

THE FUTURE OF THEORY, II (Feminism, Phenomenology, Philosophy)

A Public Conversation with Dorothea Olkowski and Jean-Michel Rabaté

Moderated by Greg Flaxman

Thursday May 8, 2003; 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm

Event Location: Slought Foundation (4017 Walnut, Philadelphia)
This event is free. Reservation not required.

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Questions by Jean-Michel Rabaté and Greg Flaxman for Dorothea Olkowski

Section I: A Philosophical and Feminist Background

1. Dorothea, even before your engagement with Deleuze, or at least contemporaneously with it, your work concerned Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological tradition. I wonder if you might talk about your entry into the "Society of Phenomenology," by which I mean not only the actual society but, more generally, the predominantly male world of continental philosophy and phenomenology.

2. For better or worse, Dorothea, you are known as one of a still-select group of women working on Deleuze. In your last book, *Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*, you mention the vagaries of the reception of *A Thousand Plateaus*, which seems to have skewed toward male scholars in both the United States and France. While you have argued that this should not be the case, perhaps you can speculate about why the feminist potential of Deleuze's philosophy was (and is) so delayed and why you specifically decided to engage this philosophy.

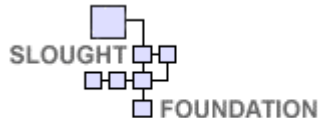
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Section II: The Ruin of Representation

1. In light of the title of your most recent book, I'd like to ask you to explain why feminism, which has historically tried to manipulate or subvert representations, ought to undertake the wholesale "ruin" of representation. Indeed, what is it about representation in general that constitutes, as you say, a form of oppression?
2. Dorothea, when I heard that you had planned to speak about love today, I immediately (and perversely) thought of the opening pages of your last book, which partly consist in a discussion of Catharine MacKinnon's analysis of the regime of representation. While you clearly sympathize with MacKinnon's critique, I wonder what you make of her stand, with Andrea Dworkin, against the publication of pornography. How do we distinguish between the actualization of the erotic and a kind of pornography that degrades femininity? Is not a certain kind of degradation, or what might better be called sadism, integral to erotic experience?
3. To a remarkable degree your work constitutes a philosophical dialogue with art and artists. In *Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*, of course, you devote ample space to the consideration of Mark Kelly, but in the past you have also discussed Bill Viola, Michel Tournier, among others. In your mind, what is the relationship between philosophy and art, and would you risk saying, with Nietzsche, that "philosophy must be evaluated in light of art, and art in light of life"?

Section III: Life, Love, and Affection

1. Dorothea, your work on Bergson, and the kind of Bergsonian feminism that you have created, remains to my mind completely unique in contemporary philosophy —especially insofar as Bergson's vitalism was, during his lifetime, recruited as part of a natalist movement in France that attempted to redress population decreases and to sustain the idea of the French nuclear family. To your mind, is it possible to say that Bergson has —ironically— posed "false problems" for philosophy? How then do you conceive of your own work as intervening in Bergsonism?
2. In your work on Bergson, Deleuze, and Irigaray you continually stress the primary —we might even say, germinal— role of affection in philosophy and feminism. And yet we are all aware of the problems to which the discourse of affection often leads, namely, a kind of personalization, particularization, even solipsism. Is it possible to speak of an affection that is not limited to one's own experience, to one's own narcissism? Can we speak of affection in an "impersonal" sense?

Section IV. On the "love of one's own"

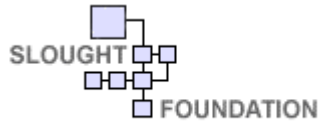
1. The gentle or angry claim that women should be entitled to "an ...X... of one's own" (X standing for a room, a body, a sexuality) has often been taken as a staple feminist motto. Having worked on Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* and its wholesale critique by Marx and Engels in the *German Ideology*, I'd like to have your opinion on this issue: can one speak of "being one's own" or "loving one's own love" without having to take into account the hard economics of ownership? How much is love dependent upon the foundational concept of "propriety" that most anarchists mean to debunk?
2. One of the founding fathers of anarchism, Max Stirner explains the love is not ruled out by what he calls the "community of egoists" but refuses the idea that love can develop in the name of external values: "If I cherish you, it is because I hold you dear, because in you my heart finds nourishment and my need satisfaction, but it is not for the sake of a higher essence whose hallowed body you are; it is not on account of my beholding in you a ghost, a spirit that appears to me but from egoistic pleasure?" (*EO*, p. 54) Is your reading of Plato attempting to subvert it in the name of a similar community of egoists?

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3. Freud's model of sexuality leaves an important place to auto-eroticism; one might almost say that auto-eroticism is the paradigm of all subsequent libidinal developments. The little infant who discovers the lips as an erogenous zone seems to be saying, according to Freud: "What a pity that I can't kiss myself!" (*Three Essays* p. 48) The insight may be read in two ways: either there is a core of masturbatory self-sufficiency before the drive intervenes to send the child searching for other types of objects that will only replace it; or there is a constitutive dehiscence in our libidinal development in which the parts of the body selected by our drives eternally remain parts. In brief, what I have in mind is how much do we need to believe in a "whole body" as our own body in order to speak of a "love of one's own"? In other terms, what happens when I am loved for a part of my body or when I love just a part of someone's body and not the "whole person"?

Section five: on Plato.

1. You move strategically from Plato's *Republic* to the *Symposium*. Leo Strauss saw in the *Symposium* the key to Plato's entire political theory. Would you also say that there can be no political theory of the ideal state that would not be at the same time a politics of love?

2. You quote Diotima's speech to Socrates in the *Symposium*. What stands out is that Socrates claims that he owes everything he knows about love (and we know that he knows nothing except in questions about love) to her teachings. What I take to be a main difference in the way she reasons about love is that she refuses the neat dichotomies favored by both Socrates and the Sophists. As Diotima explains, it is wrong to say that something that is not beautiful is ugly. Love is first of all an in-between category, not a god but not purely human, a *daimon* but also a "mean between ignorance and wisdom" and also between Poverty and Efficacy.

When Socrates asserts confidently that all men "desire their own good", she is more skeptical: "Then why, she replied, are not all men, Socrates, said to love, but only some of them? Whereas you say that all men are always loving the same things?" (*Symposium*, 205 b). If you had to give an answer to that question (which is avoided by Socrates) what would it be?

3. Should we assume that it is Diotima who embodies what Plato thinks about love in the *Symposium*? In Lacan's reading of the *Symposium*, the person who articulates a true insight about desire and love is neither Diotima nor Aristophanes (who seems to remain a rather strict Freudian) but Alcibiades, precisely because he disrupts the order of the speeches about love.

Alcibiades' unruly intervention at the end of the discussion aims at praising Socrates in such a way that he (Alcibiades) will be free to seduce Agathon (apparently pursued by Socrates). His double-edged praise of Socrates allows Lacan to introduce his theory of the *agalma* (the hidden treasure concealed by a rough exterior appearance) and thus to disclose the function of the object *a*, i.e. the object of desire.

Without reopening the entire file of Lacan's conception of love as "giving what one does not have," how would you theorize the relation between love and desire?

4. Finally, how do you relate to Alain Badiou's motto that one should return to Plato -- if only for the reason that any serious philosopher should try above all to articulate the truth about love? As a Deleuzian, are you ready to "return to Plato"?

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