituted because the prison is a

fundamental institution in our world. Its presence symbolizes the power of punishing and isolating who is considered an inadequate member of society. Prisons are a necessary element of the legal system, which builds on the idea that the individual is the basic unit of society, a bearer of rights that are recognized to him but that can be taken away in instances of criminal behaviors. Far from being autonomous, self-contained and self-possessed, the subject is constituted by society, the target of its practices, "*a permanently open display case of psychological and sociological truths, to which you always remain subordinate*" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 60). At the same time, nonetheless, the subject is also a *constituting* entity: in becoming domesticated by the panopticon, it collaborates with power by producing himself/herself after the social norms that are made to discipline our actions and behaviors from within.

Foucault's discussion of power also tackles the issue of resistance. Power dynamics are not made up only by domination or authority, they also involve the possibility for pushbacks, diversions and interferences. Resistance is the fundamental counterpart in the unfolding of power relations. In particular, transgression and its ability of measuring "*the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise*" (Foucault, 1977b, p. 35), is one of the most interesting instances of defiance to Foucault. But, at this stage of theorizing, Foucault does not see resistance to power (with its implied potential for freedom) as rooted in the subject. It is, instead, seen as a discourse, a "*freeness as opposed to power*" (Huijter, 1999, p. 66) that has agency but no authors (Kruks, 2006).

4.2.3 Towards a theory of the discursive practices of subjectivity

If the exposition of Foucault's reflections came to a halt here, the emerging picture would portray a subjectivity where freedom, agency and intentional pro-activity are not really accounted for (if not completely discarded). From this standpoint, it is not surprising that Foucault has been described as the anti-humanist philosopher par excellence.

However, one needs to be cautious with labels here, as many have observed (see for example Crossley, 1994, Kruks, 2006; Vintges, 2001; Zahavi, 2009). While Foucault harshly criticizes an *"unmediated and transparent notion of the subject or identity as the centered author of social practice"* (Foucault, 1970b, p. XIV), he never completely succeeds in getting rid of the idea of a *"minimalist notion of self"* (Zahavi, 2009) understood as a distinctive for-me-ness of experience. In his early writings, even if not explicitly acknowledged, there is always a lingering idea that subjectivation is received and experienced by some form of subjective perceptual entity. In other words, in analyzing the unfolding of disciplinary practices, Foucault always presupposes – even if he does not address it explicitly - the existence of a subjectivity that interiorizes power dynamics and conforms to them. This subjectivity is *not* of the essential, self-contained type, it is something different. It is a subjectivity that needs to be explored in terms of *"possible experiences, modes of conduct and reactions"* (Huijser, 1999, p. 66). I will come back to this point in chapter 6.

In an interview that took place in 1984, the year of his death, Foucault explains that throughout his life his main interest had been *"to find out how the human subject fits into certain games of truth, whether they were truth games that took form of a*

science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control" (Foucault, 1997, p. 281). In reflecting about his philosophical understanding of human subjectivity, he identifies a shift in the way in which he approaches the topic. In his early works, as we have seen, his focus is on how the subject defines himself/herself in relation to truths deriving from coercive practices (the system of the prison) or scientific truths (psychology, psychiatry etc.). His later reflections, on the other hand, set out to investigate "*the practice of the self*", meaning the "*(...) exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself and to attain a certain mode of being*" (Foucault, 1997, p. 281). Let us illustrate these tropes in the second part of this chapter. I will build on these insights to offer my understanding of selfhood in chapter 6.

4.3 Constituting oneself as a subject

4.3.1 Games of Truth

Foucault's project of exploring how a human being creates himself/herself as a subject starts off with the investigation of the relationships that exists between a subject and truth. As explained, for Foucault subjectivity is not the outer manifestation of a fixed, essential and self-contained self, but, on the contrary, it is produced by the discourses of truth and knowledge from which we derive what 'being who one is' means. For example, according to Foucault, in stating that I experience myself as a woman, as a student, as a squash player and so on, I am establishing a variety of relationships with myself, which, taken all together, constitute my personal subjectivity

at the moment. What is important to stress here is that, for Foucault, my subjectivity is not autonomously determined. On the contrary, it hangs on the 'games of truth' that *"are operative in, through and around 'me'"* (Huijer, 1999, p. 67). 'Being a woman' is a truth-game that comes with a number of rules and norms and practices that needs to be followed in order to be recognised as a woman. The same can be said for 'being a student', 'being a squash player' and so on. In this sense, 'games of truth' are to be understood as *"the set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of amusement, it is a set of procedures"* (Foucault, 1997, p. 297). This idea is foundational: for Foucault, constituting oneself as a subject is a matter of equipping oneself with truths - as well as of resisting them - through which one can define who he/she is. Precisely, establishing a connection with who we are and doing work on ourselves are activities that require relating with *"a set of truth obligations: discovering the truth, being enlightened by the truth, telling the truth"* (Foucault, 1997, p. 177-178). But how do human beings achieve a sense of self and shape experiences? In other words, how do we engage with truth-obligations? This is the topic that I will tackle in the next section.

4.3.2 The Techniques of the Self

According to Foucault, we constitute ourselves and develop knowledge about who we are by virtue of what he calls the *"techniques (or 'technologies') of the self"*. He describes them as *"the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it or transform*

it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery and self-knowledge" (1997, p. 84). Foucault comes up with the concept of the 'techniques of the self' in the late years of his life (see Foucault, 1978 and 1985) , when he examines how different civilizations would practically engage with the endeavour of "*occupying oneself with oneself*" (1997, p. 226). The two cultures that Foucault takes as the basis of his analysis are the Greeks and Romans of the early centuries of the Roman Empire and the Christians of the late Roman Empire (fourth and fifth century D.C.). In discussing these two civilizations, he often makes reference to a third set of techniques, the ones that have come to be used in modernity. However, while we do not have an organic discussion of the latter comparable to the former two, it is still possible to put together an account of his ideas based on his last interviews (1997).

In the next three sections I will sketch the techniques used in Antiquity, Christianity and modernity. This discussion is crucial in order to understand why Foucault proposes the notion of "aesthetics of existence" as an alternative set of possible contemporary techniques that can be used today in order to make sense of our own subjectivity. As the reader will appreciate, the idea that subjectivity emerges by virtue of self - techniques and that one can assume an aesthetic approach to existence are constitutive of the understanding of subjectivity that I present in this dissertation.

4.3.3 Antiquity

In the Greco-Roman world, the idea of being a subject largely revolved around the principle of *epimeleisthai sautou*, an expression that Foucault translates as "*to be*

concerned, to take care of yourself” (1997, p. 226). Self-care was a key attitude that had to be cultivated rigorously because it was perceived to be the primary way in which a man¹³ could practice freedom. For Greeks and Romans, being free was an utterly important condition in that it stood in contrast to being a slave (not only of others, but also of one’s own passions and desires).

Practicing self-care was conceived as an ethics, a mode of living a meaningful life. The way one carried oneself in the world (not only in terms of actions, reactions and emotions but also of appearance and clothing) was seen as the direct consequence of someone’s ethos. From this perspective, being able to exercise control over oneself and to actively stylize one’s own life was understood as a way to be respectable and leave a proper legacy, both highly valued life-achievements. What is important to stress is that in Antiquity, moral attitude did not entirely coincide with the compliance to external laws or codes. As Foucault (1978, 1985, 1997) explains, while some basic principles of social conduct were in place, the extent to which and how one decided to comply to them was a personal prerogative. Major transgressions were indeed punished, but apart from these cases, citizens were left free to decide how they wanted to live their life. Self-care was not forced upon them from the outside with laws or with the threat of punishments, it was a personal choice that required proactivity and first-person engagement. In particular, practicing self-care was a matter of building oneself after a number sought-after, experimented and self-selected ‘logoi’ (namely ‘truths’). Equipping oneself with these truths was an effort that required the willingness to experiment with

¹³ In the case of ancient Greece this refers strictly to the free male citizens (and not to women nor to slaves).

one's own constraints with practical actions. This is what the concept of *askèsis* refers to. This term is used by Foucault (1985) to refer to the "*training of the self by the self*" (Huijer, 1999, p. 77), an attitude typical of Greek civilization that owed a lot to stoic philosophy. *Askèsis* was an active way of approaching life, a keenness to voluntarily put oneself through struggles and hardships in order to test oneself and find out what type of reactions one was keen to have. It was self-imposed discipline geared to the acquisition of freedom understood as self-mastery, as the detachment and emancipation from emotions and passions. The ascetic attitude (which needs not be confused with abstinence) involved, for example, discussing with confidants (philosophers, peers and friends), meditating, experiencing conditions of discomfort (fasting for some time, living in conditions of poverty, etc.) and reflecting and reviewing one's own past actions.

An important tool for self-direction that Foucault (1997) mentions are the *hupomnēmata*. These were private notebooks that served both as inventories and as sources of inspiration for conduct. One would record on them memories, events, occurrences that had stimulated particular thoughts, inspirational quotes, extracts from poems or books, personal thoughts or something heard from someone else. Their purpose was to constitute a recollection of fragments that would provide suggestions, guidance and stimuli informing what type of person one wanted to be. They were the "*logos bioēthikos for oneself, an equipment of helpful discourses, capable –like Plutarch says - of elevating the voice and silencing the passions like a master who with one word hushes the growling of dogs*" (Foucault, 1997, p. 210).

It needs to be clear that the *hupomnēmata* were not intimate journals where one would jot down accounts the deepest secrets of one's soul. Their main purpose was not to allow for the revelation of a hidden self, but "*to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear and read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shape of the self*" (1997, p. 211).

Foucault (1997) stresses that in the Greco-Roman context being occupied with oneself was far from being an act of narcissism, self-indulgence or self-interest. It was an ethical, and, equally significant, a political duty. Having respect for oneself, mastering one's own passions and instincts and, overall, constantly being figuring out one's own limits and blind spots was seen as a necessary requirement for anyone that wanted to be in a position of power. The assumption was that only a man who took great care of himself would have been able to take care of others properly. Being a balanced and rightful ruler was an exclusive prerogative of the ones that knew who they were and owned up to it. As a consequence, taking care of the self is also a way to take care for others because "*a person who took proper care of himself would, by the same token, be able to conduct himself properly in relation to others and for others*" (Foucault, 1997, p. 287).

Overall, the techniques of the self in Antiquity placed great emphasis on the idea of building one's own subjectivity through pro-active self-experimentation. In other words, the emphasis was on practices of self-formation. However, with the advent of Christianity and the progressive disappearance of paganism, these priorities shifted, as I will explain in the next section.

4.3.4 Christianity

Foucault (1997) states that as a confessional religion, Christianity imposed on its practitioners very specific truths. Devoted men and women had to believe in specific texts, have faith in particular dogmas, accept the authority of the clergy and so on. Moreover, to be a good Christian, one had the moral obligation of exploring one's own interiority, that is, to come to grips with who one was on 'the inside'. This involved a constant scrutiny of inner temptations and desires, with the goal of expelling sinful thoughts and emotions. Christianity required to confess and expose these internal movements to others, so that the whole community could observe acts of penitence. The underlying idea was that only by disclosing the impure truths hidden inside one could finally renounce to them and work his/her way to eternal salvation in the afterlife.

As Foucault (1997) stresses, Christianity posited that the truth of the self could be accessed only by pure souls, an achievement attainable through self-knowledge. However, self-knowledge was not understood as an exercise of building oneself up as it had been for the Antiques. For Christians, learning about oneself was a matter of self-decipherment, of bringing up bad thoughts with the ultimate purpose of renouncing to the sinful self.

Foucault focuses on two main techniques of self-decipherment and self-disclosure that were utilized in Christianity in two different periods of time: '*exomologesis*' (Foucault, 1997, p. 243) and '*exagoreusis*' (Foucault, 1997, p. 245).

Exomologesis, (meaning “*recognition of fact*”, Foucault, 1997, p.243), involved an almost theatrical/ritual recognition of oneself as a sinner and a penitent. This practice entailed a number of more or less public actions (e.g. fasting, dressing down, abstaining from sex, declaring oneself a sinner in front to a clergyman, explaining one’s misbehaviors and requiring the status of penitent). These specific procedures were all geared to generate a clear distinction between the sinner and the other members of the community. As Foucault (1997) highlights, in fact, the key feature of exomologesis was that the punishment (which could also be self-punishment) was intertwined with the voluntary public confession of one’s wrongdoings. As Foucault (1997) notes, this was a paradoxical way of dealing with penitence in that the only way to make a sin go away was to disclose the sinner. From this perspective, “*the greater part of the act of penitence was not in telling the truth of sin but in showing the true sinful being of the sinner*” (p. 244).

The act of telling one’s own hidden truths was also constitutive of the second technique used by Christians, *exagoreusis*. Foucault (1985) talks about this practice in relation to monastic Christianity, which based its self-techniques on two principles: obedience and contemplation. In particular, *exagoreusis* entailed a constant verbalization and disclosure of the inner movements of the inner self to someone in a position of authority.

As Foucault (1978) explains, in the monastery monks were expected to show complete obedience to the master and they were not allowed to take autonomous decisions. Moreover, they were expected to live a life of contemplation, dedicating

every single living thought to God and expelling every emotional instance that diverted them from the Divine. But given the monks' lack of autonomy, the only way in which they could be sure that their thoughts were pure was to verbalize them to the master, who, by virtue of experience and wisdom, was believed to be able to help discriminate between good and bad thoughts. Thus, the way in which monks constituted a relationship with their subjectivity was based on the confession of their 'inner truths', with the goal of letting go of the impure thoughts.

Foucault emphasises that both *exagoreusis* and *exagoreusis* implied learning about oneself through a scrutiny of 'inner truths' and their consequent disclosure. Moreover, the confession always went hand in hand with renunciation. As Foucault (1997) observes, in Christianity "*Self-revelation is at the same time self-destruction*" (p. 245), meaning that the ways in which one would learn about oneself always required "*the refusal of the self, the breaking away from the self*" (p. 245). Bringing impure thoughts to light and confessing one's own sins was seen as the way to make the temptations of the devil less influential. Thus, while in Antiquity the techniques of the self revolved around the creation of one's own subjectivity through experience, in Christianity they became a matter of deciphering ourselves and of renouncing to impure thoughts for the sake of eternal joy in the afterlife.

The reason of this shift is to be found in the different conception of the purpose of life that Antiquity and Christianity bought into. According to Foucault (1997), in Antiquity there was very little concern with the afterlife. Living a good life was not "*a problem of deviancy, but of excess or moderation*" (1997, p. 260) in that a good life was

one based on gaining control over oneself and practicing moderation, which were seen as key elements of becoming a good leader and in building a good reputation.

Conversely, in Christianity, the main preoccupation was God and the afterlife, thus the notion of living a good life became a matter of adhering to religious codes and renouncing to the passions and emotions that would make human beings victims of the devil and his lures.

4.3.5 Modernity

As previously mentioned, Foucault did not have the time to tackle the modern techniques of the self that emerged with the Enlightenment because in 1984, death took him away. Nonetheless, it is still possible to derive a sense of where his thoughts were going with regard to this topic from his last interviews (see Foucault, 1996, 1997; Rabinow, 1997).

Foucault (1997) maintains that, starting from the eighteenth century, the Christian imperative of learning about oneself through the precepts of religion and through confession was progressively substituted by the necessity of knowing ourselves through another set of emerging truths, that is, the truths of the human sciences (in particular psychology and psychiatry). The religious duty of conquering Heaven in the afterlife was progressively substituted with the humanist obligation of learning about the true essential nature of Man.

From this perspective, the relationship that moderns have come establish with their subjectivity has been modelled after the truths offered by science, with their

promise to capture the 'normal' and 'natural' status of the human condition. As remarked by Bernauer & Mahon (1994), in modernity the prevalent mode of subjectivation is based on science, so much so that *"one recognizes and attaches oneself to a self presented through the normative categories of psychological and psychoanalytical science and through the normative disciplines consistent with them"* (p. 151). What this implies is that truths of science have offered the repertoires of truths that we rely on to constitute our self-knowledge. As explained in the first part of this chapter, for Foucault, the creation of the modern subject occurs through self-disciplinary practices: we model ourselves after the truths and norms that society imposes on us. The interiorization of these truth-games fashion us as their victims. In allowing them to discipline us from the inside we commit ourselves to their very specific version of human experience. In this sense, by establishing a relationship with our subjectivity based on scientific truths, we have come to take for granted that there is such a thing as an essential self, that there are 'natural', 'right', 'universal' and 'normal' ways of being human. Moreover, we assume that these ways can be discovered and defaulted back to if we engage in processes of scientific explorations by means of which we can recognize and fix our abnormalities.

At this point, one might legitimately wonder if there is a way out of this scenario. Are the modern scientific techniques of the self the only ones available in our contemporary society? Is it possible to imagine different sets of relationships with the self?

The answer that Foucault provides is positive. Subjectivity can be known and experienced in ways that are non-essentialist, non-scientific and non-rationalistic. But, Foucault (1997) alerts, to do so we need to de-naturalize the relationship between truth and subjectivity.

At a superficial level, this might look like an invitation to throw out of the window the idea of scientific knowledge as the spokesperson of the truth about human nature in favour of an alternative set of truths. This is incorrect. Foucault (1997) does not advocate a substitution of a truth A with truth B because this mechanism only perpetuates the problem in a circular fashion. The point that Foucault makes is different and has to do with adding up new possibilities to experience subjectivity in textures that are not scientific, medical or biological. In this sense, the techniques of the self he proposes do away with one the most powerful proposition of Western subjectivity, namely the idea that truth (in its discursive performances – as religious truths, as psychological truths and so on) is the fundamental element upon which our sense of subjectivity hangs. He asks: *“After all, why truth? Why are we so concerned with truth, and more so than with care of the self? (...) How did it come about that all of Western culture began to revolve around this obligation to truth which has taken a lot of different forms?”* (1997, p. 295).

In his last interviews (1997), Foucault explains a set of self-technologies that are disjointed from the concern for truth. Specifically, he posits the possibility of relating with one’s own self as a creative and artistic endeavour. As he explains: *“from the idea*

that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.” (1997, p. 262).

Foucault’s understanding of subjectivity in aesthetic terms is crucial to the framework I offer in this dissertation. Moreover, his reflection of an aesthetics of existence share a lot and complement de Beauvoir’s existentialist notion of ‘arts of living’, which will be tackled in the next chapter. Drawing on the fusing of these insights, I too argue that as subjects, we can relate to our selfhood in aesthetic/existentialist terms.

The next section will present Foucault’s reflections on the aesthetics of existence and it will emphasise in particular how it relates to the key question: “what it is to live a meaningful life?”

4.4 The Aesthetics of Existence

Notoriously, one of the main critiques that has been aimed at Foucault’s works is the lack of ethical thought (Fraser, 1985; Habermas, 1987; Taylor, 1984, 1989, 1991). However, as stressed by many (see Bernauer & Mahon, 1994; Foucault, 1997; Vintges, 2001), this attack is plausible only if one conceives ethics in a very strict Kantian sense, namely in terms of principles that apply to anyone in every situation. Given Foucault’s radical rejection of universalisms, it is not surprising that in his oeuvre one cannot find a discussion of ethics in terms of generally applicable rules. Still, the accusations of moral nihilism and relativism (Fraser, 1995; Taylor, 1984) seem to be too far-fetched. Foucault is really interested in engaging with ethics, but the way in which he answers the

question “what is the best way to live?” is informed by the way in which Antiquity understood ethical behaviour.

As previously mentioned, for the Greeks ethics was not a matter of a strict application of universal imperatives enforced by laws. For them, the notion of ‘living a good life’ was an autonomous commitment to self-care and it emphasised the idea of constructing one’s own subjectivity through experience. For the ancient Greeks, the key question was “*are you a master or a slave of your own passions?*” (Foucault, 1997, p. 260). A beautiful life was characterized by the personal choice of exercising control over behaviours and feelings. Achieving mastery in dealing with emotions in moderation was highly valued in that, for the Greeks, how one related to others largely depended on how one related to oneself. The more one was in balance and had a grip on his emotions and behaviors, the more one was able deal with others without trying to dominate them. In this sense, caring for others was seen as the most important by-product of self-care.

While not advocating for a mindless recovery of the practices in use in ancient Greece¹⁴, Foucault is fascinated by the idea of an ethics centered around personal choices and self-care. Drawing on the practices of the Greeks and in particular on the idea that subjectivity is constructed when we experiment in action, he proposes an ethics in the form of an ‘aesthetics of existence’. What he wants to emphasise is that ethical behaviour can be seen as a personal, pro-active and creative endeavour and not

¹⁴ As he observes, the beautiful life in Antiquity was not something that could be enjoyed by everybody, it was a prerogative of an elite (namely free men) and excluded vast portions of the population (for example women and slaves). See Foucault, 1997, p. 254.

as a function of obedience to external universal principles. His overall objective is to offer an ethics as *“a strong structure of existence without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure”* (1997, p. 260).

Foucault’s idea of aesthetics of existence consists of *“intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria”* (1985, p. 10-11).

In the first part of the chapter I outlined how Foucault’s early works present our subjectivity as constituted by power dynamics that we internalize and, as a result, that end up disciplining who we are and how we unfold in practice from the inside. In his later works he partially reframes and adds new nuances to his positions by positing that it is, in fact, possible to establish a creative relationship with oneself. Borrowing in particular from the works of Charles Baudelaire, Foucault offers a subject that *“tries to invent himself”* and that *“face[s] the task of producing himself”* (1997, p. 312). The idea that a subject can actively intervene and decide what type of relationship he/she wants to establish with oneself brings about a dimension that was previously undertheorized, namely the dimension of choices and freedom. In an almost existentialist fashion, Foucault notes that freedom constitute the ethical substance of an aesthetics of existence. In his words: *“Freedom is the ontological condition for ethics. But ethics is the considered for that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection”* (1997, p. 284). In this sense, the active engagement in creative and reflexive practices of self-care and self-

mastery represents the path to break free from the normative truths we lean on to make sense of who we are. Practicing freedom then becomes a question of reflexively recognizing and negotiating with the relationships of power that characterize our being-in-the-world. Drawing from the Greeks, Foucault argues that in taking care for oneself and striving for self-mastery one can find the freedom of choosing how to put together all the different fragments that compose who we are so that they can hold together as a provisional unity. Self-care then becomes an overall poetic strategy of coordination that requires us to actively face and engage with the ways in which we constitute ourselves and, at the same time, it also forces us to take responsibility for who we are. In particular, Foucault invites us to build a relationship with ourselves drawing on the vocabularies of art. This point is well illustrated in the following quote: *“What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”* (Foucault, 1997, p. 261).

It is not a case that Foucault mobilizes aesthetic categories to describe an alternative to the conventional understanding of selfhood in scientific terms. As Bernauer and Mahon (1994) observe, *“an ‘aesthetics of existence’ resists ‘a science of life’ [...]. It liberates us from endless self-decipherment and from subjecting ourselves to psychological norms”* (p. 155).

Consistent with his rejection of universal rules, Foucault never explains in details how one should go about the creation of oneself as a work of art. While he does suggest

that activities such as philosophizing, reading books and, most importantly, writing about his experiences have been *his own* ways to concretely create a sense of himself as an oeuvre¹⁵ (see Simons, 1995; Vintges, 2001), he ultimately believes that each of us to find the most appropriate ways. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the attempts that we make will be successful. Regardless the lack of clear-cut indication, there is one important aspect of the aesthetics of existence that he emphasises, namely the critical evaluation of the ways in which we relate to ourselves in the present. This is a crucial point in that the goal of an aesthetics of existence is to be able to let go of current truths in order to experience new possible forms of subjectivity.

Let us turn to these insights in the following section.

4.4.1 Getting Free of Ourselves

For Foucault, an aesthetics of existence cannot but stem from a critical attitude towards the ways in which one relates to one's own selfhood in the here and now. He refers to this process as a "*critical ontology of the self*", that is, "*an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is one and at the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and as an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them*" (1997, p. 319).

A critical ontology of the self begins by assessing the historically determined truths upon which we derive our sense of selfhood. As previously mentioned, in our

¹⁵ As Vintges (2001) argues, Foucault made "*philosophy out of his life and "lived" his philosophy*" (p.166). According to this interpretation, Foucault used his books as the site of self-creation, constituting himself as a subject that resisted modes of subjectification (Simons, 1995).

society the truths that we are fashioned by largely derive from a scientific/psychological/mentalist understanding of the human being. Foucault posits that once we recognize that these truth-games impose limits on us, we find ourselves having the opportunity to start to actively transgress our current modes of subjectification, experimenting alternative ways to be in the world. What he emphasizes here is a form of subjectivity that unfolds in action and not through the quest of an inner truth or by virtue of blind acceptance of external norms (1997). Specifically, Foucault suggests that the construction of ourselves as subjects occurs as a *“tinkering with self, a reconstruction from heterogeneous materials of who and what we are, and how we think, behave and act”* (Brewis, 2004, p. 33). It is important to stress that he is not thinking to the act of self-stylization as an act of autonomous creation. He does not believe that one can uproot oneself from the given social and historical conditions. Conversely, the possible practices of transgression one can decide to engage are *“not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group”* (1997, p. 291). Thus, constituting oneself as a work of art is a matter of experiencing different ways of being in the world, choosing which ones we want to include in our sense of self and then use them as a new ground for problematization. An aesthetics of existence, in fact, is not a ‘once and for all’ achievement, it is a constant active commitment. As Huijer (1999) notes, *“the aesthetics of existence is a process of eternal recurrence: each subject forms a way of living that is achieved and can give rise to problematization and the recurrent use of the aesthetics of existence instrument”*

(1999, p. 80). According to Rabinow (1997), Foucault's framing of subjectivity can thus be conceived as a "*continuous self-bricolage*" (xxxix). In other words, creating ourselves becomes a matter of combining the many different ways of being in the world that we enact on a daily basis, striving to find strategies of co-ordination for the multiplicity of fragments that compose us over and over again.

Overall, what Foucault invites us to do with an aesthetics of existence is distance ourselves from taken-for-granted truths about who we are. At the same time, he is also suggesting to think about the holding together of our subjectivity as a provisional unity that is achieved in poetic terms, that is, by means of an artistic strategy that provides cohesiveness to the many selves that we enact and that, together, render who we are.

4.5 Subjectivity and Freedom for All

As outlined in the previous section, for Foucault it is crucial to carry out a critical ontology of the self and to actively experiment with new forms of being. The reason for this is that it is only in the estrangement from pre-given formulas and fixed truths that we can experience freedom in practice. According to him, in fact, freedom should not be understood as an absolute, a state where everything can happen. Conversely, he argues that the freedom that we can enjoy is always situated in context and that one needs to get his/her hands dirty to experience it. For him "*[L]iberty is a practice. So there may, in fact, always be a certain number of projects whose aims is to modify some constraints, to loosen, or even to break them, but none of these projects can, simply by its very nature, assure that people will have liberty automatically, that it will be established by*

the project itself" (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 245). Thus, the freedom Foucault is concerned with is a slow, modest and perhaps most remarkably, highly frustrating practice in that it provides no guarantee that it will bring us contentment. Getting free of ourselves and creating one further self is always a work in progress, it opens up new ways of being that are not final nor essential, but that will have to be problematized all over again.

Nonetheless, positing freedom in non-essential and non-absolute terms does not make it meaningless or useless. On the contrary, the freedom we can practice through an aesthetics of existence should be a key concern in our life because, according to Foucault (1997) "*the first and only useful point of resistance to political power is in the relationship of the self to the self*" (p. 299).

As mentioned earlier, Foucault never conceptualizes ethics in terms of moral universals. However, in his proposal of an aesthetics of existence he does offer what Vintges (2001) calls a "*positive but undertheorized ethics*" (p. 166) based on a single principle: "*freedom for all*" (p. 174). Borrowing from the Greeks, Foucault maintains that committing to an aesthetics of existence is both an ethical and a political act. How could one allow others to practice freedom if one does not go through the experience of it first? The only way in which freedom can be experienced is when everyone has access to it, and the only way in which one can appreciate it is through a first-person exposition to it. For Foucault, in fact, freedom is "*the very stuff of ethics*" (1997, p. 300) and its practice constitutes a way to challenge "*domination at every level and in every form in which it exists, whatever political, economic, social, institutional or what have you*"

(1997, p. 300 – 301). For what is at stake in positing an aesthetics of existence is the resistance to the most dangerous “*strategic adversary*”, namely “*fascism [...] the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us*” (Foucault, 1983, p. xiii).

Overall, the conceptualization of subjectivity that emerges from Foucault’s late works presents a self that creates itself through action in experience as self-stylized project in constant reconfiguration. His suggestion is that we can experience ourselves as the assemblage of many fragments that come to provisionally hold together and, as a consequence, we can provisionally experience a cohesive version of ourselves. As the reader will probably have already guessed, these reflections present many similarities with the understanding of the human being as an actor-network that has been discussed in the previous chapter. Both approaches posit conceptualizations of selfhood that allow us to think about ourselves without mobilizing a transcendent, essential and integral notions of subjectivity. In contrast, they maintain that it is possible to experiment other textures of being, specifically relational, proactive, provisional and creative ones.

But, as this chapter has hopefully illustrated, Foucault’s aesthetics of existence is also an elaboration of the ethical dimension of subjectivity. Acknowledging that we are constituted by truth-games, discerning which ones we are ‘buying into’ and taking charge of what type of existence we want to live is seen as the ultimate practice of freedom. In the proactive and creative engagement with the project of our self-construction, we can find the space to confront the disciplinary power that constitutes us in order to regain a partial authority of intervention into our own personal narrative.

From this perspective, Foucault's late conceptualizations of how we can establish a relation with ourselves have a lot in common with the notion of embodied and ambiguous subject theorized (and lived) by Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir.

Let us turn to this topic in chapter 5.

*“If you still believe groupings exist by themselves,
for instance, the individual,
just try to remember how much labour had to be done
before each of you could ‘take your life into your hands’”
Bruno Latour*

*“The truth of one’s life is outside oneself,
in events, in other people, in things;
to talk about oneself one must talk about everything else”
Simone De Beauvoir*

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the existentialist understanding of selfhood constituting the third pillar of the framework that will be presented in the next chapter. Specifically, I will be discussing the embodied and ambiguous human being that emerges from the dialogue between the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986). It is my contention that their existentialist-phenomenological insights complement and enrich the framings of subjectivity offered implicitly by ANT scholarship (chapter 3) and more explicitly by Foucault (chapter 4).

Following the existential-phenomenological prerogative of attending to the ‘lived experience’, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir posit that human existence is something messy and ambiguous that – paraphrasing Law (2004) - cannot be ‘*distorted into clarity*’ (p. 2). Just like ANT scholars and Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir object to the traditional dualistic terms that postulate subjectivity as consisting of pure thought, allegedly separated from the body and from the world and inaccessible to the Other. In

particular, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir are unsatisfied with both empiricist/deterministic conceptualizations that reduce the human experience to the truths of the sciences (e.g. psychology, biology, physics, etc.) and with intellectualist/idealist takes that avoid dealing with our concrete involvement with the world. It needs to be clear from now that Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir *do not* negate that sciences and intellectualisms contribute to tell us something about the human condition. Nevertheless, the point that they make is that these traditional ways of exploring subjectivity miss out on many textures of existence that we experience *concretely* in the relations we establish with the Others and with the world.

This chapter is organized as follows. In the first section, I will present an overview of existentialism, clarifying its ties to phenomenology and outlining its main philosophical concerns. In the second part, I will focus on three notions that are central to both Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's existentialisms, namely a) embodied selfhood, b) ambiguity and c) intersubjectivity. In the third part, I will explore de Beauvoir's ethical thought. In the fourth and last section, I will outline the existentialist subject that emerges from the juxtaposition of Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's philosophies.

5.2 Existentialism: An Overview

While existentialism has always struggled to find its place within orthodox philosophic academic circles, the impact that it had on the cultural life and specifically on the arts in the middle of the twentieth century can hardly be ignored. Dostoevsky,

Ibsen, Kafka, Ionesco, Pirandello, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Picasso, the expressionist movement (Pollock and Gorky in particular), Godard and Bergman are only a few examples of how existentialism gave a voice to the particular Zeitgeist that was fluttering over Europe after the Second World War. Existentialism captured and articulated the sense of disorientation and confusion towards a world that appeared meaningless and absurd, in particular after years of Nazi occupation in Europe, after the discovery of the atrocities of the concentration camps and after the lucid acknowledgement that human mass destruction had become a concrete possibility, as the use of the atomic bomb had demonstrated (McBride, 2014).

Providing a clear-cut definition of existentialism is not possible because each philosopher enacted their own particular version of it. Nonetheless, existentialism can be broadly identify as being invested in investigating how human beings make sense of their existence. As Andrew (2003) explains, *“existentialists think human existence has no pre-determined meaning. It is up to each of us to use our own freedom to choose our actions and interactions in the world. Each individual carries the burden of finding, revealing and making meaning of the world”* (p. 25).

Existentialism aims at comprehending the human experience from a first-person person standpoint. From this perspective, existentialist thought, in particular as enacted by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, shares the phenomenological mission of avoiding the intellectualisms typical of the Cartesian philosophy and of idealism in order

to go “back to the things themselves”¹⁶ (Husserl, 1970, p. 168). Given the many commonalities that phenomenology and existentialism share, in the next section I will sketch out the relationship between the two.

5.2.1 Existentialism and phenomenology

Phenomenology emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century thanks to the works of Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938). Husserl’s main interest was to come up with a method to analyse directly the “lived experience”, by-passing the mentalist abstractions that Western thought had inherited from Plato and his doctrine of ideas.

Traditional philosophical concerns had always grappled with questions such as “what is the substance of reality?” or “how do we know whether something is truth or not?” For Husserl, these preoccupations were only secondary in that, if we attend to our daily lived experience, we can appreciate that we *already* exist and are involved with a world full of things and other people. Thus, for Husserl, instead of looking for abstract objective explanations of reality, what was far more crucial was to pay attention to how we encounter and experience the world and its ‘stuff’. One of the core concepts of phenomenology is that we can establish relations with things only when we are conscious of them. In other words, our consciousness is the means according to which we grasp the world. By virtue of being conscious of something, we encounter that something (that is, a ‘phenomenon’¹⁷). This is why phenomenologists, including the ones

¹⁶ As Crowell (2017) observes, “while not all existentialist philosophers were influenced by phenomenology (for instance Jaspers and Marcel), the philosophical legacy of existentialism is largely tied to the form it took as an existential version of phenomenology” (section 1, second paragraph).

¹⁷ ‘Phenomenon’ is a word that derives from Greek and that means ‘thing that appear to view’.

that are mainly interested in issues related to human existence, emphasise the role of sensual perception and internal experiences over deductive methods, scientific or metaphysical truths.

Following the phenomenological principle of sticking to the concreteness of life as we experience it, Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) took the discussion in the realm of subjectivity and questioned the way in which traditional Western philosophy had engaged with the question “who am I?”. He observed that, from Descartes on, the idea of “individual subjectivity” had always been assumed as the basic interface by virtue of which human beings experience the world. Traditional Western philosophical takes on selfhood had identified ‘human nature’ in terms of different substances, for example, rationality, spirit, acts of perception and so on (Mansfield, 2000). Heidegger noted that all these different models of humanity had missed out on perhaps the most fundamental point, which, for him, was to problematize the very nature of Being. Thus, the question that had to be addressed was: “What is it to say that one is?”

