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## CYBER-D SUBJECTS: DELILLO'S COSMOPOLIS AND SHTEYNGART'S SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY

**Summary**

In recent times, concerns have been raised by writers, and others associated with the literary field, about the fact that the novel may be a dying art and that the habit of reading among the general populace is on the decline. One of the key reasons cited for the same is the emergence of the cyberspace, which offers a number of options for leisure time activities that compete with reading for the attention of the masses. Furthermore, it is commonly argued that the cyberspace has impacted and altered people's psyches as the information overload and ready access to various modes of entertainment cause people to lose the capacity to maintain focus for an extended period of time on any one particular task. This also, purportedly, causes people to become more and more reliant on machines to do their everyday tasks, their thinking for them. Such concerns are highlighted in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Gary Shteyngart's *A Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), both of which are set in dystopic societies where people use their devices as crutches to enable them to navigate the world. These anxieties, this paper will argue, are caused by shifts in the literary fields which have been brought on by increasing possibilities in terms of creation, dissemination, and reading of texts in the internet age. These misgivings, therefore, will be framed and unpacked to understand and highlight their ideological underpinnings.

**Keywords:** Cyberspace, novel, social media, human subject, embodiment

The portmanteau term “cyberspace” may be defined as the worldwide network of computers and devices. It functions as an alternate spatiotemporal realm of “being,” where we imagine, experience, and negotiate with the world and the people in it – including ourselves – guided by the rules and assumptions which are seemingly distinct from those which govern our existence in the “real time” lived realm.

Over the last couple of centuries, several theories about human subjectivity have been posited, exploring the factors influencing, and the processes involved in, the generation of identity — traits and beliefs that *appear* to impart a degree of coherence to one's personality — and the extent of the possibilities, or lack thereof, of being able to control, shape, perceive, and express the same. The post-Fordist economy was marked by a demand for ever greater speed in production and in turnover of commodities. This was spurred by greater technologization, which was initiated with much fervour across industries after the watershed economic downturn of the mid-1970s. With increasing privatization across the world, and the onset of globalization, the competition between companies became much more intense. Rather than increasing the scale of production, companies sought to influence consumption by gathering, analysing, using, and producing information in the form of surveying and computing consumer responses and trends, streamlining production information, and investing in production of advertisements to inspire and multiply consumer needs, to name a few examples. This aided the development of the internet for civilian uses.

Changes in material reality, like the incursion and/or assimilation of the internet and other information and communication technologies, pressurize and destabilize cultural discourse. This calls for a re-negotiation and re-articulation of representations and figurations of environment(s) and the human subjects in them. Silvio Gaggi, in his book *From Text to Hypertext* (1997), while reflecting on the historical juncture in question, observed: "At the present time, there seems to be a *particular* sense of crisis in the theorizing of the subject and the relation of project to the wider social, economic and political realities" (xii). These concerns and tensions may be traced in the figurations of human subjectivity in contemporary fiction. Fictional accounts of lived experiences of characters in literary narratives should be read as diffractions of historical moments in which different disciplines, institutions, and power centres engage in a discursive struggle over the interpretation of material realities of human subjects. In his book *Late Postmodernism* (2005), Jeremy Green states:

Literary field . . . [is] that ensemble of interlocking practices and institutions, including the publishing industry, the media, and the university, that constitutes, often in unexamined or unconscious ways, the environment for the practice and understanding of literature. Social, cultural, and political changes are refracted through the literary field and face the writer as a set of problems to be addressed at the level of aesthetic strategy. (3)

The post-Gutenberg literary field has been dominated by the print culture. Printed texts are generally the products of identifiable authors, and dissemination and reproduction of the same comes under the purview of copyright laws. The internet media, on the other hand, potentially allows anyone with access to an internet connection to obtain texts – visual, audio-visual, print – from across the world at the click of a mouse. Anybody who does not have access to or enjoy the patronage of publishing and printing organizations can publish their works, views, and opinions on the internet and reach a wide audience, irrespective of their credentials. Moreover, there is a shift in the manner in which books are conceived and perceived; the texts on the internet need not be necessarily read as bound, printed books. They can be updated, edited, and commented on. With the advent of hypermedia, texts may be connected to other texts by virtue of hyperlinks. The introduction and rapid development of the internet and related technologies has aided the evolution of the mass media culture. Printed literary works have become one type of avenue of knowledge creation, processing and dissemination, and of entertainment, among many. In the mid-twentieth century, Michel Foucault, in his seminal work “What is an Author?” (1969) had called for a lessening of the authorial ownership of the text that “impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction,” pointing out that