According to Heidegger, the basic form of human existence is ‘*Dasein*’, a German word that literally means ‘being-there’ but that is commonly translated as ‘existence’. In contrast to the Cartesian dualism that separates the “mental” from the “physical” substance (the mind from the body), Heidegger posited that there are no neat distinctions between “subjects” and “objects”: the self and the world (which starts from the human body according to Descartes) are not distinct entities. While Heidegger accepted that human beings and the world can be “provisionally” separated artificially, they are not to be considered separate entities in our inquiry of the lived experience.

For Heidegger, what was crucial was to address the question of existence in subjective terms, in that only 'I' can know what 'being' means to me. Heidegger stressed that the Latin etymology of the word 'existence' (*'ex-stare'* – to come forth, to emerge from) provides the best description of the 'being-in-the-world' that is specific to humans. In its etymological sense, 'existence' gives a sense of both our ability to self-reflect on who we are now and it also allows us to think about ourselves as future possibilities ('projects') that can be realized. For Heidegger, in fact, a human being is always in the process of becoming oneself: we are always "*ahead of ourselves*", looking at a future that "*awakens the Present*" (1962, p. 378).

Drawing a clear line that separates phenomenology from existentialism is not easy, especially in the case of Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir: they bleed into each other and their distinctions are not always evident, so much so that existentialism is often referred to as "*existential phenomenology*". On a general level, both phenomenologists and existentialists are concerned with the subjective experience of the world. Like phenomenologists, existentialists are not interested in finding objective and universal truths about the human being, for they rejected the idea that human beings are thrown into the world equipped with pre-given "*human essences*" that determine our subjectivity. For them, we 'become who we are' in practice, as a result of the fact that we are free to make choices. This is why both phenomenologists and existentialists tend to structure their arguments by means of offering examples that they draw from the concrete experience. The method of using examples performed in practice the phenomenological-existentialist aim of unsettling universalisms and paying

attention to particularity. In this sense, examples are not meant to be understood as empirical proof, but to “*transfer the spark of the insight to the reader*” (Boer, 1989, p. 181 in Vintges, 1996, p. 37), to pass on a specific intuition.

Overall, existentialism (like phenomenology) does not display the cohesiveness of other philosophical schools of thought. Nonetheless, there are some themes that emerge consistently. Given the need to provide a conceptual map to situate my discussion of Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, in the following sections I outline three key tropes that aim at providing a working understanding of what existentialists were about. The first one clarifies the notorious existentialist motto “*existence precedes essence*”, the second one discusses the centrality of the notion of freedom and the third one deals with authenticity.

5.2.2 Existence Precedes Essence

Sartre’s famous catchphrase “*Existence precedes essence*” (Sartre, 1973, p. 20) refers to the fact that, for him, human beings are not fixed or stable in their nature, they are not given an essence. There is no a-priori “inner self” that substantiates who we are and that we have to uncover. According to existentialists, people come to be who they are as a result of how they live their lives, that is, as a result of their choices and their conduct. In this sense, existentialism is very much focused on the “pragmatic” aspects of life, placing the primacy on the ‘practical’ over the ‘theoretical’. Both Nietzsche and Sartre agreed that human existence is action: one is what one does. From this perspective, it is not surprising that existentialists believe that philosophy needs to be

lived and practiced on a daily basis, both addressing the reflective and contemplative side of life as well as the mundanity of it, with its load of feelings, emotions, expectations, desires and frustrations.

5.2.3 Freedom

Freedom is perhaps the first word that comes to mind when discussing existentialism. I shall come back to this topic later when dealing with Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's understanding of this notion, but for now let us broadly introduce the concept.

As mentioned previously, for Sartre, there is no objective reality that defines for us our conceptual schemes. Our decisions are not dictated by a God or by previously existent values or social conventions. In *"Being and Nothingness"* (2003) he writes: *"nothing foreign has decided what we are"* (p.708). For him, my inclinations or instincts are not merely "brute facts", they are present in my experience as possibilities that become part of me when I choose to identify with them or not. Existentialists see commitment not as an act of consciousness or a mental abstraction, but as *the way of being-in-the-world*¹⁸.

An aspect that Sartre makes a point to stress is that the acknowledgement of being free is not a serene one. Conversely, it creates anguish and anxiety because it

¹⁸ This is what Sartre's refers to in the well-known example of the "exigency" of the alarm clock: *"it is I who confer on the alarm clock its exigency – and I alone"* (2003, p. 61). According to Sartre, I am the one giving to the alarm clock the power when I get up. It is in that specific moment of reflective self-awareness (when I am considering whether to get up or not) that I face my freedom. For Sartre, this is when I have to make a choice: either I confront my freedom and willingly commit to it or I run away from it. In the latter case, I am acting in "bad faith", which means that I am repudiating freedom by pretending that I am powerless in front of the alarm clock. In this instance, Sartre would accuse me of choosing to act like "they" decided. "They" refers to the mainstream, the mass-existence, the social conventions to which I kneel in front when I decide to deny my freedom.

makes me realize that I am on my own, the only one in charge of deciding for my own existence. As human beings, we face angst in our awareness that we can always (fatally) disengage and be detached from the world. This is what the absurdity of human existence consists of: it is the acknowledgement that 'we are playing a game', but that eventually our life will be over and all the meaning that we are desperately looking for does not ultimately matter in that we will not be anymore. While this stance may seem nihilistic, it is not necessary to be taken as such, as we will see with de Beauvoir. In deciding to commit to our projects and embrace freedom (together with the responsibility that comes with it), we also have the opportunity to carry out a life that is authentic. Let us turn this last crucial notion in the next section.

5.2.4 Authenticity

The idea of living an authentic life is a cornerstone of existentialism. Being authentic means that one takes decisions and acts fully realizing that one is doing so by virtue of being free and not because of some external determination. Being authentic means living in accordance with a personally negotiated self-code, without giving in to the social configurations that are imposed on the self (Jaspers, 1970). However, as Kruks (2006) warns us, "*after decades of popular self-help manuals, the term 'authenticity' often connotes today a highly psychologized notion of the search for 'inner meaning' or the quest to get in contact with one's 'inner-self'*" (p. 67). It needs to be clear that this is not what existentialists mean when they talk about authenticity. They reject the idea of an 'inner self' that is waiting to come to light under the right circumstances. 'Being

authentic' is a matter of constantly committing to our freedom and owning up to who we are, as opposed to *"be sculpted by exterior forces like a lump of clay"* (Kruks, 2006, p. 67). In this sense, authenticity implies a high level of integrity and, most crucially, of self-transparency, in that being authentic requires us to assume full responsibility for our actions. Being authentic is to ask ourselves this crucial question: *"Do I succeed in making myself, or will who I am merely be a function of the roles I find myself in?"* (Crowell, 2017, section 2.3, penultimate paragraph). By mobilizing this notion, existentialism emphasises that there is not a universal and universally valid way to live life, but that everyone is free to decide how to be engaged with their own projects. Perhaps, as Vintges (1996) observes, *"that is the real reason why existentialism arouses perturbation: not because it despairs of man, but because it asks of him a continual effort"* (p. 61).

5.3 Merleau – Ponty's and De Beauvoir's Existential Subject

In this section I will attempt a cross-pollination of Merleau-Ponty's and De Beauvoir's thought on subjectivity. I acknowledge that the choice to look more closely at Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's thought is arbitrary and can be debated. However, there are positive reasons for my decision, the main one being what Langer (2003) describes as a *"relative paucity of commentaries linking de Beauvoir's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy"* (p. 134). In this sense, while De Beauvoir's affinity with Sartre's philosophy has been explored thoroughly, the same cannot be said about the connections between de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty (with some exception, see for

example (Cerbone, 2008; Kruks, 1990; Langer, 2003). To fill this gap, in the next section I will look at three attributes of subjectivity that have been considered central by both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir. I am referring in particular to the notions of:

- a) embodied subjectivity,
- b) ambiguity and
- c) intersubjectivity.

It needs to be noticed that these aspects are closely interconnected and that the degree of depth that Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir dedicate to each topic varies. Moreover, both Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's intellectual productions are complex and far from being monolithic. Thus, while I will touch on many tropes discussed by their philosophies, I will have to necessarily gloss over others and oversimplify aspects of their thought that are clearly worth much more attention.

5.3.1 The embodied subject

Merleau-Ponty

One of the central topics tackled by Merleau-Ponty's thought is the idea that our body constitutes the basis for our experience of the world.

In "*The Phenomenology of Perception*" (1962), Merleau-Ponty presents a critique of the traditional Cartesian understanding of the human being as characterized by the mind/body divide. The problem he has with this traditional framing is that it places its primacy on mentalist relations with the world, underplaying the role that the body plays in creating meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, it is misleading to conceive the human body as

an 'object' that a separate substance - the mind - operates. Conversely, Merleau-Ponty maintains that “[O]ne is one’s own body. There is no ontological separation between the experiencing ‘I’ and the body as one lives it. (...) [T]he lived body is one’s intentional opening to the world, through which alone one experiences meaningful things in the first place” (Morris, 2008, p. 111).

As human beings, our bodies are the means by which the world is revealed to us. We never relate to our body as an external object or, as Husserl puts it, “*as a thing ‘inserted’ between the rest of the material world and the ‘subjective’ sphere*” (Carman, 2012, p. 275) because, as Merleau-Ponty explains, I never simply ‘observe’ my body. Instead, “*my body (...) is my point of view on the world (...) my general ability to inhabit (a world)*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 85, 359). As the basis for human existence, the body mediates meaning, and, in turn, it is also mediated by meaning (Morris, 2008). It is not a case that Merleau-Ponty uses the term “to inhabit” (in French ‘habiter’) to express the active relationship that embodied subjectivity establishes with the world. For him, our lived bodies do not neutrally occupy space and time, but they inject them with meaning. Mixed-martial artists, for example, do not merely ‘stand’ inside of the cage, they move inside it, they see angles where to push their opponents, they invent paths to get them to the fence and so on. They pro-actively map the space and connect with it through movement. In doing so, the cage ceases to be a neutral spatial background, but it becomes an intentional part of the mixed martial artists’ projects, or, as ANT scholars would say, an enrolled actor.

The term that Merleau-Ponty uses to capture this idea of a sentient, intentional, carnal embodied subjectivity enlivening space and time is 'body-subject'¹⁹.

It is important to highlight that the notion of subjectivity as an active body-subject does not imply that Merleau-Ponty is proposing a behaviourist/empirical/materialist understanding of the body. What he argues, instead, is that *our mind is not separated from our body, but that it is incarnated in it*. The body 'understands' and 'thinks' too and it does so on a level that is anterior and independent from intellectual representations. For example, when a mixed martial artist is attempting to take the opponent down with a judo throw, he/she is not relating to his/her own body as an external machine that is waiting for instructions. He/she is not wondering where hands, feet, hips have to be placed. Mixed martial artists perform takedowns (and throw punches or kicks, go for submissions and so on) without prior cognitive reflection, their bodies perceive an opening and already 'know' and coordinate action accordingly.

For Merleau-Ponty, this 'knowing' of the body occurs in that our being-in-the-world²⁰ is mediated by action, by bodily movement and by the meaning derived from sensorial experience. He conceives "*motility as basic intentionality. Consciousness is in first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'*" (1962, p. 173). Thus, instead of saying "*I have a body*", we should be saying "*I am my body*", which better expresses the

¹⁹ As Crossley (1995) observes, while the term 'body-subject' is very common in Merleau-Ponty scholarship, it has been utilized by him only once in "*The Concept of Nature I*", which is part of the collection "*In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*" (1988, p. 149, in Crossley, 1995, p. 61).

²⁰ The hyphens in the construct "being-in-the-world" are meant to emphasise the reciprocal nature of the relationship between our being, the world and the fact that the former cannot exist but as situated in the latter.

notion that our primary engagement with the world is not intellectual, but practical and perceptual.

Moreover, the 'knowing' of the body goes beyond the 'boundaries' of the body itself. Our subjectivity can stretch out to include 'things', tools, machines, equipment, gear and props. The example he gives is driving a car. When we do it, besides 'knowing' how to shift gears, turn the steering wheel, we also include the car (its dimensions, how fast it can go, how long it takes to stop) in our judgements. Thus, we come to assume the perspective of the car and, as a result, our interaction with the environment changes (Crossley, 1995).

As the reader will have realized, perception is a key concept in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Perception constitutes the most crucial and primordial feature that characterizes human subjectivity. For him "*all consciousness is, in some measure, perceptual consciousness*" (1962, p. 396). In both "*The Phenomenology of Perception*" (1962) and "*The Visible and the Invisible*" (1992) he takes issues with the dualism of both empiricist/physiological and Cartesian/mentalist definitions of it²¹. For him, in fact, the body-subject is *both* perceiver and perceived *at the same time*. The famous example that he presents to explain this is the experience of a body that is touching itself. While Merleau-Ponty does agree that there are evident differences between the experience of touching and being touched, (or seeing and being seen or hearing and being heard and

²¹ The former identifies perception as "*a caused effect of a world of physical objects have upon the body (understood itself as a physical object)*" (Crossley, 1995, p. 45). Merleau-Ponty deems this view problematic in that it reduces perception to a causal effect that one object has on another and does not account for the fact that perception is related to meaning. The latter posits that perception is a constituting act of consciousness that confers meaning and significance to the world. Merleau-Ponty's critique here is that this view reproduces and perpetuates the subject/object dualism that he is adamant to reject. As Crossley (1995) points out, the problem with this stance is that "*[W]e see with our minds and not with our eyes for Descartes*" (p. 45). Overall, both approaches assume the existence of a neat separation between subject and object and fail to recognize that subject and object co-constitute each other.

so on), what he stresses is that the difference between these experiences is not a matter of dualistic oppositions, but it is something that has to do with the entanglement, the intertwining and the encroachment of the two. He refers to this relation as a 'reversible' or 'chiasmic' one. Being sentient is the reverse aspect of being sensible in that touching someone (or something) offers the possibility for a potential reversal of the situation. Thus, perceiving and being perceived are overlapping and interconnected experiences but they are not reducible one to the other. Merleau-Ponty uses the word 'flesh' to refer to this relational and reversible intertwining.

Given his focus on embodiment, it is of no surprise that for Merleau-Ponty perception is not a mental practice, "*an inner representation of an outside world*" (Crossley, 1995, p. 46). Perception is a fleshy encounter that unfolds as I experience the world and its 'stuff'. As Busch (2008) explains, "*the perceiving subject is not a mind taking note of sensible data representations, but a body at grips with phenomena*" (p. 34). Thus, the primary goal of perception is active engagement through movement. This is a key-concept that characterizes Merleau-Ponty's existentialism: our practical/perceptual engagement with the world is *the way* according to which we assume a meaningful position in the world (Crossley, 1995).

De Beauvoir

A criticism that has been aimed at Merleau-Ponty is his lack of attention towards 'different versions' of embodiment (gendered bodies, raced bodies, old bodies, handicapped bodies and so on) (see Fanon, 1967). This is where de Beauvoir's

existential-phenomenological analysis of power and of the oppressed integrates Merleau-Ponty's thought. Let us focus in particular on "*The Second Sex*" (2010) and "*The Coming of Age*" (1972).

De Beauvoir largely concurs with Merleau-Ponty in rejecting the idea that the body is only a thing or an object. In "*The Second Sex*" (2010) she writes: "[T]he body is not merely a body, but rather a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains a fulfilment – it is with reference to certain values that he evaluates himself" (p. 69). It is a body-subject de Beauvoir is thinking at, an active transcendent entity intentionally directed towards the world.

In her review of "*The Phenomenology of Perception*" (2004), de Beauvoir does agree that bodies should never be considered objects. Yet, in "*The Second Sex*" and specifically in the portion titled "The formative years", she finds herself discussing how girls do not have the same possibilities that boys have with regards to embodiment. While boys can conceive their bodies the way that Merleau-Ponty posits, girls undergo a socialization process that involves shame towards their bodies and their appearance. According to de Beauvoir, girls are not free to experience their body as intentional and transcendent, like boys do. She highlights how women's bodies are always forced to be 'embellished' with high heels, snug clothes, jewellery, make up, corsets and so on. All these elements interfere with women's way of creating that meaningful connection that Merleau-Ponty's body-subject has with the world.

As many have suggested (see for example Cataldi, 2001; Vintges, 1996), de Beauvoir endorses Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body-subject: for both, the active

body is our momentum towards the world and it incarnates our meanings, values and ideas. However, while Merleau-Ponty does not ask questions regarding *whose* body philosophy is referring to, de Beauvoir does. By addressing the case of women in the “*The Second Sex*” and of old people in “*The Coming of Age*”, she offers the idea that there is not one singular ‘universal’ type of embodiment, but that they’re multiple.

From this perspective, by combining Merleau-Ponty’s thought with de Beauvoir’s it is possible to open up an intellectual space where the multiple enactments of embodiment can be ‘carnally’ explored.

5.3.2 Ambiguity

“Ambiguity” is a term that derives from the Latin *ambiguitas* and it means uncertain, paradoxical, indecisive and indeterminate. When used to describe subjectivity, it has a negative connotation because it undermines the modernist Cartesian conceptualization of selfhood at its core. This understanding, in fact, thrives on notions of “certainty” and “clarity” in that it assumes that human nature is governed by a set of ontological a-priori universal properties that can be discovered by the ‘thinking substance’ (our mind). Up to these days, concepts like ‘Truth’ and ‘certitude’ (especially when related to the sciences, e.g. biological, physiological, psychological etc.) exercise a strong grip on us because traditional Euro-American conceptualizations of subjectivity use them as the irrevocable criteria upon which clear-cut distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are said to exist, dictating the basis for universal moral codes (Langer, 2003).

Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's existentialist attitude of attending to life as it unfolds in practice translates into a passionate rejection of the notion of ambiguity as something undesirable. For them ambiguity is not something 'wrong' that needs to be sanitized. On the contrary, it constitutes a fundamental mode of human existence.

Given that de Beauvoir's conceptualization of ambiguity has been highly influenced by Merleau-Ponty's (see for example Kruks, 1990; Langer, 2003; Vintges, 1996; Weiss, 2008), I will start off by describing the latter and then I will turn to the former.

Merleau-Ponty

As explained in the previous section, the primary concern that animates Merleau-Ponty's works is the refutation of dualistic understandings of the human experience. But how exactly can dualistic thinking be avoided?

To answer to this question, Merleau-Ponty points directly to the pre-reflective²² moment in which it is not possible to artificially separate abstractions from concreteness. He identifies this moment with the term '*behaviour*', which he understands as the basis for perception and, in turn, for meaningful action in the world. What is crucial about behaviour is that its meaning "*is lived through, rather than thematized and reflected upon; (...) [a]ctors may behave meaningfully without being fully or reflectively aware of the meaning that their action creates or embodies.*"

²² In phenomenology, pre-reflective self-consciousness is an implicit and first-order awareness that pre-exists more explicit or higher-order forms of self-consciousness. An explicit reflective self-awareness is possible only because there is a pre-reflective self-awareness or 'for-me-ness' (Zahavi, 2009), that constitutes itself as an on-going and more primary form of self-consciousness.

(Crossley, 1994, p. 12). This means that we can never achieve a complete awareness of our subjectivity nor fully know ourselves. If we attend to the lived experience, in fact, there is never a moment in which we observe ourselves from a neutral 'intellectual' position separated from our body. Our engagement with the world always involves both mind and body *at the same time*. Existence thus emerges as a fleshy affair in that our experiences are never disembodied.

Merleau-Ponty identifies this paradox as the fundamental ambiguity of human beings.

Ambiguity lies in the impossibility of a clear distinction between mindness and embodiment, in the irreducible indeterminacy of being both a subject and object at the same time. Ambiguous is also the relationship between nature and culture, because for Merleau-Ponty we are biological beings *and* products of our socio historical context *at the same time*. In contrast to Sartre (and partially to de Beauvoir, as we will see), Merleau-Ponty posits that the 'rules of engagement' with our situation are not made up from scratch. On the contrary, they come from a set of socio-cultural practices that the body-subject incorporates and that comes to constitute our subjectivity. In "*Signs*" (1964), he writes "*whenever I try to understand myself, the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it comes the others who are caught in it*" (1964, p. 15). In the "*Phenomenology of Perception*" he reiterates this point by borrowing a quote from Antoine Saint-Exupéry that says: "*Man is but a network of relationships*" (p. 456).
De Beauvoir

Merleau-Ponty's reflections on ambiguity were applauded by de Beauvoir. In 1945, she writes a review of the "*Phenomenology of Perception*" (2004) expressing her

agreement with his conceptualization of the paradoxical character of human existence. However, three years later, in a book entirely dedicated to an ethics that builds on the very notion of ambiguity (*"The Ethics of Ambiguity"*, 1948), de Beauvoir never mentions Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, she articulates her own account of ambiguity mobilizing Sartre's concepts and using his philosophy as a general framework. Nevertheless, the final result signals a close connection with Merleau-Ponty.

To better situate de Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity, let us briefly explain Sartre's first.

For Sartre, what characterises our existence is that we are conscious beings ('for-ourselves'). However, our consciousness always constitutes itself as consciousness *of* something. Thus, consciousness is not a substance, it is disclosure of being, "*the sheer activity of bringing about the noncoincidence with its object*" (Langer, 2003, p. 137). It is literally no-thing (where 'thing' is what is not human existence), that is, nothingness. Since human beings are not animated by a predetermined essence, identifying being as nothingness implies that we are ontologically free because our existence emerges as the outcome of the free choices that we make. Being ontologically free means that I am the only one in charge of the type of person I am and I need to substantiate my existence by facing and choosing freedom constantly. If I escape from it, I am behaving as an 'in-itself' (a thing) and, for Sartre, I am acting in bad faith because I am trying to deceive myself by making myself believe that there are other reasons that determine my choices even if I know that there are not. Moreover, while my ontological freedom is absolute, the presence of other people in the world constitute a major limit to it. When I relate to

others, their “look” constitutes an attempt of objectification because in looking at me they are making me an object amongst many others in their own world. The only possible option that I have to counter the others’ threat is to look back at them and to objectify them in turn. This is the reason why, for Sartre, relationships with people are always conflictual and problematic, causing in us anxiety and shame.

Given this picture of human existence, it is of no surprise that Sartre’s idea of ambiguity is negative and conflictual. The tragic ambiguity of human existence is a function of our lack of being, our original nothingness. It provokes nausea and anguish because it underlies the awareness that who we are has no solid foundation, that our life is absurd because it has no inherent meaning and that ‘being-for-oneself’ and ‘being-for-others’ always come with tension and struggle.

This negative experience of ambiguity is supposed to constitute the starting point of de Beauvoir’s *“The Ethics of Ambiguity”* (1948). She begins by seemingly accepting Sartre’s understanding of ambiguity as the ambivalence one experiences in recognizing that human existence is a lack of being. Yet, throughout the book, it becomes clearer and clearer that his philosophical framework (and, as we will see in in the next section, his ontology) does not completely satisfy her. Her own ambiguity towards Sartre’s ambiguity is enacted by both acknowledging the sense of pessimism, failure and unhappiness that the awareness of our nothingness brings about, and, at the same time, by countering it with the argument that this sense of failure is not itself a ‘brute fact’. Like everything, it is ambiguous, and it allows us to make a choice. We can always try to create a meaningful life by attempting to positively affirm our existence consciously.

In other words, what de Beauvoir is doing here is carving out her own philosophical path by introducing a layer that is not originally present in Sartre's thought. She creates a distinction between the idea of consciousness as 'disclosing being' and as the 'will to disclose being' or 'willing oneself free'. By doing so, de Beauvoir highlights that Sartre's idea of human beings as ontologically free does not provide any indication about what to do with this original freedom. In principle, one could use it to be an awful person²³. However, for her, if one wishes to disclose being by willing to be free, then one puts oneself in the situation of proactively rejecting nothingness. This is what de Beauvoir calls 'uprooting', that is, willing to experience the lack of being in positive terms. It is an ethical choice that we are making (thus the title "*The Ethics of Ambiguity*"). 'Uprooting' paradoxically anchors us in our situation of embodied subjects. Willing the disclosure of being takes us from an abstract idea of original freedom to the carnal dimension of practice. From this perspective, de Beauvoir wholeheartedly agrees with Merleau-Ponty that it is our bodily dimension that allows us to engage with the world. Pure consciousness ('disclosing being') does not have a grip on the world, but willing to be free implies rooting ourselves into our carnal dimension, acknowledging our being both consciousness and body.

Some commentators have deemed de Beauvoir's ontological notion of 'uprooting' and 'willing to disclose being' 'problematic' (see Langer 2003 and Kruks, 1990). There is substance to this critique, as I will discuss later on, but for now let us focus on de Beauvoir's positive and creative take on ambiguity.

²³ This is a possibility that Sartre accepts and has no philosophical problems with (see Sartre, 1988).

For her, ambiguity is *“a paradoxical reality, in which each of the two contradictory aspects of a single existent carries equal weight”* (Kruks, 1990, p. 91). In this sense, she ascribes more to the paradoxical ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty as opposed to Sartre’s tragic one. Just, like Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir also prefers to explain the multifaceted nature of ambiguity with the phenomenological method of using examples.

For her, ambiguity lies at the heart of the paradox that every moment that we live brings us a step closer to death. It also characterizes our condition of embodied subjects in that we experience ourselves as *“a pure internality against which no external power can take hold”* and, at the same time, *“as a thing crushed by the weight of other things”* (1948, p. 7). Moreover, ambiguity animates also the relationship with the other: we experience our subjectivity in terms of individuality, but, at the same time, we are also deeply interdependent on other people.

As the reader will have understood by now, the confusion and the frustration that the impossibility of pinning down ambiguity brings about are a good sign. Following Langer (2003), it is better to *“refrain from trying to clarify ambiguity through explanations or definitions. Explanations assume that we can ‘unfold’ ambiguity, spread it out in front of us, and analyse it. Definitions assume that we can circumscribe, capture and fix it. Such attempted clarifications miss the very meaning of ambiguity. Ambiguity separated from existence is no longer ambiguity”* (p. 90).

5.3.3 Intersubjectivity

This section is dedicated to Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's reflections on our relationship with 'the other'. Just like it happened with embodiment and ambiguity, their way of seeing intersubjectivity as *constituting* subjectivity (and I will explain in which terms respectively) denaturalizes traditional modernist understandings of selfhood and, in emphasizing the role of relationality and situatedness, presents some characteristics that I maintain have the potential to enrich the amodern ontology of ANT and Foucault's ideas of an aesthetics of existence.

Merleau-Ponty

In "*The Visible and the Invisible*" (1992), Merleau-Ponty offers an answer to the philosophical problem of the other that stands in contrast with the traditional framings of alterity. He takes issue in particular with a) the idea that other fellow human beings are inaccessible because they are locked inside their consciousness and b) the master/slave dialectic that posits an omnipotent subject controlling others and defining their horizon of meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, both formulations are wrong because they are abstractions. His argument is that, in the lived experience, we come to appreciate Otherness²⁴ only in the encounter with it. Thus, alterity can never be absolute because it requires a subject that recognizes it as such. In other words, what Merleau-Ponty is positing here is that the self and Otherness are connected in reversible terms in that they are always somehow already entangled with the subject, and, in turn, the subject is always impacted and altered by the encounter with the other. 'ANT and After' scholar

²⁴Merleau-Ponty does not discriminate often between the structure of our relations with people or with things, thus what is said for 'the world' is also valid for the relationships with other people.

Mol (2002) posits a very similar idea when she observes that “*Nothing ever ‘is’ alone. To be is to be related*” (Mol, 2002, p. 54)

Merleau-Ponty’s radical phenomenological proposal is to be understood against the backdrop of his conceptualization of perception as a carnal grasp of being. Let us explain this point with an example. When I touch my computer, there are not two computers (one as an idea in my head and another in front of me), but only one that I carnally perceive. If someone else comes and uses it too, there is still one computer (not two), but this time, two sentient subjects are perceiving it²⁵. This is crucial because it implies that we do not live in hermetically sealed worlds, but that we share a common visible, touchable and perceivable space that Merleau-Ponty calls the “*intermundane space*” (1992, p. 269).

As Crossley (1995) suggests, the notion of intermundane space and the idea that body-subjects are always both sentient and sensible substantiate the notion of “*intercorporeality*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1992, p. 143) or “*carnal intersubjectivity*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 173). With these terms, Merleau-Ponty wants to point out that subjectivity is ontologically relational (or ‘reversible’ or ‘chiasmic’) in that it always encroaches upon the alterity of the other. This entanglement is due to the fact that we are carnal beings and not only pure consciousness. From this perspective, Merleau-Ponty totally disagrees with Sartre’s conceptualization of the human being as a purely ‘for-itself’ that relates to the other only by attempting objectification. This vision is problematic for Merleau-Ponty in that it amounts to a solipsistic framing of existence.

²⁵ This does not necessarily mean that what they see and how they make sense of it coincide (Merleau-Ponty makes the example of optical illusions and specifically the image of Rubin’s vases).

Conversely, by positing that our embodied subjectivity is always a) open to the world and b) co-constituted by, Merleau-Ponty is arguing that human beings are *ontologically interdependent on one another* in that we are associated by a fleshy bond that is anterior to rational and cognitive activity. For him, the other can always potentially 'read' us in that our bodies incarnate our feelings, intentions and emotions. As he explains, "[W]e must reject the prejudice which makes 'inner realities' out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible only to a single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another consciousness, they are types of behavior or forms of conduct which are visible from the outside" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 52).

The notion that our emotions are publicly available does not imply that we cannot keep our emotions and thoughts private, of course we can. What Merleau-Ponty means is that our emotions and thoughts do not belong to a hidden "secret garden" or an "inner self". Conversely, they assume a fleshy and perceptible form because they manifest themselves through our actions and conduct.

This way of framing emotions is a crucial aspect in Merleau-Ponty's existentialism in that it suggests that the ways in which thoughts and emotions manifest themselves are rooted in specific socio- historical contexts and, as a consequence, they can vary. In noticing how different cultures express feelings, he highlights how "*we do not have different ways of expressing anger or love. We have different ways of being angry and being in love. (...) Differences in affective styles amount to existential differences*" (Crossley, 1995, p. 53). Moreover, in the "*Phenomenology of Perception*" (1962), he

writes: *“Feelings and passionate conduct are invented like words”* (p. 189). It is not the case that he focuses on words. Language, in fact, is a key element in Merleau-Ponty’s fleshy interworld.

Drawing on structuralism (and in particular de Saussure), Merleau-Ponty understands language as a communal practice that is specific to a certain geographical and historical context that is reproduced and altered in its use. Of course, for Merleau-Ponty, language is never disembodied; it is always situated in material situations. At the basic level, this situation is the body-subject, which takes up language from the social context and uses it to speak. As reflective beings, in fact, we depend on language because it constitutes the means by which we articulate our thoughts, our self-talk and our self-reflection. But Merleau-Ponty does not think that language determines our thoughts. For him, thought and language are reversible entities: the body-subject speaks through and, at the same time, is spoken by language.

Merleau-Ponty’s insights on language have two major implications. First, language allows for the identification and definition of “stable” situations or realities within specific socio-cultural contexts. Second, it makes our thoughts potentially always accessible to others. If language is a public practice that is taken up by the body-subject, then our thoughts and self-reflections are substantiated by the same type of rules, resources and signs that are available to others. Again, this is not to say that we cannot have secrets or hide our thoughts, this is always a possibility. The point that Merleau-Ponty is making is different: he is suggesting that our thoughts and self-talk are not the

products of an isolated “*tacit cogito*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.171), but that they are the outcome of the reversible relationship between the world and the body-subject.

The emphasis on how language ties us to the world takes Merleau-Ponty a step further away from the idea of subjectivity as isolated from the other. As Langer (2003) puts it, for him (as opposed to Sartre), our relations with alterity is intrinsic and not extrinsic. It is interesting to notice that, while Sartre negatively defines consciousness as a ‘hole’, Merleau-Ponty describes it with a term that is dear to ANT scholarship: for him, consciousness is a ‘fold’, a ‘hollow’. As he explains: “*The outside and the inside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself*” (1962, p. 460).

De Beauvoir

De Beauvoir’s creative and pro-active spin on ambiguity implies an understanding of the relationship between self and the other that occupies an intermediate position between Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s. Just like the latter, she maintains that subjectivity is a relational phenomenon. However, as remarked by many (see Kruks, 1990; Langer, 2003 and Vintges, 1996), she never fully ascribes to Merleau-Ponty’s fleshy reversible ontology because she never completely gets rid of Sartre’s “intellectual solipsism” (Vintges, 1996).

Let us discuss this point by going back to some aspects of de Beauvoir’s “*The ethics of ambiguity*” (1948) that have been criticized (Langer, 2003; Kruks, 1990). The main weakness detected is the notion of ‘disclosure of being’.

For de Beauvoir, disclosure is the ability that human beings have to bring the world to life by encountering it at the level of consciousness. According to Langer (2003), the problem is that de Beauvoir's formulation still builds on the idea that there is a pure, absolute consciousness that is independent and separated from the world. Thus, while Merleau-Ponty's embodied consciousness does away with the subject and object dualism, de Beauvoir somehow remains stuck in it because she assumes that the 'disclosed' part of the relationship is a passive, self-contained entity that is brought to life by consciousness. As we have seen, she suggests that one chooses to proactively engage with the situation by 'willing oneself free'. Thus, while she does posit that meaningful relationships can happen by virtue of carnally 'rooting' ourselves in the world, she does not give up the idea that we are ontologically pure consciousness, and, as such, that our "for ourselves" can never be known by the others. In this sense, she does not obliterate Sartre's solipsism with the same resoluteness that we find in Merleau-Ponty. Instead, she gives to it an "*intellectual practical spin*" (Vintges, 1996, p. 61).

As Langer (2003) observes, in her review of the "*Phenomenology of Perception*" (1945), de Beauvoir praises Merleau-Ponty's notion of intersubjectivity, stressing how he allows us to avoid using violence towards ourselves. Yet, in her philosophy, de Beauvoir does not completely follow him. Her notion of disclosure still implies that my relationships with others will be extrinsic as opposed to the intrinsic interconnectedness posited by Merleau-Ponty. Nevertheless, while de Beauvoir does not entirely embrace Merleau-Ponty's reversible ontology, she still contends that her 'intellectual solipsism'

(Vintges, 1996) allows for the possibility of cultivating mutually validating, positive and nurturing relationships with others.

According to de Beauvoir, it is in the embodied and emotional dimension that I can establish inter-validating relations with people. As ambiguous beings, in fact, we are never only pure 'for-itself' and the body is not a mere object. We are mind *and* body *at the same time*. Thus, reflections on how to be-in-the-world should start from the acceptance of our ambiguity and from our engagement with freedom. In practice, this idea translates into finding, creating and committing to values that we decide on our own and that will substantiate our conduct in the intersubjective world.

One of the critiques against de Beauvoir is that in "*The Ethics of Ambiguity*" and in "*The Second Sex*" she merely juxtaposes Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's ontologies and then oscillates back forth between the two (Kruks, 1990). I disagree with this interpretation and, instead, I concur with those who maintain that de Beauvoir's works do present an original (but not undeniable) ontological basis for understanding our ambiguous relations with the other (see Langer, 2003; Vintges 1996, 2001). Agreeing with Langer (2003), I also believe that de Beauvoir 'promiscuous ontology' presents some glitches that Merleau-Ponty's overcomes and I consider his more solid. Yet, in turn, de Beauvoir's thought on how we relate with the other tackles issues that Merleau-Ponty only touches tangentially, making her philosophy a valid contribution to his. I am referring in particular to a) her insights on the possibility for constructive, mutually validating relationships with others, b) to the focus on the relevance of the emotional aspects of our intersubjective interactions and c) to her reflections on ethics

as an 'art of living'. I will deal with a) and b) now and dedicate the entire following section to point c.

As mentioned, both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir do not share Sartre's anti-social ontology. As far as De Beauvoir is concerned, while she does accept that being observed by a look that one cannot return equally is indeed objectifying, she also offers that this is not the only possible option. 'Looks' can be of "*mutually validating reciprocity*" (De Beauvoir, 2010, xviii), meaning that people are not necessarily confined in a subject/object type of relationship, there is also the possibility for equality, human fellowship and solidarity. When a *subject* meets another *subject* (that is, when there is no constant attempt to enslave and to escape from enslavement), there is no need for oppression.

Thus, while for Sartre, the other is always attempting to objectify me by taking my world away from me, for de Beauvoir, the other can take my world away, but he/she can also give it back to me with new textures and nuances added on top. This is precisely the reason why she posits that we depend on other people in order to create a meaningful existence. In her words: "*one can reveal the world only against a backdrop of the world revealed by other men. No project can be defined except by its interference with other projects*" (1948, p. 70).

So now the question is, how is it that we connect with others?

For de Beauvoir, the answer lies in our emotional dimension. One of the striking aspects of her entire oeuvre is the constant attention that she pays to feelings as the means of connection with others. Our emotions are the key element thanks to which

equal bonds between fellow human beings can (or fail to) happen. Emotions are the locus where we overcome our separateness and we recognise that the other is an ambiguous human being as much as I am. The most egregious example of this idea is physical love, which is a recurrent topic in her works. For her, sexual love²⁶ anchors us to the situation in that allows us to realize an immediate contact with the other by virtue of a powerful overflow of emotions that makes us experience both our own fusion of body and consciousness and, at the same time, the fusion with someone else (Vintges, 1996). The emotions caused by physical love melt the boundaries between subjects, they create a direct fleshy connection that makes us experience the other person not only as a body (that is, as an object), but as an embodied consciousness.

One aspect that de Beauvoir makes clear is that mutually validating bonds between people are not an a-priori given. In other words, relationships of non-objectification are possible only if we decide so. In this sense, for de Beauvoir emotions are ethical choices and while her existentialism maintains that we can choose how we relate with the other, she is not naïve and she is deeply aware that bonds between equals are not a concrete reality for everybody.

Relationships of objectification are a big concern of hers, so much so that both *"The Second Sex"* and *"The Coming of the Age"* present a thorough analysis of the systematic ways in which women and old people are 'othered'. De Beauvoir acknowledges that clashes, conflicts and domination are unavoidable parts of our embodied experience because - just like love and fellowship - they stem from our

²⁶ De Beauvoir distinguishes between "erotisme" (eroticism, lust) and "amour" and she uses the latter more frequently.

ambiguity. In the *"Ethics of Ambiguity"*, she explains oppression as a phenomenon related to our emotional sphere and, more specifically, to the nostalgia we feel towards the sense of irresponsibility and impunity we experienced in our childhood. As children, in fact, we enjoy a special condition: we are free, but we are not aware of it because we live in a world where someone else (parents or, in general, adults) takes decisions for us. During childhood, our ambiguity manifests itself in the fact that we are ontologically free, but we are not 'willing ourselves free' because we are never considered responsible for our actions. It is only in our teenage years that we start grasping our freedom and the responsibility that it brings about. At this stage, freedom is inebriating: we start questioning rules and social norms. But freedom is also very scary, because we realize that our actions and our conducts impact others. As adolescents, our engagement with freedom is related to how our personality has developed so far. The more we grow up, the more the awareness that we are becomes petrifying and we become more aware that who we are is entirely up to how we deal with our circumstances. This is why, especially as adults, we often prefer to adopt 'the easy way' (namely, to act in bad faith) and to escape from our freedom, in the attempt to re-live the feeling of happiness and carefreeness that characterized our childhood. This is why de Beauvoir sees in the ethical choice of 'willing ourselves free' a crucial dimension of intersubjectivity: by choosing to assume a positive stance towards our ambiguity and, consequently, by rooting our ontological, abstract freedom into our situation through concrete actions, we cannot but acknowledge that our existence is interconnected to the existence of the other. Our actions impact other people's freedom in the same way

that their actions affect mine. In other words, I can be free only when everyone else is, and this is why, for de Beauvoir, one needs to be entirely committed to freedom, for oneself and for everyone else. There is no neutral position here because avoiding facing freedom turns into a denial of a positive interconnection with others.

It is worth pointing out that the way in which de Beauvoir sees freedom presents striking similarities with Foucault's notions of self-care. For both Foucault and de Beauvoir, the common good stems from the ethical subject, and not from external universal moral codes. In de Beauvoir's case, one needs to practice one's own freedom because, in doing so, one enables freedom for the other. However, for de Beauvoir, this line of reasoning is not valid for those who oppress and dominate other people and also for those find themselves in a condition of total immanence. The latter are 'constituted subjects' (Beauvoir, 2010), meaning that they are an emanation of their oppressors who have hopelessly ruined freedom for them. In these instances, de Beauvoir justifies the use of violence against the oppressor, fully realizing how this is another ambiguous situation in that it transforms whoever is committed in fighting the oppressor into an oppressor in turn. As Langer (2003) notes, for de Beauvoir "*violence is both outrageous and unavoidable. Failure to take action perpetuates the violence of existing oppressive conditions; and acting to abolish such conditions itself involves violence. We must strive to inflict less violence than that which we try to forestall or eliminate*" (p. 100). Thus, the choice is not between violence or non-violence, but between difference types and degrees of violence.

The idea that violence is a persistent characteristic of our relationship with the other is shared by Merleau-Ponty. In *“Humanism and Terror”* (1969), he writes *“we are what we do to others (...). To respect one that does not respect others is ultimately to despise them, to abstain from violence towards the violent is to become their accomplice. We do not have a choice between purity and violence, but between different kinds of violence. Inasmuch as we are incarnated beings, violence is our lot”* (p. 109).

While he never mentions de Beauvoir in this specific work, his reflections are compatible with her deeper understanding of oppression and objectification, which for him stems from bad communication. When our actions and intentions are not understood we then look at the Others *“as if they were insects”* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 361). Moreover, as Langer (2003) highlights, Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of oppression is only partial and does not dwell on why oppression is so pervasive and deeply rooted in us. This is why de Beauvoir’s analysis of the nostalgia for our childhood complements well his philosophy.

The third topic de Beauvoir pays attention to and that is compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s thought is what it is to concretely live “a good life” from an existentialist standpoint. Let us discuss it the following section.

5.4 De Beauvoir’s Ethics

As Vintges (1996) observes, the vast majority of commentators identify de Beauvoir’s ethical thought with *“The Ethics of Ambiguity”* (1948). However, the ethical dimension of existence is a life-long interest of de Beauvoir which she constantly tackles not only in her the philosophical writings (the above-mentioned *“Ethics of Ambiguity”*,

"The Second Sex" and *"The Coming of Age"*), but also in her novels (specifically *"The Mandarins"*) and in her autobiographies. If we follow Vintges (1996, 2001) and we pay attention to the entirety of her intellectual production, it is possible to distinguish two main stages in de Beauvoir's ethical thought. The first one is a 'moralistic' phase and it includes the works written in the Forties. The second one understands ethics in the form of an *"art of living"* (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 180 – 182) - that is, as a personal project of self-stylization - and it runs from the late Forties/early Fifties onwards.

5.4.1 "Willing oneself free": The Moralistic Phase

The first phase of de Beauvoir's ethical thought largely coincides with the moral attitude described in *"The Ethics of Ambiguity"* (1948). Here de Beauvoir argues that ethics is not to be understood as a set of abstract absolute moral rules that are imposed on us from the outside. Conversely, as we have seen, assuming an ethical attitude consists of "willing oneself free". "Willing oneself free" constitutes the only positive moral principle that we should keep in mind when facing our concrete ethical dilemmas. This positive attitude connects ontological freedom to the concrete situation one finds oneself in. In doing so, de Beauvoir distances herself from Sartre's notion of absolute freedom in that she acknowledges that freedom is conditioned by our socio-cultural context. De Beauvoir, in fact, is deeply aware that not everyone enjoys the same level of freedom and that some people are not in the condition to exercise their original freedom because they are oppressed. This is why she maintains that to "will oneself free," one needs to be in a socio-cultural condition that allows for it. From this

perspective, “willing oneself free” is not only an ethical principle, but also a political one in that it requires to take a stance against oppression and domination. I am a ‘moral subject’ not only when I realize my freedom, but also when I strive for everybody else’s freedom. Thus, while maintaining that ethics should guide our concrete and practical choices, de Beauvoir does have in mind a general moral principle, namely that “*we should only respect freedom if it serves freedom, and not when it flees itself, distances itself from itself or impedes the freedom of others*” (Vintges, 1996, p. 71).

Overall, “*The Ethics of Ambiguity*” makes a strong case against the understanding of ethics in terms of abstract moral codes. However, at this stage de Beauvoir still offers an idea of what a moral attitude should look like. For her, ethics is the subjective endeavour of ‘willing oneself free’. This is the only positive norm that de Beauvoir sees informing the concrete choices that we make about how to get involved with the world and with other people.

5.4.2 Ethics as an “Art of Living”

De Beauvoir’s ethical thought does not end with “*The Ethics of Ambiguity*.” According to Vintges (1996), a first example of how her non-strictly philosophical works perform her ethical thought is the philosophical novel²⁷ “*The Mandarins*” (1956), which tells the story of a group of characters’ grappling with their moral decisions.

²⁷ For de Beauvoir, a philosophical novel is not to be confused with a novel *à these*. The latter is meant to teach a lesson, something that de Beauvoir is not interested in. For her, the purpose of literature is to capture the ambiguity of human existence at the subjective level, which is something that pure philosophy and its abstract language, fails to do. Philosophic literature constitutes the perfect middle ground: it allows for the possibility of exploring “*the truth of concrete experiences of people in concrete situations (...) without molding them into abstract schemes of formulations*” (Vintges, 1996 p. 76).

In this book, de Beauvoir does not completely deny her previous 'moral' stage but she does present some remarkable changes. While she still believes that human beings are free and have the ethical responsibility of self-selecting how to conduct themselves in the world, in "*The Mandarins*" there is no trace of positive moral rules. Instead, as Vintges (1996, 2001) points out, there is a negative indication – 'do not oppress anyone' – which provides the background scenario for a positive ethics that takes the form of "*an art of living*" (de Beauvoir, 1956, p. 181).

The basic idea that animates de Beauvoir's notion of 'art of living' is that we can create our own life-project within our given conditions by engaging in a creative negotiation of our sense of self. According to de Beauvoir our subjectivity is something that we decide for ourselves and that we are free to achieve in practice through our actions. In "*The Mandarins*", Henri, the main character, asks "*Who am I? What is the truth about myself?*" (p. 185). The answer that emerges is that "who one is" is the result of the practice of self-organization and collection of the multitude of experiential elements that make up who we are. In this sense, the "art of living" ethics is precisely what allows us to conquer our own subjectivity, to get a grip on our own ambiguity on our own terms. For de Beauvoir, subjectivity is an unfinished and unfinishable 'work in process' which holds together by virtue of the constant tackling of one's situation. Being 'who one is' is a matter of *choosing* to keep different truths about ourselves together and, by doing so, imprinting a sense of unity and coherence (not necessarily consistency) to the plethora of experiences and emotions that comprise us.

Anticipating one of tropes that characterizes Foucault's view on subjectivity (Kruks, 2006; Marso & Moynagh, 2006b), de Beauvoir often mentions that, as human beings, we are 'detotalized' and 'fragmented' (1965, 1966). Our experience slips away constantly; it is made up of many scattered pieces and there is never a moment in which we have a firm grip on the entirety of our own experience. This is why literature and in particular, autobiographical works are kept in such high regards. For her, writing and the intentional reflexivity that it entails are the privileged place where we can exercise our own 'art of living'. According to Vintges (1996, 2001), this explains why she is such a prolific self-writer. With her diaries, letters and five autobiographies, de Beauvoir performs *in practice* what crafting a sense of self looks like. But it needs to be clear that the point of writing a memoir is not to provide an accurate representation of who one is²⁸ nor to surface some hidden truths. The goal is to engage in an exercise of self-monitoring and self-creation that gives a direction to our being-in-the-world. Writing about what we do and who we are and, more broadly, offering accounts of ourselves is a way to 'build ourselves', to organize our subjectivity, to bring together in a coherent and personal fashion the many heterogeneous elements, experiences and emotions that together make us who we are. It is the creative moment when our sense of who we are emerges, which, as a consequence, informs and guides how we carry ourselves in the world in practice. This is why the case study (chapter 7 and 8) heavily relies on interviews revolving around autobiographical narratives. These interviews require telling a story and, just like writing, telling a story is a way of coordinating oneself into

²⁸ As Bair (1990) reports, Nelson Algren, one of de Beauvoir's lover, allegedly commented "*Autobiography – shit! Auto-fiction, that's what she wrote*" (p. 594, in Vintges, 1996, p. 89).

cohesiveness, of choosing to highlight some aspects and downplay others, in short, of creating who we are.

It needs to be made clear that de Beauvoir's 'art of living' is not concerned with intentions, feelings or desires, but only with actions. This is why self-discipline and self-organization are so crucial for her: they substantiate the actions that constitute our subjectivity. It is not a case that in de Beauvoir's letters and journals are full of detailed descriptions of every activity she carries out, every place she attends, every meal she eats, every person she spends time with, and so on. Just like the ancient Greeks with their *hupomnemata* (see chapter 4, her goal is also to organize, stylize and direct her being-in-the-world.

At this point, one might ask if pursuing an 'art of living' is really an ethical commitment or only a self-interested if not narcissistic turn in de Beauvoir's thought. This is far from being the case. On the contrary, the main purpose de Beauvoir sees in her ethics in form of an art of living is not so much the achievement of self-mastery, but communion, connection and emotional engagement with other people.

In "*The Mandarins*" (1956), all the main characters are deeply concerned with the improvement of other people's life. According to Vintges (1996, 2001), de Beauvoir's autobiographical work itself constitutes her attempt to share her own experience with others so that it can be useful and pass on the spark of the insight that it is possible to come to terms with our situation and build a sense of self that we deem authentic.

In a contribution to a debate on the purpose of literature (1965), de Beauvoir explains how writing – which was her way of 'reaching out' - can help others live their

lives because it allows for a type of connection that does not 'do violence to ourselves', as she would say. In providing an example of how people navigate through life and what meaning they give to their projects, de Beauvoir posits that literature (which is a creative act or communication) allows us to establish communion with our fellow human beings, helping to overcome our sense of separateness and isolation. From this perspective, de Beauvoir's 'art-of-living' ethics is deeply preoccupied with the quality of life of the other. However, in contrast to traditional ethical thinking, the preoccupation for others is culmination of her ethical thought and not the starting point. In other words, what de Beauvoir maintains is that contributing to the quality of life of others is a function of how we shape and come to terms with our own freedom.

Overall, de Beauvoir's understanding of subjectivity and ethics presents many similarities with Foucault's notion of "aesthetics of existence" (see chapter 4). It is striking that both Foucault and de Beauvoir, in objecting to psychological/behaviourist essentialisms, feel compelled to draw on the language and imaginary of art to articulate their reflections on what it is to be a subject.

Having said this, it needs to be underscored that de Beauvoir's reflections on 'self-creation' and 'art of living' are not an endorsement of the aestheticisms enacted by authors like Oscar Wilde or Anais Nin (Beauvoir, 1993). Vintges' (1996) suggests that de Beauvoir "*distanced herself from an aesthetic attitude to life, i.e., a striving to transform one's own life into an autonomous work of art*" (p. 102). For her, de Beauvoir's "*art of living is ethics rather than an aesthetics. We can thus talk of a non-aesthetic art of living*" (p. 102). I do not agree with this interpretation in that it hinges on a very narrow and

'despotic' (see Nanni, 2000) understanding of aesthetics as only pertaining to the judgement and appreciation of Beauty. In my opinion, all these writers – including de Beauvoir, Foucault (and Nietzsche too) – share much more than what separates them. They all break with the idea that art is a domain that needs to be kept apart from everyday life. With very different poetics, they all inject their life-projects with an artistic and creative sensibility. In doing so, they direct their attention to textures of experiences that have to do with evocation as opposed to representation, with emotions as opposed to explanations, as creation as opposed to compliance and as activity as opposed to passivity. In my opinion, just like Foucault, also de Beauvoir's 'art of living' can be seen as an ethics in form of an *aesthetic* in that it offers a way to attend to the creative, active, subjective process of self-stylization.

5.5 Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's Existential Subject

In this chapter, my goal was to explore the notion of subjectivity emerging from the dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir's existentialisms. As we have seen, their philosophies share many common traits. Yet, they also present some divergences. Some of them are irreconcilable; others constitute the ground for a fertile cross-contamination.

With regards to the commonalities, both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir reject the traditional Euro-American metaphysical idea that human beings have a given nature that can be known objectively by the sciences. For them, subjectivity is a complex, non-

essential phenomenon. In contrast to the modernist primacy placed on mentalist cognition, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir offer that our first-person givenness of the world is experienced by our sentient and sensible body. This is why we are ambiguous: our encounter with the world is never purely intellectual, but always practical and experienced in the flesh.

As perceiving and situated subjects, we are free to decide what type of person we want to be. Freedom represents the foundational mode of human existence: by being free, we can creatively choose how to conduct ourselves and how to establish relationships with others. However, both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir distance themselves from the notion of freedom conceptualized by Sartre in "*Being and Nothingness*". For them, the freedom that we experience and perceive is never absolute but it is always counterbalanced by the concrete limits imposed by socio-cultural conditions. Our goal is to 'transform' freedom through our actions and perceptions. This is why both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir's take on subjectivity is (paradoxically) deeply superficial. They believe that what we are emerges in the surface. We are *how* we are, the form *is* already the substance. As we have seen, both strongly despise the idea of an 'inner self' and they are unimpressed by hidden intentions and desires. What counts is action.

One last trope that distances Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir from traditional conceptualizations of selfhood is that they see subjectivity as an intersubjective phenomenon. This point is fully embraced by Merleau-Ponty and by his reversible ontology that posits intrinsic relations with others. For him, we are always potentially

available to the Others because human beings draw on the same socio-cultural repertoires, which vary according to the time and geographical location. Thus, what makes us 'who we are' is what Merleau-Ponty calls our "style" (1964), which consist of the ambiguous, creative process of *how* we choose to absorb/reject/interact with the given cultural resources²⁹.

De Beauvoir agrees with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis of the intersubjective dynamics that characterize the unfolding of subjectivity. However, she hesitates to fully ascribe to it and ultimately remains (contentiously) attached to an underlying idea of pure consciousness that has its roots in Sartre's philosophy.

In my view, Merleau-Ponty's ontology is more rigorous than de Beauvoir's. Yet, I do not think that her introduction of the notion of "willing the disclosure of being" seriously compromises her existentialism. On the contrary, comparing de Beauvoir's approach to Merleau-Ponty shows how her philosophy offers some key insights that are not enough developed - if not plainly ignored - by Merleau-Ponty.

In his works, there are in particular two tropes that he only touches on: a) the emotional dimension of existence and b) ethics. In both instances, de Beauvoir's philosophy fills these gaps. In the first case, she stresses how our emotional sphere moulds our relationship with the other. In doing so, she also provides an explanation of oppression that is absent from Merleau-Ponty's thought. In the second case, her 'art of

²⁹ As Silverman (2008) points out, for Merleau-Ponty "*expressing oneself is paradoxical since it grows from already established and thoroughly evident expressions. However, we detach ourselves from these conventional expressions so that they can be new enough to arouse attention*" (p. 102)

living' constitutes the ethics based on a "*good ambiguity*" that Merleau-Ponty deems necessary but that he never actually develops (see Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 11).

But it is Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment that benefits the most from de Beauvoir's insights. His conceptualization of body-subject, in fact, presents some problematic universalist traits that de Beauvoir's reflections on the experience of 'othered ways of embodiment' (e.g., women and the elderly) correct.

Overall, the dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir portrays an idea of subjectivity as a fleshy, ambiguous and relational phenomenon that is accomplished in concrete action. By doing so, they do away with modernist dualisms without resorting to a total de-centralization of the subject. From this perspective, it is not surprising that, in the last twenty-five years, scholars have used their thought to overcome some of the problematic aspects of postmodernism (Crossley, 1994; Kruks, 2006; Vintges, 1996, 2001; Visker, 1999).

The relevance of Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's insights for my framework lies in the fact that they offer philosophical tools to explore how human beings navigate and make sense of lived experience (specifically within organizational processes in the case of this dissertation) while moving towards the *achievement* of our own subjectivity. Paraphrasing Strathern, they offer a 'theory' of the self that understands its own processes of production (2004). In my opinion, their specific enactments of externalism complement the relational ontology of ANT and shares many commonalities with the subject that Foucault was conceptualizing in the final stage of his life.

The fusion of these three perspectives and the resulting method-assemblage of subjectivity are the topic that I will discuss in the next chapter.

*“For this rather weak identity
that we try to preserve behind a mask
is in itself a parody:
plurality resides in it, innumerable souls within it;
the systems thwart and rule each other.
Once one has studied history,
one feels “happy that one, unlike the metaphysicians,
does not have one immortal soul but many mortal ones”
M. Foucault*

*“I can't think in terms of boundaries.
Those imaginary lines are as unreal to me as elves and pixies.
I can't believe that they mark the end or the beginning
of anything of real concern to the human soul.
Virtues and vices, pleasures and pains cross boundaries at will.”
Kurt Vonnegut*

6.1 Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to present an alternative way of discussing subjectivity in the field of Management and Organizational Studies. My proposed approach distances itself from the one-dimensional, essentialist and rationalist notions of selfhood that organizational scholars tend to assume in the mainstream. It also challenges the deconstructed, fleeting and fragmented ‘non-subject’ purported by postmodernist perspectives.

In particular, building on:

a) ANT and its material, symmetrical and relational understanding of realities as networks (including the reality of the subject, see chapter 3),

b) Foucault's reflections on how one can critically and creatively constitute a relationship of self-knowledge in order to build up one's selfhood (chapter 4) and

c) Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir's notion of the embodied and ambiguous self that organizes itself through existential choices (chapter 5),

the next pages will attempt to bring an amodern, aesthetic and existential awareness to the self that is enacted in organizational settings, heeding to aspects that are currently overlooked by the standard narratives of selfhood in organizational scholarship.

This sixth chapter is divided into four parts. The first focuses on why and how insights from ANT, later Foucault's thought and Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's philosophies have been chosen as the ingredients for an alternative method-assemblage of subjectivity. In the second part, key themes of the three bodies of knowledge described in the previous three chapters will be braided together into an alternative recipe to manufacture knowledge about subjectivity. In the third section, I will flesh out why my method-assemblage of selfhood can be relevant to the extant discussion about the subject within organizational processes and in the fourth and concluding section I will share some reflections on the role of the researcher when mobilizing an amodern, aesthetics and existentialist approach to carry out research about subjectivity.

This chapter is a bridge that links the more 'theoretical' part of this dissertation to its 'applied' portion. Chapters 7 and 8 will present some examples of how my proposed recipe can be performed in practice, making present textures of subjectivity

that, while being part of the organizational experience, seldom receive the attention that I believe they deserve.

6.2 Connecting ANT, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir

6.2.1 An eclectic methodological framework? On complementarity and (supposed) incommensurability

The discussion featured in the previous three chapters implies that ANT, Foucault's, Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's thought can be made to converge around a number of key ideas on the reality of selfhood³⁰. But, at the same time, the discussion also makes clear that these different bodies of knowledge tackle different questions and enact different interests. Thus, while I deliberately choose to cultivate a theoretical common fertile ground to root my framework, I am also very aware that this proposed association presents the potential of being accused of lack of intellectual rigour and /or eclecticism³¹.

The question '*can a philosophy centred around the idea that who we are is the outcome of the choices we make (existentialism) be reconciled with perspectives that aim at de-centering subjectivity (Foucault) and de-emphasising the role of human beings in the enactment of the social (ANT)?*' is not unreasonable at all, especially considering

³⁰ The reason why ANT, while not being a 'theory of subjectivity', is included in my framework has already been dealt with in detail in chapter 3. Here I will only repeat that, while subjectivity is not the main concern of ANT, thinking about who we are as an actor-network – as I will explain in detail in the section 6.4.2 of this chapter - offers productive insights about it.

³¹ Eclecticism refers to the operation of picking and mixing strands of knowledge without paying too much attention if they are consistent or not. Postmodern scholars have no problem with this a strategy. For them, every body of knowledge is a social artefact, an outcome of situated cultural and institutional activities. As such, a random association of theories and style is not deemed problematic because none of them can state 'the Truth' but, at the same time, all of them state 'one truth'. In this sense, my framework does not resort to eclecticism, as I illustrate later on in the chapter.

that both Foucault (Flynn, 1997; Michel Foucault, 1970b, 1996, 1997) and Latour (Crease, Ihde, Jensen, & Selinger, 2003; Latour, 1999b) have publicly criticized phenomenology and existentialism, targeting in particular the emphasis on transcendental consciousness and the anthropocentrism. This is why, taking this question very seriously, I will now proceed to illustrate my rationale for combining insights from ANT, Foucault's, Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's thought. To carry out this task in the most straightforward way, in the next sections I will walk the reader through the path I traveled in order to ponder if these three literatures can connect. First, I will focus on the juxtaposition that presents a lower degree of controversy, namely ANT and Foucault's works. Then, I will discuss the alleged more problematic pairing, Foucault and ANT with existential-phenomenology.

6.2.2 (Not-So-Complicated) Relationship: Connecting ANT and Foucault

The connections between ANT and Foucault's thought are not controversial. They both understand the nature of reality as non-essentialist and relational. Most crucially, they also make a point of focusing on the role that power-relations play in the achievement of reality. ANT works within a Foucauldian view of power in that it conceptualizes it as a diffused and capillary attribute that innerves every type of productive relation (Fox, 2000). Moreover, ANT builds on the power/knowledge dyad postulated by Foucault (Law, 1986). In both literatures power is not a 'thing', but a verb. As Latour (1986) points out, "*power is not something you may possess and hoard (...). Power is, on the contrary, what has to be explained by the action of the others who obey*

the dictator” (p. 265). From a Foucauldian and an ANT perspective, power is a crucial ingredient in the crafting of realities (including the reality of the self of course), in that realities are the concrete outcomes of practices and actions innervated and flavoured by power, and not pre-given out-there-nesses that exist independently of it. The ontologies performed by ANT and Foucauldian thought are compatible and their conceptualization of power as omnipresent, practical and productive not only makes the possibility of their connection rather straightforward but it also opens up possibilities for further theoretical developments.

At this point, the more pressing questions are the following: can some type of harmony be created between Foucault and ANT on one side and Merleau-Ponty’s and de Beauvoir’s existentialist-phenomenology³² on the other? Can these three approaches tune into a common frequency? The following two sections tackle these questions.

6.2.3 More Complicated Relationship: Foucault and Existentialism

Foucault identified himself as belonging to a general movement of rebellion against phenomenology (Crossley, 1994a). In his interviews, he would often point at Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (who had been a professor of his) as the two key-figures he would disagree with the most (see for example Foucault, 1988, 1997). However, this self-proclaimed intellectual antagonism³³ has been substantially challenged by several scholars (see for example Crossley, 1994; Fox, 2000; Gillam, 2013; Kruks, 2006; Levy,

³² In this chapter, the term ‘existential-phenomenology’ is used to identify exclusively Merleau-Ponty’s and de Beauvoir’s philosophy, unless differently specified.

³³ Crossley (1994) defines it a ‘*self-identified opposition*’ (p. 4) on Foucault’s side.

2001; Vintges, 2001) who, on the contrary, have noticed how Foucault's thought often displays striking similarities and connections with existentialism. For example, Crossley (1994) argues that Foucault and Merleau-Ponty works can be very well reconciled in that they ultimately share a common interest of exploring, in practical terms, the *embodied* ways in which subjects are both shaped by the circumstances and at the same time, are able to creatively engage/negotiate with them. The main point that Crossley (1994) makes is that Foucault does not contradict Merleau-Ponty's existentialism. Instead, he completes it. Thus, the two bodies of thought are not to be seen in as competing against each other, but as mutually enriching. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty stands to gain from Foucault a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics (which may be seen as Merleau-Ponty's weak point, see chapter 5). On the other, Foucault's view of freedom and of how the embodied self can act upon itself can be enriched by Merleau-Ponty's existentialism (see Crossley, 1994, 1995)

But Foucault's affinities with existentialism do not stop with Merleau-Ponty. They can also be observed in relation to de Beauvoir's work.

The overlaps between de Beauvoir's and Foucault's works have been an object of extensive analysis (see chapter 5). Kruks (2006) explains how "*The Second Sex*" (written in 1949) anticipates Foucault's ideas on panopticism (1995) and on the conceptualization of the inseparability of power and knowledge. Vintges (2001)³⁴ adds that de Beauvoir and Foucault propose parallel philosophies of subjectification that a) conceive selfhood in aesthetic terms, specifically as a self-stylized project of self-creation

34 For Vintges (2002), Foucault's and de Beauvoir's insights are so strikingly similar that she groups them under the umbrella label '*post-existentialism*' (p. 165).

and b) are empirical, meaning that they set out to “*make philosophy out of their lives and live their philosophies*”, (Vintges, 2001, p. 166).

In this context it is also relevant to mention here that Foucault’s thought and Sartre’s existentialism also present many affinities (see for example, Fox, 2000; Gillam, 2013; Levy, 2001). An in-depth discussion of their similarities is beyond the point of this dissertation, but I mention their existence here in that they once again highlight that Foucault’s thought and existentialism are not as distant as they may seem at a superficial level of analysis. Foucault, in fact, never completely succeeds in his proclaimed attempt of obliterating the subject of existential-phenomenology. On the contrary, as phenomenologist David Zahavi (2009) argues, in his own works, Foucault always tacitly assumes a phenomenological understanding of selfhood and of subjective experience, even if he does not commit to it openly.

For Foucault, it is the social reality and its constituting dynamics of power that moulds us into subjects. However, he is able to formulate this idea only because he is taking for granted “*a more basic experiential notion of self*” (Zahavi, 2009, p. 3), a “*ubiquitous dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experiences*” (Zahavi, 2009, p. 9). According to Zahavi, this phenomenological notion of ‘minimal self’ not only “*provides the experiential grounding for every subsequent self-ascription, reflective appropriation and thematic self-identification*” (Zahavi, 2009, p. 17) but is at the basis of Foucault’s and of all constructivist approaches (ANT included). However, it needs to be clear that this pre-reflective sense of self that Foucault (and constructivists) work with is not abstract pure consciousness but embodied. In other

words, Zahavi's (2009) argument is that Foucault is covertly mobilizing an underlying phenomenological sense of subjectivity as carnally hooked to experience, unfolding in material interactions with the world and situated in nature and in culture.

Other scholars have noted that early Foucault's goal of 'destroying the subject' has not been realized. Crossley, 1994; Gutting, 2002 and Žižek, 1999 all argue that Foucault falls short in declaring the "death of man" (Huijser, 1999, p. 62) because, as Crossley puts it, "in the panopticon we deal with a sentient subject, a subject that knows that she is being observed" (p. 185), while for Žižek, similarly, "*there is no pre-existing positive Body in which one could ontologically ground our resistance to disciplinary power mechanisms*" (p. 301).

Foucault's ultimate failure to emancipate himself from an experiential and perceptive form of subjectivity is the ultimate conceptual nexus that allows me to postulate a possibility for connection between his thought and the existential-phenomenological take on subjectivity offered by Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir. Not only do the three French authors share many key insights on selfhood but, most crucially, Foucault's (unacknowledged) inability to offer a solid alternative to the existential-phenomenological idea of self as a perceived and self-reflective givenness of experience represents a viable means of creating a philosophical space where his reflections can hang together with Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's.

Now that the idea that Foucault's thought is incompatible with Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's existential-phenomenology has been debunked, it is time to turn to

the (supposedly) most problematic juxtaposition I am proposing: the relationship between existential-phenomenology and ANT.

6.2.4 Very Complicated Relationship: ANT and existentialism

The main goal of ANT is to challenge the taken-for-granted separation between subject/object that characterizes the modern understanding of reality. To achieve this, ANT focuses on how entities (human and non-human) come to associate with one another, placing its primacy on how relationships of mediation occur.

From this perspective, the main critique of Latour to phenomenology as a broad philosophical movement (that is, not specifically to existential phenomenology) is that it is too concerned with questions of human agency and intentionality. In the introduction to *"Pandora's Hope"* (1999) he notes that phenomenology *"deals only with the world-for-human consciousness. (...) Instead of exploring the ways we can shift from standpoint to standpoint we will always be fastened down into the human one"* (p. 6). In an interview with philosopher of technology and self-identified post-phenomenologist Don Ihde, Latour (2003) reiterates the same idea targeting in particular Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. While Latour concedes that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy constitutes *"a very interesting tradition for embodiment"* and that it is *"certainly more helpful than over rationalistic position, because of the attention on the lived world"*, for him Merleau-Ponty's existentialism is inevitably flawed and ultimately incompatible to ANT in that it is *"an entirely human-centered account of embodiment"* (p. 16).

Just like with Foucault's case, Latour's repeated efforts to cut ties with the phenomenological tradition have been questioned by many scholars (in particular in the field of Science and Technology Studies), who could not help but highlight the many overlaps existing between the two approaches (Adams & Thompson, 2016; Conty, 2013; Harman, 2010; Ihde, 1993, 2003, 2009; Introna, 2009, 2017; Olsen, 2010; Verbeek, 2005).

Adams & Thompson (2016) identify four main convergences between ANT and phenomenology, which I believe already make a strong case for speaking of possible fruitful synergies that can be created between the two literatures. It needs to be stressed that Adams & Thompson (2016) write this list with phenomenology and not with existentialism in mind. However, I believe that their analysis applies also to Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's existentialism³⁵.

The first commonality between ANT and phenomenology (including existentialism) is that they are both adamant in rejecting the modern mode of conceptualizing reality in terms of dichotomies, drawing arbitrary lines that neatly separate subjects from objects, insides from outsides, nature and culture, self and Otherness etc. Second, both propose to focus on empirical practices as a means to avoid creating knowledge that leans on said modern dichotomies. One cannot but notice that the language used by the two approaches is similar: ANT suggests to 'follow the actors themselves' (Latour, 2013) while phenomenology sets out to 'go back to the things

³⁵ I am in essential agreement with Langer's (Langer, 2003) interpretation of de Beauvoir's ontology as being more problematic than Merleau-Ponty's (see chapter 5). This is why I prefer to lean on Merleau-Ponty's 'reversible ontology', as de Beauvoir's is not as rigorously developed as his.

themselves' (Husserl, 1970). This emphasis on how the practice leads to a third common trope: phenomenologists and ANT researchers alike strongly oppose essentialist notions of reality, preferring performative and experiential ones. Lastly, ANT and phenomenology converge in how they deal with questions of method: both produce thick descriptions and put forth their points by working through examples and case-by-case scenarios, refusing to impose abstract theories and/or to look for causal explanations (see Adams & Thompson, 2016).