Although, since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeoisie society, of individualism and private property, still, given the historical modifications that are taking place, it does not seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity and even in existence (Foucault 160).

Many authors have reflected on the perceived loss of their cultural authority in terms which are antagonistic to the new media and popular culture products. Concerns about the death of the novel, and also assertions that the novel could be viewed as a space from which to pose resistance to mass culture, are all based on, wittingly or not, humanist assumptions about the human subject as the owner of his Self, capable of original thought and agency, and of *his* creative, cultural product. These apprehensions are reflected in Don DeLillo’s essay “The Power of History” (1997), published in *The New York Times* in 1997. He states:

The novel . . . is dynamic, ambitious and power-haunted. It draws the best young talent. It places an abundance of means

at the writer's disposal, all conducive to foul-up. It has shaped, for better or worse, the novelist's self-lionizing nature and his potential for overreach and excess. And it has lately grown desperate for attention . . . it is the evanescent spectacle of contemporary life that makes the novel so nervous.

The ideologies of print culture are seemingly challenged by new media forms. The cultural realm appears to be dominated by mass produced / directed products. There is a perceived lessening of authority – and de-legitimization of claims to distinction – of the purveyors and products of “good” printed literature. Together, these widely held presumptions heighten worries about the possible circumscription of the scope of the human subject and a transformation of the mass psyche to one which is conducive to comprehensive manipulation by hegemonizing forces. While examining novels for perspectives on the proliferating debates on cyber-d human subjectivity, it is imperative to bear in mind that a number of authors write with an evidently antagonistic attitude towards products of mass culture and their modes of transmission like the overarching media of the internet.

Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* (2003) follows the same line. It traces the journey across Manhattan of the wealthy asset manager Eric Packer, who goes to a salon to get his hair cut. The narrative, largely centred on his car ride, depicts the infiltration of his daily lived existence with technology and how that impacts his behaviour. One may argue that his limousine, where he is almost exclusively housed through the length of the book, acts as a symbol of the private self. He conducts most of his business there, using the latest technologies which the vehicle is fitted with – television, computer monitors, and security cameras. The internet is his conduit to the public world. Super-fast internet connections and instant availability, update-ability, and process-ability of information appear to have enhanced human cognitive ability greatly, and have helped remove the spatial-temporal constraints of “reality.” He can connect with anyone, anywhere, for any purpose. Rather than being grounded in psycho-sexual biological reality, Eric believes that human subjectivity, especially his own expansive cognitive abilities, are consonant with the socio-temporal verities of cyberspace.

With the development of computers, the internet and related gadgets, people are fed with a barrage of information and images which are not “real” but are representations of the “real.” Their interaction with, and experience of the “real” world, comes *after* their encounter with it in the form of represented information and images on the internet and television. The public world is mediated to Eric through its transmitted representations, which construct his

experience and assessment of reality. The internet and related technologies developed in a military-then-capitalist context in order to overcome the limitations of the human subject who was bound by biological and spatial location and had limited attention span and cognitive abilities. The value and need for human productive labour altered in this context. The most characteristic form of employment in the information age is that of analysing the eponymous information, which is produced, processed, and transmitted by means of technology. Choices, material context, and enterprise of the human subject no longer appear to matter in a world where no one can match the speed and ubiquity of technology. The loss of control over oneself and one's immediate environment is emphasised most urgently in Eric's downfall. He defies all the logic predicted by the data streams of the net, and decides to invest in Yen, an investment which seems promising because of his own calculations. However, he loses the money and realises for the first time, that he is not in control of the machines which he uses to control the world around himself. The human subject does not interpret information by projection of his own values and spatial-temporal situation on it. Instead, extrinsic information is used to measure the self, its limits and location in the world. This is illustrated in *Cosmopolis* in near-fantastic terms. In the novel spy cameras have been installed which upload Eric's images and transmit them via a closed network to his security and health officials so they can monitor his health 24/7. He repeatedly observes himself in the surveillance footage that can be viewed on the monitors fitted inside the vehicle. In one instance, "[t]he car was moving. Eric watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline. The car stopped and moved and he realized queerly that he'd just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he'd seen it on-screen (DeLillo 10). This futuristic *déjà vu* is repeated many times in the course of the journey.