Are these four shared key tenets enough to undermine Latour's claim that the phenomenological project is ultimately incommensurable with ANT?

The answer to this question is far more complex than a straightforward 'yes' or 'no'.

As noted by Conty (2013) and Harman (2010), one cannot disagree with Latour's (2003) observation that phenomenology operates having the human subject as the starting and ending matter of concern. In this sense, Latour's point that phenomenology misses out on a crucial portion of the story by underplaying the role that non-human actors play in the achievement of reality is well taken. But is this enough to deem the two approaches incompatible? I do not think so. Like others (Adams & Thompson, 2016; Conty, 2013; Ihde, 1993; Introna, 2009, 2017; Olsen, 2010; Verbeek, 2005), I too think that the incommensurability between phenomenology and ANT that Latour points at is more ascribable to contextual elements (e.g. the different cultural/historical climates in which the two approaches emerged and the different styles of philosophic/academic writing) instead of insurmountable differences in worldviews. As Harman (Harman,

2010) notes, in fact, “*phenomenology harbors resources that lead it to converge with Latour’s insights, however different their starting points may be*” (p. 100). Even more to the point, Introna (2017) argues that “*the most recent work of Bruno Latour (2002, 2005) suggests that he has taken up many of the insights of phenomenology in his ongoing work. Thus, the later Latour can be seen as a bridging figure between the constructivist tradition and the phenomenological tradition*³⁶” (section 1.3, last paragraph).

The argument I put forth here as a rationale for a productive combination of ANT and the phenomenology is that the former performs an understanding of the world that resonates and takes on many insights of the latter. Thus, I do not think it is fair to write off the possibility of productive connections between the two. In my opinion phenomenology and ANT fold into each other and can complete and extend each other’s understanding of the world. In fact, while ANT is not a ‘social constructivist’ approach (meaning anthropocentric), it is indeed a constructivist one, as Latour himself makes a point of stressing (Latour, 2003). But, if ANT is a constructionist framework, then Zahavi’s (2009) argument (e.g., every constructionist account of subjectivity cannot but assume an embodied form of self-referentiality that anchors us to the experiential flow) applies to ANT as well. Thus, the perceptual/ experiential embodied ‘openness to the world’ that is key to phenomenology and specifically to existentialisms of Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir is not denied by ANT. It is not its main interest, but it is not done away with either.

³⁶ Latour himself seems to agree with Introna’s insight. In “*An inquiry into the mode of existence*” he states that this project “*inherits from and generalizes phenomenology and takes up its descriptive intuitions of pure phenomena, the ‘back to the things’ approach, but after having extirpated itself from the subject-object configuration which has imposed this (modern) tradition*”.

ANT indeed posits that things are an overlooked constituting force of the social in that non-human actors “*have an effect on the course of action that is irreducible to human intervention*” (Van Oyen, 2018, p. 1). However, while heavily questioning the modern idea that human beings are the masters of the universe, ANT does not deny that human beings make meaning of reality in a reflexive and intentional way (what is ANT if not a way to make sense of reality?) and it does not “*ascribe capacities of intentionality, reflexivity and consciousness to things*” (Van Oyen, 2018, p. 4). ANT has a clear (existential) issue with the idea that ‘reality’ is all about human beings, but it does not deny that human beings exist. Human subjectivity is treated exactly in the same way that the rest of reality is: as an accomplishment that occurs through associations. Thus, ANT does not do away with humans. However, it does invite us to re-consider our ideas on what constitutes human subjectivity, making space for a renewed attention to the role that material actors play in what we come to refer to as ‘who we are’^{37 38}.

To me, ANT’s proposal of giving voice also to the material qualities of the reality of subjectivity does not seem to be utterly irreconcilable with Merleau-Ponty’s and de Beauvoir’s philosophies. There is productive tension there. Notwithstanding the fierce anthropocentrism and the ferociously humanism which is clearly not shared by ANT, their existentialist projects – just like ANT’s - revolve around the idea that human beings are not the special creatures that modernism professed (so much so that they

37 This is the very handy example offered by Van Oyen (2018). “*Ethnographers of science have muddied the supposed purity of the modernist scheme itself by showing how scientific facts – the epitome of western immaterial relationality and its Enlightenment principles – rather than deriving from purely abstract eternal laws, are contingent upon such things as the size of test tubes, the distribution of funding and the focus of gossip*” (p. 1)

38 Haraway (1991, 2008), Mol (2016), Hayles (1999) and Latour (1999) are all ANT or ANT-friendly examples of how subjectivity can look like from a perspective that goes beyond ‘all-too- human’ accounts.

experience the proverbial *angst*). As the reader will recall (see chapter 5, the main point that Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir bring forth is that 'who we are' is a composition of 'life-material' (the various *situations* made up of human and non-human actors) that comes to hold together in practice within relations. No point of contention here with ANT scholars. Where Merleau-Ponty and especially de Beauvoir (anticipating Foucault) clearly diverge from ANT is in their analysis of human agency and how, for existentialists, it gets to be actively exercised through the choices subjects make within the conditions of possibility offered by 'the situation'. From this perspective, ANT and Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's existentialisms undoubtedly move towards different fields of interests and intellectual developments. But to me this difference does not seem to impair the possibility of building a fruitful even if vivacious dialogue between the two bodies of knowledge that can help create knowledge about subjectivity in ways that are original and creative.

In all honesty, I believe that the oddness and the improbability of the association I am proposing constitutes its main strength. It is only by daring to experiment on the margins of what is considered appropriate, orthodox and safe that one can attempt to re-shuffle and re-energize the existing conversation. My attempt here is to overcome the stale modern-postmodern debate and to shift the attention to the concrete, carnal and complex ways in which we stylize our projects of subjectivity within organizational dynamics. Mixing together ways of understanding subjectivity that are considered at odds but yet perform a certain harmony seems to be an interestingly viable way, even if risky and with high potential for failure.

6.3 Composing A Cohesive Theoretical Framework

The previous section has laid out why I believe that conditions of possibility for dialogue between ANT, Foucault's, Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's exist. Now the time has come to address *how* these three strands of knowledge can be connected as a methodological practice. In other words, in which manner can ANT, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir be made to hang together in ways that preserve their different flavours without reducing them to taste the same?

To answer this question I mobilize two ideas discussed by Mol (2002, 2016) in the attempt to conceptualize modes of relation that are not 'logically coherent' – that is, not geared to deal with the existence of contradictions³⁹ - yet able to render "*the difference existing between 'hanging together' and 'falling apart'*" (Mol, 2016, p.1): partial connections and *clafoutis*.

6.3.1 Partial Connections

The first idea that informs my combination is the notion of 'partial connections', a concept that Mol (2002) borrows from anthropologist Merlyn Strathern (2004). 'Partial connections' are realized when what "*not in itself but through the act of comparison, appears to be both similar and different*" (Mol, 2002, p. 80). Partial connections emerge when acts of association do not collapse into reduction. From this perspective, partially

³⁹ As Mol (2016) explains, when thinking about coherence in the realm of propositional logic the first thing that comes to mind is the principle of non-contradiction. This means that the statements 'x is y' and 'x is *non-y*' cannot be true at the same time because, if they were, they would contradict each other, which is a possibility that is not contemplated by the discipline. In this sense, according to Mol, logic coherence is a type of coherence that works at its best when utilized in simple and linear situations. But what to do when dealing with realities that are complex and messy? Is the difference between 'holding together' and 'falling apart' possible to discuss exclusively with the means of logic? For Mol the answer is not, hence the proposal of using the *clafoutis* as an alternative metaphor.

connecting ANT, Foucault's, Merleau-Ponty's and de Beauvoir's thought does not mean shaving off differences. Conversely, it is a matter of sifting the common ideas that the three strands of knowledge share but enact in different manners and playing around with them, looking at how they spill and confuse into each other while preserving their original and unique features. Table 6.1 lists and briefly describes the 5 main tropes that partially connects the three literatures.

Tab. 6.1

<p><i>Non-essentialism</i></p>	<p>The three approaches emphasise that realities (including the realities of subjectivity) emerge <i>in practice through action</i>. In rejecting the idea of a-priori innate properties that cause subjects to be a certain way, the three literatures all heed ‘the surface’, that is, they refuse the idea of inner, hidden essences that determine how reality will turn out to be. My argument is that ANT, Foucault’s late thought and Merleau-Ponty’s and de Beauvoir’s existentialism all share the insights that ‘being’ as a noun (and consequently, human beings’ subjectivity) is an achievement, something that comes to hold together, enacting its own reality in multiple, relational and situated ways.</p>
<p><i>Relationality</i></p>	<p>According to all three literatures, realities are produced <i>in interaction</i>. Realities are understood as the outcome of more or less stable connections with Otherness (both human and non-human), which inevitably brings about complexity, uncertainty, indefiniteness and ambiguity.</p>
<p><i>Omnipresence of power</i></p>	<p>ANT, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir share the idea that all relations and interactions are innerved by power, which is seen as an omnipresent force that innerves action. In the three literatures power emerges as a relational practice, that is, as characterized by small but incessant and repeated transactions, discreet choices, negotiated trials and soft seductions.</p>
<p><i>Materiality and embodiment</i></p>	<p>The three literatures all have a problem with the notion that mentalism and cognitivism is the privileged mode of exploring and knowing reality. Their proposal is to pay attention to <i>the material and carnal</i> quality of experience.</p>

<p><i>Aesthetic sensibility in the project of assembling subjectivity</i></p>	<p>The three literatures make a point of focusing on how realities emerge in concrete, material practices. Consequently, it is of no surprise that they all feel the need to break away with mentalist, rationalist and direct ways of discussing reality. This is why, each in their own specific ways, ANT, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir all reach out into different conceptual domains of reference. The point of breaking away with direct and abstract representations is to highlight that ‘knowing’ phenomena does not need to be reduced to a question of finding out a singular, universal ‘Truth’ (the modernist view) or many, disconnected ‘Truths’ (the postmodernist one) about it. According to ANT, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, ‘creating knowledge’ is a matter of activating other sensibilities, tuning into other frequencies or, as Law (2004) suggests, of making present different sets of goods. Specifically, all three literatures indicate the realm of aesthetics as one capable of offering alternative ways to ‘know’ and ‘make’ the reality of subjectivity in richer and ‘more generous’ (Law, 2004, p. 156) manners.</p>
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6.3.2 Theoretical Clafoutis

The second idea that helps conceptualize a generous coherence amongst ANT, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir is inspired by the lessons taught to Mol by a clafoutis prepared on a rainy day (Mol, 2016, p. 1).

A clafoutis is a baked dessert made up of a layer of batter topped by fruit (cherries are the most popular choice but plums are also an option) covered by a second layer of batter. The reason why Mol finds clafoutis so metaphysically enticing is because they constitute a very practical example⁴⁰ of how distinctive entities and techniques can

40 In her words: “an exercise in practical philosophy” (Mol, 2016, p.1)

cohere notwithstanding tensions, frictions and historical and geographical specificities. The very existence of the *clafoutis* proves that a diversity of ingredients can coagulate into a composite that hangs together and that is enjoyable and nutritious without making of all the ingredients an indistinguishable clusterfuck of edible materials. In this sense, not only does *clafoutis*-like coherence encompass incommensurabilities and divergencies; it also derives its strength from them. It is the specific combination of ingredients that stylizes the *clafoutis* by generating its particular taste and texture.

Just like a *clafoutis*, the combination of perspectives I am proposing can be seen as a composition of ingredients that holds together and that has a specific theoretical flavour.

But the number of possible variations that a theoretical *clafoutis* could enact is huge, and it exceeds the possibilities offered by the means of a 'PhD dissertation'. Thus, to shape up the explanation of my recipe in an ordered manner, I will utilize the ingredients following the same order in which they were presented in the previous chapters. First, I will handle the ANT portion and then I will gradually incorporate Foucault and finally work them together with Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir's existentialism.

6.4 A Recipe for Subjectivity

6.4.1 The self amodern

This preparation starts off with Latour's (1993) notion of ontological amodernism⁴¹.

As explained in chapter 3 the amodern eye does not see the world as the realm of neatly separated a-priori givens described by Kant. From an amodern perspective, the singular self-contained a-priori realities that populate the world of modernity are in fact complex patterned networks that assume their specific configurations as the results of interactions between human and non-human 'stuff'. This applies also to subjectivity.

Let us think of myself as Caterina. Oversimplifying, the modern-realist approach – the most common in MOS⁴² – tells us that there is some sort of singular essence that constitutes who I am. Concepts such as 'psychological make-up', 'personality-types', 'identity traits', 'one's own true nature', 'one's own inner self' all contain seeds or whole trees of this idea. Subjectivity is already determined and we can know it by digging out our 'inner truths' that make us who we are. Opposing the modern view, the postmodern one⁴³ broadly offers that there is no essence that makes me Caterina. Who I am is nothing but a provisional occupation of 'identity slots' (being a woman, an academic, a daughter, Italian etc.), and my chaining onto them is the result of the interiorization of imposed socio-cultural norms. As Caterina, all there is to me is a bunch of ephemeral and volatile discursive formations that have no gravitational pull in that they encroach upon a 'non-Caterina' (the 'anti-subject' described by early Foucault, see chapter 4).

⁴¹ One could argue that amodernism was somehow anticipated by Merleau-Ponty's reversible ontology, but it is clear that Latour surpasses it because he makes the point of diffusing agency between human and non-human actors equally. Merleau-Ponty, instead, is clearly more interested and concerned with the agency and relative freedom of human beings.

⁴² See chapter 3

⁴³ I am deeply aware that I am oversimplifying to an extreme degree an approach which is much more nuanced and complex than what I am making of it, as I have discussed in detail in chapter 4. I invoke the reader's understanding and hope that she/he will bear with this oversimplification for the sake of this example.

While modern and postmodern conceptualizations of selfhood are in contrast to each other, this contrast is on a superficial level. Both, in fact, portray a singular, abstract and mentalist notions of selfhood. To avoid repeating the same intellectualisms, amodernism heeds *the concrete material practices* that produce subjectivity in the different locations where subjectivity unfolds. The amodern suggestion is to bracket any pre-conceived idea about what my 'true self' is or is not and, instead, to pay attention to how I constantly carnally and materially '*caterina*' (verb) in the world. Right now, for example, 'Caterina' is emerging from the practices of being a student. 'Caterina-student' unfolds by *doing* students' stuff: writing a PhD dissertation, being enrolled into a university, living in the city where my university is, writing a thesis, sitting in front of a computer, wearing glasses, being financially precarious, having back pain because of the hours spent in front of a computer, feeling like I will never get this dissertation done, writing papers, reviewing papers, going to conferences, paying tuition fees, spending time in the library, applying for a student visa and so on. To be clear, what this list is looking to suggest is that the composition of my selfhood as a student *is achieved* by virtue of more or less routinized practices, practicalities and material relations that generate my reality of being a student. Using Law's (2004) words, who I am as 'Caterina – student' is sustained by a thick '*hinterland*'⁴⁴ (Law, 2004, p. 160) made of interactions (human and non-human) that allows me to achieve the specific configuration I assume as a student.

⁴⁴ 'Hinterlands' were abundantly discussed in chapter 5, but the convenience of the reader here is once again how Law (2004) defines them:

"*Hinterland*: a bundle of indefinitely extending and more or less routinized and costly literary statements about reality and the realities in themselves; a hinterland includes inscription devices, and enacts a topography of reality possibilities, impossibilities and probabilities. A concrete metaphor for absence and presence" (Law, 2004, p. 160).

The main takeaway is that a modernism shifts the attention to the situated practices that enact who we are. While this may seem banal, it has far reaching implications for how we understand 'knowing and making' subjectivity in MOS. An a modern move makes the practicalities that constitute our own subjectivity the point of entry for inquiry. Knowing subjectivities is understood as a matter of tracing how a self assumes its specific configurations *in practical terms*, that is, paying attention to *all* the materials (human and non-human) that partake this enterprise. On a concrete level, in fact, who we are not only is always embodied, as Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir noted. There is more us beyond our skin. Our selves stretch out of it and come to include non-human 'stuff'. Otherness folds into our subjectivity and on a closer look contours and borders become blurry. This is why conceptualizing selfhood as an actor-network is a useful theoretical device.

6.4.2 The self as an actor-network

This recipe calls for selfhood as "*a set of elements (including, of course, a body) that stretches out into the networks of material, somatic and otherwise, that surrounds each body*" (Law, 1992, p. 4). 'Who we are' is understood as the relational effect of the configurations and re-configurations of sets of a variety of elements that mix, fold into each other and hold together as networks. For Law (1992) "*analytically, what counts as a person is an effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting, materials (...)* [p]eople are who they are because they are patterned networks of heterogeneous materials" (p. 4).

My subjectivity as ‘Caterina - squash player’ is a handy example. The kitchen⁴⁵ that produces ‘Caterina - squash player’ includes rackets, sweat, training partners, courts sprints, frustrations, memberships to squash clubs and relative social drinks, opponents, strings, drills, diets, watching squash tournaments, shoes, forehands, grips, courts, balls, taking lessons, referees, awards, strategies, skirts, coaches, competitions, learning how to move on a squash court, meeting new people, winning, losing, training, social events after competitions etc. In short, ‘Caterina – squash player’ is an assemblage sustained by a messy bundle of relations, situations, choices, actions, experiences and emotions – the ‘*craftwork implied in practice*’ (Law, 2004, p. 59) – that make me hold together as ‘Caterina - squash player’ in the ways I do. The hinterland that allows for this enactment is swarming with activity and is moving constantly. All its components are engaged in the attempt to enrol other actors (human and non-human) into a specific sustained performance of my subjectivity. When the network ‘Caterina – squash player’ succeeds in enrolling a specific racket that is more apt to my style of playing, an alignment of interests comes to be realized. With time, my subjectivity as a squash-player becomes more stable in that the way I hit the ball improves in quality, making my performance of ‘being a squash-player’ plumper and sturdier.

The point that is important to stress here is that the agency that energizes the project of ‘Caterina - squash player’ is not exclusively human and it is not an abstraction. If one attends to the practicalities of playing squash, in fact, one will soon realize that the agency of the squash player is far from being ‘all-too-human’. Conversely, agency is a

⁴⁵ This is a term used by Latour and Woolgar (1979).

collective and relational 'more than human' endeavour, one that is distributed amongst all the actors (human and non-human) in the network and, most crucially, one that requires a lot of effort in order to be enacted.

As an example, let us think of the amount of work that is folded into the staging of playing a good shot. The ball needs to be lured into this project, in that it needs to be warm enough to bounce properly off the walls and it needs to be hit from a certain distance and at a certain degree. If the ball is not disciplined by the distance and by the racket, then playing becomes harder in that my muscles need to generate more power to make it move as I want to. But the racket has its saying too, because its weight and the tension of the strings can facilitate or hinder my shots. And how about the quality of my movement? Moving around efficiently on court is a pre-requisite to play good shots. But this efficiency is not willed into life through hopes and dreams, it requires a lot of effort in that it needs to be crafted, and to do so there is a long list of actors that need to be seduced. Lungs, heart, limbs and muscles all need to agree to be exercised constantly. Feet have a lot of say here. They often need to negotiate with plantar fasciitis because when it shows up walking is painful. Thus, it is also up to them whether I can play squash or not. The list could go on forever, but what needs to be clear here is that the model of agency enacted by the actor-network 'Caterina – squash player' is not of the modern type. I indeed have agency, but this agency is the diffused agency of actor-networks, meaning that it is the relational effect produced by the collectives that my subjectivity forms with things and other individuals within specific situations (Abrahamsson, 2014).

Positing subjectivity as an actor-network places the primacy to the material and fleshy practices that make the self, and practices are always localized and situated. This implies that who we are can never assume exactly the same shape. We will necessarily emerge in slightly modified manners, impacted and informed (even if only slightly) by the interactions (with people and things) that we experience and by the situations where our subjectivity unfolds. 'Caterina-squash player', for example, can never be a finished, crystallized and 'once and for all' product. I will constitute myself in different ways according to who I play with, to the court I am playing on, whether I am training or competing, whether the court is in good or bad conditions, if I am injured, if I feel confident, nervous and so on. The slightly different versions of 'Caterina - squash-player' will share many and significant overlaps because some practices are habitual and produced and reproduced in similar manners over and over again. Notwithstanding these overlaps and similarities, positing the self as an actor-network highlights once again that our subjectivity is a predicament constantly achieved in action and in relations. Let us discuss what the idea of relationalism implies in the next section.

6.4.3 The Self Relational

The main point that relationalism brings about is that we come to achieve our selfhood in the specific ways we do by virtue of the connections that we create with human and non-human Otherness, which are bound to our specific location. Relationalism gives a voice to the promiscuity, the uncertainty and the complexity that occur when different kitchens of subjectivity exchange practices, collaborate and mesh

with each other. Relationalism provides a vocabulary to surface the ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir see as the mode of existence of selfhood. Conceiving subjectivity as a relational project, in fact, erodes the taken-for-granted dualistic boundaries between self and Otherness (human and non-human) because it highlights how these boundaries are not anterior givens, but contours produced in practice, inherently unstable and potentially always open to re-configuration. Quantum physics has a concept that captures the relational project of voicing connection in separation: quantum entanglement. In quantum entanglements, particles that have once interacted remain somehow connected even after separation occurs, so much so that their state cannot be described without taking into consideration the state of the other particles that they have encountered. Quantum entanglements are a fascinating topic (Barad, 2007), but for now I will limit myself to elaborate on the notion of connection in separation as it pertains to selfhood.

‘Caterina-squash player’ will be evoked again as an example. How do I draw contours around my self? Where does my subjectivity end and where does Otherness (human and non-human) begin?

A relational perspective suggests that my subjectivity as a squash player (understood as an actor-network) is entwined with all the other actors that participate and relate to my network: rackets, shoes, training partners, courts, opponents, tournament and coaches. Let us focus on my coach Neil for a moment. He is folded into ‘Caterina – squash player’, but we are clearly not reducible to each other. What relationalism tells us here is that fractions of Otherness are pleated into who we are.

Fragments of my coach 'are' me now. But this is not all. Every time I play, I also enact a tidbit of Neil.

The notion of subjectivity as a relational object implies that Otherness is a constituting part of who we are. Versions of alterity (human and non-human) are always folded into our flesh.

Of course, the association of our hinterlands does not function like a copy-machine. In the processes of translations something gets lost, something gets rejected, something gets modified, amplified, revisited and so on. Obviously, my enactment of 'being a squash-player' will never be Neil's (because the sets of practices from which we emerge are different). But sameness is not the point here. What relationalism invites to grapple with is how the encroachment of different hinterlands generates who we are in our flesh. The relationality of selfhood projects us into an intellectual space that heed the procedures of how we constantly *carnally* co-create each other (with 'other' being understood as human and non-human). In a sense, I *am* my coach. I am all of my opponents. I am my racket. I am the club I play at. I am my plantar fasciitis. Using Merleau-Ponty's language, relationalism highlights that we are Otherness and Otherness is who we are: "*Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 407).

6.4.4 The Self Multiple

Up to now I have limited myself to using the example of 'Caterina – squash player'. However, if I am to take seriously the commitment to attend to how selfhood

unfolds in practical terms, then I also need to address the fact that who I am exceeds 'being a squash-player'. I am also 'Caterina – student' and 'Caterina -teacher'. 'Caterina - friend', 'Caterina - daughter', 'Caterina – roommate', 'Caterina – customer' and 'Caterina – aunt' are also performances of my subjectivity. There is 'English-speaking Caterina' and 'Italian – speaking Caterina'. In the past there were 'Caterina - waitress' and 'Caterina – arts student'. There is 'Caterina – fat' and there was 'Caterina in super-shape'. All this to say, my subjectivity is multiple. In other words, there are different versions of 'Caterina' emerging from practices that co-exist at the same time. These versions are clearly not detached, they relate to each other. They partially connect, overlap and fold into each other. For example, as 'Caterina-student' I sit in front of a computer typing on a tiny keyboard for six hours in a row. As a result, my back hurts. The back-pain does not go away in the performance of 'Caterina – squash player'. Thus, my being a student spreads into my being a squash player. At the same time, when I play squash I cannot think about my dissertation because I need to focus on playing, and the clarity that derives from the squash - break informs how I enact my performance as student. What this means is that different versions of Caterina encroach upon each other, bleed into each other and flavour each other. However, they never collapse into singularity. 'Caterina – squash player' is 'Caterina – student' but, at the same time, is different. Perfect correspondence between different versions of subjectivity can never occur because each version of Caterina emerges in concrete practices and practices are always localized.

But if there are *'more than one but less than many'* (Mol, 2002, p. 55)

enactments of selfhood that are enacted in practice, how is it that we experience singularity and a certain amount of cohesiveness on a daily basis?

Because we make it. We produce it. Singularity and cohesiveness are achieved in practice. In this sense, the 'hanging together' of the multiple self is akin to the holding together of the clafoutis "*in all her modest glory*" (Mol, 2016, p. 1). Subjectivity is a composition, an orchestration, an arrangement of multiple enactments of who we are that are coordinated into one. We organize our multiplicity into singularity.

6.4.5 Ontological Politics/Critical Ontologies of the Self

Let us consider 'Caterina – squash player' when playing a match. Within this situation, different enactments of 'Caterina – squash player' can emerge. I (understood as an actor-network) can implement very aggressive strategies or wear down the opponent by playing an excruciating slow game. I can play dirty or be an example of correctness. I can be a humble winner or an over the top one. I can be a classy loser or a sore one. In other words, not only is 'Caterina -squash player' multiple (as we have seen in the previous section), but there are also different 'flavours' that my configuration as 'squash player' can enact, different styles of subjectivity that can be assumed.

Thus, within the conditions of possibility that the situation 'squash match' allows for, how do I coordinate myself as the subject 'Caterina – squash player'? In other words, according to which strategies does subjectivity come to hold together in the specific configurations that it assumes in practice?

To answer these questions we have to consider the '*ontological politics*' of the self (Mol, 1999a) first.

'Ontological politics' is a concept mobilized by Mol (Mol, 1999a) to refer to the relationships between "*the real, the conditions of possibility and the political*" (Mol, 1999, p. 86). The term 'politics' emphasizes the '*active mode*' and the '*process of shaping*' of reality, underlining that its constitution is always '*both open and contested*' (Mol, 1999, p. 75). Thus, engaging with the ontological politics of the self means that we are pondering to know and make subjectivity in ways that do not assume 'Truth' as the only possible way to know who we are. Let me explain this point.

If subjectivity emerges in practice (as argued up to now), then there is no a-priori Truth to who we are. But, if there is no pre-given Truth, then one can discard the idea that 'Truth' is the only golden standard to discuss subjectivity in that other grounds for explorations are plausible. Foucault's notion of 'critical ontologies of the self' highlights that the reasons why pre-given 'Truths' (religious Truths in Christianity, scientific Truths nowadays) have been considered 'The Only Way' to know and make subjectivity are *political*. Thus, if the choice to enact version A of subjectivity as opposed to version B is political, then in line of principle one can decide to deal with subjectivity in ways that go beyond the idea that all there is to human beings is predicated upon universal scientific (psychological, biological, neurological etc.) truths.

At this point, let me go back to the question posed at the beginning of this section:
according to which strategies does subjectivity come to hold together in the specific configurations that it assumes in practice?

Embracing Mol's ontological politics and Foucault's critical ontologies of the self, this framework addresses this question by choosing to investigate strategies of coordination of the self that are *not* scientific or psychological or socio-psychological in nature. Let me be crystal clear. I am *not* denying that they are relevant. They are. *I am not saying that science is useless or false.* Science is crucially important and, when carried out rigorously, it indeed produces truthful knowledge. Nevertheless, the field of Management and Organizational Studies overflows with these types of theorization and it largely overlooks the fact that subjectivity can be known in ways that are different and perhaps more generous than science. Thus, given that a PhD dissertation should attempt to make an original contribution, my choice is to tackle subjectivity in the way proposed by Foucault and de Beauvoir: as an aesthetic endeavour.

6.4.6 Aesthetic Strategies of Coordination: The Poetics of the Self

Drawing on Foucault's idea of treating subjectivity as a 'work of art', the final step of this recipe sets out to make present the creative strategies of coordination that allow for our 'holding together' as selves. In other words, how do we 'customize' the given conditions of possibility of subjectivity and stylize them into *our* self?

As explained in chapter 4, not only Foucault but also de Beauvoir thought that the arts (not the sciences) provide a much more productive and stimulating domain of reference to make sense of subjectivity. In particular, both Foucault and de Beauvoir are fascinated by a very precise portion of the artistic endeavour, namely the phase when the projects of the self are concocted. Aesthetics scholar Luciano Nanni calls this specific

productive moment of the artistic experience '*poetics*' ('*poetica*' in Italian)⁴⁶ (Nanni, 2000).

For Nanni, poetics are the '*productive conceptualizations of art*' (Nanni, 2000, p. 7). They are the attitudes, the values, the beliefs, the priorities – in one word - the goods that animate artistic endeavors; the stylizing projects that innervate creative action and that get inscribed into material substance (human and non human). Poetics are not essences, for they emerge in embodied and material ways through practice and assume their configurations in relation to their location and cultural use. Moreover, poetics are performed and ascribable not only to a '*single subject*' (for example, Picasso's 'blue period' or 'pink period' are two different poetics enacted by the same 'individual subject') but also to '*diffused subjects*' (Nanni, 2010), that is, a group of people that belong to the same socio-cultural movement (e.g. impressionism, cubism, expressionism are all poetics identifying 'diffused subjects') (Nanni, 2000).

Here I mobilize Nanni's conception of poetics in that it sums Foucault's notion of 'aesthetics of existence' (see chapter 4) and de Beauvoir's 'arts of living' (see chapter 5) into one single term. 'Poetics of subjectivity', in fact, captures the idea of concrete, proactive and creative strategies of coordination of the heterogeneous, situated materials of experience into self-selected singular endeavors of subjectivity. In this sense, following poetics of subjectivity means attending to the concrete work and the practices

⁴⁶ Luciano Nanni is a philosopher that belongs to the Italian critical phenomenological aesthetic movement. In Nanni's '*adespotic aesthetics*' (2000), the term 'poetics' is not used as in R. Jakobson's (see for example Jakobson, 1968), that is, as defining art in essentialist terms. According to Nanni, artistic identity is not to a matter of some intrinsic a-priori given artistic essence, but it emerges as the outcome of the usages and practices enacted by a specific culture. In his words: '*Artisticness is a function (a relation) in which, if desired by some culture, anything may enter. There are no artistic things and objects by nature*' (Menetti & Nanni, 2017, p. 145). This is why Nanni refers to his aesthetic theory as 'adespotic' (that is, without a master): because there is no pre-given universal significance to art, for art is what is used and practiced as such.

that go into 'taking care of ourselves' (Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence') and into putting together our situated life-philosophies (de Beauvoir's 'arts of living').

The purpose of analyzing poetics of the self is to cast the light on how, as subjects (understood as actor-networks), we organize multiple enactments of subjectivity into singularities by paying attention to how we creatively orchestrate our actions in experience and practice. But it needs to be clear that this has nothing to do with navel-gazing quests for the 'inner self', or strenuous analysis of daddy's or mommy's issues. Conversely, the point of talking poetics is observing the outcome on the surface, setting out to make justice of how the work that subjects put into actively negotiating, adjusting, or refusing the various possible possibilities of subjectification made available by the situation.

If discussing poetics means paying attention to how, as subjects, we creatively orchestrate our own constitution in the world, then talking poetics also means exploring how we negotiate our freedom in practice. The practicalities of freedom-making, in fact, are the other side of the poetics of subjectivity. They are folded and fused into our poetics, and together both provide the specific bite and taste that characterize the particular the holding together of our selves. Clearly, the freedom of self-coordination that underpins the notion of poetics of the self is situated, relational and diffused amongst our hinterland. Moreover, it is not given to us for free, it involves a lot of work to be achieved.

Let me clarify this point bringing back again 'Caterina – squash player'. The freedom that this configuration of self can practice is not in absolute terms, meaning

that *in practice* I cannot configure myself into each and every possible option that the conditions of possibility of the situation 'squash' offers. Stating otherwise would be abstract chatter. Constituting myself as 'Caterina - professional squash player', for example, is a 'free choice' that exists only in the world of ideas in that it is not substantiated by situated and relational practices. I do not play like a professional, I do not have the endurance of one, I do not move like one and I do not understand the game as one. In other words, as an actor-network, my hinterland is not powerful enough to assume such a configuration and translate it effectively. The case of 'Caterina - top club player' is different though. Given my situatedness, this is a viable project that I am concretely free to pursue. Within the jurisdiction of the practicalities of squash, I can concretely decide to work myself up as 'Caterina - top club player'. But I could also choose to navigate squash as 'Caterina – once-a-week player' or 'Caterina – looking-to-have-fun-not-to-compete player'. These three are all possibilities of subjectivity that are concretely available to me and that I am free to experiment with in practice. Tracing my poetics as a squash player then will be a matter of observing what I practice in action ('how I take care of myself' Foucault would say) in order to coordinate my network into one specific version of myself. What actions substantiate my being a squash player, which alterity is invited in, which practices of subjectivation come to be part of who I am and how all these fractions find that specific way of hanging together that results in 'Caterina – squash player'. It will be a matter of exploring how my freedom emerges in modest acts freedom-making, that is, in the bundles of choices that I enact when I negotiate the incorporation or rejection into my project of subjectivity the pre-given

materials, vocabularies and repertoires to include into that my situatedness makes available to me.

6.5 The amodern, aesthetic and existentialist approach and MOS. Why bother?

Why would the field of Management and Organization Studies care about an amodern, aesthetic and existentialist approach to the study of subjectivity?

As explained in chapter 2, the field of MOS tends to discuss subjectivity in ways that may seem very diverse at first sight, but that at second consideration display a lack of creativity and methodological originality. Specifically, there are five main issues that I detect in extant treatments of subjectivity in MOS (here's a brief list as reminder, these tropes have already been already discussed in chapter 2):

1. The almost exclusive deployment of mentalist notions of selfhood that reify logical coherence (see Mol, 2016) and metaphysical singularity (see Mol, 2002 and Law, 2004),
2. The adoption of the concept of 'Identity' as the main spokesperson for subjectivity and selfhood,
3. The habit of thinking about who we are in terms of dualisms (unity vs fragmentation, stability vs instability, personal vs social, nature vs culture, agency vs structure) (see Law, 2004, 2016),
4. The acknowledgement that subjectivity has to do with practice and action but the failure of organizational scholars to theorize this relationship effectively (see Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008)

5. The nearly total reliance on linear and direct representations of subjectivity (Law, 2004, 2016).

The recipe of subjectivity presented in this chapter is an attempt to challenge or at least, to re-consider these taken-for-granted ideas of selfhood that dominate our field.

With a discussion of poetics of subjectivity, my goal is to open up a space to do justice to the practical, material, sensorial and fleshy ‘embodied and beyond’ qualities of selfhood understood as an actor-network. It aims at offering a mode of ‘knowing’ and ‘making’ subjectivity that wants to be ‘*more generous*’ (Law, 2004, p. 156) than the traditional models of subjectivity built under the sole jurisdiction of mentalism and cognitivism.

Moreover, talking about subjectivity as an amodern, aesthetic and existentialist assemblage is a way to address a question that seems to be very abstract but that, in practice, has very material and carnal consequences: how do we draw the lines that separate one from Otherness (human and non - human)? My recipe strongly argues that ‘who we are’ is not a private affair with clear contours but, instead, one that spills over on Otherness (human and non-human) and that exceeds the provisional boundaries that we are used to drawing around our selfhood. But if, as my thesis argues, ‘who we are’ is a multiple fleshy and material inscription of our relations, then attending to *how* we actively and creatively choose to ‘show up’ at the tables of interaction with the world (that is, how we enact our poetics of subjectivity) impact and affect not only our

hinterland, but also the hinterlands of all the actors that partially connect to us. This means that we are our organizations and that our organizations are us.

Unfortunately, giving voice to the 'bleeding over' of Otherness into our subjectivity is not a deed that lends itself to the simple explanations and the logically coherent accounts that the scholarship in MOS enjoys aplenty. Tracing poetics of subjectivity, in fact, requires a temporary bracketing of abstract and linear accounts of selves in favor of renderings that engage with the carnal, the sensuous and the material and that are not afraid of exploring the beautiful, the sublime, the comic, the picturesque, gracious, the sacred and the ugly that is our human existence (Strati, 2009).

But how does one attempt to know and describe the material, multiple, relational and poetic qualities of being a self? This the topic that I will discuss in the fourth and last part of this chapter.

6.6 Reflections on the Role of the Researcher

Looking at subjectivity from a modern, aesthetic and existentialist perspective is a matter of questioning boundaries and challenging lines that seem very definite from afar but that, at a closer look, are not. The first boundary to fall apart is the one that separates the researcher from the subject of the study. A modernism, in fact, invests the researcher with '*ontological responsibility*' (Law & Benschop, 1997, p. 175). In other words, if one accepts the modern proposal that representations not only describe but also work upon the subjectivities that they describe, then the 'God trick' of pretending

that the researcher is an independent actor that looks into subjectivities from the outside of reality (Haraway, 1991) is not available anymore.

A second boundary that crumbles down is the one that distinguishes who is considered to be an expert and who is not. On the one hand, everyone is an expert in selfhood by virtue of the fact that everyone is a self. On the other hand, if becoming who one is an achievement that occurs in practice, then no one can be an expert in that no one can see into the future. This is what Latour refers to when he notes that the researcher ought not *“tell anyone the shape that is to be drawn – circles, cubes or lines – but only to go about systematically recording the world-building abilities of the sites to be documented and registered”* (Latour, 1999a, p. 21).

Thus, learning about selfhood means recognizing and being mindful of a) one’s own entanglement with the selves one is attending to and b) one’s participation in the achievements that are being described. In Law’s words, *“you never stand outside and watch. If you engage with them at all, you are drawn inside”* (Law, 2016, p.33).

At this stage it is hopefully clear that this ‘being drawn inside the subject one is documenting’, from an amodern, aesthetic and existentialist standpoint, cannot be conceived as an exclusively mental phenomenon. It is instead a predicament pleated in the corporeality of sensible knowledge and in the relationship with it (Strati, 2009). Arguing that the researcher is part of the flesh of network and that he/she can know it in sensible ways implies that subjectivities can be known in modes that exceed rationality and logic. As opposed to abstract and mentalist knowledge, an embodied, sensible and situated one can dare *“to shock, to awe, to move, to demand participation, to dominate”*

(Law, 2016, p. 40). The amodern, aesthetic and existentialist researcher can deliberately be after an estranging effect à la Brecht⁴⁷. This is why amodern, aesthetic and existentialist accounts of subjectivity welcome non-direct forms of representations (for example metaphors, allegories, ironies and metonymies, see Law 2004 and Law 2016) and are deliberately after the discussion of beauties, styles, flavors, fits, harmonies, resonances and but also ambiguities, uncertainties, estrangements, indefiniteness and complexities. The reason why these terms are used in their plural form is that, as Law (2004) makes clear, *“What counts as beauty”* - or as style, flavor, fit, harmony, pathos, resonance etc. – *“can neither be determined in general nor out of context. Absolutist theories of aesthetics are not better guide to tastes-in-practice than are those of epistemology to truths-in-practice”* (p. 149).

It is for this very reason that I, as a researcher attempting to know subjectivities mobilizing an amodern, aesthetic and existentialist approach, need to stress that the framework presented in these pages does not intend to suggest a universal and general theory of subjectivity. However, I do understand that this chapter may suggest so. If so, this is because the academic conventions that norm how to structure a PhD dissertation require to follow a particular format according to which theory is separated from practice. But given that methods creates realities, such imposed separation gives away

⁴⁷ German playwright Bertolt Brecht describes the notion of ‘estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt* in German)’ as *“playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious”* (1936). What Brecht wanted was to distance his audience from the characters and the action so that identification and catharsis could not be realized. In other words, Brecht wanted his audience to challenge and question his characters and his plays, not to emphasize with them without the possibility for an intellectual critique.

the impression that abstract general theories of subjectivities can exist, while the main point that as a researcher of subjectivity I want to bring forward is that in practice generalities and particulars always coexist and encroach upon each other within specific locations. Abrahamsson (2014) explains this point like this: *“Location needs to be considered by the researcher. However, it never happens alone or without effort, and it always happens somewhere. Happenings are staged and enacted through the collective work of actors in various localities”* (Abrahamsson, 2014).

Thus, as the reader may have noticed, my solution to pass on the idea that particularities are folded into localities and vice versa was cheating. Taking many pages from de Beauvoir’s (Moynagh, 2006; Vintges, 1996) and from Mol’s (2008) books, I tried to explain what may be seen as the ‘generalities’ of a framework through particular examples. And, to be perfectly, honest, I am doing this also *right now* by discussing what the ‘role of the researcher should look like’ through an example of my experience. Moreover, to do away with the idea of a general and universal theory of subjectivity I have also made abundant use of culinary metaphors, specifically the one of the recipe (see Mol, 2016). A recipe, in fact, can have many variations and can be nutritious and delicious even when prepared in different ways. Just like it happens with food, the recipe of subjectivity that I am proposing here can be performed in different manners and made to reflect tastes of subjectivity that are different from mine.

Of course, the number of possible variations is multiple. This is why, as far as this dissertation is concerned, here I will limit myself to provide only some variations of how carrying out research on subjectivity from an amodern, aesthetic and existentialist

perspective can look like in practice. In particular, in chapter 7 I will be looking at the multiplicity and the relationality of the subjectivity of UFC fighters and in chapter 8 I will attempt to trace their collective poetics and then I will zoom into the poetics of Dominick Cruz, a fighter currently on the roster. The goal of these two chapters is to offer a way to 'sensitize' accounts of subjectivity in MOS and destabilize the deeply rooted idea that only cognitivist, analytical and scientific (or, most of the time, scientific) approaches can provide valid and legitimate ways to learn about subjectivity in organizations.

*“You can add up the parts
You won’t have the sum”
Leonard Cohen*

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will suggest how the amodern, aesthetic and existential methodological insights presented in chapter 6 can be utilized in practice to make present the practices, the multiplicity and the relationality of subjectivity, that is, qualities that are generally overlooked in MOS. The selves I will be attending to are the ones of mixed martial artists (*MMA*) working for the biggest and most renowned fighting promotion, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (*UFC*).

This chapter is divided into three main parts. The first one is dedicated to the account of the research process. Here I will illustrate my strategy, explaining the rationale for making such an abundant use of examples. The second section will provide a basic overview of *MMA* as a sport and offer a general introduction to the *UFC* as a company. This part will also clarify why I decided to focus on fighters in my case study. Lastly, I will focus on exploring the subjectivity of fighters in terms of relationality and multiplicity. The goal here is to highlight how discussing located practices of subjectivity can distance us from modern and postmodern renderings of selfhood. At the same time, it also offers ways of creating knowledge about organizational selves that are “*more generous*” (Law, 2004, p. 157) in that they make space for accounts that aim at knowing

subjectivity through our sensory intelligence, appealing to our aesthetic judgement (Strati, 2009).

Before proceeding with the chapter, a disclaimer is necessary.

My choice of zooming into discrete aspects of the methodological framework is arbitrary and it does not represent the only manner in which the content of chapter 6 can be used in practice, by me or by others. The reason why I have decided to frame my 'empirical contribution' by elaborating on the most distinguishing (and perhaps less straightforward) aspects of my framework is because the format of a PhD dissertation imposes space limits and I believe that concepts such as subjectivity as emerging from practices, materiality, multiplicity and relationality need more examples than the working ones presented previously. However, in my opinion the reflections on subjectivity presented in this dissertation have the potential to generate research that exceeds what this and the following chapter presents. I will offer some ideas on how to utilize my framework in the section 'Future Directions' of chapter 9.

7.2 The Research Process

This section outlines the research process that I put into place to write this chapter and chapter 8. First off, I will discuss my research strategy, illustrating the main characteristics of single case study design and my specific enactment of it. I will then elaborate on the method of using examples and provide information about the data I used to build my accounts.

7.2.1 Research Strategy

The research strategy of my choice is the case study and the type of inquiry that it enacts is qualitative.

Stake (1995) and Thomas (2011) point out that case studies are concerned with the complexity and the particular nature of a case in question. In this sense, they constitute an apt vehicle for an intensive examination of a particular phenomenon, for example, an organization, an event, a person or a group of people in my case. Knights & McCabe (1997) also observe that case studies provide the opportunity to explore a specific case in detail by adopting a combination of qualitative methods, allowing for multi-disciplinary theoretical approaches. This makes the case study design a suitable fit for the performance of the framework presented in this dissertation.

Mills & Durepos (2013) argue that one of the main characteristics shared by case studies that work with the ‘traditions of the post and beyond’ (with ‘traditions of the post’ referring to postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism, see chapter 2, and ‘beyond’ pertaining to amodern approaches such as ANT) is what they call a “*holistic approach*” (p. x). My case study finds a home in the ‘beyond’ portion and it is permeated with a holistic sensibility. In this chapter, in fact, my goal is to complicate simple, unitary, unambiguous and singular accounts of subjectivity by focusing on the complexity that substantiates the holding together of subjectivity. To do so, in this chapter I focus more on questions of practice and in the next one I dwell more on questions of style and poetics. In other words, this chapter explains how dynamics of associations and situated practices all play a role in becoming ‘the fighter one is’. Capitalizing on these insights,

the next chapter will illustrate how UFC fighters creatively style their own subjectivity as UFC fighters, negotiating with multiple practices, relations and, repertoires of subjectivity that the situation 'being a fighter signed with the UFC' makes available to them. My main goal here is to give a voice to the complexity, the messiness and the ambiguity of the processes that substantiate the crafting of one's own style of selfhood. Thus, deploying a holistic approach is a mandatory choice.

So, how is this goal to be achieved? Through *(re)assembled thick descriptions*. Let me explain what this two-concept locution refers to.

The first concept, *(re)assembling*, builds on the idea that the content of an account (for example an object, an event, an organization, a relationship or, in our case, the unfolding of one's subjectivity) does not have an "essential nature" or an "objective constitution" granted by the "order of things". Consequently, the moment in which one provides a narrative about something, one also inevitably alters and manipulates that narrative by virtue of participating in its creation and translation (see chapter 3) through the action of re-telling it. The concept of *(re)assemblage* is the most suitable for my framework because it highlights that there is no assumed given immutable and fixed constitution of what it is to be a fighter. As I will suggest in chapter 8, fighters create their own personal flavor of subjectivity by customizing the pre-given repertoires of practices that the situation 'UFC' makes available to them. In this sense, discussing *(re)assemblages* of subjectivity and their creative stylizing projects poetics (that is, their poetics) highlights the relational and 'always-in-the-making' quality of 'being a UFC fighter'.

The second concept is '*thick descriptions*'. Thick descriptions are a typical tool of qualitative research (Bryman et al., 2011). Their goal is to gather a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. But thick descriptions are not neutral texts, they are located in time and space and, most importantly, they are put into paper (or typed into a computer) by a human being, the researcher.

A general explanation of the role of the researcher in producing knowledge about subjectivity was already provided in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, I believe that it is necessary to add more details that pertain to the writing up of this specific case study. In other words, given that by discussing subjectivities of fighters I am playing a role in how they come to be known, it is only fair to explain how I customized the general insights illustrated in chapter 6 in relation with this particular location (a PhD dissertation).

In putting together this case study, two distinct but partially connected sets of ideas were mobilized. The first one was inspired by Latour's & Woolgar's (1986) ethnographic work on the life in a scientific laboratory (see chapter 3). The second one was borrowed from Strati's reflections on engaging with the production of aesthetic organizational knowledge (2009). Let us discuss them in order.

In "*Laboratory Life*" (1986), Latour & Woolgar argue that to cast new light on a phenomenon, the researcher needs to approach the object of study with no a priori expectations. This is referred to as a sense of "*anthropological strangeness*" (p. 29) which aims at mimicking the way in which anthropologists set out to observe unknown tribes. The main feature that I derived from this approach is curiosity swirled with

sprinkles of humbleness, with the latter referring to the acknowledgment that I am not an expert nor a judge of subjectivity. There is no inherently 'right' or 'wrong' way of knowing and making subjectivity. If subjectivity is a multiple, relational outcome that emerges in specific ways according to the location, then no one can be said to 'own' its knowledge, in that said knowledge is also multiple, relational and dependent on certain practices.

The second insights that informs the (re)assemblages of UFC fighters' selves offered in this chapter and in the following one are Strati's reflections on aesthetic knowledge, in particular on what it means to put in first place modes of knowing that rely on the senses instead of cerebral activities. As Strati's (2009) explains, "*although the cognitive level of intelligence is still important, a great deal of organizational life eludes it, and is instead grasped by another form of intelligence, namely sensory intelligence*" (p. 253). Moreover, according to Strati (2009) "*there is no organizational scholar that does not undergo aesthetic experience, either when constructing field research or when processing or communicating the results of that research through texts, lessons and lectures, even if they then do not know how to express that experience for research purposes*" (p. 252). In my case study, the mobilization of my sensory intelligence was achieved through what Strati himself (1999) calls 'imaginary participant observation' (*IPO*), an idea which he uses to describe the process of resonance with a specific situation by virtue of empathic understanding, setting out to feel the sense of it (as opposed to 'make sense' of it) through an evocative knowledge-creation process (Strati, 1999). According to Strati (2009), "*IPO activates all the senses with its capacity for*

aesthetic judgements, rather than operating at the level of cognition and analytical-rational logic, and it constitutes the ‘felt’ personal knowledge that Polanyi (1958) calls ‘tacit knowledge’ (p. 242). The reason why I was able to engage in IPO is because in the past I experienced many of the locations and where the subjectivity of mixed martial arts emerges, namely MMA gyms. I also experienced the scale before a match, the referee and the ring or the mat of an official competition. I did not do that as a UFC fighter of course, but as a striking (Muay Thai and boxing) and grappling (Brazilian Jiu Jitsu) practitioner and competitor. Thus, while I am not claiming that I underwent the same experiences that UFC fighters go through (which – to be clear - I will not do), I can sympathise⁴⁸ with them by virtue of having experienced (on a much much much more basic level) similar practices within similar and sometimes same locations and having found myself facing questions of self-stylization of my subjectivity as a fighter, amateur boxer or Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) practitioner in my case.

In my case study, I combine Latour’s & Woolgar’s (1986) suggestion of writing from the point of view of an “external observer” with the empathy and the ‘affect’ that underpins IPO, capitalizing on my carnal experience of parallel locations and parallel practices that UFC fighters engage with on a daily basis. The use of these two semi-fictional devices offered the opportunity to look at the UFC fighters closely enough to empathically appreciate their endeavors. At the same time, given that I have never practiced MMA, I was also able to maintain distance, which allowed me to look at being a fighter in all its ‘weird’ complexity.

⁴⁸ In this context I am using the word “sympathise” in its etymological sense, which derives from the Greek word “sympatheia”, that is, “*feeling with*”, “*sharing with*”.

One last reflection on the situatedness. The narratives that I present are localized and belong to this particular time. The cues of their situatedness emerges specifically in the sources of data. As the reader will appreciate, in fact, in my analysis I draw on social media, podcasts and media content mainly produced for the internet as sources of data. Given that the internet creates and abandons trends at the speed of light, the meaningfulness and the use of social media as inscription/self-inscription devices in 2019 will probably change and in some years from now, perhaps, their relevance and use might be completely different. Thus, my empirical contribution needs to be seen as localized and enacting the particular flavour of the time in which it has been produced, that is, the years from 2015 to 2019.

7.2.2 Notes on Method: On Using Examples

The method I use to (re)assemble the narratives that constitute the case study is inspired by de Beauvoir's systematic use of examples. As explained in chapter 5, in phenomenological inquiry examples are used to transfer specific insights or ideas; not as empirical evidence that can be generalized (Vintges, 1996). As an existential-phenomenologist, de Beauvoir makes her cases by providing a large number of examples and, by doing so, she stresses her anti-essentialist stances (Moynagh, 2006). Moynagh (2006) sees this method as partially connecting to Kant's and Arendt's notion of "*exemplary validity*" (p. 13). As Arendt argues, in fact, "*examples disclose generality without surrendering particularity*" (Arendt, 1982, p. 130 in Moynagh, 2006, p. 15).

Method-wise, this case study enacts de Beauvoir's notion that it is not possible to incorporate the particular in the universal. As seen in chapter 5, according to her, quests for universal truths are misleading because they silence more practical queries about the opacities, the contradictions and the indeterminacies that characterize the human condition.

Choosing to make present subjectivity through examples is inspired by Law's observation that *"simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent"* (2004, p. 2). Just like Law (2004) argues that a train collision can be used as a performative allegory for the disorganization of the railway system, using examples to discuss subjectivity is in its own right a performative allegory that aims at passing on the idea that subjectivity is fractional, complicated and messy affair, not reducible to the direct, simple and linear accounts that organizational scholarship tends to produce.

7.2.3 Data Collection

The data used in chapter 7 and 8 have been collected over the period of four years, from June 2015 to July 2019.

In reflecting on where a researcher should start the process of inquiry, Latour suggests that *"as always, it is best to begin in the middle of things, in medias res. Will the reading of a newspaper do? Sure, it offers a starting point as good as any. As soon as you open it, it's like a rain, a flood, an epidemic, an infestation. With every two lines, a trace*

is being left by some writer that some group is being made or unmade” (Latour, 2005, p. 27).

In my case, instead of opening up a newspaper as per Latour’s quote, I use the internet. The reason why I do so is because it is the main and most accessible medium where one can find content about the UFC and its fighters outside of the US. Besides from the fighting events themselves, the most accessible source of official UFC media content is the official UFC You Tube channel. This channel presents a rich source of data, including original productions such as the promotional web show “*UFC Embedded*”, which is aired during “fight-week” (namely the week that precedes the fight). These videos present original footage of the fighters in the gym, in their private quarters and travelling to the city where their bout will take place, preparing mentally and physically up to the day before “fight night”, that is, the evening of the broadcasted show. The UFC You Tube channels also serve as a direct means to broadcast free media events such as the official press conferences pre and post the main show. Moreover, it airs the official promos and the “behind the scenes” footage of these promos, which often include interviews with the fighters and their coaches.

Another important source of data is constituted by social media such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, which constitute a florid archive of inscriptions of subjectivity accessible to everyone. As Elliott (2014) observes, in fact, the explosion of global communication and of social media in particular, is crucial for discussions about selfhood.

In order to grasp ‘what it is to be a UFC fighter’ as a relational and multiple outcome, I also paid attention to MMA journalism (both traditional and web-based), specifically to interviews with UFC fighters, both in UFC – staged events (for example, pre - and post – fight press conferences and interview) and in other settings, mainly podcasts and web-broadcasts such as ‘The Ariel Helwani’s MMA show’, ‘The Joe Rogan MMA Show’ (Joe Rogan is the UFC color commentator) and ‘The MMA hour’. The reason why I rely primarily on interviews, especially long interviews such as the ones that take place in podcasts, is because they can be seen as a form of autobiographical material. Interviews represent a moment of reflexivity in which fighters share who they are and how they make sense of themselves and of what they do. Just like in the case of de Beauvoir’s journals, it is not so relevant that interviews present ‘truthful’ accounts, in that their value resides in the fact that whatever they communicate constitutes a performance of the fighters’ sense of self.

7.3 Mix Martial Arts and the UFC: Setting the Stage

This second section starts approaching the core of this chapter. I will first provide some basic background information about the sport MMA and of the organization I focus on, the UFC. I will then explain the rationale for my choice of carrying out research on the subjectivity of UFC fighters.

7.3.1 Mixed Martial Arts in the UFC

The institutional website of the UFC, one of the company's official self-inscriptions, presents the UFC as the world's leading MMA promotional organization and the 'largest pay-per-view event provider in the world'⁴⁹. In simplistic terms and only to provide a working definition for the reader⁵⁰, MMA for now can be described as a sport that features two professional fighters facing each other using a combination of striking and grappling techniques belonging to various combat disciplines such as BJJ, boxing, Greco-Roman or freestyle wrestling, karate, sambo, Muay Thai, kickboxing, judo, Tae Kwon Do, etc. According to the Unified Rules of Martial Arts, the set of rules that the UFC as an organization contributed to create in the 90s and abides to, the fight can happen when fighters are on their feet and also when they are on the ground. A match can end in three ways: by knockout, by submission or by decision. Knockouts happen when an athlete gets hit so hard that he/she is no longer able to defend him/herself and carry on with the fight. Submissions are either chokes or joint locks. When fighters are caught in a submission, they have the option to tap the opponent to signal to the referee that the fight needs to be stopped. Sometimes, the act of tapping out does not occur rapidly enough or the referee is not fast enough in separating the fighters, so athletes can end up being choked unconscious or getting injured. Lastly, if the match does not end with a knockout or a submission, it is up to the judges to decide who won the bout. Broadly, the goal of each match is to establish which mixed martial artist's fighting style is more effective and dominant within a weight class.

⁴⁹<https://www.ufc.com/about> Retrieved on July 25th, 2019

⁵⁰ The goal of this section is to provide a sufficient amount of information about MMA and the UFC so that the reader can make sense of the following sections. However, I anticipate from now that later on the case study will challenge the notion that MMA is about "two fighters going against each other", complicating this apparent and abstract simplicity.

Let us now turn to the company, the UFC.

7.3.2 The Ultimate Fighting Championship

The UFC is owned and operated by the company William Morris Endeavour (also known as WME ING), a talent agency that represents actors, musicians, writers, directors and athletes that has its headquarters in Beverly Hills, California. WME bought the UFC and its original parent company Zuffa LLC ('Zuffa' in Italian means 'brawl') in 2016 for \$4.025 billion⁵¹. At the time, this acquisition was the largest-ever sale in sports.

The UFC recognizes nine weight divisions for men and three for women⁵². Each weight class is populated by fighters that compete to be the UFC champion in their respective division. When a fighter wins the title of UFC champion, he/she is awarded a championship belt, which is the equivalent of a trophy. The belt is the material inscription of the status of dominancy of the champion over the other competitors.

However, this status is not permanent. While the physical belt becomes the property of the winner, the title of UFC champion needs to be periodically defended, meaning that the number one of each division is expected to fight the best contenders in order to retain the title.

The best fifteen fighters of each weight class are included in the rankings. The ones followed by the UFC are published on the institutional website and they are

⁵¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattconnolly/2016/07/12/ufc-sold-to-wme-img-what-happens-to-the-fertittas-dana-white-joe-rogan-ronda-rousey-and-others/#98327b47d31e> Retrieved on June 22nd, 2019

⁵² Men's divisions: Flyweight – limit of 125 lbs // Bantamweight – limit of 135 lbs // Featherweight – limit of 145 lbs // Lightweight – limit of 155 lbs // Welterweight – limit of 170 lbs // Middleweight – limit of 185 lbs // Light Heavyweight – limit of 205 lbs // Heavyweight – limit of 265 lbs
Women's divisions: Strawweight – limit of 115 lbs // Bantamweight – limit of 135 lbs
<http://www.ufc.com/discover/sport/weight-classes>. Retrieved on March 6th, 2016

updated after each event. UFC rankings are created by a panel constituted by members of the media, who are required to vote which fighter they believe to be best in every weight class. The champion gets automatically the first position by virtue of having won the title. Champions are eligible to be voted for the general ranking, the so-called “pound-for-pound ranking”. Competitors appearing in this list do not fight directly against each other. The aim of this list is somehow “theoretical,” almost exclusively a matter of prestige, in that it constitutes an assessment of what is considered to be the best fighting style regardless of the weight class

Today, the UFC has more than 500 fighters on its roster. Fighters are not employees though, when their legal status is of ‘independent contractors’. This is a classification that has created and still creates many controversies. Challengers of this definition⁵³ argue that the UFC expects fighters to behave like employees, but it does not treat them as such in return. Fighters, for example, have to be constantly available for anti-doping tests and they cannot travel without having communicated their movements to the UFC. Moreover, fighters cannot display the logo of personal sponsors on their gear (and consequently receive money), they can only wear the official Reebok uniform. So far, on the fighters’ side there have been very few attempts to create an association and to discuss unionizing. In these rare instances, the UFC has always publicly displayed anti-union stances⁵⁴.

⁵³ <https://mmajunkie.com/2017/08/ufc-fighters-employees-or-independent-contractors> Retrieved June 30th, 2019

⁵⁴ <https://www.mmafighting.com/2018/4/24/17273824/leslie-smith-to-take-legal-action-ufc-after-having-contract-bought-out-in-wake-of-union-efforts> Retrieved June 30th, 2019

The UFC produces roughly 40 live shows every year. It prides itself to be the largest pay-per-view provider in the world⁵⁵, broadcasting its shows in more than 120 countries. In the United States and Canada, the company has in place deals to distribute its content in chains of restaurants and bars. Moreover, in 2011 the UFC made a breakthrough in the mainstream TV circuit 2011 by signing a seven-year deal with US-based Fox Sports Media Group. This agreement is described by the UFC as a crucial moment of its history⁵⁶, testifying to the stable growth in popularity of MMA. In 2018, a second major distribution deal was signed with the American broadcasting conglomerate ESPN⁵⁷, signaling once again the raising popularity of the sport and of the UFC as a company.

The UFC is also engaged in a florid licensing activity, which ranges from fitness facilities such as Performing Institutes dedicated mainly to UFC athletes to the franchise of one hundred UFC gyms⁵⁸ catering to the wider public, from home training videos to diet programmes⁵⁹. UFC fans can also purchase the UFC Magazine, the UFC official videogame (in franchise with EA Games, one of the most renown companies in the field of videogames) and, the UFC branded apparel produced by Reebok and various memorabilia such as DVDs, gloves signed by the fighters, posters and so on.

As mentioned in the previous section, particularly relevant for my case study is the extensive web presence of the UFC, both in terms of provision of original content

55 <http://www.ufc.com/discover/ufc/index> Retrieved on Jun 21st, 2019

56 <http://m.ufc.ca/news/ufc-on-fox-announcement081811/> Retrieved on March 2nd, 2016

57 <https://www.mmafighting.com/2019/3/19/18272292/ufcs-new-exclusive-pay-per-view-deal-with-espn-explained> Retrieved on July 2019

58 <https://ufcgym.com/> Retrieved on March 2nd, 2016

59 <https://www.ufc.tv/category/ufc-fit> Retrieved on July 27th, 2019

and of opportunity of direct connection and interaction⁶⁰. The UFC, in fact, directly controls the broadcasting of “UFC TV” (the website dedicated to the pay-per-views events outside of the US) and “UFC Fight Pass” (a subscription website which offers to its paying subscribers live events, media footage, fights on demand and original content). Moreover, UFC followers and fans interact directly through social media (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) with fighters, coaches but also with other key-employees such as, only to name a few, the colour commentator⁶¹ Joe Rogan; the person in charge of deciding which fighter is going against who, match-maker Joe Silva; the referees; and the women (‘girls’) that display the number of the round about to be disputed during the fight (also known as “Octagon girls”). Interestingly enough, it is Dana White - the only President that the UFC has ever had – who stands out from this crowd: he is renowned for his feisty social media back-and-forths with fans, which are often the object of the attention of MMA media⁶².

7.4 Justifying my choice of studying the UFC and its fighters

There are several reasons why I chose to provide an example of how the framework for selfhood presented in chapter 6 can be practiced by exploring the subjectivity of UFC fighters.

Here I outline the main two. The first is more ‘traditional’ and has to do with the need to demonstrate my being consistent with established academic practices dictated

⁶⁰ <https://www.ufc.com/connect> Retrieved on June 21st, 2019

⁶¹ A ‘colour commentator’ is a sports commentator that helps the play-by-play commentator, by providing technical analysis.

⁶² <http://www.bloodyelbow.com/2015/7/23/9022217/ufcs-dana-white-spirited-twitter-exchange-with-idiot-and-moron-fans> Retrieved on March 2nd, 2016

by the location where I am presenting my ideas (that is, a PhD dissertation). The second one involves a meta-reflection on the enactment of my own poetics as a researcher; the why of carrying out research on the subjectivity of UFC fighters?

a) *Reason #1: To bridge gaps and/or problematize the MOS literature*

The reason why the subjectivity of UFC fighters is relevant for Management and Organizational scholars as well as for practitioners is that, by virtue of their profession, UFC fighters represent an extreme example of how paying attention to tropes such as embodiment, existential projects and sensorial fulfillment can inject new life into the debate about subjectivity in MOS, de-naturalising its essentialist, self-contained and cognitivist characterizations. Being a mixed martial artist, in fact, can be seen as an extreme example of a singular, self-contained and solitary endeavour. Thus, undoing singularity, self-containment and autonomy in a profession as extreme as being a UFC fighter can give us some insights of what challenging the same tropes in less-extreme environment can look like. As Prasad (2014) suggests, focusing on 'extreme examples' as a way of deriving lessons that can be used in non-extreme situations is a well-established academic practice. In the medical field, for instance, it is very common to carry out research on high-risk groups and then to translate and adapt the acquired knowledge to lower-risk populations. MOS are also well-versed in this. For example, a lot of the leadership literature, especially in its early iterations, took its first step with the study of military leadership practices (Johns & Saks, 2001).

Moreover, fighting is one of the oldest forms of collective entertainment and, following the teaching of ANT perspective, (re)assembling stories of “today’s gladiators” is a means to reveal something about our society. The poetics of subjectivity of UFC fighters represent one extreme example of how existential projects manifest themselves in practice within the specific situation constituted by UFC and bring about existential motives like experiencing violence, confrontation, anguish, fear but also deep human connection, respect for the opponent, self-discipline, choices of personal values and quest for personal moral compass. As suggested elsewhere (see for example Hardaway, 1976; Koller, 2004) these themes together with metaphors of war, fight and sport antagonism are frequently used in business studies because they “*resonate with the practitioners organizational/management research is meant to influence*” (Wolfe et al., 2005, p. 184). A proof of this is the constant success of numerous non-academic books that are inspired by the experience of people in the military, athletes and so on⁶³.

b) Reason #2: As a manifestation of my own poetic as a researcher

The second reason why I chose to study UFC fighters has to do with my own poetic as a researcher. Exploring the subjectivity of mixed martial artists enacts my personal style and taste in doing research and reflects topics and ideas that I care about. This dissertation condenses my interests in selfhood, ontological multiplicity,

⁶³ See, for example, “*Extreme Ownership*” by J. Willink and L. Babin, “*Sun Tzu and the Art of Business: Six Strategic Principles for Managers*” by M. McNeilly, “*Women and the Art of War: Sun Tzu's Strategies for Winning Without Confrontation*” by C. Huang and A.D. Rosenberg; “*I feel great and you will feel too! An inspiring journey of success with practical tips on how to score big in life*” by P. Croce and B. Lyon; “*Joe Torre’s Ground rules for winners: 12 keys to managing real players, tough bosses, setbacks and success*” by J. Torre and H. Dreher, only to name a few.

philosophy, aesthetics, embodiment, organizations that deal with extreme performances and MMA. The reason why I make a point of acknowledging my own interests and positioning is because, as already explained in chapter 6 and in the previous section, I acknowledge that researchers are entangled in the network they are studying. In this sense, I could define myself as an 'extreme fan', because not only I do follow the UFC, but I also carry out research on it.

If one were to look at this dissertation using the concepts explained in the previous chapter, one could say that within the repertoires offered by the situation 'academia', I have chosen some materials and themes and I have stitched them together according to my own taste. These pages are the material effect of my style of subjectivity as a researcher. They constitute who I am and they will participate in creating and translating my own subjectivity as a scholar.

After having clarified my research strategy, having provided background information about MMA as a sport and about the UFC as a company and having explained my choice to utilize UFC fighters to explain how my recipe of subjectivity works, it is now time to discuss the main topic of this case study. In the following section I will finally answer the 1-million-dollar question: what is it to be a UFC fighter?

7.5 Being a UFC Fighter

7.5.1 A Messy, Relational Affair

The overall goal of the third and last section of this chapter is to challenge the idea that UFC fighters are best understood as singular, essentialist, mentalist and self-contained phenomena. These concepts underpin the understanding of what it is to be a UFC fighter and they tacitly provide the parameters of what can be said about MMA and what being an MMA practitioner is about.

MMA is conventionally labelled as an 'individual' sport. This is the taken-for-granted assumption that is mobilized both inside the fighting community (practitioners, fans, coaches, journalists, referees, athletic commissions, promoters etc.) and outside of it (mainstream media, broader society, legislators). What is at work here are the dominant Euro-American metaphysical assumptions of singularity, autonomy and self-containment, which lead us to think that being a mixed martial artist is a solo activity: a unitary, definite phenomenon. I invite the reader to pick a random article about the UFC. The typical account of fighters before the beginning of a match would probably mention something like the door of the octagon (that is, the UFC cage) shutting down and two fighters standing inside of it, alone and independent entities ready to go against each other.

Except, in practice, they are not alone. Nor independent. The heroic narrative of separateness and self-sufficient individuality works exclusively on an abstract, 'purified' level. If we follow the framework discussed in chapter 6 and attend to the practicalities of what is happening inside the cage, what unfolds in front of us has nothing to do with autonomy. Nothing is independent in the cage, for everything associates and relates.

One first observation is that fighters need each other in order to fight. More on this later on, for now let us proceed with a list of basic relationships. Fighters also need their gloves, their mouthpieces, their protections, their trunks and tops (in the case of women), not to mention the voices and instructions of their coaches and teammates. Another important presence is the cage is Vaseline, which is to be applied exclusively on the faces of the fighters, so that the skin on the most likely points of contact is more moisturized and slippery, thus less likely to tear. Vaseline is a powerful actor in the cage for it can help or handicap fighters. When applied in places other than the face, which is illegal, it provides an advantage because it compromises grips and frictions, altering the effectiveness of takedowns and grappling exchanges.