A similar intermingling between the material world and the cyber world is emphasised in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), a novel set in a future American society which has become absolutely reliant on the internet media. It predicts what the contemporary pop culture and screen-obsessed world, in which all of its *current* features have been taken to their logical ends, will look like in the future. Everybody carries all-purpose cell phone like devices – “the apparati” – which provide them with information about the persons and environment around, with entertainment and with media of communication. People are depicted as being entirely reliant on the internet in order to negotiate the world – they experience the latter through the lens of the former. At one point in the story, after a state-imposed ban on the use of technology, practically all social interactions and activities come to a halt.

Characters have no idea about how to deal with *actual* reality, which is posited in the novel as being a realm separate from the internet technology-determined, experiential reality. Lenny writes at this point in his diary:

My apparat isn't connecting. . . . I can't connect in any meaningful way to anyone, even to you, diary. Four young people committed suicide in our building, and two of them wrote suicide notes about how they couldn't see a future without their apparati. One wrote, quite eloquently, about how he "reached out to life", but found there only "walls and thoughts and faces", which weren't enough. He needed to be ranked, to know his place in the world. And that may sound ridiculous, but I understand him. We are all bored out of our fucking minds. My hands are itching for connection. . . . But all I have is Eunice and my wall of books. . . . Work has been good. Kind of a blur, but even a blur is better than the slow churn of reality. (Shteyngart 268)

The way people connect with each other has been transformed with the emergence of the ever-present cyberspace. A community of ever-connected, but isolated individuals has come into being, as people are connected by means of the representations of the other individuals that are fed to them by content on television shows and social networking sites. Instead of connecting and identifying with others by means of measuring them in terms of frames-of-reference of *be-ing* one derives from one's own self and experience, they define *themselves* by the representations of the others on the net. On Facebook, we connect with other people on the basis of "friend suggestions" prompted by the site; we classify our interests and describe our personalities by means of the categories provided and receive constant suggestions for "liking" activities, cultural products, etc. which are based on the information we have ventured on various forums and on analysis of trends and predictions by information processing software and professionals. Advertisements of commodities that would appeal to people of a profile similar to ours are introduced in the margins of "our pages." To approach the issue from another angle, this is reminiscent of the post-structuralist decentering of the self, which emphasizes the fact that human subjects have *always* been the products of multiple discourses and not the autonomous agents that the liberal-humanist selves were conceived to be. Foucault declared that discursive systems dictate the idea of what constitutes — and defines the parameters of what it means to be — an individual subject at any given point in time. However, for many noted authors and critics, this decentering of the subject in itself is a sign of the all-pervasive nature of advanced or multinational capitalism, which has invaded — by the aid of technology — the private space of the individual

subject, altering his/her psyche into becoming subjected to, confused by, and *therefore* pliant to, information assault and manipulation by mass cultural content. Such a person is unlikely to be able to engage with the solitary act of dedicated, sustained reading. According to DeLillo, the fast-forward nature of the decade is an apt subject for a novelist. But the novel itself, the old, slow water-torture business of *invention* and *doubt* and *self-correction*,<sup>1</sup> may seem to be wearing an expiration date that takes effect tomorrow (“The Power of History”). Spy cams are ever present in public areas. Personal cameras, cell phones, and computer cameras, which are owned by wide chunks of population, who record and click any given moment and often upload it on the net at video streaming and social networking sites, are omnipresent/omniscient. The idea of being watched is something a person may not even be conscious of, but the awareness of it has been ingrained in people through their existence in a high tech society where behavioural forms have developed in accordance with the cognizance that any moment could find an individual documented and uploaded for all to see. This injects their behaviour with self-consciousness. In *Cosmopolis*, Eric’s attention is caught by a live video streaming of the President of the United States:

This was a feature of the Midwood administration, the chief executive on live videostream, accessible worldwide. . . . The president was in shirtsleeves, sitting in a quotidian stupor. He twitched once, blinked a few times. His gaze was empty, without direction or content. There was an air of eternal flybuzz boredom. He did not scratch or yawn and *began to resemble a person sitting in an offstage lounge waiting to do a guest spot on TV*.<sup>2</sup> Only it was eerier and deeper than that because his eyes carried no sign of immanence, of vital occupancy, and because he seemed to exist in some little hollow of nontime, and because he was the president. (DeLillo 33)

It is interesting to note that the President is not named. Since a President is the first-citizen, across DeLillo’s oeuvre, he often becomes the symbol for Every(American)man. The given description and the name assigned to him stress the complete erasure of any sort of personal identity independent of a public – and publicly engendered – identity. Technologically aided invasion of the private space by the public (establishment and the masses) is comprehensive. Cyber-d citizens define themselves in terms of mass mediated representations of self-conception and conduct, which in turn are influenced by different permutations and combinations of the dominant economic, social,

1 My emphasis.

2 My emphasis.

and political forces. This serves to erase the significance of markers of material spatial-temporal reality which human beings inhabit. One must pause to note that post-structuralist theories, by highlighting the constructed nature of the human subject, in a way made *perceived* material reality – including bodily markers like colour, height, and so on – a non-essential factor in determining a person's identity, because how these figured in the way a person was measured was dependent on different discursive systems. Cyberspace appears to instantiate a certain kind of interpretation of the implications of post-structural theories.

Arguably, post-structural thought subverted the authority of the normative modern, historicist, teleological understanding of history by revealing the contingency, unfixedness, and multifariousness of any given moment of existence. Although time is measured more closely, in terms of nano-seconds and such miniscule markers, it has ceased to be of significance in the way a person identifies himself as a consciousness and identity, unfolding in time, and embedded in materiality. For the critics and writers wary of the impact of the present information and communication technologies, the cyber-d subject, a recipient of constant bombardment of mass-mediated representations, is reading novels less and less, because for him “meaningful unities of perception, subtended by the continuity of conscious identity, are broken apart, splintered into fragments of heightened sensory experience. . . . [The typical] form of relation [of this culture] is through difference, rather than unfolding causal patterning of narrative” (Green 31). In Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, while consoling Eunice for not being able to entirely comprehend the book he just read out to her, Lenny says: “Even I'm having trouble following this. It's not just you. Reading is difficult. People just aren't meant to read any more. We're in a post-literate age. You know a *visual age*” (Shteyngart 64). This is reminiscent of Jonathan Franzen's statement “For every reader who dies today, a viewer is born, and we seem to be witnessing, here in the anxious mid-nineties, the final tipping of a balance” (Green 5).

In *Cosmopolis*, the death of a rival of Eric's is captured in great, nuanced detail by cameras, with every micro frame offering a wealth of information, and is uploaded online. Eric watches it again and again. There is an erasure of the difference between an action and its representation. Witnessing a real action is rendered equivalent to viewing its representation. Temporal distance, which separates action and retrospective reflection, is effaced. In his essay “The Power of History,” DeLillo states:

Things flash and die . . . an individual's name . . . haunts every informational nook, and you can't figure out who the person is inside the name or what the context is that gave such abrupt

prominence to the name, but it never actually matters and this is the point. . . . [Events are] subject to the debasing process of frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence.

The past is ever present in the internet archives, while at the same time being depthless and elusive. For instance, on a social networking site, details of our virtual activities are stored in the archives. We may return to them, alter them, comment on them and even erase them. This has always been a feature of past remembrance, one may contend, but it is brought to home with force when we review such instances of “past” manipulation on the net.