Moreover, in the cage there is also a referee, who clearly plays a huge role in how the fight unfolds. And how about the canvas that covers the octagon? The canvas is there too, and it can be more or less clean. This is not a mundane detail: the sweat or blood present in the canvas are crucial because, just like with Vaseline, their agency is something that needs to be dealt with. Blood and sweat have material consequences on how the match plays out. The fighters that step into the cage will find the canvas more or less slippery, depending on if they are performing at the beginning or at the end of the event. As a consequence, the status of the canvas impacts the quality of the movement and, in turn, it plays a role in how fighters constitute themselves on fight night. Moreover, the canvas is covered with brands and logos. This is a visual reminder for fighters that they are not exclusively mixed martial artists. They do not fight for themselves exclusively: sponsors have invested in the event thus they have to entertain

the audience. Logos and sponsors are also present in the cage: they represent the bottom line of the UFC, the profit that needs to be made.

The scenario above presented is a very general one, no names or specific fights have been mentioned. The writing was at a high tempo because it was meant to pass on the complexity and the thickness of the topic, trying to stress how much we miss out on when we settle for the ‘two fighters alone facing each other’ narrative. Are we dealing with two independent, stand-alone entities ready to go against each other? If we think in terms of abstractions, yes. However, the short list of actors above presented (the apparel, the shouted instructions of teammates and coaches, the grease, the referee, the canvas and its sweat and blood) suggests otherwise. A fight is a complex scenario, a network of human and non-human material that associates and disassociates. If one follows what happens *in practice* in this very specific situation (the moments before the beginning of a fight), ‘being a UFC fighter’ assumes a composition that is more akin to an *ensemble* effort as opposed to a solo one. In other words, it configures itself as the relational outcome of a number of actors engaged in associations that unfold in a specific location at a certain moment in time (the octagon on fight night) and that *together* participate to the constitution of who one is as a UFC fighter. Let us elaborate on this point.

7.5.2 The Fighter Relational

Let us challenge traditional assumptions of self-containment and independency by considering a specific fight, the heavyweight bout between Francis Ngannou and

Derrick Lewis that took place at UFC 226 on July 7th, 2018. This bout marked the return to the octagon of Francis Ngannou, who had been labeled one of the most promising prospects that the heavyweight division had ever seen. What made Ngannou come to prominence had been his impressive punching power (the highest ever measured by the UFC⁶⁴). His impressive winning streak featuring 6 wins and 0 losses (with 5 wins out of 6 by knockout) gained him a shot at the UFC title, which did not go his way. For the first time in the UFC, Ngannou lost a bout to then champion Stipe Miocic. His return, the fight against Lewis was a highly anticipated one: just like in boxing, also in MMA heavyweight matches are seen as promising to be particularly spectacular due to the sheer physical power that is unleashed throughout the fight, and both Ngannou *and* Lewis have reputations as impressive hard-hitters. Moreover, this fight was framed as Ngannou's chance to exorcise the demons of the loss to Miocic.

However, the high expectations did not match what happened on that night. The Ngannou-Lewis fight has become a classic in negative terms, being described as the worst heavyweight clash of all the time⁶⁵. Both fighters did not engage in meaningful and effective exchanges, so much so that the number of strikes landed during the fight is, as of now, the second fewest of all time⁶⁶.

This match is an example⁶⁷ of how conceiving 'being a UFC fighter' as a private affair sanitizes their subjectivities from relational qualities. On that night of July 7th,

⁶⁴ <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2017/11/26/16700994/video-francis-ngannou-sets-record-for-punching-power-mma-ufc> Retrieved on June 22nd, 2019

⁶⁵ <https://www.mmafighting.com/2018/7/14/17570348/fighttweets-just-how-bad-was-francis-ngannou-vs-derrick-lewis> Retrieved on June 22nd, 2019

⁶⁶ <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2018/7/8/17546884/mma-stats-derrick-lewis-francis-ngannou-landed-31-total-strikes-ufc-226> Retrieved on June 24th, 2019

⁶⁷ As explained in the beginning of this chapter, this is an arbitrary starting point. Because we always find ourselves in media res, as Latour (2005) suggests.

Ngannou and Lewis constituted themselves in association, and, by doing so, they both carved themselves onto the other. In the aftermath of this match, both fighters had their fighting prowess heavily questioned, which impacted the quality of their holding together as UFC fighters. This happened in particular in Ngannou's case, who faced serious criticisms not only from journalists and fans, but also from UFC President Dana White, who accused him of being too full of himself⁶⁸. Here is a quote from the post-event press conference:

"I can tell you that his ego absolutely ran away with him. The minute that happens to you in the fight game, you start to fall apart. I had some personal encounters with him, as did other people in the organization, and this guy's ego was so out of control."⁶⁹

I want to draw the reader's attention to how the bundle of different actors (the loss to Miocic, Derrick Lewis, the fight and the media, the fans and President White's comments) have all come to play a role in the constitution of who Ngannou is as a fighter. All these people, events and narratives have conferred a specific quality to the making of his subjectivity which emerges in practice every time he trains, every time he is interviewed and every time he steps inside of the octagon and, overall, in the locations where his subjectivity of a fighter is practiced. Ngannou would not be who he is without all this crowd of actors: they are folded in his subjectivity. Of course, the same can be said for Lewis and for all fighters, in that – and this is the point that this section

⁶⁸ <https://mmajunkie.com/2018/08/ufc-dana-white-francis-ngannou-might-never-be-same> Retrieved on June 22nd, 2019

⁶⁹ <https://mmajunkie.com/2018/07/dana-white-gives-post-mortem-on-abomination-ngannou-vs-lewis> Retrieved on June 22nd, 2019

wants to clarify - the actor-network 'subjectivity of a fighter' is a 'project in becoming' that emerges in constant interaction with Otherness.

Another challenge to the notion that UFC fighters are autonomous and self-contained selves comes from the associations between coaches and fighters.

One of the most egregious and successful fighter-coach partnerships in the UFC roster is the one between T.J. Dillashaw and Duane Ludwig. Under Ludwig's guidance, Dillashaw won the 135 pounds UFC title twice. Here's an excerpt of an interview that speaks to the crucial role that they both play in each other's life:

T.J. Dillashaw: ... dude, this is our (his and Ludwig's) journey, I'm not doing this shit alone, If I was doing it alone it would be a lot harder, I'm not saying I couldn't do it but it would not be to this level, I would not be who I am. I told him, this is our journey, you know, that's why this shit works because I don't have a bigger ego and I'm like pheeew, whatever, me and Duane really see eye to eye
(Ludwig interrupts and talks over Dillashaw)

Duane Ludwig: I want him to succeed

T.J. Dillashaw: He's family, he's family now.

Duane Ludwig: That's why I am all in because T.J. is all in. I don't have a vast stable of fighters, I have a few guys that float through my place, right, I work with them a little bit here and there but T.J. is all in so I am all in.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Excerpt from The Joe Rogan MMA Show #41 recorded on September 12th, 2018.
The whole episode is available on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB7tpgwwg1g>

While Dillashaw and Ludwig do not use the vocabulary of relationality, this quote is telling in how deeply and unmistakably Dillashaw acknowledges that Ludwig is a constituting factor of who he is as a fighter. When Dillashaw says that he does not have a big ego, what he means is that he trusts Ludwig to shape and infuse himself into his fighting artistry, which is a foundational factor in a fighter's subjectivity. Dillashaw's combat style includes sophisticated footwork, constant changes of stance mixed with unusual strikes, high pace and unorthodox combinations of attacks. It is an uncommon and very recognizable manner of fighting, one that Ludwig, a former kick-boxer and mixed martial artist himself, conceived and tailored with Dillashaw in mind. Each combination of techniques in the Ludwig-Dillashaw fighting system has a name and only the two of them are aware of what the different labels refer to. This made-up MMA grammar - a grammar of words *and* movements - excludes everyone else from understanding what techniques Dillashaw will perform. During fight night, Ludwig can shout the name of whatever combination he deems appropriate and Dillashaw executes it, without giving away to the opponent and to the other corner what will come next.

What needs to be clear is that the association Dillashaw-Ludwig goes well beyond the mentalist idea that a coach contributes to the performance of a specific fighter. The association between fighters and coaches is instead a material one, one that informs who they are in their flesh⁷¹. From holding the pads to creating tailor-made combinations, from putting together original footwork to inventing an original lingo that is unknown to anybody else. Ludwig inscribes himself into Dillashaw's body. His previous

⁷¹ The same can be said for training partners, but, in this example, I am focusing on coaches.

fighting experience, the hours spent watching combat sports, studying and practicing techniques, his understanding of fighting, his theories on movement etc., all of these elements – *elements that make Ludwig who he is* – are passed onto Dillashaw in a practical, carnal manner.

As explained in chapter 6, my take on subjectivity offers that our primary means of engagement with the world is our body. By attending to a fight or even to a training session, one can appreciate how fighters' bodies get acquainted with the space of fighting in a manner that is not intellectual but practical and perceptual. Fighters do not merely 'stand' inside of the octagon, they proactively map it. They know the cage with their bodies. They feel it. They sense angles and paths to attacks; they perceive openings and shifts in energies. Thanks to their movement, the octagon ceases to be a neutral background and becomes an intentional constituting parts of the fighters' projects of subjectivity. In Dillashaw's case, his knowledge of the cage is entangled with Ludwig's, it is flavoured by him. The way in which his limbs react to his opponents' are influenced by the association with Ludwig. His weight is as well. Dillashaw needs to be light and lean to be able to implement Ludwig's fast pace style.

Another way to appreciate what it means to say that fighters' subjectivity emerges in material and carnal relationships is comparing the bodies of the fighters before and after a fight. Encounters of hinterlands carve themselves onto fighters' bodies, showing up in swollen eyes and faces, bloody cuts, bruises, broken limbs and so on. Physical damage inscribes itself onto the body, altering one's own constitution as a

fighter and, in turn, one's own poetic. Retired former UFC middleweight champion Michael Bisping is an example of this.

On January 19th, 2013, Michael Bisping was head kicked by Vitor Belfort during a bout in the event 'UFC on FX: Belfort vs Bisping'. As a result, Bisping's right eye was permanently injured: his retina detached, and he almost entirely lost the sight from that eye. Belfort was now folded into Bisping's configuration as a UCF fighter. In a September 2013 interview, Bisping explained how, at first, he refused to see a doctor because he was too scared to have to give up his career. Eventually, he did receive medical attention and had oil injected as a temporary solution. This fix did work temporarily to keep the retina in place, but the sight was never recuperated. But the problems with his right eye were only starting: his retina detached again, then he got glaucoma, and then other complications ensued. After the Belfort encounter being medically cleared for fighting became a challenge, and the doctors were not supportive of his decision, as he explains in this excerpt of a 2018 interview:

Michael Bisping: *To be able to be cleared by the commission to fight you gotta have 2200 vision, which I was able to scrape by with the skin of my teeth. My doctor was always amazed that I could still see to that amount... if I squinted in the right direction, and I turned here and the light was just right I could just about make up the 2200 (...). What happens is that (...) you see different two images, distorted images, and your brain cancels the distorted one, so ..*

Joe Rogan: *So the depth perception remains the same?*

Michael Bisping: *No no, depth perception is the real issue (...)*

It was an issue throughout my last few fights ... (...) I was cleared medically by the doctors, the UFC was very, very on top of all of that, the UFC sent me to a number of different doctors and as I was saying I passed the test just.. and every time I did the doctors were like “we don’t recommend that you fight”

Joe Rogan: *Of course*

Michael Bisping: *2200 vision is still clinically blind⁷²*

The injury caused by Belfort not only got incorporated but also shaped and participated into Bisping’s unfolding as a fighter, so much so that it contributed to push him to seek out other viable career opportunities for his life after the octagon. Thinking about ‘what’s next’ is something that very few fighters tend to do because it is seen as going against one of the main tropes that constitute the repertoire that the situation “being a UFC fighter” has made available. As I will explain in the next chapter, UFC fighters tend to have a belief that they will win the belt, that they are the best fighter and, consequently, deserving of hefty UFC paychecks able to settle their life once and for all. The injury undermined Bisping’s confidence and made him re-negotiate with this trope, as he explained in 2018:

Michael Bisping: *I had the eye injuries (...). From when the eye injury happened in 2013 I always felt like I was on borrowed time, so I was conscious of trying to set myself outside of the octagon. While a lot of fighters do not have the luxury, I’m thinking ‘it could end any moment’; so I was actively pursuing a life outside the*

⁷² Excerpt from The Joe Rogan MMA Show #52 recorded on December 11th, 2018. The whole episode is available on here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-DaEa0Tpg>

*octagon, a career outside the octagon, so that when that day came I was good, you know?*⁷³

Eventually, the decision to retire arrived. Unsurprisingly, it was a decision that revolved around his eye. In the following excerpt, Bisping is discussing with the interviewer the idea of ‘losing the edge’, that is, losing the above-mentioned confidence of being capable of becoming a champion. According to Bisping, if one loses that rock-solid self-belief to be the best fighter in the division, one needs to give up fighting in the UFC because the stakes are too high for one that is not completely and utterly convinced that winning the belt is an actual possibility. The interviewer (comedian Theo Von) then asks why Bisping decided to retire:

Theo Von: *Did you know that your edge was starting to go or was it just..?*

Michael Bisping: *No, it wasn't that. My edge is still there 100%, but for me I had injuries, you know, a lot of injuries. My right eye suffered a lot with that, my vision out of that eye is almost inexistent [sic], I can't see out of it but tiny tiny bits, and... and... and....the word got out and everyone was targeting that side so... it is what it is*⁷⁴

⁷³ Excerpt from The Joe Rogan MMA Show #52 recorded on December 11th, 2018. The whole episode is available on here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-DaEa0Tpg>

⁷⁴ Podcast ‘This Past Week End with Theo Von’ # 136, aired on October 4th, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IceO58vDzQ>

Bisping retired after two losses in a row. In his last fights, he was hit hard several times on his 'blind spots'. He then began to notice that his sight from the 'good eye' (the left eye) was becoming more and more impaired. Given his numerous other jobs (UFC commentator and analyst, actor, entrepreneur in an internet betting company), he decided to hang up his gloves at the end of May 2018. He was inducted in the UFC Hall of Fame in July of the same year.

Ngannou's, Dillashaw's and Bisping's cases all exemplify how discussing "being a UFC fighter" as a solitary enterprise that follows the mind vs body Cartesian template is a very reductionist approach that forces the complexities of the modes of association of subjectivity into an abstract simplicity. Even though fighters do not explicitly talk about 'co-constituting each other carnally', they are deeply aware of the magnitude and of the impact that relationships of associations have on themselves and how they affect them as body-subjects, for every interaction leaves (more or less generous or more or less damaging) material inscriptions.

Up to this point I have focused on the notion of relationality. However, the framework presented in the previous chapter also attempted to question another fundamental assumption: the reality of subjectivity as singular. I will elaborate on the supposed singularity of the self of UFC fighters in the next section.

7.5.3 Multiple Practices in Multiple Locations

So, what about the less considered yet foundational relationship between MMA and singularity?

MMA does not escape the dominant Euro-American metaphysical assumption according to which reality is one a-priori and definite entity that exists “out-there” (Law, 2004).

MMA, in fact, is generally conceived as a singular cohesive sport, albeit including techniques from other combat disciplines. The same presumption of singularity pertains to MMA practitioners: a mixed-martial artist is commonly seen as a singular cohesive logocentric unit that engages one’s own body in a plurality of physical endeavors. But: is this singular logocentric account of ‘being a UFC fighter’ a destiny?

To answer this question, I will attend to the practices that substantiate ‘what it is to be a fighter’.

7.5.4 Attending to the locations where fighters’ subjectivity unfolds

Section 6.4.3 of the previous chapter suggests that in order to know subjectivity, one needs to follow the actors in the locations where ‘who one is’ assumes gravity. As far as being a UFC fighter is concerned, covering a comprehensive list of these locations would be too long. Thus, for space reasons, for now I will primarily focus on the site where fighters train: professional MMA gyms. The facilities where fighters signed with professional MMA promotions train tend to look alike, so the main points that this account brings forward can be broadly made to apply to professional MMA gyms in general⁷⁵. However, this specific section is based on Tristar Gym in Montreal (Canada). This facility is led by Firas Zahabi and it has included, under its banner, current and

⁷⁵ The reader can look at the pictures of how professional MMA camps are organized here:
-SBG Ireland: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bw2jwGAAn83/> or
-American Kickboxing Academy (or AKA) <https://www.americankickboxingacademy.com/facility>

former UFC fighters such as Georges St. Pierre, Joanne Calderwood, Joseph Duffy, Aieman Zahabi, Ryan Hall and Mickey Gall. I personally trained Brazilian Jiu Jitsu there in 2017, so I can rely on first-person observations and, at the same time, I can engage in IPO.

The first thing to be noticed when stepping inside of Tristar is the strong smell of sweat and bodily odors mixed with bleach. The stench sets the tone: this is not a plastic franchise that needs to look and smell pleasing. This is a gym where people work hard. They sweat. They bleed. They spit. Sometimes they get very nervous and their stomach acts up. This is a gym for people who cannot risk a skin infection, hence the overpowering smell of bleach and disinfectants. Ringworm, staph infections or, even worse, Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) force the infected fighter to sit out of training and to have to medicate oneself. Both are not ideal, especially when one is getting ready for a fight. First, having to deal with a skin infection interrupts the momentum of the preparation for the fight; second, antibiotics - which are needed in case of staph infection - weaken the already under stress immune system of fighters. Skin infections are also highly contagious and, if spread around, they can also affect others relationally, with all the perks and consequences explained previously.

With the nose slowly getting used to the cocktail of smells, one starts to realize that an MMA gym is made up by different areas. On the left side there is a boxing ring. On the right side, a smaller area with weightlifting equipment and some cardio machines. Close-by another bigger space, this one with a variety of boxing bags hanging from the ceiling. Some of them are shorter, some of them are longer, so that they can

accommodate both boxing (punches-only) techniques and kick-boxing ones (including punches, kicks, knees and elbows). The middle of the gym is occupied by a vast grappling mat. Further back there is another conspicuous rectangular matted area, this time enclosed by a fence. Last but not least, on the right side, a real-size UFC octagon stands out.

This multiple spatial configuration of the MMA facility clashes with the idea that MMA and being a fighter are singular, universal and unitary phenomena. MMA, in fact, is practiced in all these different spaces and emerges from them in different modes. In the boxing ring, 'being a fighter' is a matter of practicing striking techniques such as punches, kicks, knees and elbows. While these techniques derive from boxing, kickboxing and Muay Thai, they cannot be said to be boxing, kickboxing and Muay Thai. They are boxing, kick-boxing and Muay Thai *for MMA*.

A boxer would slip punches and bob and weave in order to avoid being hit. However, in MMA such lowering of the face may invite in a kick or a choke. They are efficient boxing practices but bad MMA choices (which by itself suggests that also the reality of slipping and bobbing and weaving is multiple and depends on locations). The same can be said for BJJ. In BJJ, practitioners wear a heavy kimono, which allows for the gripping of the fabric to execute chokes, pin down the opponent and so on. In MMA, male fighters only wear shorts and female wear shorts and a top, so there is no kimono nor excess fabric to hold on to. Getting a hold of the opponents is a matter of using one's limbs. Here is an excerpt from the Dillashaw's interview mentioned above that shows how fighters are used to the multiplicity of the sport:

Joe Rogan: *And in your academy, do you have everything there, do you have submission instruction, wrestling, or do you go to different places for your (Brazilian, A/N) jiu jitsu, how do you do it?*

T.J. Dillashaw: *Mmmh, the only thing I do not at my gym is my jiu jitsu. I go to Gracie Barra in Irvine with Felipe de Monica. He is a straight up ninja.*

Duane Ludwig: *Man, he knows jiu jitsu for MMA. Just like you were saying, Mark Muñoz... wrestling for MMA, I probably got striking for MMA... Man, T.J. has a really good camp around him, I would have liked to be in his position to understand martial arts (...) I'm just so happy for him⁷⁶*

In the gym, according to the area of practice, being a mixed martial artist configures itself as being an 'MMA striker' or being an 'MMA grappler' or 'practicing MMA-savvy take-downs'. Each of these components, of course, are multiple in their own rights. 'MMA-savvy takedowns' can derive from Greco-Roman or free-style wrestling or from Judo. Ronda Rousey, former and now retired UFC135 lbs women champion was a former Olympics medalist, thus her 'MMA-savvy takedown style' was a version of Judo that was made to work for MMA (Judo is multiple too). Daniel Cormier, current UFC heavyweight champion never made it to the Olympics medal (even if he made it to the Olympics), but his MMA takedowns were informed by freestyle techniques. I could go on with examples, but the point here is that multiple 'pasted versions' of grappling, wrestling, boxing made to accommodate the specific prerogatives of MMA come to hold

⁷⁶ Excerpt from The Joe Rogan MMA Show #41 recorded on September 12th, 2018. The whole episode is available on here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-DaEa0Tpg> 9

together as MMA in the octagon, where the subjectivity of fighters emerges as the creative stitching of these ‘pasted’ versions of combat disciplines *in relation* to the actors that a certain location makes available (see previous section on relationality). Attending to how MMA comes to be in practice undermines the idea that there is one singular order to which the subjectivity of MMA fighters is ascribable to. Instead, we are dealing with multiplicity: multiple pastiched disciplines, multiple coaches, multiple locations, multiple styles, multiple iterations of subjectivity: the terms ‘MMA’ and ‘fighter’ are umbrella labels that organize multiple enactments of MMA and of ‘being a fighter’ that co-exist at the same time.

The multiplicity of ‘being a fighter’ manifests itself in multiple ways. For example, as far as fighting style is concerned, ‘being a mixed martial artist signed by the UFC’ today is different from being one in the early days. When the UFC started to promote its first events back in the 90s⁷⁷, its enactment of MMA would emerge as ‘combat style x’ vs ‘combat style y’. The UFC marketed itself as the promotion setting out to find out which fighting discipline was the most effective and, relationally, fighters constituted themselves as very skilled in one single specific combat discipline. But the more fighters would step into the cage, the more the configuration of MMA would morph, beginning to assume the texture of a pastiche of combat disciplines that the MMA community relates to nowadays. Thus, while some UFC fighters kept on performing themselves as ‘specialists in one discipline’, others began crafting for themselves a more balanced and well-rounded style.

⁷⁷ The first UFC event took place on November 12th, 1993 in Denver, Colorado (USA)

Today, the version of MMA that emerges from UFC events is characterized by fighters proficient in all aspects of MMA. The days when a BJJ practitioner could step into the octagon with a beginner's level of striking are long gone. Many fighters, if not the majority, tend to constitute themselves around a holistic and well-rounded fighting style. Two fighters that have been occupying the top positions of the 'pound-for-pound' ranking, Demetrious Johnson, former 125 lbs champion (now fighting for One Championship, another MMA promotion active mainly in Asia) and Jon Jones, current 205 lbs champion, are two examples of fighters that enact a holistic approach that displays mastery of MMA striking as well as MMA wrestling as well as MMA grappling. However, the UFC roster still includes fighters that stand out for their strengths in one aspect of MMA. For example, the highest selling pay-per-view event of all the UFC history, UFC 229: Nurmagomedov vs McGregor (October 6th, 2018) is a classic iteration of the MMA wrestler vs the MMA striker match-up. In itself, already this style vs style explanation is emblematic of how within the same octagon multiple versions of MMA unfold. The same can be said for the multiplicity of fighters. Let us consider for example the multiple versions of one of the most famous UFC fighter ever, former 145 lbs and 155 lbs champion Conor McGregor.

As the reader can appreciate from the wording of the previous sentence, there is a 145 lbs McGregor and a 155 lbs McGregor. On the weigh-in ceremony scale, both look very dehydrated and fragile, but in the former version his body is disturbingly depleted, so much so that his weight cut to the skeletal 145 lbs version is often referred to as one

of the most extreme amongst UFC fighters⁷⁸. As McGregor detractors know very well, how McGregor constitutes himself on fight night is also multiple. During the first minutes of the fight, McGregor's striking is very fast and aggressive, but the more the fight goes on the more he becomes tired and his stamina starts to fade away. Another example. In 2017, McGregor, capitalizing on his mainstream fame, co-promoted his first professional boxing match against Floyd Mayweather. In that occasion, another version of McGregor emerged: not 'mixed martial artist' but 'boxer'. Also, early-career McGregor is different from now millionaire star McGregor. I could go on with the examples, but what I want to suggest here is that the subjectivity of McGregor is not a universe, but a multiverse (Law, 2015). It comprises by "*more than one but less than many*" (Mol, 1999, 2002, Law, 2004) versions of who he is that are coordinated into one under his name. The reality of his subjectivity as a fighter can be grasped as the outcome of multiple practices and of multiple relationships that come to hold together in practice. His 'holding together' as a fighter is not something that exists ostensibly, a singular abstract essence that made him who he is. It is also not something that was achieved in solitary confinement. 'Being McGregor' and, more broadly, 'being a fighter' emerges as the embodied outcome of multiple relationships and practice. Being a fighter is not only a matter of *performing* 'pastiched' versions of striking, of takedown techniques and of grappling. It is also a matter of associating with training sessions, recovery time, eye pokes, opponents, sparring partners, fatigue, punching bags, doctors, supplements, coaches, skipping ropes, boxing bags, diets, dehydration sweat, barbells,

⁷⁸ <https://mmajunkie.com/2016/03/photos-check-out-difference-between-conor-mcgregor-at-145-pounds-and-now-170> Retrieved on June 28th, 2019

skin infections, competitions, stitches, tears, black eyes, gloves, mats, rankings, belts, wins and losses, soreness etc.

The goal of this chapter was to discuss a practical example of how subjectivities can be 'known' in terms of relationality, embodiment and multiplicity. Through many examples, fighters selves have been accounted for as *"happenings staged and enacted through the collective work of actors in various localities. (...) To multiply the situations and locations through which something (being a fighter, A/N) happens, and to point to complexity, is to suggest that action is neither isolated nor fixed, but rather that it emerges through specific events and situations"* (Abrahamsson, 2014, p. 126). From these pages, being a fighter has emerged as a matter of associations, of practice, of flesh and of multiplicity, and not as a matter of singularity, self-containment, logocentrism and independency.

The following chapter will proceed in the direction suggested by framework discussed in chapter 6, but it will focus on a different key insight: the poetics of being a UFC fighter.

In other words, I will explore namely how UFC fighters creatively stitch-together their practices, relationships and multiplicity coming to 'hold together' in their own style of 'being a fighter'.

*“It’s funny
‘cause everybody’s got
a different sort of way of doing it”
Joe Rogan*

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the practices and locations that substantiate what it is to be a mixed martial artist. The focus on the material work that goes into ‘being a fighter’ defied singular, mentalist and self-contained ideas of selfhood and opened up modes of making sense of their subjectivity as relational and multiple, as suggested by the recipe for subjectivity (see sections 6.4.3 and 6.4.4). This chapter continues the practical and material exploration of what it is to be a mixed martial artist in the UFC, but in these pages my primary goal is to investigate how poetics of subjectivity emerge (see chapter 6, section 6.4.6). Thus, here I will explore the ontological poetics of UFC fighters, which, as explained in chapter 6.4.5, are constituted by the manners according to which fighters go about negotiating, stitching together and tailoring their own way of being a mixed martial artist given the possible modes of existence that the situation ‘being a fighter in the UFC’ makes available to them.

Given that the topic of this chapter is a discussion of the selves of UFC fighters as existential and aesthetic projects, I will structure the following pages in a manner that loosely recalls art textbooks. Let us say one wanted to learn about expressionists, for example. In this case, an art textbook would offer first an overview of the ‘collective poetics’ (Nanni, 2000) of expressionism, that is, the tropes that characterize expressionism. Second, it would dwell into ‘single subject’ (Nanni, 2000) poetics, that is,

into the work of specific expressionist artists, showing how they have engaged, personalized and translated expressionist tropes and preoccupations.

Inspired by this template, in the first part of this chapter I will explain the main tropes or, more precisely, the ‘truth games’⁷⁹ (Michel Foucault, 1997) that characterize the poetics of ‘UFC fighters’ as diffused subject, as explained in my framework in chapter 6, section 6.4.6. In the second part, I will zoom into the poetics of Dominick Cruz, former 135 lbs. UFC champion, illustrating how he has engaged in his version of ontological poetics by his interfacing and negotiating with UFC truth-games. The main purpose of this account is to trace how he has built himself up and made sense of who he is as a fighter, crafting his own specific and recognizable aesthetic style of subjectivity.

8.2 The Collective Poetics of UFC Fighters

In the book *“How music works”* (2017), David Byrne⁸⁰ reflects on the relationship between music and space. For him, the notion that music is the product of the mind of a singular creative genius is misleading, in that music is first and foremost made in and for a specific location. He explains: *“The music perfectly fits the place where it’s heard, sonically and structurally. (...) the music, a living thing, evolved to fit the available niche”* (Byrne, 2017, p. 16). Gregorian music, for example, is made to fit and interact with churches made of stones with high ceilings. Hand drums and percussive music perfectly match the outdoors. Wagner’s richness and harmonically powerful orchestras are made

⁷⁹ As mentioned in chapter 4, Foucault (1997) defines ‘truth games’ as *“the set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of amusement, it is a set of procedures”* (p. 445).

⁸⁰ David Byrne is the former lead-singer and song-writer of the band *Talking heads*.

to fit and fill opera theatres. What Byrne is suggesting is that, in order to understand the poetics of music, one needs to understand how it mixes, how it adjusts and how it makes use of the geographies in which it is practiced.

Byrne's insights on the interactions between music and space are useful to start easing into Foucault's and de Beauvoir's proposal of treating subjectivity as a work of art, as suggested in chapter 6, section 6.4.6.

Just like the specific creative composite of factors that make music⁸¹ (notes, harmonies, resonances, instruments etc.) engages and deals with the situation where it is performed, also mixed martial artists creatively compose their subjectivity in negotiation with the tropes and the truth-games that the UFC⁸² makes available to them, as suggested in section 6.4.5 of chapter 6. But are these truth-games? What are some common set of rules by which the truth of being a fighter is produced?

Here I will tackle four interrelated but distinct sets of practices:

1. Practices of toughness,
2. Practices of hard-work,
3. Practices of reliability and
4. Practices of respect/disrespect.

I am cognizant that the list of these tropes is not exhaustive, but I believe it still provides a general grasp of the truth-games that UFC fighters confront themselves with

⁸¹ It needs to be clear that considering space a constitutive element of music does not mean that the practice of making music lacks creativity, passion or emotional drives. On the contrary, it means that creativity, passion and emotional drives all find their way into music, but in manners that have to be negotiated with the restrictions imposed by a certain space or, to use a familiar term, a certain situation.

⁸² In this account, the UFC as an organization is not seen as a physical building located in Las Vegas, but as an actor-network (see chapter 3).

and mobilize as constituting material of their collective poetics. All fighters confront themselves with these themes and interact with them in their own way, incorporating them into their subjective poetics according to their taste.

I focus on these four tropes specifically because they are a constant presence in the data. Not only do they emerge from fighters' interviews with MMA journalists and with non-media interviewers, they also constitute the thematic underpinnings that animate and drive the editing of the promotional material produced by the UFC. This convergence is crucial in that it signals that the UFC is not a neutral location for fighters' poetics to unfold; it is instead an active participant (if not a driver) of the aesthetics of fighters' subjectivity.

8.2.1 Truth-game # 1 – Practices of Toughness

The first ingredient of the poetics of mixed martial artists in the UFC is the necessity to be able to deal with hardship in all the multiple versions in which they manifest itself within the 'situation UFC'. How does toughness look like in the UFC?

For starters, in order to be signed by the UFC, fighters must be good mixed martial artists, meaning that they have to be able to perform at the professional level. Such mastery comes with the use and abuse of one's own body day in and day out, in the gym and during official competitions. And this is only the beginning.

Given the amount of hard training, of hitting and being hit that goes into preparing for a fight, it is quite rare for UFC fighters to go through a whole training camp without injuries and, if that happens, they put up with the pain. As Dominick Cruz

observes: *“The camp is really where the damage is done, not the fight. The camps are just painful for five rounds⁸³, that’s just how it is⁸⁴”*.

Sometimes fighters happen to have to deal with overly aggressive sparring partners and they end up hurt. Michael Bisping recalls one of these situations while he was preparing to fight Georges St. Pierre at UFC 217 on November 4th, 2017:

Michael Bisping: *The week before the fight... had the best training camp of my life... sounds braggy, but... knocking out multiple sparring partners, not on purpose... I just... I felt incredible, I felt absolutely incredible.*

Final sparring session (...) the gym is absolutely packed, I’ve got some guys there sparring me and you know... everybody wants to be the guy that gets the takedown, or whatever, gets the submission on the guy... that’s how it is, that’s why I don’t like to go to too many MMA gyms, when I am almost fighting, because every time you walk in you have a target on your back.

Anyway, it was the final round. We did five rounds, it was the Friday before the fight and this guy shoots in, shoots a double leg, runs me all the way across the octagon as if his life depended on it, picked me up, slammed me down and his shoulders went right into the ribs and I felt it instantly, all the cartilages tore completely... and I just started swearing and screaming ‘fucking...! Fuck...!’ because I knew, I knew...

⁸³ In the UFC, fights for the title last five rounds while regular fights last 3 rounds.

⁸⁴ Excerpt from the podcast “The Joe Rogan Experience”, episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB__GxM&t=1s

So, I went and saw a doctor and whatnot, and it wasn't good, so I got treatment every day. I was having ice on me and all that type of stuff, but it wasn't working, so what we came up with... we came up with this plan.

I was going to inject myself with lidocaine before the fight 'cause it would numb me. But the problem is that the area where it was... you can pierce a lung where I had to go in... you can pierce a lung and bleed to death (he laughs, a.n.)

Joe Rogan: *Jesus Christ...*

Michael Bisping: *So I got this doctor, I had the needle, I had the lidocaine and I was fucking going and stick into the toilet and FaceTime the doctor... ok... and the whole thing... it was just too on top, it was bullshit, I was 'fuck this, this is the stupidest plan ever, bollocks to it, I'll fight with a sore rib, a bit of adrenaline and, you know, I'm not going to feel it anyway, which I didn't on the night, and people said 'but you weren't being yourself, that night you weren't moving too much and I said, 'yeah, no shit, I couldn't move... but, as I said, all credit to Georges, he did great'⁸⁵*

Michael Bisping, who, as seen in the previous chapter, fought for the last portion of his career without being able to see from his right eye, is an example of how fighters face adversity and practice resiliency. They work through and around the pain, they do their best to nurse their injuries and to avoid making the damage worse and they carry on with their preparation focusing on other aspects of their game plan. If injuries are not completely healed by fight night, as long as they are not completely impairing, fighters

⁸⁵ Excerpt from 'The Joe Rogan MMA Show' #52 recorded on December 11th, 2018. The whole episode is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-DaEa0Tpg>

push through them. Bisping's decision to fight while in pain is not a rare one. *'Notorious'*, the documentary about Conor McGregor, details how McGregor injured the ACL tendon of his left knee during the preparation for the main event of the card UFC 189 on July 15th, 2015, where he was scheduled to fight for the interim 145 lbs. UFC title. John Kavanagh, McGregor's coach, recalls in an interview with MMA journalist Ariel Helwani how McGregor could not wrestle at all in preparation for a fight with a decorated wrestler like the opponent he had to face, Chad Mendes: *"We didn't do one live round of MMA sparring or wrestling for this training camp because Conor had an injury. So we weren't able to train at full pace. So this wasn't us at full capacity either."*⁸⁶

What needs to be stressed is that the common practice to suffer through and to work around injuries is not exclusively the heroic and romantic trope of men willing themselves to achievement through adversity. Resilience and toughness do not emerge from and in an impartial background. In the UFC, withdrawing from an agreed-upon bout is a scenario that needs to be avoided as much as possible for several reasons. First, UFC fighters are not employees, they are classified as independent contractors. This means that they get paid exclusively if they show up and perform on fight night. If they cancel a fight because of an injury, they do not make money. Second, the UFC is in the business of selling content, namely, fights. The company needs to schedule and promote its events months and months in advance: having to make changes in the fight card, especially last minute, is an annoyance and it is highly discouraged in that it can jeopardize ticket and pay-per-view sales, not to mention the problems that it can create

⁸⁶ Excerpt from the MMA Hour episode 290, aired on July 15th, 2015.

for future match-making strategies. In short, it can hurt the bottom line of the UFC, which is what the company is ultimately interested in. As Lorenzo Fertita, founder and former owner of the company that used to control the UFC has been reported to have commented in several occasions⁸⁷, what the UFC cares for is the UFC, not the fighters.

8.2.2 Truth Games # 2 – Practices of hard work

Partially connected but not reducible to practices of toughness are practices of hard work. Being a UFC fighter is a labor-intensive job, one that requires dedication, commitment, blood and sweat - literally.

Just like in the case of toughness, the trope of hard work does not emerge from a neutral location. It perfectly fits the UFC interests and bottom line. The UFC is the most famous, the biggest and most profitable MMA promotion. Throughout the years, it has built for itself the reputation of the company with the best athletic talent. Other MMA organizations such Bellator, One Championship or the Professional Fighting League do not have the talent, the wealth of events, the rich history, and, overall, the prestige of the UFC. Being signed by the UFC is already by itself a recognition of how good one is as a fighter, and in order to be a UFC-worthy fighter, one has to work hard. Two statements that could be attributed to the entirety of the UFC roster are: 'I am the first one to come to the gym and the last one to leave' and 'no one works harder than me'. Conor McGregor is perhaps the most famous example of how the trope that through hard work one can achieve success has been performed in practice. This is a quote of his that

⁸⁷ <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2016/4/7/11383024/mitrione-fertitta-said-ufc-main-product-is-show-and-production-not>
Retrieved on July 19th, 2019

has transcended the MMA community and that has become a motivational mantra also in the mainstream:

“There is no talent here. This is hard work, this is an obsession. Talent doesn’t exist. We are all equals as human beings. You could be anyone. If you put in the time, you will reach the top and that’s that. So, I am not talented, I am obsessed”

Being the most successful fighter in the UFC, McGregor is often asked about his success and confidence. Where do they come from? The answer, unsurprisingly, is hard work. This is a quote from an interview that aired on UFC on FOX after the 14-seconds knock-out that won him the 145 lbs. UFC title against José Aldo on December 12th, 2015:

*Confidence grows through work ethic, through seeing what is happening around. And that’s it. I put work in and it’s paying off. I truly believe that my work is the correct work. What I’m doing is correct (...)*⁸⁸

The same practice of hard work as the key means of achieving success was also evoked in an interview two years later, before his boxing match against undefeated boxing legend Floyd Mayweather, the first and (as of now) last co-promotion that the UFC has ever partaken:

Conor McGregor: *My confidence comes from my work ethic. That’s it. I know that work I am putting in. I will be back here [in the gym where he was training] at... now it’s 20 past 7. I will be back here at about 11.30, which is 6 and a half hours*

⁸⁸ UFC 194 post-fight interview with Conor McGregor, aired on December 12th, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzJ9EsxY2N4>, retrieved on July 16th, 2019

*post the previous workout. (...) So, we will be back here at 11.30 tonight, we will do a second workout, we're preparing correct and we are preparing hard. This is where my confidence is coming from. My confidence comes from hard work.*⁸⁹

Another well-known fighter known for his work ethic is Nick Diaz. This is his take on hard work:

***Nick Diaz** - You know I work harder than you. I make 170 lbs. You have guys like Alvarez, who is fighting McGregor. He is small. He is shorter than McGregor. He should fight at 45 [145 lbs, a.n.] But you know why he doesn't do that? 'Cause he'd have to do the diet I do, put the miles I do. I put in miles, I put in rounds. I'm on the mat doing Jiu Jitsu. These guys don't have black belts. If they do, they've no real boxing background. McGregor has no black belt, he's just learned Jiu Jitsu, like before the last fight... (...) It takes a long time to learn Jiu Jitsu and then these guys don't want to invest in that and if they do that, they are not gonna go and do boxing, like, traditional, they're gonna do kickboxing, and that's just going to be enough for them, and then they're going to go home to their nice wife and their nice life and they have a bunch of other stuff to worry about... I'm over here [counting on his fingers]... miles, Jiu Jitsu, pro-boxing, kick-boxing and judo... and sambo. And I'm doing all of it, taking all of it into consideration and always have.*⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Conor McGregor on his work ethics at a press conference before the Mayweather fight, August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddPx3XURSM&t=170s>, retrieved on July 16th, 2019

⁹⁰ Nick Diaz's interview on Rich's Rant Radio Show. Aired on November 26th, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPzbBAJsHjI> Retrieved July 16th, 2019

As Diaz's quote highlights, being one of the best in the UFC comes to be thought as requiring a high level of commitment to a number of different practices and skills. Inside the gym, fighters have to train hard, condition their bodies, be dedicated, consistent and devoted to their artistry. They also have to eat properly in order to maintain a certain weight. Sometimes fighters move up in weight division, so they have to eat more to gain muscle. Far more commonly, fighters have to diet down, which is another task requiring a lot of dedication. The week before the fight, virtually all fighters (excluding heavyweights) aggressively cut weight and dehydrate themselves in order to weigh in at or below the weight that names the division. Failing to 'make weight' is frowned upon because not only provides an unfair advantage, it also signals unprofessionalism and laziness.

Here is an excerpt from an interview by BT Sports journalist Caroline Pierce. Some context is needed. Dana White is in Liverpool, UK, for the event UFC Fight Night: Thompson vs Till, which took place on May 27th, 2018. White is asked to comment on a welterweight from Liverpool, rising star Darren Till, who had missed his required weight prior to his bout against Stephen 'Wonderboy' Thompson. Till is a big and tall man, and he is known to have to go through a difficult extreme weight cut in order to be able to step onto the scale within the limits imposed by the welterweight division (170 lbs.). Moreover, in the days prior to the weigh in for this very event, Till's then-pregnant girlfriend was hospitalized.

Caroline Pierce: *Can we have your reaction to what happened?*

Dana White: *It sucks. You know, this is a big fight, this is an important fight and anytime a guy doesn't make weight – especially in his own hometown – it's a bad situation. Listen, you have a long laundry list of excuses if you are in Las Vegas, if you had to fly somewhere far, you didn't have enough time to acclimate or whatever, but in your own hometown that's a tough one.*

Caroline Pierce: *Obviously Darren had a difficult situation with family, as he said... any sympathy in that sense?*

Dana White: *Always, absolutely. But, at the end of the day, you are a professional and you have to be in that mode. It sounds cold, but you have to block that stuff out of your head, he can't change that right now, but this is the biggest moment of his life and his career and it's just as important as anything else going on...⁹¹*

Given the need of the UFC to organize, promote and sell content, it is of no surprise that any type of behavior that stops the well-oiled running of operations of creation of UFC content is discouraged and often punished, formally and informally. If a fighter misses the required weight or pulls out from fights too often, the UFC will react accordingly, as the Dana White's example suggests. In the UFC, hard work is not enough: it needs to go hand in hand with reliability, as I will explain in the following section.

8.2.3 Truth Games # 3 – Practices of Reliability

⁹¹ Interview with BT's journalist Caroline Pierce, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbv1oSOo5U> Retrieved on July 16th, 2019

When asked what his opinion was on being an active fighter in two different weight divisions, Max Holloway told journalist Luke Thomas: “*The UFC knows I’m one call away*”⁹².

‘Being one call away’ means being a reliable fighter; stepping up for the UFC whenever the company needs. This is a third trope that fighters have to confront themselves with. Not only fighting in the UFC requires being tough, being hard-working and being exceptionally good at MMA. On top of all this, one needs to say ‘yes’. A lot.

Reliable fighters accept all the fights that the UFC offers. They sign a fight agreement last minute, make the required weight, fulfill all the promotional obligations with the media and perform on fight night, preferably in a spectacular manner.

Some of the most decorated and successful fighters are very much invested into this truth-game, and they spin into a heroic and stoic direction. The first name that comes to mind is Donald Cerrone one of the most active fighters in the UFC roster. His philosophy is to confront himself with as many opponents as possible. In his words: “*My fighter mentality is easy... anybody, anyplace, anytime*”⁹³. In the post-fight interview after his win against Miller at the event UFC Fight Night: Cerrone vs Miller on July 16th, 2014, Cerrone stated: “*I’ll fight anybody,*” (...) “*All the UFC has to do is call me, and I’ll be there. Whether it’s 170 [pounds], 155—I’ll fight whoever.*”⁹⁴

⁹² Interview with Max Holloway on ‘The Luke Thomas Show’ on Sirius FM. Aired on April 4th, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCCnjIU3sO4> Retrieved on July 15th, 2019

⁹³ UFC 187 Promotional Video on Donald Cerrone. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_BCppjkHFY Retrieved June 18th, 2019

⁹⁴ <http://fightland.vice.com/blog/anyone-any-place-anytime> Retrieved July 19th, 2019

Cerrone is not the only fighter that has embraced the “anytime, anywhere, anybody” philosophy. Conor McGregor as well has made his will to take on everybody regardless of weight class or of discipline one of the main leitmotifs of his poetics as a fighter. During his interviews he often says: “*I stay ready so that I don’t have to get ready*”. His fighting career speaks to this trope. He made a point of chasing the UFC belt in two different divisions, 145 lbs. and 155 lbs. On his run to conquer the 155 lbs. title, after his scheduled opponent pulled out for foot injury, he accepted to fight Nate Diaz at 170 lbs., 15 lbs. over the 155 lbs. weight limit he was supposed to compete at. Later on, in August 2017, with no background in professional boxing, he took on undefeated boxer Floyd Mayweather in a 12 rounds boxing match. It is not disputable that a big pay day has played a role in making the decision of taking up another combat sport and another ruleset. Still, the choice of confronting one of the most decorated boxers in front of a big audience and facing a loss still signals his inclination of take up different opponents even when the circumstances are not ideal.

Interestingly enough, while McGregor is an egregious example of how fighters can practice reliability in the UFC, he is also an example of what can happen to fighters when they say ‘no’ and express some malcontent towards the UFC.

In March 2016, the UFC was planning the main event for the UFC 200 card. They were working on the rematch between two of its most popular fighters, McGregor and Nate Diaz. This was a highly anticipated fight. For starters, it was a fight with the biggest draw of the company, McGregor. But there was more. In its first iteration, which at the time became the most sold pay-per-view event in the UFC with more than 1.3 million

buys, McGregor lost to Diaz. This loss marked his first defeat in his UFC career after an impressive run which also included the 145 lbs. belt. What made the fight even more attractive to fans was that the two fighters disliked each other, and they were not hiding it.

The rivalry, the chance for McGregor to revenge his first loss, the celebration of the 200th event... all these elements were pointing at a record-breaker event in the making, a win-win situation for the fans, for the fighters, McGregor *in primis* and for the UFC.

However, on April 19th 2017, President Dana White announced that McGregor had been pulled out from the card because he had refused to interrupt his training camp and to fly from Europe to Las Vegas to take on media obligations. Dana White explained the reasons of the choice of the UFC as follows:

*"I respect Conor as a fighter and I like him as a person. But you can't decide not to show up to these things. You have to do it."*⁹⁵

Conor's case at UFC 200 is one of the most infamous, but it is far from isolated. The UFC is known to reprimand fighters that are not enthusiastically adhering to the 'anytime, anyplace, anytime' philosophy. Here is an excerpt from an interview with President Dana White on June 24th, 2019. He was asked to comment on fighters refusing to take fights on short notice:

Dana White: *We have guys that don't fight when they are supposed to fight and then... I mean, this is the thing that happens: when you don't take a title fight*

⁹⁵ <https://www.mmafighting.com/2016/4/19/11464766/dana-white-conor-mcgregor-pulled-from-ufc-200-because-he-wouldnt>. Retrieved on July 16th, 2019

right when it's offered to you, the chances of you, you know, getting that next title shot are slim to none. ⁹⁶

Not being considered for title fights is a serious punishment, but it is not the worst that can happen to a 'non-reliable' fighter in the UFC. In July 2019, John Lineker was let go from the company after 16 years. While Lineker had been a fans' favorite for a long time mainly because of his aggressive fighting style, in his public statements and on his social media he had made clear that he did not appreciate how the UFC was handling his career⁹⁷. Moreover, he had a history of pulling out of scheduled fights for injuries and of failed weight cuts. This is how Dana White detailed why Lineker was let go:

Dana White: *I think it was because he hasn't made weight a few times," said White, "and I just know that the matchmakers were super frustrated with him. The guy wasn't being professional. (...) When you don't make it to the octagon either a bunch of times, it's a waste of everybody's time, energy and money. We expect guys to be professional, do what they're supposed to do, show up. The matchmakers were done. They had it.* ⁹⁸

Cerrone's, McGregor's and Lineker's examples suggest that each fighter in the UFC negotiates one's own will to fight 'anytime, anywhere, anybody'. Overall, the UFC embraces and encourages the practice of self-actualization and fearlessness 'being ready

⁹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffY2H1N3Am4>. Retrieved on July 15th, 2019

⁹⁷ <https://mmajunkie.com/2019/07/john-lineker-released-ufc-contract-16-fights>. Retrieved on July 18th, 2019

⁹⁸ <https://www.mmamania.com/2019/7/6/20684230/dana-white-details-john-lineker-release-the-guy-wasnt-being-professional-ufc-espn-mma>. Retrieved on July 18th, 2019

so that one does not have to get ready', but it does so because it constitutes a means of compliance to organizational necessities.

8.2.4 Truth Games # 4 – Practices of Respect and Disrespect

The last truth-game that UFC fighters negotiate and experiment with is the one that revolves around being respectful and honorable towards one's opponent. This trope also manifests itself in negative terms, namely when fighters choose to constitute themselves as 'the bad ones': the disrespectful, the impertinent and the trash-talkers.

Many fighters in the UFC act in respectful and with decent manners, enacting their own version of 'bushido'. Traditional martial artists often deploy this Japanese term ('bushido' can be translated as 'the way of the warrior') to refer to practitioners that - besides being masters of their fighting artistry - are also courageous, honorable, loyal to their teachers and frugal. 'Bushido' can be understood as an ethos based on values like respect, honor, loyalty, sincerity, self-control, decency, courage, and benevolence.

UFC fighters do show respect towards their opponents. This happens, for example, when a fighter that is relatively young or that has been recently signed by the UFC is asked to fight an older and more decorated colleague. This is the case of Ryan Hall, a relatively new addition to the UFC roster, when he was matched up with BJ Penn, who is considered to be one of the legends of the sport. The event was UFC 232 Jones vs Gustaffsson on December 29th, 2018.

Ryan Hall: *B.J. Penn has been personally extremely inspiring to me (...). I've never been in a situation like this quite before, where I'm getting to compete against the people who I've looked up to, truly looked up to since the beginning of even my grappling career. (...) And I can absolutely say that I've drawn a great deal of inspiration and information from watching B.J. compete over the years.*⁹⁹

Another example of how respect, decency and humbleness are enacted in the UFC is the aftermath of the Neil Magny vs Demien Maia match which took place during the event UFC 190 on August 1st, 2015.

Demien Maia's fighting style heavily revolves around his high-level Brazilian Jiu Jitsu.¹⁰⁰ Neil Magny, who has a solid ground game (he has a brown belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu) but less sophisticated than Maia's, did not perform well against him on fight night and ended up being submitted in the second round. Months later, Maia was scheduled to teach a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu seminar in the town when Magny lives, so Magny contacted Maia on twitter and asked him if he could sign up for the seminar. Here's the exchange:

Neil Magny: *Is it ok if I attend?*

Demien Maia: *Sure Neil. It will be an honour*¹⁰¹.

Hall, Magny and Maia are some examples of how UFC fighters conduct themselves in respectful, humble and decent manners. However, an account of the

⁹⁹ Ryan Hall interview on 'The MMA Hour' with Luke Thomas before his fight with BJ Penn on UFC 232. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6iMumKZSw8>. Retrieved on July 18th, 2019

¹⁰⁰ Damien Maia is one of the 'specialist' fighters that tend to rely mostly on one fighting discipline. See chapter 7, section 7.5.4

¹⁰¹ <https://twitter.com/neilmagny/status/683026027556114432>. Retrieved on July 18th, 2019

themes that are at play in the crafting of one's own subjectivity as a UFC fighter would be incomplete without a mention of the practices of trash-talking.

Professional wrestling has its own term to describe the counterparts of the respectful and dutiful fighters: it is called 'being a heel'. 'Heels' are villains, they trash-talk, they taunt, criticize and mock their opponents. The UFC has its robust fair share of 'heels' and trash-talkers. Thus, while some choose to go down the 'bushido' path, fighters like Chael Sonnen, Conor McGregor, the Diaz Brothers, Joanna Jedrzejczyk, Dominick Cruz, Khabib Nurmagomedov, Micheal Bisping and Colby Covington - only to name the most notorious ones - prefer to insult and offend their opponents, saying and doing whatever they can to get under their skin before the fight takes place. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Joe Rogan where Michael Bisping explains his rationale for being a trash-talker:

***Joe Rogan:** You did a great job in pissing people off in your career, and that plays a factor. Whatever you can do to get them a little bit out of their comfort zone, a little bit out of their composure, and you were really good at that.*

***Michael Bisping:** Yeah, you know, I hate that to be the first thing that people say about me but, it was a thing. It was what I did, and in my mind, where I come from, with my background, if we are going to fight then we are going to fight and then it's all out war, until it's all said and done.*

And if I can make you doubt yourself, if I can... you know, it's like at the weigh-ins. At the weigh ins, that's the last time you are going to have the chance to stand in front of your opponent and send a message to him, you know what I mean?

And if you can get to his face and you can just instill a little fear, puff out your chest... that's what animals do in the wild, puffy chest out, look intimidating, look as angry as you can.

And some fighters might just look at you and laugh and say 'this ain't going to work on me', but with some it does and then they're not going to fight to the best of their abilities because they are slightly doubting themselves, they are not fully committed to the punch or kick. And if they are not fully committing, they are not 100%, they are not fighting as well as they can be and I am winning that battle, you know?

So yeah, you may look like a thug standing up there and pointing your finger and talking shit, but it's for a reason.

Joe Rogan: *It works*

Michael Bisping: *Yeah, it does. Look at McGregor. McGregor is the best at it, he gets people to fold...¹⁰²*

While Bisping used to engage in belligerent and aggressive practices of trash-talking, disrespect in the UFC comes in different shapes and forms, and each fighter enacts its own way. Some perform very witty and cerebral versions of it. Dominick Cruz, for example, upsets his opponents with his sharp analysis of their weaknesses, all presented with a calm and neutral tone of voice and poised demeanor. Khabib Nurmagomedov does not like to demean his opponents during interviews or press

¹⁰² Excerpt from 'The Joe Rogan MMA Show' #52 recorded on December 11th, 2018. The whole episode is available on here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-DaEa0Tpg>.

conferences, but he insults them on fight night, in the octagon, throughout the entire duration of the fight. Chael Sonnen and Conor McGregor, who are considered to be the most charismatic, most charming and funniest trash-talkers, know no limits when it comes to taunting and offending their opponents. In the past, both have resorted to racism for example by painting Brazil (the home country of their respective opponents) as backwards and uncivilized¹⁰³¹⁰⁴. McGregor's Islamophobic insults towards Nurmagomedov's wife¹⁰⁵ and Colby Covington's racist post-fight interviews and tweets¹⁰⁶ are perhaps the most disturbing examples of the lengths some fighters go to in order to constitute themselves as brash, insolent and disrespectful.

Just like in the case of the three other tropes discussed so far, constituting oneself as respectful or disrespectful is a choice that fighters negotiate within the specific context of the UFC. Thus, while the UFC has no problem in reprimanding fighters that are not seen as professional or as reliable, trash-talking and impertinent demeanor tends not be seriously sanctioned by the UFC. On the contrary, it is accepted if not downright encouraged, in that it generates interest in a fight and, in turn, it makes the UFC more profitable. The more the audience is interested and invested in a rivalry, the more people are excited and willing to tune into the UFC event or to buy the pay-per-view. Here is Michael Bisping explaining this dynamic during a podcast with Joe Rogan:

¹⁰³ <https://www.mmafighting.com/2014/4/22/5640438/wanderlei-silva-calls-chael-sonnen-a-racist> Retrieved July 29th, 2019

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.sportsjoe.ie/mma/amid-madness-conor-mcgregor-pulled-best-line-year-178206> Retrieved on July 29th, 2019

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.bloodyyellow.com/2019/4/4/18295311/islamophobia-ufc-conor-mcgregor-ethnic-religious-tension-fight-promotion-khabib-crime-mma> Retrieved on July 18th, 2019

¹⁰⁶ see <https://www.mmafighting.com/2017/10/29/16566160/colby-covington-calls-brazilian-fans-filthy-animals-after-defeating-demian-maia> Retrieved on July 18th, 2019

Joe Rogan: *A lot of people wish that fighters were more respectful, treating it [being a fighter, a.n.] the martial arts way, bow to each other...*

Michael Bisping: *And it is great. It is. It's funny, I was working out this morning and the gym manager, he said: 'I feel like that side of things [trash-talking and disrespectful conduct, a.n.] it's kind of... it's killing the UFC. (...) and I nodded away, respectful, to the guy, but... I see his point, I understand what he is saying, but it is entertainment (...)*

That's another reason why I used to do it [trash-talking, a.n]. You are trying to sell a fight. You want every part that you involved in to be as popular as possible, whether it's a podcast, whether it's fighting, whether it is... if no one is watching, no one gives a fuck, then you are not going to be booked again, you are not going make it into the big cards... I know from a consumer's standpoint, if I'm watching a fight (...) [trash-talk, a.n.] it hypes, it's great, it's awesome to watch.

Yes, it's beautiful to see two fighters bow, shake their hands and all this sort of things, but it is also a little fucking boring, if I'm honest.

When I'm working at the weigh-ins show [Bisping works as an analyst for ESPN, a.n.], I'm like 'give me something to talk about please, 'cause I don't want to talk about your boring last fight that went to a split decision, where nothing really happens. But, if you get in their faces at the weigh in, great, we can pump it, we can sell the fight, we can hype it up'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Excerpt from 'The Joe Rogan MMA Show' #52 recorded on December 11th, 2018. The whole episode is available on here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-DaEa0Tpg>

It is interesting to notice how Bisping bent the trope of respect and disrespect in manners that allowed for both enactments to co-exist at the same time. Just like a Brechtian actor that acts a play while, at the same time, disclosing the artificial nature of acting, Bisping engaged in trash-talking and disrespect while, at the same time, admiring and being inspired by his opponent.

Here is another excerpt from the podcast with Joe Rogan where he illustrates his specific way of tailoring the trope of respect/disrespect in the occasion of the fight against Georges St. Pierre, the fighter that defeated him at the event UFC 217 on November 4th, 2017 and took away from him the title of champion of the UFC middleweight division:

Michael Bisping: *God bless Georges, I respect the hell out of him. He's a great guy. I know I talked a lot of shit leading to the fight, but that was only me having a laugh. I was literally having fun with it, no ill will towards Georges.*

Joe Rogan: *It seems like you were enjoying it*

Michael Bisping: *Yeah, I was just having fun, just busting balls. I think Georges is incredible, I think Georges is a consummate professional. He's an inspiration for all aspiring martial artists. If there is one man you can model your career around the way he trains, the way he looks after his body, the way he cross-trains... Georges St. Pierre would be that man, you know.*

He's an inspiration to myself, you know, so nothing but the greatest of respect... but people... that doesn't sell. People don't want to see that, so I'll play the bad guy.

I've been portrayed as a bad guy in my entire career, by the UFC, the editing ... I've fallen at fault of some creative editing, I've fallen at fault of my own mouth at time...¹⁰⁸

The trope of respect/disrespect is enacted by Bisping in a playful manner, as something he has fun with and that he enjoys. Bisping's interview is relevant in that it tells of how he negotiated his own specific style of being respectful/ disrespectful in the UFC coming up with his specific recipe of this specific truth-game.

In the next section, I expand on what it is to negotiate and tailor the existing truth-games into a poetics of existence. Specifically, I discuss how Dominick Cruz, former 135 lbs. UFC champion, has engaged in the creative practices of coordination that enact his specific fighting style and his own specific way of being a UFC fighter.

8.3 Poetics as existential strategies of coordination

The third and last part of this chapter braids together the many different insights that have been discussed so far in this case study (multiplicity, relationality and the tropes that constitute the collective poetics of being a UFC fighter) with the goal of providing an account of the poetics of subjectivity of one fighter, Dominick Cruz.

¹⁰⁸ Excerpt from 'The Joe Rogan MMA Show' #52 recorded on December 11th, 2018. The whole episode is available on here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD-DaEa0Tpg>

This section is divided into two parts. First, I will provide a brief overview of Dominick Cruz's career. Then, I will discuss how Cruz coordinates multiple and relational complexity into his own style of subjectivity. Specifically, I will explore his constitution as UFC fighter by focusing on how he stitches together his own unique fighting style (namely, his poetics of fighting style), and how he characterizes his existential project as a fighter in the UFC (that is, his poetics as a UFC fighter).

These two aspects are analyzed as they emerged in two very specific times and location. The first one is during a long interview (2 hours and 20 minutes) with Joe Rogan. This interview was recorded as episode 921 of the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience" and it aired on February 23rd, 2017. The second one is the interview that took place after his defeat against Garabrandt at UFC 207, at the post-event press conference of December 31st, 2016.

The reasons why I chose to analyze the first interview is because Joe Rogan's podcast constitutes one of the few outlets that hosts long interviews with fighters. During these interviews, fighters discuss about fighting with the current color commentator of the UFC, Joe Rogan. They also reflect on their artistry and they share how they make sense of their experience in the UFC. Dominick Cruz himself recognizes that this is the first time that he shared some self-reflections when during the interview he says to Rogan:

"You are hearing the story right now but I haven't told anybody... because.... I don't sit down and talk for two hours to anybody about this stuff, so it's like who am I

going to go and do an interview with and talk about this stuff? Pretty much you are the only guy that gets into this weird stuff [reflexivity, a.n.], so here we are”.

The reason why I also analyze the post-fight interview together with the Joe Rogan’s podcast is that both were recorded after Cruz’s second loss of his career after a 10 year winning streak.

Just like being stopped by an injury, also losing a fight (especially after a long winning streak) is a very interesting and fertile moment in that it recalls the time when a system falls down and a new one needs to be built again. As Law (1992) observes, *“Just occasionally we find ourselves watching on the sidelines as an order comes crashing down. Organizations or systems which we had always taken for granted -- the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Continental Illinois -- are swallowed up. (...) These dangerous moments offer more than political promise. For when the hidden trapdoors of the social spring open, we suddenly learn that the masters of the universe may also have feet of clay.”* (p. 1). His recent loss to Garbrandt and the long list of injuries that he has been dealing with all represent moments of self-reflection and of critical ontology of the self (see chapter 4) for Cruz. In signaling to him that the fabric of his subjectivity has come undone (or, using Law’s words, that the ‘truths’ about himself have ‘feet of clay’), these occasions offer the opportunity for re-configuring his modes of holding together as a fighter, to re-negotiate the quality of the fabric of his subjectivity.

8.3.1 Introducing Dominick ‘the Dominator’ Cruz

Dominick Cruz fights in the bantamweight division (135 lbs.). He is a three-time former UFC Bantamweight Champion. Cruz started out his career as mixed martial artist

in 2005 fighting for organizations such as Rage in the Cage and Total Combat. After racking up 9 wins, he joined the World Extreme Cagefighting (WEC), a company that promoted fights in three of the lightest weight divisions, 135 lbs., 145 lbs., and 155 lbs. In his first WEC fight Cruz lost to Urijah Faber, marking the beginning of a long-lasting rivalry. Cruz became WEC 145 lbs. champion in June 2008, when he defeated Charlie Valencia. After winning the belt in 2008, Cruz proceeded to go on a 6-fights winning streak. In 2010 WEC was acquired by the UFC, and Cruz won the title bout in 2011 against Faber.

After becoming UFC Bantamweight champion, Cruz won his second UFC title defense on October 1st, 2011. However, he broke his right hand in the first round¹⁰⁹. He was expected to fight for a third time for the UFC bantamweight championship against, again, Urijah Faber. The fight was highly anticipated because both Cruz and Faber also served as coaches of the sport reality TV show produced by Zuffa, the "*The Ultimate Fighter*", which, as a tradition, sees the coaches of each team facing each other at the end of the season. The match between Cruz and Faber was expected to take place on July 7, 2012 but on May 7, 2012, Dominick pulled out of the match due to an ACL injury. On December 3, 2012 it was revealed that he underwent a second ACL surgery after some medical complications¹¹⁰.

Cruz was scheduled to return to the UFC octagon in February 2014 at UFC 169 in a unification bout with interim UFC Bantamweight Champion Renan Barão. However, in

¹⁰⁹ Dominick Cruz's hand requires surgery, <https://www.mmamania.com/2011/10/4/2468744/dominick-cruz-hand-injury-will-require-surgery>, Retrieved on July 29th, 2019.

¹¹⁰ "Dominick Cruz Injured, Out of UFC 148" <https://www.mmaweekly.com/dominick-cruz-injured-out-of-ufc-148> Retrieved on January 17th, 2016.

January 2014, UFC president Dana White announced that Dominick had torn his groin and vacated the UFC Bantamweight Championship¹¹¹. Thus, White promoted Barão to undisputed UFC Bantamweight Champion, and Cruz lost his belt.

After nearly three years away from the sport due to injuries, Cruz returned to the octagon on September 27, 2014 at UFC 178 against Takeya Mizugaki. He won the fight by a KO in the first round and, this win earned him his first *Performance of the Night* bonus award¹¹². At the post-fight press conference, Dana White confirmed that Cruz 's next fight would be for the Bantamweight Championship against the new interim Bantamweight champion, T.J. Dillashaw. However, on December 22, 2014, Cruz communicated that he had torn the ACL in his other knee. This new injury sidelined him for the whole year in 2015.

After this setback, Cruz came back to the octagon to face then Bantamweight champion T.J. Dillashaw on January 16, 2016 at UFC Fight Night 81. He won by a split decision, in a fight that has been labeled as one of the most impressive comebacks¹¹³. In June 2016 Cruz defended his title and won again against Faber, completing their trilogy. He then faced Faber's teammate Cody Garabrandt on December 30th, 2016, but this time he lost by unanimous decision, for the first time in more than 10 years.

The fight with Garabrandt marks the last time that Cruz stepped into the octagon to fight. He was scheduled to fight in December 2017 and in January 2019, but both

¹¹¹ "UFC Champ Dominick Cruz's Return Pushed Back By Second ACL Surgery". <https://mmajunkie.usatoday.com/2012/12/ufc-champ-dominick-cruzs-return-pushed-back-by-second-acl-surgery> Retrieved on January 17th, 2016.

¹¹² Matt Erickson (2014-09-28). "UFC 178 bonuses: McGregor, Cruz, Romero, Kennedy earn \$50,000", <https://mmajunkie.usatoday.com/2014/09/ufc-178-bonuses-mcgregor-cruz-romero-kennedy-earn-50000> Retrieved on January 17th, 2016.

¹¹³ <https://www.foxsports.com/ufc/story/ufc-dominick-cruz-just-completed-the-greatest-comeback-in-ufc-history-011816>, retrieved on July 19th, 2019

times Cruz had to withdraw from the fights because of injuries, respectively a broken arm and a shoulder problem. After the shoulder injury, Cruz communicated that he expects to be on the sidelines again until the end of 2019.

8.3.2 “How are you telling me I’m doing something wrong?”: Cruz’s poetics of fighting

In the first part of the chapter I explained that the UFC does not like when fighters pull out from scheduled events. It is considered a sign of unreliability, even if it is because of injuries. As the brief introduction of Cruz has offered, if there is a leitmotiv in his career, it would be his constant battle with injuries. So why does the UFC seem to be more tolerant with him?

First of all, Dominick Cruz, when healthy, is a very successful fighter and a fan’s favorite. He is known mostly for his unique fighting style – a fighting style that has allowed him to be dominant and to remain at the top of his division for more than a decade. Cruz’s way of combining the three components of MMA (ground game, takedowns and striking) is very unorthodox and highly recognizable. His artistry is characterized by a solid wrestling foundation, by non-traditional, very fast, unpredictable movement and by attacks coming from unusual angles. Rogan captures this very specific non-traditional style when he says to Cruz: “*Someone could show me a silhouette of you moving around and I’d go ‘oh, that’s Dominck Cruz’*”¹¹⁴.

So, what is the poetic that innerves Cruz’s fighting style? How did he come up with his version of MMA?

¹¹⁴ Excerpt from the podcast “The Joe Rogan Experience”, episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7L-KB__GxM&t=1s

Here's how he explains it:

Dominick Cruz: *I need to make sure that I'm not taking damage. As long as I'm not taking damage I should win. I gotta be hard to hit, my defense needs to be flawless with the size of gloves [4 ounces as opposed to the 10 oz or 12 oz used in boxing or in Muay Thai, a.n.].*

It's not going to be the same as boxing. I can't just sit here and cover like this because my gloves are just a quarter of the size. Things peak in, and I learnt that real quick. So I said, alright, so I need to move non-stop, I can't sit still like I do in boxing or in kick-boxing because you are going to be taken down as well, so, so that's where my mind started changing... it's with the takedowns.

In this first excerpt, Cruz explains how he thinks he can win fights: by not being hit and getting hurt. Thus, avoiding damage is the organizing principle around which his poetic revolves. To achieve this goal, the first actor that Cruz needs to enroll are the small gloves. Gloves have a lot of agency in a fighting situation: the bigger they are, the more one can hide one's face and protect oneself from being hit. In the UFC, gloves are small, so their interests diverge from Cruz's project. To align the actors of his fighting hinterland, Cruz makes a stylistic choice: instead of relying on the gloves, he decides to rely on his movement for defense. This an existential choice because it comes to enact who he is a fighter, so much so that his movement is the characteristic he is known for. His defense is physically getting away from punches and kicks, that is, not constituting himself as a target.