The present becomes outdated at the moment of coming-into-being because of the dizzying speed of updating, ordering, processing of information about the world that is made possible by the cyberspace and the constant focus on devising more and more efficient technological aids for every conceivable human action. This frenzied activity is driven by the motive to optimize the utilization of resources — land, capital, people, renewable and non-renewable resources, and technologies — for the advancement of the ultimate capitalist aim of profit. An ethic of innovation is stressed, as the capitalist motto is to beat competition in the world of global capital. “The present,” DeLillo’s character, Vija Kinski suggests, “is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential” (DeLillo 34). The present thus appears to be unstable and hard to comprehend. For instance, on account of the fast pace of technological development, newer gadgets and applications are introduced with little time to allow the cultural assimilation of new technology and to measure its impact on our lived environment. The moment of invention is the moment of obsolescence. Portable devices in *Cosmopolis* are not named because the minute they are devised, they are supplanted by fresher models, and there is no time to develop nomenclature for them. They are simply referred to as “hand held devices.”

Possibilities of alternate realities — closely connected to the realm of the future — die out because an inability to comprehend and fix one’s location in the present translates into an inability to imagine possible trajectories for the future. In Shteyngart’s novel, increasing virtualization is accompanied by intensification of totalitarian tendencies in American politics. Absolute power is vested in the hands of a few companies who manipulate the government and the citizens, who are not active, thinking agents any more, but are passive consumers. Market logic has invaded all relations, organizations and institutions of society — the former United Nations is now the United

Nation Retail chain, and international governments are mere fronts for financial and trading organizations to settle important deals on their behalf and obtain resources and open up markets for them. Many characters protest against the government's inefficacy in the domain of public welfare. Internet news channels, streaming and social networking sites are flooded with calls for mobilization; devices are distributed to the "low networth individuals" squatting and protesting in the Central park, to help them update themselves, to bridge technological inequality, and to help them get in touch with as many people as possible (Shteyngart 7). Yet, in response, all that the government has to do in order to render the people impotent is to switch off their devices. Since the people have been reliant on the net in order to coordinate with and update each other about the ground situation, this move clams down their protest. And once they have been cut off and stunned like this, the state moves in and eliminates all the media people and protestors.

DeLillo, however, retrieves a space for possibility in this exhausted world. Packer, the symbol of the confluence of cyber technology and capital which rules the world, annihilates himself because he recognises himself to be a subject defined and constituted by a technologically determined existence. He becomes an anomaly which the system is unable to influence or co-opt into its order. The system focuses on determining the contours in which human subjectivity will mould itself, spelling the very determinants of subjectivity, influencing behaviour, mediating experience by its representation – but it cannot accommodate erasure of the created selves through their own agency. Therein lies a negative possibility. Between Eric's watching a recording of his death and between his actual death lies a moment of impasse, which is pregnant with the possibility of the emergence of a new narrative, marked by an expectation of annihilation which allows for the possibility of the emergence of something new: "this is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound" (DeLillo 84). One must note that this betrays the assumption of the existence of an originary pre-given self who is retrievable by unearthing of and extrication from existing systems of signification in the world, and also of a self different from the changing, multiple, divergent material realities of the world. In the book *Future Libraries* (1995), Howard Bloch and Carla Hesse argue that "what we are witnessing in the remaking of the modern literary system at the end of the twentieth century is not so much a technological revolution (which has already occurred) but the public reinvention of intellectual community in its wake" (10). The writers' attempts to posit literature as the one realm where the symbolic order infected by techno-capitalistic logic could be annihilated

and then resurrected in a renewed form is not uninformed by persisting liberal-humanist ideas, many of which had been highlighted and subverted by a number of twenty first century post-structuralists, as well as by apologists for the information-communication technologies.

However, all species of criticism about subjectivity are confined in their theorization by certain continuing assumptions about the nature of the human subject — a major instance of which is the neglect of embodiment. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Katherine Hayles explains: “Only because the body is not identified with Self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference including sex, race, and ethnicity” (Hayles 4). Critics who sustain some faith in the liberal-humanist definitions of the human subject, whether they are aware or not of its connection to property relations, mark the ability of the individual to *think* as the defining element of the individual. A corollary to that is an emphasis on the dichotomy between an individual’s own(ed) self and the rest of the world. There, body doesn’t figure as a significant factor in determining subjectivity, but as a holder of the conscious self. This broadly explains the primary reason behind the concerns about humans relinquishing those aspects of their personhood, which distinguish them as a species, to intelligent machines. Post-structuralist theorists, having decentered the subject and declared it to be the product of discourse, often fail to factor in the fact that the individual subject’s bounded-ness as a single entity is ensured by the material frame and location of its body, and hence that the body is a major factor for consideration. Similarly, champions of the cyberspace’s ability to erase all bodily differences and disabilities, and to render everybody equal and equally capable in the said realm, ignore the fact that an individual operates the computer situated *within* material realities — in fact, the information accessed through the screen is not disembodied either, as the computer, and the other technological aids, have material form as well. Apocalyptic views about how the technologies that we have created have now slipped beyond our control and comprehension, and have begun to manipulate us, ignore the fact that machines have not evolved and adapted to the environment like human bodies have. They may learn to manipulate us — like we manipulate them. They may appear to replace us, in certain functions. However, they will always remain distinct in embodiment. Machines, humans, culture, and nature are all parts of a complex system — none of the elements are objects to control, or subjects to do the controlling. What one makes also impacts and alters oneself. It’s not a dual, but a complex, spiralling relationship.

Human subjectivity is not marked by a pre-given selfhood. It cannot be convincingly effaced either, contoured as it is in a bodily frame. It is ever-evolving, and is only partially located in consciousness. It is firmly embedded in highly complex material *and* ideated worlds of which it is not the master and neither is it mastered — but with which it is amalgamated. The world of diverse, ever transforming conventions, norms, and discourses that the human subject inhabits is always in a state of flux, but is more *noticeably* so at the present moment since the closed interpenetration of the network of information and communication technologies and of human beings' lived experiences is a focus of much concern and theorization. This makes the present a fruitful time for intense and fruitful debate and renegotiation of prevailing trends, customs, and belief systems, and to mark a recognition of the fact that ideas about who/what we are/can do are always in a state of non-teleological evolution — before received or inadequately deconstructed ideas get normalized.

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## CYBER-D SUBJEKTI: DELILLOV COSMÓPOLIS I SHTEYNGARTOVA SUPER TUŽNA ISTINITA LJUBAVNA PRIČA

### Sažetak

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U posljednje vrijeme sve je prisutnija zabrinutost pisaca i drugih koji se bave književnošću zbog činjenice da je roman umjetnost koja umire i da je navika čitanja u opadanju među širim stanovništvom. Jedan od ključnih razloga koji se navodi je pojava *cyber* prostora, koji nudi brojne mogućnosti za slobodno vrijeme natječući se s čitanjem za pozornost širokog sloja stanovništva. Osim toga, često se raspravlja o tome kako je *cyber* prostor utjecao na promjenu psihe ljudi preopterećujući ih informacijama i pružajući im neometan pristup različitim načinima zabave, što je uzrokovalo da ljudi gube sposobnost da na duže vrijeme zadrže pozornost na nekom određenom zadatku. To također, navodno, uzrokuje da se ljudi sve više i više oslanjaju na strojeve da izvrše njihove svakodnevne zadatke i misle umjesto njih. Takvi su problemi istaknuti u romanu Dona DeLilla *Cosmopolis* (2003) te romanu Garyja Shteyngarta *Super tužna istinita ljubavna priča* (2010), koja su oba smještena u distopijskim društvima gdje ljudi rabe svoje uređaje kao štake koje im omogućuju kretanje svijetom. Te tjeskobe, prema tvrdnjama iznesenima u radu, uzrokovane su promjenama u književnim poljima, koje su nastale povećanim mogućnostima stvaranja, diseminacije i čitanja tekstova u doba interneta. Te bojazni, dakle, bit će uokvirene i „raspakirane“ kako bi se razumjela i istaknula njihova ideološka podloga.

**Ključne riječi:** *cyber* prostor, roman, društveni mediji, ljudski subjekt, utjelovljenje