As explained in the previous chapter, fighters are multiple, meaning that there is a 'striking Cruz' and a 'takedown Cruz'. The two are different, but partially connected by his quest for elusiveness:

***Dominick Cruz:** That's where I knew I had to do something different... in no striking sport on earth is there a takedown involved, so that means that I need to attack on a different plane and that means that I need not be on the centerline (...). As long as I don't fight down the centerline it takes away almost all weapons from all styles... boxing is probably the one style that flows most off the centerline, but when we are talking about Muay -Thai or wrestling or Judo... almost every other martial art. They attack down a straight line, and so I knew I could take away most of their weapons just by changing the plane that I fought on... If I fought on a different plane than them, then they wouldn't have answers for the plane that I'm fighting on because everything they do is on that line, so, instead of fighting them and their style I fought the lines they were fighting on, and that kind of changed things, mixed with the defense.¹¹⁵*

Here Cruz is explaining how his style cannot be pinned down exclusively as defensive because his defense is of the attacking kind. His effort to stay away from the centerline is more than just a way to position himself outside of the space where it is easy to get hit or to be taken down: it is a way to set up attacks. Cruz knows that his

¹¹⁵ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7L-KB__GxM&t=1s

opponents will attempt to bend and organize the fighting space in the traditional ways of boxing, Muay-Thai, wrestling etc., so his choice is to focus on taking away the familiarity of the space from his opponents by fighting off the centerline. In order to avoid getting hit, Cruz needs to control the space, and he can do so when the embodied knowledge of his opponents is challenged, that is, when fight is happening on a different plane, where the bodies of the fighters he is facing are confused and more vulnerable:

Joe Rogan: *Where did you get all your footwork from?*

Dominick Cruz: *It was a mixture of things. It all started from me fighting at 155 lbs. weighing in at 142 lbs., that's where this whole mindset started. So I was 'they are already twice as big as you and on fight day they are going to be three times as big as you, so you'd better not get touched, you'd better not get grabbed, you'd better not get hit at all.*

Don't let them touch you because they are too big... If they take you down your energy is going to be zapped by the time you do get up, if you get up, and if they hit you they are big and strong and they are probably going to put you out.' So you have to use all that strength, all that size against them and make it their weakness instead of their strength.

And that's how I started [with the footwork, a.n.], because I was so little. I said, 'alright, I need to focus on defense'. Obviously I need to hurt them too, but after they do what they are trying to do with their big strength, being stronger, being powerful and being more athletic, they are going to wear themselves out and now we're even and, in the middle of the round, all of those things that they had early...

*We're even now. Now I can outthink them, pick them apart and beat them. And I've always had that mentality rather than 'fight fire with fire'. It just didn't make sense to me, when my body was on the line. I wanted the path of least resistance, so I started with that.*¹¹⁶

This part speaks to the embodied dimension of subjectivity. Who Cruz is as a fighter is not an abstract concept, it is a very material state of being. Being a smaller fighter in a bigger weight division presents more problems and health risks for him than for his opponents, thus the way in which he crafts his fighting style has to account for these concerns. It is his embodiment that makes Cruz's poetic so peculiar: his movement does not present orthodox answers to the problems that fighting presents because, being a smaller fighter, his goal is not 'to fight fire with fire', responding to every single technique with another technique. Instead, he wants to take the fight to a place where he can fulfill his embodied need to take away some advantages from his opponents. Cruz wants them to be exhausted, he wants his limbs to be confused, so that his attacks can be effective. Consequently, the need for confusion and messiness also requires him to disregard traditional or 'correct' ways of throwing techniques. If the opponent is in a vulnerable position and a less-than-perfect jab would catch and hurt him, Cruz has no problem in using that 'incorrect' punch. His main goal is to avoid being hit, and if a creative jab can work towards that cause, he is ok with it. This instrumental and

¹¹⁶ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7L-KB__GxM&t=1s

pragmatic style has undoubtedly gained him many successes, but it has also been the target of many critiques:

Dominick Cruz – *I got ridiculed my whole career.*

Joe Rogan - *How so?*

Dominick Cruz – *You're not supposed to do that, you're boxing. You're not supposed to do that, you are kickboxing. You are not supposed to do that, you are wrestling... but I'm not doing any of these things, I'm doing them all mixed together, so how are you telling me I'm doing something wrong?*¹¹⁷

For Cruz, fighting is not a quest for formal purity, it is about not getting hit so that one can keep on winning over and over again:

Dominick Cruz: *For me, the best in the world aren't the ones who just wins, it's someone who wins and stays on top for a long period of time. Because now you don't just have a style to win a fight, you have a style to stay winning, which means that your style hits so many different avenues that you can compete with all these different styles no matter what they match you up against (...)*

No matter what style you try to throw at me, [my style] is going to give you a problem. And that was the basis that I wanted to create every time that I fought, every single time that I fought somebody, it was 'it does not matter what your gift

¹¹⁷ Excerpt from the podcast “The Joe Rogan Experience”, episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB__GxM&t=1s

*is, the planes that I'm going to fight you on will make it impossible for your gift to be your gift anymore.*¹¹⁸

Cruz undoubtedly puts a lot of time, energies and thought into stitching together his own version of MMA. However, he also recognizes that his style is relational and that it has been influenced and co-authored by his coach, Eric Del Fierro, whom he trusts a lot.

Dominick Cruz: *I had a couple of things that I did naturally and then Eric... Eric has a skillset where he... if you have a natural movement he doesn't tell you to fix it, he lets you do it and then turns it, adds a weapon to it. That's his gift. And I had a lot of these little weird odd things that I did. (...) Instead of trying to change what I already did with my wrestling (...), he just let me do what I did. Up to 5 – 0 [5 wins, 0 losses, a.n.] with my wrestling or whatever I taught myself, and then he [Eric, a.n.] just tighten up and made it into a pro-level look, to an extent: speed, timing, range, this type of things.*¹¹⁹

Del Fierro resonates with Cruz's unconventional poetic of fighting. This is suggested by the fact that he was able to create for him a supportive space where he could keep on practicing and experimenting with his unusual style while still being able to improve and polish his fighting skills.

¹¹⁸ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB__GxM&t=1s

¹¹⁹ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB__GxM&t=1s

Overall, if one were to sum up Cruz's poetics of fighting, one would point at his aggressively-defensive and unique movement. As we have seen, his movement is not an ex-novo creation, but it is the material inscription of his embodied need to avoid being hit. In other words, the way in which Cruz produces his version of MMA is an enactment of his existential choices. The possible choices Cruz can make are not infinite, they are situated, and they account for the material conditions in which they are made (smaller gloves and smaller body-type). The strategic combination of these choices comes to substantiate who he is when he fights. But, being a mixed martial artist does not only occur when fighting. There are more situations that Cruz has coordinated into his own style of subjectivity. This is the topic that I will tackle in the next section.

8.3.3 "The greatest moment of my life was realizing that I did not need the belt to be happy": The Poetics of Dominick Cruz.

How did Dominick Cruz work himself up as the version of the UFC fighter he is?

How did he creatively orchestrate the different practices of subjectivation made available by the situation UFC? What are the values, beliefs and attitude that characterize his own poetic as a fighter?

Besides explaining how he pro-actively stitched together his style of fighting, in the interview with Joe Rogan, Cruz also chronicles the journey that brought him to constitute himself as the fighter he is today.

According to Cruz's account, there is one specific event that prompted him to start questioning who he was: when the UFC took away from him the title of champion. Up to then, the fabric of his subjectivity was strong and tight: his existential project had

revolved around being the best fighter in the world, being the UFC champion. When he had to face a serious streak of serious injuries, which eventually culminated with him being stripped of the belt, the certainties about his subjectivity began not to feel so certain anymore, and he started to ask himself some hard questions.

***Dominick Cruz:** So who are you unless you are winning? We don't know, do you know? You are counting on that belt to know who you are now. (...) That was the hurdle I ran into when I lost my belt, I didn't know who I was anymore. And that's how I knew this, that's how I figured out what my issues were...¹²⁰*

The fabric of who he was ripped open with the first series of injury. At the time of the first knee injury, Cruz was 26 and his MMA career was at his prime: not only was he the UFC Bantamweight champion, he was also considered to be one of the best pound-for-pound fighters. Moreover, he was working on 'The Ultimate Fighter', a reality TV show that follows two groups of fighters that train together and compete against each other in a tournament, with the goal of winning a UFC contract.

Traditionally, the finals of the tournament take place on a UFC event main-carded by the coaches of the two groups. In 2012 Cruz was one of the two coaches together with his long-time rival Urijah Faber. This season was introducing an element of novelty: while in the past coaches did not have to go through the training camp at the same time as they were coaching the participants, this time the UFC had decided to

¹²⁰ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7L-KB__GxM&t=1s

broadcast the whole series live, so coaches had to train for their own fight and coach simultaneously.

In the interview with Joe Rogan, Cruz recalls how tough his training schedule was. At the time, he was training four times a day: twice with his coaches and twice for his own match. One day, during a regular training session, he injured his knee and, consequently, he had to pull out from the fight with Faber and he had to go through an ACL/MCL reconstruction. The surgery and the rehab kept him out of the competitions for nine months. The problems with his knee were not over though, and he had to undergo a second surgery on his knee. After his second ACL reconstruction, Cruz worked hard to rehab his knee, and when the doctors cleared him, he agreed to take a fight against Renan Barao, who at the time held the title of UFC Bantamweight champion ad interim. His training camp has been going on for one month when Cruz started to notice some nagging pain in his groin. The feeling was intermittent, so he did not make much of it and he kept on with his training camp as usual. During a session, he threw a punch and he fell on the canvas: his leg had given up. Cruz explains to Joe Rogan that he knew that there was something mechanically wrong with him: one does not fall from throwing a punch. He finally decided to see a doctor and he found out that he had torn his quad muscle off the bone. He could not fight with such an injury, so he called UFC President Dana White – who, Cruz recalls, was angry at the news – and he pulled out of the fight.

At the beginning of his time on the sidelines, at the time of his first knee injury, Cruz approaches his time off exactly as a training camp: his rehab was a matter of working as hard as possible and toughening it out. His first reaction is to his injuries is to

'compete' with them, to attack them as hard as he could. This was an existential necessity of his, because up to that point, practices of hard work and toughness were the only modes of subjectivation that he knew as a UFC fighter:

***Dominick Cruz:** And I was like 'I'll be fine, this isn't bad, I can do this, I've gone through worse'. So, I'm doing it, I still haven't just given up yet, so I'm still competing in my mind, which is the problem.*

And that's when you are just overworking. And not just doing things you are not supposed to on your knee, but just in general in life, I'm just overworking. I'm doing my Fox stuff to make money [Cruz is a fight analyst for the UFC, which at the time had a contract with FOX, a.n.], and then I'm trying to do my rehab five days a week because I have to come back and fight for the belt when I come back.

And that's another thing that people don't equate: I was the champ, so I gotta come back and fight for the belt when I come back after this injury. I don't just get to come back and fight three rounds, I gotta come back and fight five rounds... never been done before. I have nobody to bounce this thought off of, I just had to wing it man. And so I was, and that caused, I think, a lot of problems with me because I didn't think I had the mental capacity to deal with it at that point with all the things that I was doing.¹²¹

At that moment, Cruz was overwhelmed. Not only was he dealing with his injuries, but also his financial situation was becoming more and more precarious:

¹²¹ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7L-KB_GxM&t=1s

Joe Rogan: *What were you doing financially back then? That's where it gets rough, right?*

Dominick Cruz: *That's another part. As athletes, we only make money when we fight for the prize, and thank God, Lorenzo [Fertita, at the time one of the owners of Zuffa, a.n.] and the UFC, they gave me a decent chunk of money for the first part of time while I had the belt (...)*

They were paying a stipend even after I was hurt, and then when they stripped the belt and gave it to Barao, they stopped doing that because I'm not the champion anymore...¹²²

As anticipated in the beginning of the section, being stripped from the belt is the moment that leads Cruz to realize that who he thought he was did not hold up anymore.

Dominick Cruz: *And that's when it kind of turned [into] reality. 'You're not the champion on paper anymore, so what are you going to do? Is this it? How are you going to make money? What are you going to do with this, how are you going to do that?*

And I panicked, but I knew that I was gonna still come back and fight 'cause I was still young so I hadn't given up on fighting yet, still healing my second ACL surgery so I'm still not fully admitting that I'm not... that I'm a mess.¹²³

¹²² Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB__GxM&t=1s

¹²³ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB__GxM&t=1s

This is how he explains his 'being a mess':

Dominick Cruz: *Couldn't train, couldn't run, couldn't walk, couldn't bend my leg, laying on the couch, eating pain pills... Realizing: 'man, unless you train, unless you compete, you hate yourself. You are a piece of shit in your own mind, without those things, without the beautiful girlfriend, without the beautiful house, without the nice cars, without the big money to show people. You hate yourself. So, what am I really doing? Why am I doing this?'¹²⁴*

Cruz here is chronicling an existential crisis. Using the language of de Beauvoir, he was coming to grip with his own ambiguity. On the one hand, he had constituted himself in the most desirable way a UFC fighter could ever constitute himself: he was the champion, he was unique, he understood fighting better than anyone. On the other, he hated himself because, even after having achieved that composition, he was not content.

Dominick Cruz: *It was the cascade of trying to figure out why I was so sad with all the things that I earned around me. I already had everything that I thought... When you grow up in a trailer like I did and then you go to win a GTR¹²⁵, the car you wanted since you were a kid in a price fight and having a home that you bought with your own money when you'd never thought that you'd be able to own a home*

¹²⁴ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB_GxM&t=1s

¹²⁵ A GT-R is a high-performance sports car produced by Nissan.

in California 'cause you lived in a damn trailer park in Tucson, Arizona, it kinda makes you feel like that's it, like you've done crazy great things. Those were all just dreams to me and they happened so quick (...)

When I got those things, I was still sad, that's my point. I had my depression. (...)

From an existentialist perspective, Cruz's depression can be seen an expression of him realizing human beings' existential void; the 'nausea' Sartre talked about. The lack of happiness made him dig deeper, questioning whether the truth-games made available by the UFC (wins, belt, money, fame, accomplishments, legacy and so on) were really what he needed to build himself up as a subject.

Thus, Cruz started to engage in his version of critical ontological work (see chapter 6, section 6.4.5). He assessed his condition and recognized that something in his composition of subjectivity needed to change. At the beginning, he did not know what to change and how to go about it. But at one point, he found an answer in his own way, namely, by praying. The answer that he received was the opposite of what he was used to do: doing nothing:

Dominick Cruz: *I pulled out of that fight, I was stripped of my belt and that was the beginning of me giving up on fighting, to an extent. And what I mean by that is... It's different than you think, it sounds negative when you say it, but it's actually the building point in my life when I finally let go of control.*

I always had this thing up to that point where I wanted to control everything. It's just something that I always had to get to be able to do... This last one, after the 2

ACL reconstructive surgeries coming back and then tearing my quad... I said: 'I don't know what else you want me to do, I've got through two ACL reconstructions' my higher power is God, so I'm praying at this point... (...)

'So what do I gotta do man? I'm in this for reasons bigger than myself, I wanna come back and show to people that this can be done, I'm not the only one that can do this, anybody can do this, right? (...)

No answers, no nothing.

And I said, maybe that's the answer. I remember thinking maybe the answer is 'you might never fight again, are you ok with that?'

And that was something that I never allowed my brain to even go to, ever, until all these injuries hit me, and I would have never been able to unless I went through all that.¹²⁶

'Giving up fighting' constituted a crucial step in Cruz's negotiation of a more 'owned' way of being a UFC fighter, and it is one of the crucial attitudes that constitutes his poetic today.

Cruz knew that he had practiced toughness and hard work in damaging ways. This knowledge was not a hypothetical thought, it was carnal. With the injuries, his body was constantly signaling exhaustion, so much so that when he gave up on the existential need of being the 'best possible version' of a UFC fighter, his body started to heal. Moreover, the moment in which he stopped being obsessed with paying attention

¹²⁶ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17L-KB_GxM&t=1s

exclusively to achievements that were to be attributed exclusively to himself, to wins that would contribute to his own legacy, to belts that only he would possess, he started to realize that his individualistic choices had prevented him from opening up to other alternative modes of being, like being an insightful analyst or a good coach.

***Dominick Cruz** - When I did that [letting go of control, a.n.], my health skyrocketed immediately.*

I just went to therapy knowing I was trying to get better, but I didn't care if I fought again or not.

I focused all my energies in Fox [his fighting analyst job, a.n.] and coaching the guys at Alliance Training Centre to make them better and try to make the team better and feed off the thirst and the hunger that those guys had to be the champion that I still wanted to be. (...)

I decided that if I focused on Fox, focused on the positive energies of these guys at the gym, kept training, kept my mind in the sport, my body will be there because my age is compliant with my body still. (...)

And when I did that, it took away so much importance off of needing to fight, (...) that it allowed me to open up and say 'If you never fight again you are still a great person, you still did great things, you still laid the tracks for the Bantamweight division... You had a great career Dom, it's ok if this is it.

I kept that mindset, kept on focusing on the things that I could control instead of the things that I couldn't, like the fact that I wasn't competing yet, and as I did that, I got healthier and healthier. (...)¹²⁷

A second main insights that Cruz gained from his critical evaluation of his subjectivity and that now is a central feature of his poetic was a re-centering around his main purpose as a UFC fighter. He remembered and re-connected to the reason why he decided to be a fighter in first place, which was the transcendent need of cultivating one's self, of becoming a better human being, not of accumulating money and stuff.

Dominick Cruz - *I'd lost sight that the whole reason we are fighting is a spiritual, emotional, physical and mental battle that help us to grow as an individual and as a human being, not just to have these things that you think they'll make you happy.*

A key element that helped Cruz re-organize his subjectivity was asking for professional help for his depression. What he gained from it was the empowering sense that he could decide how to react to the situation he finds himself in. Winning or losing do not come with a pre-established way of dealing with them, one can transform a loss in a win there if they will to. Cruz realized that being a champion was not the only way to feel fulfilled, one can find contentment regardless of the wins or the losses:

¹²⁷ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7L-KB__GxM&t=1s

Dominick Cruz: *I just needed a little bit of a push and learn some things about my own mind, and understand my own emotions and to understand that I didn't need all these things that I was thinking weren't real, it was me not being in control of my own emotions. Your own emotions are your choice, and I chose to feel trapped, I chose to be sad, I chose to feel like I was jackshit, I chose all these things and it's like, 'you don't need fighting to be these things, you need to let go of fighting to learn that you are something without it'.¹²⁸*

In 2014, after three years on the sideline dealing with injuries and rehabs, Cruz came back to the UFC and collected three wins. The first fight was against Takeya Mizugaki. Cruz won the fight with a knock-out in the first round, in what is considered to be one of his best performances in the UFC. According to Cruz, that fight felt different. His time out of the UFC and the self-reflection that occurred then had allowed him to switch his mindset. The Cruz that emerged on that fight night was a new, different version:

Dominick Cruz - *"I had no connection to the win or the loss at that point. It was nothing. I was just there to enjoy being there after three and a half years and all these injuries, like 'I can't believe I made it here, I'm not injured. And I remember thinking: you are in front of these people, enjoy the limelight. Enjoy this ride, this is incredible, there's people that would pay millions and trillions of dollars to get this*

¹²⁸ Excerpt from the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience", episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7L-KB_GxM&t=1s

walk you are about to get and to fight somebody in this octagon. Just enjoy it
¹²⁹(...)”

After the Mizugaki fight, Cruz was again booked to fight for the belt against T.J. Dillashaw. During the preparation for this fight, he injured his knee again. However, this time his recovery is different. Cruz explains that he felt no desperate need to overwork to come back as soon as possible this time. Instead, he practiced his newfound attitude of ‘letting go’: he rested his body and kept on working on his cognitive skills:

***Dominick Cruz** - I already know that the way to find health is to not train, let my body completely heal, don't do anything and focus on my mind. So I spent another nine months focusing on nothing but my mind and my tactic was 'your body is not working right now, so you gotta switch it over to the weapon that you have, which is your mind. Your mind is the only other weapon you use besides your body on fight night, so if your body is not working switch it over, so I just focused on my mind.*¹³⁰

Cruz returned into the octagon in 2016 and he fought three times that year. The first time he won the title against T.J. Dillashaw. The second time he defended the belt against Urijah Faber, and he won again. The third time he fought against Cody

¹²⁹ Excerpt from the podcast “The Joe Rogan Experience”, episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7L-KB__GxM&t=1s

¹³⁰ Excerpt from the podcast “The Joe Rogan Experience”, episode 921. The whole podcast can be retrieved here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7L-KB__GxM&t=1s

Garabrandt, and he lost. This was the first time in 10 year that Cruz lost a fight, his second time ever in the UFC.

This loss could have constituted a tear in the new fabric of Cruz's subjectivity. It was a crucial moment to verify whether his newfound attitudes of 'not needing the belt to be happy' or 'letting go' were only empty talk. This is the version of Cruz that emerged at the post-event press conference for UFC 207 in relation to his loss:

Questioner: *Dominick, obviously a tough night for you tonight...*

Dominick Cruz: *What was tough about it?*

Questioner: *Walking away with the loss, of course*

Dominick Cruz: *Loss is part of life, if you don't have loss you don't grow. This isn't tough, this is life.*

Questioner: *What did you think about your performance tonight? People said maybe you weren't quite at 100% tonight...*

Dominick Cruz: *They're wrong. I was there. That was 100% me. I was healthy, I was everything I've always wanted to be in my eyes... Just I got caught in a couple of transitions and that's how it goes in this game. You're swinging with 4 ounces gloves, you get caught with them sometimes. What else can you really say? I gotta go back and watch the fight obviously, but after feeling it, after getting through it, after seeing the look in his eyes a couple of times when I punched him, when I kicked him, when I fought him... I'm not disappointed in myself at all. All I can say is 'I lost' and I'll take my loss like a man¹³¹.*

¹³¹ UFC 207 post-fight press conference, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WY3K6phqyrM>. Retrieved on July 19th, 2019

Cruz did not look for excuses. He admitted that he did his best, and he fell short.

***Dominick Cruz:** I thought it was a good fight. I haven't seen it, what do you think? If it was a good fight, I hope you are entertained. That's my job. I'm an entertainer here, wherever you guys believe it or not.*

The beginning of the fight, the 8 weeks, interviews... that's entertainment. After the fight, the people that are happy that I've lost right now... that's entertainment.

This is a game where if you don't have people that dislike you, you don't know what it feels like to be liked. And I definitely have been disliked a lot throughout this game.

But I also feel a lot of love...there's some look in the eyes of some kids that I got see leading into this fight that almost brought me tears to my eyes just because I could feel that positive energy from them. That's what this thing is about, it's about influence, making people better around you. I feel like I'm still doing that, win or lose or draw. That's my goal, that's the gift God gave to me, to be able to face to face some of these athletes, the best in the world, for a very long time.¹³²

What is interesting to notice in the excerpt is how a more engaged acknowledgment of relationality brought Cruz to pay more attention to the 'entertainer' version of being a UFC fighter. While Cruz still did not miss out on the opportunity to voice the toughness that being a fighter required (e.g. having to deal with the media and not always been

¹³² UFC 207 post-fight press conference, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WY3K6phqyrM>. Retrieved on July 19th, 2019

liked), he gave a different spin on it, using it as a counterpoint to the love and affection he derives from being a fighter. Thus, in his hierarchy, winning or losing - while still being extremely important – is not as important as it used to be. Being an entertainer by offering quality fighting and constituting oneself as an inspiring example of what can be done was a new value that Cruz enacted during that post-fight press-conference.

Dominick Cruz : What I mean by saying that [not needing the belt to be happy, a.n.] is not that the belt is not important to me. What I mean by that is that it does not haunt my life anymore to where I need it. It's a different thing. It has different point when I say that, to give strength to anybody that can hear the actual point behind it.

Some will say 'oh, that's good, he doesn't want it anymore'. Well, that couldn't be more wrong. I love being the champion of the world. I love being the best on Earth. But I don't need it to be happy, and that actually releases me and sets me free. I can still be happy in defeat. That's freedom. I can't say that I've always had that. But I still feel free, I still feel at peace, I'm still happy, I'm still happy that God gave me this platform to be able to challenge myself as a man and evolve and become a better man. Regardless what anybody says about prize fighters, every single one of these fights is a life lesson if you look at it and view it right and if you use it correctly. And I used these 8 – 10 weeks of camp and this challenge and the media and say what you going to say and backing it up and taking the loss and defeat and all this to grow as a human being. That's why we're here, we're not here just to be

the best at everything, we're here to kinda been attached to everything and nothing at the same time"¹³³

As explained in section 6.4.6 of chapter 6, tracing poetics of subjectivity is another way of exploring how subjects interact and shape their own freedom. For Cruz, being free is losing and not hating himself. It is relating to fighting as a means of transformation as opposed to a fetishized quest for gold.

During his journey through his injuries, Cruz distanced himself from taken-from-granted notions of 'what it is to be a champion in the UFC', and through his embodied experiences he coordinated himself into his own very specific configuration by combining the different repertoires of subjectivity that the UFC makes available according to what he deemed to be preferable to him, that is, according to his tastes.

Fighting-wise, Cruz's main practice of freedom was to let go of 'the correct techniques' in order to stitch together a deceptive unorthodox but very dangerous style. It is important to stress that the bundle of choices that led him to come up with his style choices were not cerebral ones, but very embodied and material. They came to be as a result of the experience of his flesh, not as abstract calculations.

As a fighter, Cruz's poetics enacts his attempt not to get too involved in the situations he finds himself in (being '*attached to everything and nothing at the same time*'). Practicing freedom for him means choosing to let go of the end results in order to

¹³³ UFC 207 post-fight press conference, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WY3K6phqyrM>. Retrieved on July 19th

treating fighting as a means of sharing purpose, knowledge, practice and meaning with others.

8.4 Concluding Thoughts

Overall, I believe surfacing collective poetics and the poetics of a single individual constitutes an original way of exploring the interactions between organizations and the people that populate them. Tracing practices of freedom not only makes present how people creatively constitute who they are within organizational dynamics, it also cast some light on the truth-games that organizations allow for. As we have seen, the UFC values what can be promoted, and the practices of subjectivation that it makes available to fighters need to serve its bottom line. Within these limits, fighters can still find a way to creatively constitute themselves and to make meaning of who they are, but the margins of operations and experimentations that the UFC allows are very strict.

Discussing how poetics of subjectivity unfold in organizations is relevant in my opinion in that it highlights how deep the relationships of co-constitution between the fighters and the UFC are. The UFC and the practices of subjectivation that it sanctions are folded into the fighters' bodies. They participate in the performance of fighters' identity. Casting light on the relationship of carnal co-constitution calls for both discussions of empowerment and of questions of ethical responsibilities. Empowerment in that, as the case suggests, tracing poetics of UFC fighters highlights the pro-active and creative dimension of modest practices of freedom that can be experienced by experimenting with organizational truth-games. Ethical responsibilities because it calls

for the following question: if the subjectivity of UFC fighters comes to hold together as a patchwork, who, why and which dynamics should have a say in deciding the variety and the quality of the starting fabrics that are to be combined?

Providing an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this case study.

Nonetheless, it is a question worth asking.

Conclusions

*“Ideas are like fish.
If you want to catch little fish, you can stay in the shallow water.
But if you want to catch the big fish, you’ve got to go deeper.
Down deep, the fish are more powerful and more pure.
They’re huge and abstract. And they’re very beautiful.”*
David Lynch

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter presents my concluding thoughts. The first part sums up the dissertation and discusses the theoretical and empirical contributions that it wants to bring to the extant debate about subjectivity in MOS. The second section offers some ideas on the directions that future research based on a modern and aesthetic perspectives on subjectivity can take. The final part reflects on its limitations.

9.2 Contributions

9.2.1 Theoretical contribution

The main purpose of this dissertation is to challenge the traditional ways in which questions of subjectivity are dealt by organizational scholarship. Specifically, I critique both realist and relativist models of subjectivity (namely, the two main models that are mobilized in most of organizational scholarship). The main argument presented in this work is that abstract, rationalist, self-contained, singular and direct accounts sanitize subjectivity from its fleshy practicalities, overlooking its material, relational, creative and multiple qualities.

In order to tackle selfhood from an alternative ontological perspective, this dissertation combines three tastes of subjectivity that taste good together. Specifically, I gather together insights from ANT (chapter 3), Foucault's later reflections on building up who we are as works of art (his 'aesthetics of existence' approach - chapter 4) and de Beauvoir's and Merleau-Ponty's insights on the embodied and ambiguous subject - chapter 5).

While, at first sight, the combination of these intellectual flavours may appear unconventional, in chapter 6 I argued for the possibility of their co-existence in a methodological recipe based on a number of commonalities that the three intellectual projects share. In particular, I identify five tropes of convergence, which for convenience I list here:

- a) the refusal of essentialisms,
- b) the focus on relationships of mediations (the notion that realities are relational),
- c) the idea that power is an omnipresent ontological feature,
- d) the mobilization of an aesthetic sensibility to discuss subjectivity and
- e) the challenge of mentalist and abstract conceptualizations in favour of accounts that heed the material and the embodied quality of subjectivity.

The grouping of these themes constitutes the basis for the main theoretical contribution of this dissertation. My 'recipe for subjectivity' starts off by focusing on practices (the self amodern), which allows for a re-framing of subjectivity that is fleshy and material and encompasses the human body and stretches beyond it (the self as an

actor-network). Attending to the practices that enact the reality of subjectivity leads to two unconventional acknowledgements: a) that the boundaries of subjectivity are not as clear as we make them to be in that each enactment of who we are includes Otherness and Otherness includes us (the self relational) and b) that different selves co-exist at the same time and that the singularity that we experience is not a given but achieved in practice (the self multiple). Recognizing that analysis that revolve around Truth are only one of the many possible ways to engage with the endeavor of crafting knowledge about subjectivity (ontological politics /critical ontologies of the self) opens up the possibility of zooming into a style of 'knowing' and 'making' our strategies of coordination into singularity that emphasise the creative and self-designed quality of our 'holding together' as selves (poetics of subjectivity).

This framework is relevant to the extant discussion in MOS in that it tackles some assumptions about subjectivity that are hardly questioned. Specifically, my framework challenges the following five 'taken-for-granted' tropes that populate organizational scholarship:

1. The idea (heritage of Descartes) that who we are is an affair that pertains to our minds and the related tendency to assume logical coherence (see Mol, 2016) and metaphysical singularity (Law, 2004, 2015; Mol, 2002) as the only truthful and possible ways to discuss how we 'hold together' as subjects;
2. The almost exclusive use of 'identity' as a proxy for selfhood;

3. The reliance on dualisms (unity vs fragmentation, stability vs instability, personal vs social, nature vs culture, agency vs structure) as contours of the debate about subjectivity (Law, 2004, 2016),
4. The assumption that subjectivity and action relate to each other but the failure of organizational scholars to explain how they do so (see Alvesson et al., 2008)
5. The almost exclusive deployment of linear and direct ways of accounting for subjectivity (Law, 2004, 2016).

9.2.2 Empirical Contribution

Beyond contributing to the theoretical discussions of subjectivity, this dissertation also offers an empirical example of how the aesthetic and amodern account of subjectivity based on the framework proposed in chapter 6 can look like.

The case study brings forward the idea the tropes and the imaginaries that belong to the realm of the aesthetic experience (questions of creativity, taste and style in particular) should not be considered negligible elements of everyday routines in organizations, but as fundamental dimension of organizational dynamics on their own. In this sense, my empirical contribution aligns with aesthetic understandings of organizational life explored by scholars such as Gagliardi (2017), King & Vickery (2013), Linstead & Höpfl (2000) and Strati (1992, 1996, 1999, 2009, 2010). More specifically, by disrupting the taken-for-granted assumptions about the singular, mentalist and cognitivist nature of subjectivity in organizational settings, the case study offers an example of what it is to mobilize multiplicity and relationalism in order to discuss

subjectivity (chapter 7). The case study also discusses the main truth-games that compose the repertoire of the subjectivity of UFC fighters (namely practices of toughness, practices of hard-work, practices of reliability and practices of respect/disrespect), suggesting how the existential projects of fighters have to interface and engage with the UFC. Lastly, the case study also shows an example of how to trace the poetics that innerves subjectivity (Dominick Cruz's in this case), discussing in detail the emergence of one specific style of subjectivity.

9.3 Future Directions

The amodern and aesthetic framework for subjectivity presented in this dissertation lends itself for research in the domain of ethics. According to Mensch (2003), a solid and coherent theory of ethics cannot but start from an account of selfhood. However, the field of business ethics tends to mobilize acritically individualistic, self-contained, logocentric and rationalistic accounts of subjectivity. Cummings, (2000) suggests that the Foucauldian notion of aesthetics of existence (that is, the creative interaction and experimentation with pre-existing forms of subjectivation, see chapter 4) can constitute a viable and more generous approach to ethics and ethical responsibilities in the realm of organizational studies.

I agree with this observation, and I believe that the first possible line of research that can be derived from this framework of subjectivity is one that makes a case for organizational aesthetics as ethics of organizations. Such an 'ethics as aesthetics' would

illuminate the repertoires of subjectivity that organizations make available for their members and the resulting relational poetics.

A second path for future research revolves around explorations of poetics of subjectivity in organizations whose employees must confront existentially charged situations. For example, hospice workers must negotiate the death, dying and grief of their patients as part of their existential project. The amodern, aesthetic and existential framework of subjectivity presented in this dissertation can help make sense and surface these negotiations, casting light on their relationality and their embodied qualities.

Finally, phenomena like stress, emotional labour, organizational well-being and work life balance, not to mention dimensions like gender, age and disabilities are all areas of organizational inquiry that could benefit from an amodern, existentialist and aesthetic inquiry.

9.4 Limitations

Before discussing the limitation that I detect in this work, I would like to make clear that I recognise that there may be more problems than what I illustrate here.

However, at the time of writing, namely July 2019, I am not aware of them.

The main limitation that this work can be accused of has to do with time and space. In this dissertation I explained that the rationale for the combination of the three literatures in a theoretical framework is their convergence on five themes that challenge more traditional and orthodox understandings of subjectivity in MOS. However, one could reasonably argue that there are other authors and traditions of thought that can

be seen as equally valid quality ingredients for original recipes of subjectivity. Some examples include (in no specific order) Deleuze & Guattari (1988), post humanist approaches (see Braidotti, 2013), feminist approaches (see Haraway, 2013) and critical theory (see Adorno, 2003; Marcuse, 2013).

I believe that this critique presents a valid point. There are other possible combinations out there and in no way am I claiming that the recipe presented in this dissertation makes the best possible knowledge of subjectivity ever. Nonetheless, I also believe that we cannot know in abstract terms how recipes will turn out. Sometimes high-quality ingredients do not mesh well when they are mixed together. Sometimes what seem like weird combinations on paper taste very good. Thus, I agree that other recipes for subjectivity can exist, and they will vary in terms of how they promise to taste. However, and this is my point, we can only evaluate them when they are prepared and ready to eat, that is, when they are performed in practice.

This dissertation offers my best attempt at producing a recipe for enacting an amodern, aesthetic and existentialist approach to subjectivity in practice. Specifically, it suggests how the complexity of 'who we are' can be rendered in its multiplicity, relationality and carnal qualities by tracing how the crafting of our self occurs in material practices out of series of networked attributes and embodied performances.

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Appendix A:

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